

AL can't turn its back to JS anymore

The vacillation must stop for a clear 'yes'

THE opposition Awami League's half-hearted approach to joining the upcoming parliament session and participating in the committee meetings is as inexplicable as it is untenable. On the whole, it is unsustainable.

There are some valid reasons why we would like to insist on the unsustainability of the AL's malevolent attitude towards parliamentary activism at this juncture. First and foremost, the next general election is effectively only one and a half years away if it is considered that the last six months of the remainder two years of the present government's tenure will be taken up by the preparatory process to the national election. There is a consensus across the political and civil society spectra to the effect that unless electoral laws are radically amended we would not be able to completely ensure free, fair and impartial election in the country.

There is no gainsaying that parliament is the only place to have any meaningful discourse on the question of changing electoral laws because of the obvious reason that the amendments will have to be effected through the parliament. And a full-house parliament can only bring about the best amendment compatible with the interest of both sides. Besides, the BNP and its allies have the majority to bludgeon any statutory measure through the JS, so that if the opposition gave them a walkover it will be patently self-defeating for them. So, the opposition's need for a parliamentary leveraging at this point is highly compelling.

With the elections only two years away, the AL needs to go nearer to the people and the best way of doing it -- and who knows that better than AL -- is by reading their pulse and doing the things they want, not as a partisan segment but an electorate as a whole. As it is, the month of Ramadan has been traditionally free of hartal which occasionally even sees an exchange of invitations to iftar parties between government and opposition law-makers, providing an outlet for cross-party tete-a-tetes. Overall, one need not overstress the fact that hartal is an unpopular agenda that better be eschewed from this point on, if the opposition wishes to draw closer to the electorate.

So, it is our considered view that the AL must join the parliamentary session scheduled for October 28, take issue with the government on the grenade attack of August 21 followed by a series of bomb blasts and arms hauls; highlight its lack of transparency, corruption and misgovernance all of which must be accompanied by an alternative vision for improving things. That's how democracy works, and it grows from strength to strength.

State of our private universities

Evaluation report welcome but some questions remain

WE welcome the report of the high-powered evaluation committee led by the chairman of the University Grants Commission, set up to evaluate the performance of fifty or so private universities. However we feel that the report should have come sooner.

Very few would contest the need in Bangladesh for private universities to cater to the rising demand for quality higher education. But no body would disagree with the view that most of the private universities fail to meet the minimum criterion to impart higher education.

The report has revealed some startling and at the same time disconcerting facts that give rise to a few questions which merit answers.

One cannot help but conclude from the findings and recommendations of the report that the demand for higher education has been exploited by private ventures to the extent that not only has this been blatantly commercialised it has also assumed a disquieting dimension.

As many as between 40 and 45 of the 52 private universities have failed to meet the criterion prescribed in the Private Universities Act of 1992. The committee has also recommended shutting down eight of those for violation of rules.

The obvious question is, given the existence of strict criteria and ground rules in setting up a private university, why were these universities given a go ahead without their fulfilling the prerequisites, in the first place? Surely, permission for an important thing like a university to operate should have been given more judiciously to begin with.

While the errant university authorities must be held accountable for their failures, it is difficult to see how the relevant authorities can absolve themselves of the responsibility for allowing the situation to come to such a pass.

We feel that that no amount of political pressure should come in the way of implementation of the report. It ought to be done sooner rather than later.

ADNAN HOSSAIN

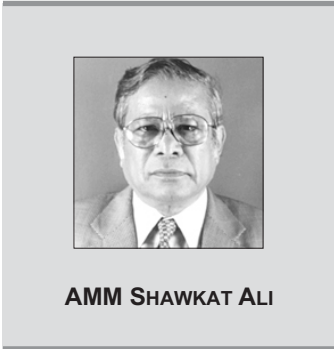
IN an academic matrix where every credentialed developmentally minded social scientist has something to say on development, this mere effort by an unlicensed lowbrow philistine might raise the hackles of the connoisseurs. So I seek apology from all those stationed within the fortified citadel of the academic community, who I guess would dismiss this unauthorised recalitrant incursion as an act of impressionistic hyperbolisation. Nonetheless, I will justify my effort by pointing to the adage: "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

There has been a recent explosion of interest in the academic pursuance of "development studies" in Bangladesh with some uni-

versities proffering master degrees in this much-desired, long-overdue discipline. Despite the fact that Bangladesh boasts think tanks like Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, development has not been institutionalised as an academic endeavour until recently when the first private university of Bangladesh blazed the trail, and many, having deciphered the demand in the market, eventually followed suit.

Phasing in of a new discipline into universities is an incontrovertible emblem of intellectualistic efflorescence. More important is the fact that as a low-income country nothing is more momentous than the study of development, which is the unquestioned desideratum of every country at the developmental plane

The fallout from August 21



THE debate on the August 21 grenade attack continues. After the Joyнал Abedin Commission report, a lot of views have been articulated by and through the media. The cabinet is understood to have been considering the report. There is no decision yet as to whether or not the government will publish the report. The report's credibility has been called into question by independent observers. The major element of attack on the report has been that it is mainly conjectural in nature. The recent statement of the IG of police on the absence of any evidence of involvement of any foreign power has further eroded the credibility of the report.

A key issue that has not been debated is whether or not the report should be subjected to the scrutiny of the parliament. The parliamentarians often refer to the fact that the parliament is sovereign, although nothing of the sort is sanctioned by the constitution. If Bangladesh were a mature democracy, such an issue would have been debated in parliament as a matter of course. That unfortunately is not the case. Besides, the existing rules of procedure that govern the working of standing committees of the parliament, empower the government to decline production of a document before the committee on the ground that its disclosure would be prejudicial to the safety or interest of the state. Since reference to the involvement of a foreign power appears in the report, it is likely that the government may not send the

report to the parliament for scrutiny and discussion.

Reference to puppet government

The newspaper reports indicated that the commission of inquiry alleged the possible attempt to install a puppet government following the August 21 grenade attack. Although many would like to dismiss this as a cock and bull story, the unfortunate fact remains that unless the full report is published, the

ministry of defence met on October 7. The general in question was also invited to attend the meeting. The general decided not to attend the meeting on the ground that some of the subjects which he requested for inclusion in the agenda for the meeting were not accepted by the standing committee.

Reasons for invitation

The primary reason for extending the invitation to the general appears to be that some of his observations relating to alleged

October 7, it could be accepted for discussion in a later meeting. He further claimed that he had written a letter to the chief of army in this regard way back in January 2003 but did not receive any reply.

It may be recalled that this is not the first time that such reports regarding denial of entry to the cantonment area have appeared in the press. It is not clear if such decisions are lawful. Doubtless, cantonment areas are restricted areas. But some areas are more restricted than others. The restric-

media, because, in the view of others, it amounted to destroying what is known in the criminal justice system as "alamat" or exhibits. If these were carefully preserved, forensic tests could have led to valuable clues relating to the offenders. SOP, it has been contended, would be applicable in case of army operations whether for training or otherwise. It is not expected to have any applicability in respect of violent crimes, which essentially fall within the civil domain. The applicable law and the procedures must guide the

that there were precedents in this regard. He also has claimed that the decision of the government is a vengeful action on the part of the chairman of the standing committee and his leaders. The chairman of the committee is an elected MP from BNP. It is idle to speculate what decision would have followed if the chairman belonged to the opposition.

The readers of newspapers remain rather confused, which is compounded further by the fact that the government decision more or less coincides with the article that the aggrieved general recently published. Further, the recommendation of the standing committee came four years after the general was promoted.

Institutional image

Press reports also have it that opinions were expressed in the standing committee to preserve and protect the image of the army and keep it above politics. The argument is well-taken but all decisions relating to the army or for that matter any other institution of the state should be taken in a manner that does not evoke any controversy. At the other end is the question of transparency and accountability of the institutions. As things stand now, the major institutions of the state, the executive, the judiciary, and the parliament are not above controversy. There is lack of harmonious relationship among them, resulting in imbalances with grave and serious consequences for constitutional governance, the pursuit of which remains as elusive as ever. The transparency and accountability of the established machineries of the state tend to be diluted when the three organs of the state fail to maintain equilibrium which is vital for good governance. This also occurs when government decisions are taken to serve narrow personal or partisan interests.

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US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Why Ohio and Florida will decide who wins in 2004

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

ONE criticism of America's presidential election is that American voters do not elect their President directly. As was the case in 2000, the candidate winning the popular vote nationwide (Al Gore won 600,000 more votes nationwide than George Bush did in 2000) does not necessarily win the presidency. The presidency is won by the candidate grabbing more than half (at least 270) of the so-called 538 Electoral College votes. Electoral College is not a "college" -- it is a way of referring to the votes each state can cast to elect the president. State legislators are empowered to decide how to award their electoral votes. Normally, the candidate winning most popular votes in a state wins ALL of its Electoral College votes; the second place finisher wins none. Three smaller states have adopted more representative versions than the popular-vote-winner-takes-all. On November 2, the state of Colorado, through a referendum (not state legislation) will attempt to award its Electoral College votes in proportion to the percentage of popular votes won by the candidates this year.

Electoral College votes are not truly representative either. Regardless of the size of the population, every state receives two Electoral College votes for their two Senators. The number of US Congressmen in every state is determined by its population. The number of US Congressmen in a state and its two Senators equal the number of Electoral College votes the state has. For example, California, the most populous state in the union, has 2 Senators and 53 Congressmen. Therefore, California has 55 Electoral College votes. The next populous state, Texas, has 34, and the third, New York, has 31. The total number of Electoral College votes is calculated as follows: 100 for US Senators, 435 for US Congressmen, and 3 for Washington, DC (which has a Congressman but no Senators), adding up to a total of

538. Since the Electoral College votes are an even number (538), mathematically it is possible that each candidate will end up with 269 Electoral College votes. In that case, the tiebreaker comes into play. The House of Representatives (Congress) gets to pick the President and the Senate picks the Vice President. Since the House of Representatives is almost certain to remain Republican majority after

and Michigan, and the West coast states are Democratic, and the South and the rest of the Mid-West states are Republican. The two major candidates never waste their campaign money or their time in each other's strongholds. All their financial and campaign resources are devoted to the so-called battleground or swing states, which are too close to call and can go either way.

Out of the 50 states that make up

sweepstakes, which will be decided by Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Mr. Bush will find it difficult to win Ohio, which has lost 250,000 manufacturing jobs during his presidency. With Pennsylvania headed Kerry's way, Kerry only has to win either Ohio or Florida to be the new President. To remain President, Bush must win both Ohio and Florida. It is as simple as that!

Historical precedents do not favour Mr. Bush. After all the spin-

reelection machine. Mr. Bush's smirk was back, so was the swagger, and the animated anger. And his lies. Missing was the substance, coherence, depth, and looking presidential. In the debates and out on the stumps Mr. Bush seems to be telling the Americans to forget about the mess he had gotten the nation into in Iraq with 1100 soldiers dead and 8,000 injured and no end in sight, the 1.6 million jobs that have been lost on his watch, tax breaks

reaches 25 per cent of American homes, has decided to air a 45-minute propaganda film before the election that will show John Kerry as a liar, a traitor and a "willing accomplice" of the enemy during the Vietnam War. Earlier this year, when ABC television's "Nightline" decided to read the names of the dead US soldiers in Iraq, Sinclair ordered its 62 TV stations not to carry the programme!

Maureen Dowd of The New York Times, which has endorsed John Kerry, points out that Mr. Bush feels that God tells him what is right and that Mr. Bush equates "disagreeing with him to disagreeing with Him." Even Republicans are worried by Bush's religious exhibitionism. Bruce Bartlett, a domestic policy advisor to Ronald Reagan says, "This is why George W. Bush is so clear-eyed about Al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist enemy. He believes you have to kill them all. They can't be persuaded, that they're extremists, driven by a dark vision. He (Bush) understands them, because he's just like them."

There is another piece of history standing in Mr. Bush's way. About 18 per cent of Americans are still undecided. History has shown that eventually the majority of the late undecideds tend to vote for the challenger. That the presidential race is a dead-heat with two weeks to go is also not good news for Mr. Bush. In a reelection campaign the incumbent either wins big (Johnson, 1964; Nixon, 1972; Reagan, 1984; Clinton, 1996) or loses big (Carter, 1980; Bush Sr., 1992). An election in which the incumbent seeks reelection is ultimately never close. If it is too close with two weeks to go (e.g. 1980 and 1992), as is the case now, the election breaks for one candidate or the other decisively just before the election. Barring unforeseen events, such as the sudden "capture" of Osama Bin Laden, in almost every case the election breaks in favour of the challenger.

the November 2 election, they will certainly pick George W. Bush as the President. The US Senate now has 51 Republican Senators, 48 Democratic Senators, and one independent Senator who votes with the Democrats. There is a slight possibility that after the November 2 election the Senate may become Democratic majority. In that case, the Democrats could choose John Edwards as the Vice President. So there remains a remote, yet intriguing possibility of a US administration headed by a Republican President George W. Bush and a Democratic Vice President John Edwards!

Anyone following the American election will notice that none of the two major candidates, Bush and Kerry, campaign in the three states with the largest population and Electoral College votes -- California, Texas, and New York. This is because California and New York are solidly Democratic and Texas is solidly Republican. No amount of campaigning will alter these facts. In general, the East coast states north of Virginia, some northern Mid-Western states such as Illinois

the US, the American presidential election on November 2 will be decided by 11 battleground states, which have 121 Electoral College votes (the Democrats won 60 and Republicans 61 of these Electoral College votes in 2000). The battleground states with their Electoral College votes in parentheses are: Florida (27), Pennsylvania (21), Ohio (20), Wisconsin (10), Minnesota (10), Iowa (7), Oregon (7), New Mexico (5), Nevada (5), West Virginia (5), and New Hampshire (4). Among the battle ground states, the Democrats (Gore) won six (Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Oregon, Iowa, and New Mexico), and Republicans (Bush) won five (Florida, Ohio, Nevada, West Virginia, and New Hampshire) in 2000. Only a few hundred votes separated the winner and the loser in several of these states in 2000. According to recent polls, Pennsylvania is tilting towards Kerry, as are Oregon, and Minnesota. Bush has the advantage in Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico. However, the smaller of these eleven states, with few Electoral College votes, will not figure prominently in the presidential

ning had run its course, the polls showed that Senator Kerry had beaten President Bush in all of this year's three presidential debates by a remarkably identical margin, 52 per cent to 38 per cent. Even when the candidates were courting Muslim American voters, Kerry was correct in referring to the "Qur'an" and Bush was off talking about "Muslims!" History shows that if a candidate is behind in the polls before the debates but sprints ahead after the debates (such as, Kennedy in 1960, Reagan in 1980, Clinton in 1992, Bush in 2000, and Kerry in 2004) he wins. If Bush is to win, he has to overcome of a lot of history that is against him.

Debates provide the voters with an opportunity to hear and see the two candidates side by side. If a neutral person, who did not know the identity of this year's candidates, was watching the debates, he would have wondered what "a peevish schoolboy" (Bush) was doing on the podium next to the intellectual running for president (Kerry)! Mr. Bush did not look what he was cracked up to be by the Republican

for the nation's wealthiest one per cent while the deficit ballooned to \$423 billion this year alone, the 5 million people who lost their health coverage, the dangerous relaxation of clean water and clean air standards under him, as well as crashing of the stock market and the skyrocketing of the gasoline prices.

With no way to run on his horrendous record of last four years, Mr. Bush has chosen a path of personal destruction for his opponent, John Kerry. Bush's single-minded focus is to demonise John Kerry. Mr. Bush campaign mantra for the Americans is, "How can you possibly think of voting for this flip-flopping, tax-loving, gay-supporting, abortion-promoting, black-friendly, unpatriotic liberal from Massachusetts?" The Bushes do not give up that easily, truth be damned! After the enormous success of the Bush-backing "Swift Boat Veterans for the Truth" liars in almost destroying John Kerry, Bush supporter, the Sinclair Broadcasting Group, one of the nations most powerful conglomerates with 62 TV stations that

OPINION

Excuse my ignorance

ADNAN HOSSAIN

IN an academic matrix where every credentialed developmentally minded social scientist has something to say on development, this mere effort by an unlicensed lowbrow philistine might raise the hackles of the connoisseurs. So I seek apology from all those stationed within the fortified citadel of the academic community, who I guess would dismiss this unauthorised recalitrant incursion as an act of impressionistic hyperbolisation. Nonetheless, I will justify my effort by pointing to the adage: "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

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Phasing in of a new discipline into universities is an incontrovertible emblem of intellectualistic efflorescence. More important is the fact that as a low-income country nothing is more momentous than the study of development, which is the unquestioned desideratum of every country at the developmental plane

at which we stand.

Though I don't intend to view development in terms of stages (as the Euro-Americo-centric schools in general do), here my intention is to deconstruct the nuances of the problematic of development. I am looking at development as a set of decided goals the acquisition of which can catapult Bangladesh to the status of a developed county by a western benchmark. (The decided factors are known to all of you).

Unlike many other disciplines where the pursuit of knowledge is viewed as an end in itself, development studies cannot be relegated to the mere academic armchair efforts directed towards the generation of what economists call "knowledge." Here again I don't intend to dive into the epistemological crisis modern

social science in general is characterised by. Unfortunately though, unlike most social sciences within which there is at least some talk on the epistemological crisis the new school of thoughts of postmodernism and post-structuralism have brought in, economists of Bangladesh have been blatantly insensitive to these new epistemic blows that have dismantled the very scaffolds of positivism upon which the so-called science of neo-classical economics is predicated. (To the best of my knowledge, no economist has even taken the pains to pay lip service to this crisis). This issue altogether merits a separate treatment.

However, unlike the time that any newly introduced discipline takes to become popular, development

studies got off to a flier. Right from the inception it contrived to attract a good number of students. Seems the avant-gardists displayed an uncanny knack of a perfect market study. As an academic field, development studies concerns itself with the problems and processes of development from all possible slants, but as I already mentioned, this should not be a mere problematisation of developmental issues for the sake of production of knowledge. Rather, it should try to inculcate the values that a person needs to be armed with in order to operate in a concerned way. Unfortunately the reality is diametrically different as people undertaking this study embark on it with a potent hunch of developing themselves materially (though at times intellec-

tually). Well, I take no exception to people's interest in self-development as the society can aspire to develop collectively only if individuals grow. In other words, development of others through self-development is probably the spirit of those who would repudiate my stance. But all these seem like a well-crafted joke to me.

In fact I don't understand why development studies is not a mockery of the perennially downtrodden who have to toil day in and day out just to make ends meet, whereas the intellectual alchemists of development swing from ground to sky, intellectualising squalor and depravation.

Then there are of course what they call the "development practi-

tions" operating as employees in the non-government altruistic organisations getting elevated from a low-level position to a higher level position by virtue of these degrees or dazzling display of topnotch departmental performance. So what it boils down to is that a coterie of people banking on the underdevelopment of Bangladesh is carving out self-interested positions, with the paupers remaining the same if not worse.

A degree in development unquestionably enhances a person's likelihood of being absorbed within the extant establishments of developmental organisations, as those coming out with a certificate are being schooled to serve the organisational interests uncritically with no regard to the possibilities

that these establishments themselves can be a major developmental straightjacket.

Given that situation, I fail to decipher why development studies is not a satirisation of the poor. Is "development studies" an industry built upon the demagogic gobbledygook of some disciplinary excesses devoid of any real concern for the unfortunate? I hope my ignorance is not inexcusable.

Adnan Hossain is a student of development studies at North South University.