

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 sullying 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 through 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



M ABDUL HAFIZ

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 gung-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 fanatics 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

PERSPECTIVES

Although the effect of the famed tet offensive 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.

itself, the war gave the impression of being a crusade against all Muslims around the world. As Edward Said aptly remarked, the Bush Administration seemed to wish to avenge the blood of innocent people killed in the World Trade Centre by shedding the blood of innocent people in Afghanistan.

that has been pumped full of these gifts, with democracy to follow in short order -- then why not proclaim that success?

Bush might be an exception, and would enthusiastically do that, but many of the neo-conservatives whose agenda he has embraced are not equally delusional. They

of Fallujah, they thought, would break the back of the resistance. That clearly hasn't happened.

In truth, the US has little idea precisely who it is up against. It is rumoured among Iraqis that Zarqawi was an American concoction when they needed a bogey man to replace Saddam -- elusive in the

idea lately that the prevailing instability and chaos in Iraq are a direct consequence of the vicious nature of Saddam's regime, although the truth is that today's bloody mess in Iraq is a direct consequence of the gratuitous invasion initiated by a small bunch of fanatics in Washington. History certainly won't absolve

the Iraqi dictator but it may have an even sterner verdict in store for the Perles, Wolfowitz, 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.

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After Nepal's royal coup Making the King see reason



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

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.

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

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!

What should India do apart from deplored 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

Marxist-Leninist), Ekti Mashal, and Sadbhava 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

after 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 service.

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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

dispensation. (RSS organs Panchayana 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 Mammooh 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.

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 their feet 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,

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

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

the attack and at the same time seek

people's co-operation in checking the spate of such bomb attacks including co-operation in free and fair conducting of the enquiry leading to identifying and capture of the culprits?

By not doing so she has not only lowered her image in the eyes of the general members of the public, but also implanted doubts in their minds as to the sincerity of her coalition government.

Such is the legacy of our politics and political management in brief. The current state however has

above all making the result of the investigation public. It is indeed outrageous to see in the electronic media that a cabinet meeting is in progress (with no less than the PM presiding) with the faces of each participant looking as though it is business as usual and nothing had happened. No less than the general secretary of the ruling party makes a brief appearance with a lingering smile through the corner of his lips announcing the government's determination to "catch the culprits" and punish them, an all too familiar rhetor-

ical attack and at the same time seek people's co-operation in checking the spate of such bomb attacks including co-operation in free and fair conducting of the enquiry leading to identifying and capture of the culprits?

One way would have been to 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.

If the opposition is failing to uphold the legacy of democratic traditions, 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 facto-

ries 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 politi-

cal wisdom, management, and

farsightedness on the part of both