

# The incurable quorum crisis

## Completing parliament's dysfunctional cycle

THE worst-ever quorum crisis in the parliament last Thursday night forcing it to be adjourned goes only to show the apathy of our lawmakers towards democracy and its institutions. We are constrained to say that the ruling BNP, with its two-thirds majority in the Jatiya Sangsad, has a lion's share of the blame for a parliament in comatose, like it or not.

First of all, the oft-repeated resolve of the BNP to make national politics parliament-centered and turn the legislature into a decision-making body, is negated by frequent quorum crises. The ruling party members' truancy, rather its own brand of 'absenteeism' from parliament has only proved the hollowness of that resolution. This has most regrettably struck at the very root of the parliament's functioning as a democratic institution.

Questions of political morality and personal ethics are involved, too. The MPs' salaries, perks and privileges have seen some upward adjustments in recent times rendering it absolutely obligatory in the public eye for them to deliver as legislators unfailingly, which in turn requires them to participate in the parliamentary proceedings on a regular basis. But they do not have the minimum courtesy of attending the House in numbers minimally stipulated for a sitting of parliament to transact a given day's business. That the parliament has become so unimportant is proven beyond any shadow of doubt by the interminable quorum crises on the floor of the House.

This makes us recall, by association of thoughts, the huge telephone bill payment default of the MPs reported from time to time. Lawmakers being rule-breakers -- how awkward that must sound! Maybe the parliament secretariat should let the public know whether the arrears have been cleared by the MPs.

Unfortunately, they do not seem to realise that frequent lack of quorum is not only sullyng their personal image, but also that of the parliament. This can deal a severe blow to the parliamentary system. It is our view, therefore, that ruling party members have forfeited their right to criticise the opposition's boycott of parliament, given the fact that the quorum syndrome has almost a similar negative effect on the Jatiya Sangsad's functioning.

## A timely regulatory step

### A share scam averted?

THE SEC deserves our congratulations on suspending public floating of shares of a private commercial bank after investigation found that around several thousand beneficiary owners' accounts (BO) it had opened might be fake. This has revealed all too clearly the fact that our capital market can be open to manipulation unless the highest capital market watchdog, the SEC is extremely vigilant, which they have been this time. This alleged scandal has, regrettably, brought to the fore the broader issue of management of our capital market.

The very manner in which the BO accounts were opened, and there were 25,000 in all, points towards an impious intent of the bank.

Such affairs are not a new phenomenon in our share market operation. Inside trading and different manners of manipulations had been resorted to in the past to reap a windfall profit.

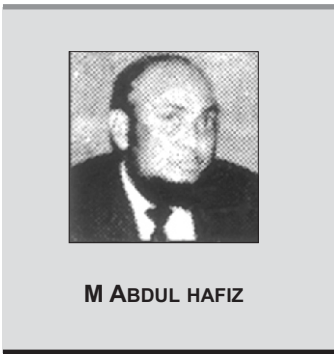
We must not lose sight of the fact that our bourse is in a very nascent state and illegal acts such as manipulation and monopolisation can only be at the expense of the common subscribers who will inevitably be at the losers' end in the absence of a level playing field. We feel that these acts could not have been possible without active collusion between the insiders, something that the investigation will hopefully unearth.

We are constrained to ask a few questions to the relevant authorities. First, are the legal provisions that govern the working of the share market adequate to protect the general subscribers' interest? Secondly, if so then do the legal provisions contain sufficient punitive measures to punish the manipulators?

Admittedly, a free market driven capital economy is our goal and we are presently going thorough the critical phase of capital market formation. This makes it all the more incumbent upon all to take measures that would inculcate rather than erode confidence in our share market. That can be possible only if we modernise our legal framework and bring it on a par with international standards.

Otherwise, attempt to reap a windfall through illegal means will only result in a devastating whirlwind for us.

# Iraq: Awaiting a Tet moment



IT is not necessarily true that George W. Bush, while embarking on the first term of his presidency with the best of intentions in a placid ambience, got wiser only after 9/11, which preceded his wreaking havoc in much of the world. Even before the tragedy of 9/11, Bush undertook the national missile shield initiative -- something that panicked even his close allies, the virtual abrogation of the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty bringing the world on the brink of another nuclear arms race, and displayed chauvinism in policies towards the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the land mine issues. All these steps

pre-dated 9/11 and in these matters Bush couldn't possibly have been prejudiced by the tragedy. The first term of President Bush was characterised by a unilateralist gun-ho foreign policy even before 9/11.

The savage attacks on New York and Washington further added to this streak of unilateralism which found expression in a war on terror that often seemed to digress from its original aim. Ostensibly, its aim was to save the US from the scourge of terrorism. However, as it unfolded

Despite the paradoxes and the dismal failure of the neo-con fanatics' Iraq project, Bush combatively rededicated himself in his second term inaugural address to the goals that had defined his presidency since September 11, 2001. And while doing, so he failed to allude to any of the consequences of his earlier policies. Isn't that a bit-odd? If freedom and liberty are to be dispensed, by military force if necessary, to nations considered deficient in these abstract attributes, and if Iraq is a shining example of a state,

know all too well that the invasion and colonisation had nothing to do with freedom, liberty, and for that matter, Saddam's weapons of mass destruction either. All but the most fanatical of them do realise that as far as Iraq is concerned, their project is a disaster. Even if the invaders apparently stepped into a minefield of uncertainty they still do not possess enough prescience or else how could they say that the Iraqi insurgency would wither away once Saddam was captured. Last November's determined destruction

battle field. Yet what the Americans somehow find it difficult to understand is that most Iraqis consider the occupation of their country a humiliating abomination. There would have been abiding resentment in the face of relatively civilized behaviour on the part of invaders. But then, civilization and the arbitrary invasion of sovereign states are contradictory phenomena in the first place.

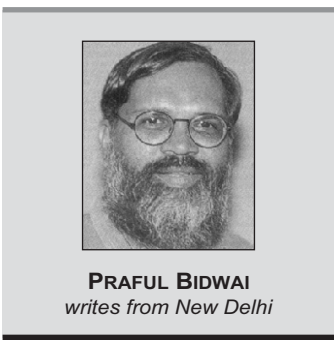
Finding no credible objective for heaping all the blame on -- the Americans have bandied about the

the Iraqi dictator but it may have an even sterner verdict in store for the Perles, Wolfwitzes, Rumsfelds, and Cheneys.

It is worth recalling, meanwhile, that the history of US imperialism suffered a serious blow on January 30 thirty-seven years ago. The National Liberation Force in South Vietnam mounted what came to be famous as its Tet offensive -- briefly over-running the US embassy in Saigon and several other strongholds of the puppet government. Although the effect of that military success was temporary it proved to be a turning point in the history of the Vietnam war, because the audacity of the attacks convinced most Americans that their nation's war against Vietnam was unwinnable. Robert Fisk feared that a decline in suicide bombing for sometimes past could mean special preparations on the part of insurgents to enact another Tet on the next Sunday, again January 30. Even if it did not happen, a Tet moment for Iraq cannot however be totally ruled out.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

# After Nepal's royal coup Making the King see reason



RECENT developments have dashed the hope that Nepal's King Gyandendra would substantially relax the draconian restrictions imposed on the freedoms of expression, political activity, and movement on February 1, when he dismissed Prime Minister Deuba.

The executive monarch has banned criticism of the security forces, "made directly or indirectly," and threatened to seize people's property whenever "necessary." Communications in Nepal remain under tight surveillance even as political leaders escape to India.

Evidently, strong criticism of the coup by the United Nations, major Western Powers and India hasn't yet had much impact. This might appear strange considering that Nepal's monarch rules -- shakily -- one of the world's 10 poorest countries, and that his writ doesn't run in two-thirds of Nepal's 75 districts, where the Maoists hold sway.

Clearly, King Gyandendra has had tacit support from a major Power. Or else, he wouldn't have ignored repeated warnings by the US, Britain, and India against dismissing Mr Deuba.

That power is probably China. On January 21, the King closed down the Dalai Lama's offices in Nepal. Beijing lavished praise on him. China regrettably describes the coup as an "internal matter" of Nepal. The King is playing "the

Nepal's parliamentary parties and the Maoists to jointly demand restoration of democratic freedoms. The opposition is becoming more coherent.

Since the King's dismissal of the first Deuba government in 2002, mainstream politicians have increasingly demanded a new quasi-republican constitution. They include leaders from the Koirala and Deuba factions of the Nepali Congress, Communist Party (United

results. No wonder 91 percent of Nepalis want either a new constitution or amendments to the existing constitution.

So, the Maoists' demand for a round-table conference, an interim government, and a Constituent Assembly is likely to gather popular and political-party support. If this happens, the future of the Shah dynasty could be in jeopardy.

The King is inviting the Maoists to talks. They will probably reject this

Many Nepalis would feel let down if India doesn't pressure the King to restore freedom. But India must be sensitive to Nepali sensibilities. The Nepalis resent India's perceived past political "interference," its proposals for construction of dams on common rivers, and its blockade of their landlocked country in 1988-89.

The Nepalis keep their clocks 15 minutes apart from Indian Standard Time -- a sign of independence!

dispensation. (RSS organs *Panchajanya* and *Organiser* support the King's coup.)

New Delhi was wrong to cancel the Dhaka Summit of Saarc to register its annoyance with the King. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should have attended the Summit and rebuked the King.

India must oppose a military solution to the Maoist insurgency crisis. The 78,000-strong RNA has proved incapable of defeating it although the Maoists only have 3,000 modern guns.

The Maoists use questionable, indeed deplorable, methods. But they are not terrorists. They have support in the countryside, which is a cesspool of unaddressed grievances and unredeemed injustices. These can only be addressed through land reform, minimum needs programmes in health and education, and a sweeping drive against corruption. India must encourage this.

India shouldn't expect much help from the US here. The US sabotaged talks with the Maoists by declaring them "terrorists" in April 2003. Earlier too, its post-9/11 militarist posture had a negative impact in Nepal and derailed negotiations.

However, India can count on the support of many other states -- and above all, large numbers of Nepalis.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

What should India do apart from deploring the coup, which will accelerate the collapse of the Nepali state -- right on its open borders? It should stop giving arms to the Royal Nepal Army and aid to the government (as distinct from NGOs delivering services to the people).

China Card." (Nepal also plays the "India Card" whenever that suits it.)

This is a high-risk gamble. Chinese support alone won't see King Gyandendra through his troubles. Beijing could easily dump him, as it did in the early 1990s.

The King has risked an even more reckless domestic gamble. He has removed the buffer between the Palace and an increasingly restive population. Now, he won't have the luxury of blaming political parties for the nation's growing problems.

His actions will probably further aggravate Nepal's multiple crises of governability and erode his own authority and credibility.

The King's takeover is spurring

Marxist-Leninist), Ekta Mashal, and Sadbhavana Party.

The King is committing a huge blunder in underestimating the pro-democracy sentiment amongst the Nepali people. The Nepalis have tasted freedom for 15 years. They prefer multi-party democracy to monarchy.

A 2003 survey by Tribhuvan University shows that 62 percent of Nepalis say "democracy is always preferable to any other form of government." Seventy eight percent favour either a limited monarchy or its abolition. Only 22 percent want an executive monarchy.

The King's rule by proxy since October 2002 has produced poor

offer after the February 8 helicopter raids on them. They regard the King as an absolutist "national betrayer," who wants to take Nepal back to the 15th century.

A pre-condition for talks between the King and any representatives of the people is the release of political leaders, and restoration of civil liberties.

The King must be firmly told this by the whole world, in particular, India. India and Nepal have innumerable family links and an open border with free movement of people and goods. Nepalis can join India's armed forces -- where over 30,000 Nepalis serve -- and rise to the highest levels. They can also join India's civil services.

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In recent years, India supplied Rs 375 crores worth of arms to Nepal, including helicopters, landmines, etc. which are liable to be used against civilians as well as insurgents.

One reason for this is New Delhi's fear that the Maoists would forge links with Indian Naxalites. This preoccupation was especially strong under the Vajpayee-Advani

# The death of Mr. Kibria: Ruling coalition must explain

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I never thought I would see this day when I would feel ashamed to be a Bangladeshi. The way our lawmakers and this government are behaving, to say the least, is disgraceful. At a time when lives are lost through all kinds of violent acts, a senior member of the ruling coalition appear on the TV screen with a broad smile and has this to say in relation to the death of Mr. Kibria, "The perpetrators behind the crime will be identified and justice meted out." The Rab, Cheetah, and Cobra are on with their free for all adventures of killing people through what they call "crossfire." Many seem to be quite elated by this "super performance of these super agencies." It is sad as to how the people of this region once known for their simplicity and docility in character have turned so violent, ruthless, and unforgiving? Where has our image as a moderate Muslim society disappeared to? We are slowly and surely preparing ourselves as ideal targets for intervention in our internal affairs by the super powers of the West. Our traders are corrupt,

our lawmakers and the opposition alike continually indulging in advancing partisan and coterie interests at the expense of national interests, and all in the name of protecting "democratic" traditions.

While the opposition specializes in occupying streets with its picket

tion. Both the opposition and the ruling coalition appear to have one single agenda. While the opposition wishes to topple the government at any cost, the government likewise is determined to cling to the seat of power come what may. In all this, the "people" who neither subscribe

If the opposition is failing to uphold the legacy of democratic traditions, the ruling coalition has made a mockery of it all. The ruling coalition also needs to explain as to how two of the most recent major bombings happened to have targeted major opposition rallies only.

ers breaking cars and throwing crackers at Rickshaw pullers and pedestrians, shutting down factories to register their protest, the ruling coalition relentlessly resort to using clubs on protestors. Today no other third world country has such street level violence on a regular basis like that of Bangladesh, not even Pakistan otherwise famously known as haven for terrorists. There has been an all round lack of political wisdom, management, and farsightedness on the part of both the ruling coalition and the opposi-

tion. Both the opposition and the ruling coalition appear to have one single agenda. While the opposition wishes to topple the government at any cost, the government likewise is determined to cling to the seat of power come what may. In all this, the "people" who neither subscribe

surpassed all previous records. The Habiganj carnage and the death of Mr. Kibria stands out as one of the blackest day in the life of our nation to date. The ruling coalition is obligated to the nation to carry out a full and thorough enquiry into the incident, bring the culprits to book and

ric. No more post facto display of so called sympathies to the members of bereaved families assassinated through terrorist attacks.

Why could not the PM visit the house of late Mr. Kibria on the day of the occurrence or at least appear in the electronic media condemning

made a mockery of it all. The ruling coalition also needs to explain as to how two of the most recent major bombings happened to have targeted major opposition rallies only. To say that the ruling party could not have been involved in such acts knowing fully well that this would reflect badly on them and also particularly at this time when the Saarc summit is knocking at the door does not clear its name automatically. The contention has to be proved beyond doubt.

This logic by the speaker that an obituary reference could not be made on the floor of the parliament before the speech of the president is not tenable. Legal implications or provision of the constitution aside, an obituary reference could be held before the speech of the president. One way would have been to be call for an emergency session of the parliament right on the day of the occurrence only to pass the obituary reference. Clearly the ruling coalition is complacent, suffers from inertia, or simply does not care.

The author is a frequent contributor to The Daily Star

# The balance of Saarc power

MONIRUL HOQUE

HAVING grown up in Dhaka in the 1980s, I was always told that Saarc was the brainchild of the Bangladesh government. At the time it seemed like a brilliant idea where cooperation amongst neighbouring South Asian nations would benefit the citizens of this region from a socioeconomic perspective. Also, free trade and boundary-less borders were amongst some of the things in the pipeline back then. By creating Saarc, the assumption was that each South Asian nations would be in a position to help the other nations and vice versa. Otherwise, why form a special club or union only to compete with one another?

Drawing global examples from

the past 10 to 15 years, it is now obvious that Associations and Unions such as Nafta, EU, Asean and most definitely Saarc do very little to no good for nations that don't possess the economic, political and/or military power to bully potential underlings. Bangladesh is no exception in falling victim to this. At the time, Bangladesh was thinking of Saarc as being mutually beneficial to all the nations. We obviously were extremely naive in thinking that our more powerful neighbour would be involved in a way that benefited us and the other nations as well as themselves (all my South Asian friends will hopefully not take offense at my statements as we surely know that almost invariably it is the governments that foster bad relationships in the South Asian regions, and not the people). Ban-

gladesh has a lot of growing up to do from our current state in Saarc with the aim to not bite off more than it can chew.

The latest Saarc conference postponement due to India's sudden refusal to attend sends a message that there is no Saarc without India. Let's face it; nobody would care if Bhutan, or any other of the five nations didn't attend. The funniest thing would be if, this time, the Bangladesh delegation for some reason said it would not attend even though they were hosting the conference. I wouldn't be surprised if the event would still go on without them. Some constitutional jargon would be pulled out to maintain, "the show must go on."

In all seriousness, I leave you fellow Bangladeshis and other South

Asians with a thought to ponder upon. In order to bring meaning to and progress through Saarc, there should be a balance of power amongst nations. For example, the six nations committed to attend should have shown leadership and absolutely gone ahead with the conference in Dhaka this year. In addition, they should have had the wisdom and good sense to invite China to be a part of the conference. China, which stands as one of the most powerful nations in the world today, has been keenly interested in becoming a Saarc member for a few years now. This move would have sent a message to all that we mean business.

Fellow Saarc nationals, let us empower ourselves with a common goal to get out of this stalemate now.

# Patriotism!

LOPA TASNEEM

I was watching the heated debate at the US Senate Hearing on the nomination of Condoleezza Rice for the post of Secretary of State. There were serious allegations made against Rice's integrity from some of the democratic senators. They had clear proof of her attempts to hide the truth from the American people on several occasions to sell the attack on Iraq.

The republican senators called it "petty politics" and said that they should all be united at a time of war. No matter how much they differ in their views, the world should see them as one Americanited and strong.

It sounded so similar to what

our prime minister has been telling us back at home: We the expatriates should not ruin the image of Bangladesh by making negative statements. If you love your country you should all be united. Bangla Bhai may not exist even though our newspapers are telling us a different story. The New York Times should be condemned for ruining our image before the world!

How cunningly the politicians try to get away from their sins! Anything goes in the name of patriotism. If you love your country, you should be able to question anything that your government feeds you. As soon as you protest an unjust act, you become unpatriotic; your love of the country is in question; you are ruining your country's

"bhaabamurti" abroad. As if the ruling party and its supporters have gotten the sole custody of "patriotism."

At the US senate, incidentally, the Democratic Senator Joseph Biden was quick to respond to this accusation of not being united: "There shouldn't be any doubt that the Americans all are united in their desire for finding a solution to the Iraq quagmire. The Democrats are questioning Dr Rice's nomination because the Bush administration isn't doing its best to find that very solution; and Dr Rice continues undermine the government's stated efforts to curb terrorism."

Raising doubts doesn't necessarily imply evil intentions and designs.

Criticizing someone should help her to be more honest next time. When someone gets so defensive as the Bangladeshi government has been in the case of Bangla Bhai, or the Bush government on the reasons for the invasion of Iraq, it makes one even more suspicious. In this time of the Information Age, it is not easy to hide the truth from the rest of the world.

When the government acts irrationally, whether in a democratic nation or under the rule of a dictator, it's the duty of the concerned citizens to protest. Isn't that how we achieved Bangla as our state language? Isn't that how we achieved our freedom from the tyranny of the Pakistanis?