

Behind the border basics



ABDUL BAYES

Quereshi. Mentionably, the current Prime Minister of India and the President of Pakistan are immigrants to their respective countries.

We began our journey and beside me in the bus, was Allah Buksh Malik -- short in his speech but tall in physical stature. He is an additional secretary to the government, a CSP and Ph.D from Cambridge in development economics. While travelling to the village Gah, we discussed many issues such as politics and poverty,

The primary school where Man Mohan Singh studied up to fourth grade has records dating back 1939 or so. The record shows that he stood second securing 55 out of 60. He hails relatively from a poor family. He was very much liked by fellow villagers because of his amicable nature, devotion to study and brilliant academic performance. The people of Gah are proud of seeing the son of their soil at the pinnacle of power, holding the post of PM in India. During a reception that was held near the village, the village "Najem" (elected village

40 per cent! The housing conditions of the poor are miserable. Paucity of pure drinking water also allegedly persists.

Late eminent economist of Pakistan Dr Mahabubul Huq lamented over the unbalanced growth of defence expenditure in countries of the sub-continent and came up with opportunity costs of doing so. The purchase of a battle tank deprives few thousand children from immunisation. Purchase of a fighter plane robs off few lakh children of their basic primary education. Both Man Mohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf -- product of painful partition -- could see that pervasive poverty still persists in rural areas and sordidly this continues to occur in the face of growing defence expenses. They should listen to the Najems of India and Pakistan who do not demand guns but want butter for the betterment of the people they represent.

As we were leaving the village, through narrow road, the words of the village Najem haunted me. South Asian countries, especially India and Pakistan, are left with too few resources to grapple with the groaning poverty. Time is long overdue to realise that peace is prerequisite for poverty reduction. The workshops and seminars on food security are likely to be of little use unless politicians value human security first and national security second. A country where millions earn less than a dollar a day, resources have to be diverted to the productive sectors like irrigation, education, health and other social dimension. Behind the border ramifications of a big defence budget should be calculated and recalculated. Men live by bread not by guns -- the sooner the leaders realise this, the better it is for all.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

Late eminent economist of Pakistan Dr Mahabubul Huq lamented over the unbalanced growth of defence expenditure in countries of the sub-continent and came up with opportunity costs of doing so. The purchase of a battle tank deprives few thousand children from immunisation. Purchase of a fighter plane robs off few lakh children of their basic primary education. Both Man Mohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf could see that pervasive poverty still persists in rural areas and sordidly this continues to occur in the face of growing defence expenses.

defence and development. We shared the view that human security is a prerequisite for national security in his region and that larger allocations to the defence might not help development. While absorbed with academics, chanting slogans of welcome by villagers stole our serious submissions.

People were greeting us showering flowers, bursting crackers and playing musical bands. Children and women were showering flowers from roof tops and male villagers stood in line to show respect. One Pakistani colleague told me that usually a bridegroom party receive such kind of welcome from bride's side. The melody that took me to my boyhood was "Ghar aya mera pardeshi, piash bujhi mere ankhaniki" (the stranger comes to my house to quench the thirst of my eyes). Any way, we marched towards the village with well-groomed Ashok Gulati leading the procession.

chief) said: "While we are facing poverty, our two countries (Pakistan and India) are buying weapons to fight each other. The village is mainly rain fed with no provision for irrigation for ages. People are getting poorer day by day".

Note that the "Najem" raised the same point that Malik and I were grappling with during the bus ride. Both India and Pakistan are buying less butter but more guns. In other countries of South Asia, including Bangladesh, soaring defence expenses tend to deter social investment. In fact, the kings are at war not the people. The people of the village Gah have long been denied access to irrigation water that could mitigate their miseries. I am sure that even when Man Mohan Singh was living in this village, villagers were facing the same problem. It is now about 70 years that the problem persists. Not only that, the literacy rate in the village is reported to be hovering around only

Activating parliamentary standing committees

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

ON September 16, 2004 before the prorogation of the 13th session the Parliament (Sangsad) reconstituted parliamentary standing committees incorporating lawmakers from the main opposition party Awami League (AL). On July 13, 2004 AL submitted names of its lawmakers for incorporation in parliamentary standing committees. The inclusion of the AL lawmakers gave the parliamentary committees full shape one year and a half after their formation and about three years into the current Parliament's five-year tenure. The AL lawmakers were not present in the House when it approved the reconstitution of the parliamentary standing committees. It is learnt from the newspaper reports that AL has expressed indignation for not giving it chairmanship in any committee and lowering its membership to only one in some vital committees. Some newspapers have reported that the AL leadership is yet to decide on joining the parliamentary standing committees because its (AL's) requests for proportionate representation of its lawmakers in the committees and allocating chairmanship of the committees on a proportional basis have not been respected by the BNP led alliance government.

Article 76 of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides that Parliament shall appoint from among its members the following standing committees:-

- (a) a public accounts committee;
- (b) committee of privileges; and
- (c) such other standing committees as the rules of procedure of Parliament require.

In exercise of the powers

conferred by Article 75 (1) (a) of the Constitution, Parliament framed its own rules of procedure and adopted those rules on July 22, 1974. Meanwhile, there have been several amendments to rules of procedure. The rules of procedure guide and regulate functional details, overall operation and terms of reference of the parliamentary committees. The parliamentary standing committees are generally grouped into such categories as

standing committee on a ministry are to examine any bill or other matter referred to it by Parliament, to review the works relating to a ministry which falls within its jurisdiction, to inquire into any activity or irregularity and serious complaint in respect of the ministry and to examine, if it deems fit, any such other matter as may fall within its jurisdiction and to make recommendations. Finance and audit committees namely,

It is beyond any doubt that parliamentary committees could be the most effective instrument of parliamentary oversight if they could effectively discharge their assigned responsibilities. But this has not always happened. Public Administration Reforms Commission in its report (vol. 1) of June, 2000 has observed, "The activities of the standing committees are usually confined to review of some routine findings of Ministries and their Agencies rather than in-depth investigation into budgetary and implementation performance."

ministerial committees, for example, Committee on Ministry of Commerce, Committee on Ministry of Industries etc.; finance and audit committees; and a number of other committees of standing nature, for instance, Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions, Committee of Privileges, Committee on Government Assurances, Committee on Rules of Procedure etc.

The parliamentary standing committees that are of greater interest to general public are ministerial committees, and finance and audit committees. According to

Committee on Public Accounts, Committee on Estimates and Committee on Public Undertakings, "are considered as special mechanisms of the Sangsad to perform its supervisory role over the government expenditures."

Rule 246 of rules of procedure provides that Parliament shall, as soon as may be, after the inauguration of each new Parliament, appoint the standing committees on each ministry. Unfortunately, these committees have not been effective to the desired level due to a number of reasons. The guidance provided by rules of procedure to appoint the standing committees on ministries "as soon as may be, after the inauguration of each new Parliament" has not been followed during the last ten years or so. During the period of the immediate past AL government, only a few parliamentary standing committees without the inclusion of lawmakers from the then main opposition party BNP were appointed after sixteen months from the date of inauguration (July 14, 1996) of the 7th Parliament.

After submission of names of BNP lawmakers, all the committees including the previously appointed 14 committees came to be constituted in full shape on May 12, 1998 that is, almost after two years from the date of inauguration of the 7th Parliament. Parliamentary committees without incorporating lawmakers from the main opposition party AL were formed after a year from the date of inauguration of the current (8th) Parliament. After the submission of names of the AL lawmakers the committees came to be reconstituted in their full shape on September 16 last that is, almost after three years from the date of inauguration of the 8th Parliament. This has undoubtedly dented the effective functioning of the committees during the period.

Secondly, for functioning of a democratic system there is the need for mutual respect between the major political parties. But this has been conspicuously absent. Prior to an amendment in rules of procedure in the fifth session of the 7th Parliament, ministers themselves headed the standing committees on ministries. The amendment provided that no minister but only a member of Parliament would be eligible for chairmanship of each of the standing committees. According to an analyst, "this was done to give impetus to the committees for effectively demanding executive accountability." The then AL government deserves appreciation for the amendment. But the AL government was not sagacious enough to accommodate the then main opposition party BNP's request to allocate chairmanship of some committees. The present BNP led alliance government has set the same example by denying chairmanship of any committee to AL, the main opposition party in the House. Allocating chairmanship of some committees to the lawmakers of the opposition parties, particularly to the main opposition party's lawmakers, will not only set an

example of mutual respect, it will also help the work of a committee to be more transparent.

Thirdly, the report of a parliamentary standing committee is presented to the House for debate. Implementation of only those decisions that are taken by the House after full-fledged debates becomes obligatory on the ministries and others concerned. This establishes the fact that unless adopted by the House, implementation of recommendations made by the parliamentary standing committees in their meetings is not obligatory on the ministries and others concerned. This reminds us of the demand made sometimes back by chairmen of the parliamentary standing committees for increasing the powers of these committees.

Fourthly, chairmen of the standing committees remain under pressure of the party high ups. It may be recalled that when prices of the essentials had started spiralling even before the start of the last Holy Ramadan, the Ministry of Commerce shifted the blame on the free market economy. But the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Commerce rejected the Commerce Ministry's report (November 5, 2003) on the price hike and formed a sub-committee "to identify the persons who let the situation out of control." People are yet to know the fate of the inquiry. Rumour goes that the inquiry was shelved due to pressure from high ups in the government.

One recent instance regarding an administrative ministry's reluctance to implement recommendations of the parliamentary committee may be cited. The newspapers reported in August last that when the management of the Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited transferred 18 employees, mostly meter readers, in line with the recommendation of the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, the State Minister of that ministry "did not agree to it." Top officials including the managing director of the company had to work under police protection due to threat from the government backed trade union. The State Minister, however, later asked the Titas authorities to transfer the employees "under pressure from the parliamentary body."

A number of such cases were reported in the press during the period of the immediate past AL government. It is beyond any doubt that parliamentary committees could be the most effective instrument of parliamentary oversight if they could effectively discharge their assigned responsibilities. But this has not always happened due to reasons stated above and some other reasons. Public Administration Reforms Commission in its report (vol. 1) of June, 2000 has observed, "The activities of the standing committees are usually confined to review of some routine findings of Ministries and their Agencies rather than in-depth investigation into budgetary and implementation performance."

The press has been appreciative of the AL decision for nominating its lawmakers in the parliamentary standing committees. The Daily Star's editorial of September 20 urged AL to join the parliamentary standing committees without further deliberation on the issue. The editorial concluded with the advice that "people will take what they say outside the House more seriously if they participate in the working of the committee system." Democracy loving people of the country are eager to see that democratic institutions function properly. BNP led alliance government may rethink to allocate chairmanship of some parliamentary committees to the opposition parties, in particular to the main opposition party. Rules of procedure has provision for reconstitution of committees of the House. The allocation of chairmanship of some parliamentary committees to the opposition parties will set a good precedent in our parliamentary democracy. Who knows BNP will not be benefited from this in future.

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BUSH-KERRY FACE-OFF

Style over substance

MIR MAHFUZ RAHMAN

PRESIDENT George W. Bush, and four-term Senator John Kerry will face off in 90 minutes of posturing, posing, and styling worthy of the best Hollywood directors on Thursday night at the University of Miami. Each will try his best to portray the other as "flawed" on the topic of US Foreign Policy clearly the most divisive issue in the election. This is a "feel good" issue, with foreign policy affecting very few Americans directly but impacting greatly on their view of the world beyond the seas.

At stake will be the hearts of 50 million viewers, meaning that a large chunk of the voters in America will be watching. Bush is currently leading most nationwide polls; however over 100 electoral votes in key states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Georgia, and Florida, are still up for grabs. That makes the race wide open. Both have very clear weaknesses on security issues, and one will slip. The winner, even by a hairline margin, will have the homestretch advantage.

For the first time, both campaigns have insisted that moderators sign a 32-page memorandum of understanding of rules that govern the debates; both parties are running very scared that something will go wrong for their candidate. While the moderator, Jim Lehrer, will closely control the debate substance, and even the delivery will be heavily practiced, the style will be solely the candidates themselves.

They will have to pull one memorable phrase, mannerism, or outburst that clearly defines him as more "Joe Average" than the other. Only 2 years apart in age, they are both very wealthy Yale graduates who had the same views on Iraq and 9/11 until 2003. Having launched his presidential campaign, Kerry headed straight for his past in Vietnam, where he won medals but came back to oppose the war. He has used this experience as a defining moment, driving the difference in almost every speech.

Bush fell back on his experience in moulding public opinion: the art of politics. In 2000, he was fiercely successful in portraying Al Gore, then Vice President, as being prone to "exaggeration." However, this may come to bite very hard for Bush this time around.

Having declared "Mission Accomplished" on the deck of an aircraft carrier on May 1, 2003, with a large banner overhead, Bush is fending off a large section of his voters who believe in his leadership but are now unsure of the results. They have counted over 1000 US soldiers dead in Iraq, most importantly almost 900 after that fateful declaration.

The US mission does not seem accomplished. This provides Kerry with a good weapon to portray Bush as a neophyte in the art of leading a country to war. The focus could move quickly to Bush's record

as a pilot in the Texas Air National Guard, where he served but did not go to Vietnam. Kerry can also argue that security was compromised in the rush to go to a misguided war, and that funds could have been used for domestic security and catching Bin Laden.

Bush has his own weapons to counter his style. You may think it simplistic, but it works in small town Americana. No politician in US history has won two elections in a row without being able to communicate directly with the American people, bypassing any political machine. It is no mystery that since JFK's election, when the first presidential debates were shown live on television, only Reagan and Clinton have completed 2 terms. That is over 40 years.

Bush's campaign raised an astounding \$120 million as of the end of 2003 -- breaking the record amount he raised during the same time in the 2000 race, when he won with only 47.9 per cent of the votes and only 271 (out of 538) in the Electoral College. If he can win the debate handsomely, he is on the verge of making political history.

Bush will hammer away at "patriotism" issues of Kerry. And he is very good at that. Can a man who never served in combat really question a decorated war hero's love for his country because of his public opposition to an entirely different war? Yes, just ask John McCain, decimated by Bush's style and rhetoric in the primaries. And McCain is certainly more appealing to the American voters than Kerry.

For Kerry to beat Bush, he'll need to give the public confidence in his ability to provide security, catch Osama Bin Laden, and divert funds for the US economy. Bush has his advantages lined up with his post 9/11 leadership, and euphoria in removing the Taliban and Saddam on short notice. He also has Kerry's mind-numbingly dull patrician mannerisms, more apt for the US Senate rooms, working in his favour.

Most polls show Bush with a slight lead in terms of electoral votes. However, there are a large number of independent or undecided voters who swing based on their feeling just a few days before the voting day itself. These are the hearts and minds at stake on September 30.

Fate does not provide many chances; there's one up for grabs for John Kerry on September 30. If John Kerry the veteran and the father show up, rather than Senator Kerry, we shall have a fight in our hands. Can he seize the day? George W. Bush is inching his way to a place next to Reagan and Clinton. Can John Kerry stop him in his tracks? Tune in Thursday night to find out!

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