

Why the AL should join the budget session

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE Chief Whip of the main opposition Awami League (AL) told The Daily Star on June 1 that the AL would not join the budget session of parliament scheduled to begin on June 7. The explanation furnished by the Chief Whip of the AL is that they don't want "to give legitimacy to the budget" by joining the budget session. The AL General Secretary has, however, told the journalists that a final decision on the issue would be taken at a meeting of the party's parliamentary wing prior to the session. We hope against hope that deliberations in the meeting of the party's parliamentary wing will be in favour of its joining the budget session.

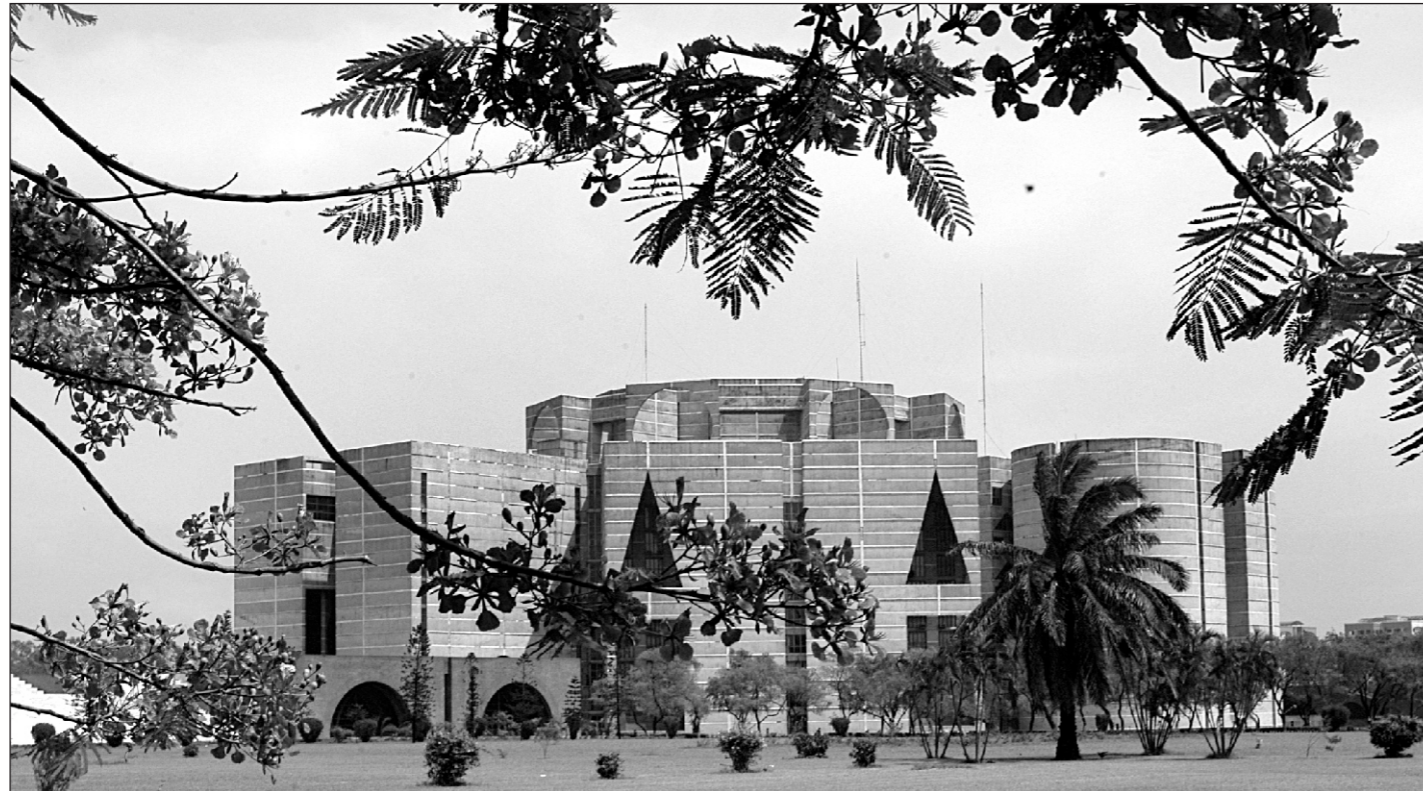
It is a fact that the AL has a poor record of participation in the sessions and sittings of the current parliament. But what led to such a situation? Is the AL alone responsible for this? Boycotting the parliamentary sessions and sittings has been a perennial problem since the reintroduction of parliamentary system of government in the country through the Constitution (Twelfth Amendment) Act, 1991.

The BNP government came to power on the results of the election held on February 27, 1991 under the caretaker government of President Shahabuddin Ahmed, a nominee of the combined opposition formed to topple the government of President Ershad. But the BNP government showed reluctance to the demand of the three major opposition parties — the AL, the Jatiya Party, and Jamaat-e-Islami — to formally introduce caretaker system of government in the constitution. So, the opposition resorted to hartals and sustained boycott of parliament. To press the ruling BNP, the MPs of the opposition parties went to the extent of submitting their resignation on December 28, 1994.

When the AL formed the government on the basis of results of parliamentary election of June 12, 1996, the main opposition BNP frequently boycotted parliament sessions and sittings on a number of allegations such as absence of neutrality of the Speaker, allowing insufficient time to opposition lawmakers to speak on national issues, corruption, misuse of powers by the government, etc. The sole objective of boycotting parliament by the opposition parties, in particular by the main opposition party in parliament from time to time, has been to make parliament dysfunctional and thereby force the party or alliance in power to step down.

Now the question is why should the main opposition AL join the forthcoming budget session? First, the budget is "the annual financial statement or the statement of the estimated receipts and expenditure of the Government of Bangladesh in respect of each financial year." Rules of procedure of parliament

Many political analysts are of the opinion that the BNP-led alliance government feels comfortable with the absence of the AL lawmakers in the House. The presence of many veteran parliamentarians of the AL in the House and their articulation of issues sometimes creates serious problems for the ruling alliance. The AL leadership should remember that the absence of their lawmakers from the House would only benefit the government.



(ROP) contain the details on the presentation, discussion, voting, and passage of the budget. The pertinent point here is that the House is at liberty to discuss the budget as a whole or any question of principle involved in it. There are already criticisms that "politics of vote" has influenced the formulation of the revised Annual Development Programme (ADP) of the current financial year as well as the ADP of the next financial year. Why should not the AL attend parliament to pinpoint that allocation in the vital sectors of the economy such as agriculture, education, health has been slashed down in the revised ADP to feed the rural infrastructure projects for earning votes? The main opposition AL should also point out in the House that the next financial year's ADP amounting to TK. 24,000 crore is "ambitious" and "unrealistic." The voters will be wooed with the promises of development.

Second, the AL must delineate how the increases in the prices of kerosene and diesel have adversely affected the common people of the country. The people are gasping under an increasing inflation rate. Inflation rate has been increasing steadily and stood at the highest point in the last five years at 6.72 percent in March on a point-to-point basis. The moving average of inflation is also at its highest level at 6.18 percent. The spending of about

50 percent unspent money of the revised ADP between April and June and the disbursement of the increased salaries of the public servants in June will lead to further increase in the rate of inflation. The AL lawmakers should not forget that they have to speak in the House for the removal of the grievances and sufferings of their voters.

Commenting on the AL Chief Whip's disclosure of the AL decision not to join the forthcoming budget session, The Daily Star in its editorial of June 3 writes: "We urge the AL leadership to join the parliament session without much ado. They have to realise that the JS is the house of the people, not of the government. People have elected their representatives to speak in parliament not to be absent from it. So, the AL's apparent failure to distinguish between the parliament and the government has only lowered the party's standing in the public eye. The AL MPs represent the people of their constituencies in the very least; and perhaps, more to the point, the country as a whole as the elected opposition."

Third, the AL claims that it is a pro-people party and it has its roots among the common people. So, quoting from the Poverty Monitoring Survey Report 2004 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the AL lawmakers may point out in the House how, in contravention of the professed state policy of reducing

income disparity gap between the poor and the rich, the income disparity gap between the poor and the rich actually widened in six years until 2004. Household income comparison in particular shows that the rich saw a household income level rise of 13.36 percent while the poor found it decreasing by 3.56 percent.

Fourth, the AL lawmakers should tell the nation through the House how corruption has been eating into the vitals of the national economy. The AL lawmakers may tell the people through the House how the country occupied the number one position in the corruption perception index of the Transparency International during all the past three years of the BNP-led alliance government.

Fifth, the main opposition AL and other opposition parties have demanded reforms in the caretaker government system and in the Election Commission. The AL in consultation with other opposition parties is expected to present before the nation the detailed proposals on these two issues shortly. It may be mentioned that according to Article 65 of the constitution, parliament is also known as the "House of the Nation." So, by participating in the budget session, the AL can also place those two proposals in the "House of the Nation." This will be their good strategy to fight for the reforms both inside and outside the

parliament.

Sixth, Amnesty International and the US State Department have expressed concern over the poor human rights in Bangladesh. Serious concern has been expressed over the extra-judicial killings following the deployment of rapid action battalion (RAB). The AL lawmakers can take up the human rights abuse issues for discussion in the House.

Seventh, many political analysts are of the opinion that the BNP-led alliance government feels comfortable with the absence of the AL lawmakers in the House. The presence of many veteran parliamentarians of the AL in the House and their articulation of issues sometimes creates serious problems for the ruling alliance. That is why neither the ruling alliance nor the guardian of the House, i.e. the Speaker, takes serious initiative to bring the AL lawmakers back to the House.

To conclude, the AL lawmakers should join the forthcoming budget session to discharge the responsibilities entrusted by the constitution and the ROP and to speak for their electorates. The AL leadership should remember that the absence of their lawmakers from the House would only benefit the government.

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THE POSADA CARRILES CASE

George Bush should practice what he preaches

RON CHEPESIUK

US President George Bush Jr. has vowed to hunt down terrorists no matter where they go or where they hide. On August 26, 2003, he said: "If you harbour a terrorist, if you support a terrorist, if you fund a terrorist, you are just as guilty as the terrorists."

That's eloquently put, but the fact is that one terrorist-related development in Bush's own backyard shows that, when it comes to bringing suspected terrorists to justice, the president is willing to make an exception to his vow, by practicing a hypocritical double standard and bending to political expediency.

In referring to the case of Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban native and Venezuelan national who is accused of involvement in a 1976 bombing of an airliner that killed 73 people on a flight from Caracas to Havana and is wanted by both Cuba and Venezuela. Interestingly, Posada Carriles was twice acquitted by Venezuelan courts of bombing the plane, but escaped from a Venezuelan prison in 1985 while awaiting another trial on appeal. He has been on the run ever since.

Last April, Posada Carriles quietly slipped into the US and is now awaiting a Bush administration decision on his request for residency status first given to him in 1962 and for political asylum, in part for his past work for the CIA on behalf of the Nicaraguan Contras. Last May 28, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez told reporters: "We demand that the US government stop its hypocrisy and its two faced attitude and send this terrorist [Posada Carriles] back to Venezuela."

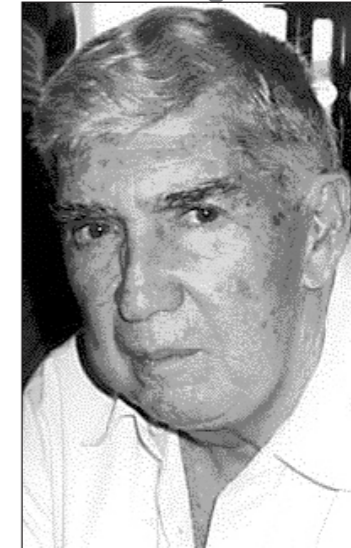
The gutsy Chavez, whose relations with the Bush administration can best be described as rocky, has threatened to break off diplomatic relations with the super power unless it meets Venezuela's demand. Uncle Sam needs to seriously consider this, given that Venezuela is the US' biggest oil supplier. Meanwhile Venezuelans are outraged and thousands of them have taken to the street to demand that Uncle Sam extradite Posada Carriles. There is plenty of evidence to contend that Posada Carriles was a hardcore terrorist long before Bin Laden or Al Qaeda appeared on the scene. He is linked to the car bomb murder of ex-Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier in Washington DC and to a series of bomb attacks in Havana, Cuba, which killed an Italian tourist.

According to US government documents, the Cuban was also involved in the sordid Iran Contra affair in which President Ronald Reagan attempted in the 1980s to topple Nicaragua's Sandanista government by selling arms to Iran and then using the money for his "freedom fighters," the Contras. In 2000, Posada Carriles was jailed in Panama for involvement in an alleged plot to assassinate Castro, but he was pardoned that year by outgoing Panamanian president Mireya Moscoso.

The incident illustrates the power of the virulently anti Castro Cuban-American lobby in Florida and its influence on US politics, especially the Republican Party. The lobby played a key role in Bush's two presidential campaigns and will play a key role in any political campaign that Bush's brother Jeb might make beyond his

INSIDE AMERICA

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erm as Florida governor. The reaction of the Cuban American population living in the Miami area illustrates well the familiar adage that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. A recent poll of 300 Cuban-Americans living in the Miami area revealed that 60 percent of them have a favourable opinion of Posada Carriles.

Still, the case has made international waves and could have fallout for the Bush administration as it pursues its War on Terrorism. It certainly has given Bush's many enemies a lot of ammunition. Consider:

- Last May, the 13th Brazilian Convention on Solidarity with Cuba denounced the US double standard concerning terrorism and its harbouring those who practice it.

- Thanks to the Bush administration policy on the Posada Carriles matter, Cuba is using the controversy for its own propaganda purposes, despite the fact that it is harbouring its own Posada Carriles, Assata Shakur, a member of the Black Liberation Army, a branch of the Black Panther Party, Shakur, who fled to Cuba 25 years ago, was found guilty in US court of the 1973 killing of a New Jersey state trooper, but Cuba won't give up the suspect to US authorities.

- Although Posada Carriles is wanted by Cuba, Venezuela has said unequivocally that it would not extradite the suspected terrorist to Cuba if the US ever approves its extradition request.

- Mexico concedes that Posada Carriles entered the U.S. illegally on his way to the US, but says that Cuba didn't warn it in time that Posada was in the country. Mexico's foreign minister has said that his country would have extradited Posada to Venezuela if it knew of Posada's presence there.

- Even the far away Philippines has been caught up in the international incident, for Cuba has asked for the country's help with the matter because it is a staunch US ally. Last May 30, a Philippine spokesman told the Philippine Star newspaper that, "The DFA (the country's Department of Foreign Affairs) is studying the matter carefully. We prefer that this be handled through diplomatic channels."

In the British Isles, Rosie Kane, Scottish Socialist Party and member of Scottish the parliament, told the BBC News: "I am going to Cuba in the spirit of international solidarity, for truth and justice, and I'll be taking the message that the people of Scotland stand alongside the people of Cuba in opposition to the war mongers in the White House." Meanwhile, Great Britain's Solidarity with Cuba Executive Committee has demanded that the Bush administration extradite Posada Carriles to Venezuela.

It would be disturbing enough if Posada Carriles was the only suspected Cuban terrorist harboured and coddled by the US government, but, unfortunately, there are others. Orlando Bosch, for instance, a co-conspirator in the Havana hotel bombings, was about to be deported when George Bush Sr. granted him US residency, and the Cuban is now living the good life in Miami. Two other anti-Castro terrorists, Jose Dionisio Suarez Esquivel and Virgilio Paz Romero, were serving time for Letelier's murder when they were quietly released from jail by Bush Jr. Indeed, according to Amnesty International reports, the US has long been a haven for death squad members and deposed Latin America right wing dictators suspected of human rights violations.

Fortunately, some members of the US Congress have realized the damage the Posada Carriles matter can do to the US and have not let the matter rest. They have asked President Bush to deny Posada Carriles asylum and to extradite him to Venezuela. They have compared the 1976 airplane bombing to the events of September 11.

Bush should listen to the congressman and take note of the growing international outrage over his handling of the suspected terrorist seeking refuge in the US. He needs to be consistent in his policy toward terrorism, no matter its origin, if he expects to have the strong support of the global community in the War on Terrorism. Meanwhile, we Americans don't need to see any more terrorists living the good life in Miami.

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Freedom's cry: Pink Revolution in Kyrgyzstan

SAAD KHAN

THE recent bloodbath in Uzbekistan was a test case for democracy and the free world. The champions of free world failed it, and failed it miserably. The wave of democracy that has led people to lay down their lives for freedom has resulted in the emergence of quite a few democracies in the world, more notably and more recently, in the Russian periphery. The nascent democracy is just like an incipient plant, which has to be nurtured, watered and cared for, otherwise it may wither and dry up. The new democracies need support from the civilized world, which at the same time, must demonstrate its unequivocal determination not to permit or condone state tyranny against civilians anywhere in the world. After the March events in Kyrgyzstan, it was more or less writing on the wall that people would come out on the streets in Uzbekistan. The West remained unprepared for that and when the time arrived, a green signal was given to Islam Karimov to go ahead and butcher his people. All of this augurs ill for the future of democracy and for that of humanity.

Instead of the freedom loving people worldwide becoming emboldened, the recent incidents have comforted the despots around the globe, that let alone bringing them to account for their crimes against humanity, they could rather be encouraged to go ahead in throttling freedoms, if only their policies in general did not annoy the Western powers otherwise. Now the chances of Uzbekistan following the model of Kyrgyzstan seems increasingly remote, while the reverse happening, that is the new Kyrgyz leadership becoming authoritar-

ian on the Uzbek pattern, is more likely.

Kyrgyzstan, the latest addition in velvet revolutions, was one of the most unexpected of places, where the sheer motivation of the people could have thrown away the yokes of despotism. A relatively unheard of nation of five million, the land-locked, mountainous and tribal republic of Kyrgyzstan, remains among the most isolated countries in the world. It is one of the six Muslim majority republics of the former Soviet Union that changed colonial masters in 1991; the Russians left these republics in the hands of "indigenous Stalins" -- groomed and trained by Moscow.

Little wonder, independence from Moscow was only nominal. The Russians retained military bases, controlled all the industry and resources, and dictated the foreign and even domestic policies of these nations. Russia purported to embrace democracy at home, but would not tolerate the same in her hinterlands like Georgia, Ukraine, and Central Asia, not if she had a choice. One after the other, three nations have manifested their will and determination to show Moscow's protégés the exit door. The peoples of the three Baltic republics had done this a bit earlier, around a decade and a half ago.

In Georgia, red rose was the symbol of the opposition led by the present President Saakashvili, the colours of Yuschenko's camp in Ukraine were orange and that of the democratic opposition in Kyrgyzstan happened to be pink. These colours of revolution have come to symbolize the spirit and colour of freedom.

The revolution in Kyrgyzstan was the biggest surprise not only because of the sheer momentum

The US President George Bush met with Ukrainian leader Viktor Yuschenko and made a point to visit Georgia to show solidarity with the people's revolution that brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power; his decision not to visit Kyrgyzstan, that could have been a morale booster for all the democratic forces in the region, is not something that could have missed the eye.



of events. Each day, one would write a column to post to papers the following day, when it would have already become too late to be of any relevance. The speed of pen would fail to keep pace with the zeal of the Kyrgyz nation. They did it, without the ostentatious display of American money and European support, as was much too evident in the streets of Kiev and Tblisi, in the heydays of crises there. The protests in Kyrgyzstan, in the Southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad, however, were the spontaneous reaction to a rigged parliamentary election, orchestrated to bring in the kith and kin and close cronies of ousted leader Askar Akayev, and manipulated to bar all prominent

opposition figures. Opposition was doled a mere six-seat presence in a House of seventy-five deputies, that too, only for media consumption abroad. The writing on the walls was clear, Akayev would not only belie his promises to step down after three terms of unchallenged rule, in October this year, by managing an amendment through a rubber stamp parliament, but open the way for his children to rule the country after him. If Azerbaijan's Haydar Aliyev and Syria's Hafiz el Asad have treated their nations as a family property, bequeathing the throne to playboys sons, what after all was wrong with Akayev's daughter? For weeks, Kyrgyzstan was being ruled by two parallel gov-



ernments, a fragile administration in the North and a mob rule in the South. Akayev's reaction to the situation was more or less a textbook response of dictators. He first called the protesters traitors and refused even to discuss demands for re-polling; then when things grew out of hand, he showed willingness to negotiate, while exploiting the Western sensitivities to Islamic fundamentalists by calling all of them Islamists; and finally, firing his own Interior Minister for being soft on the citizens, appointing a former intelligence chief to the post who immediately threatened use of live fire arms. Like Islam Karimov, he finally did order a bloodbath, but in this instance,

the forces refused and rather helmeted mounted police were seen joining the protesters, shouting slogans against Akayev. Fearing for his own life, Akayev ran away from the country. Meanwhile the country's Supreme Court stepped in by annulling the results of parliamentary elections.

Like all the four neighboring Central Asian republics, the Kyrgyz despotism survived by playing on the fear of resurgent Islam, exploiting the presence of rich mineral resources to lure Western economic interests, and permitting the presence of military bases to both the United States and Russia. The ostentatious and over stocked US military base at Manas remaining in place in sharp

contrast to the typically impoverished Russian base at Kant, both not far from the capital Bishkek, are standing testimonies to the fact that too many vested interests and stakes from divergent ends had been collected in Kyrgyzstan, so that no power in the world really wished a change in status quo, except that of the common men and women of Kyrgyzstan.

Like in Iraq, Cuba, and North Korea, the potentially most destabilizing factor in a post-dictatorship phase is the paucity of recognized public leadership, since none is allowed to grow in authoritarian dispensations. There is no leader in Kyrgyzstan whose hands are not red for past collaboration with the same regime that has been ousted. Now acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev, was Prime Minister till recently, Foreign Minister Felix Kulov was a former Vice President and head of Security, and the new Speaker Ishenbai Kadyrbekov was a party leader.

With this background, the future is clear, either there would be a stable democracy, if the free world supports the new regime, or it's going to be a bloody civil war, Iraq-style, if it doesn't. In Ukraine and Georgia, the discontent was not to that level that people would have risked their lives for a change in government. It was only when the Western powers made clear to the communist regimes that killing spree was not an option, the people got emboldened. In Central Asia, the discontent is to a level that life has ceased to remain the highest priority for freedom-starved nations. Yet, if the world remains a silent spectator in the post-revolution Kyrgyzstan, then it would be a social, political, and environmental catastrophe.

With the struggle between democrats and despots becoming over, the clan-based and regional tensions may surface. Ethnic rivalries between Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Chinese, Uighur, and Korean nationalities may turn violent. The erstwhile landlords, fiercely opposed to Akayev's land reforms, may also jump into the fray. And the organized crime gangs, largely responsible for the looting in Bishkek following the flight of Akayev, may try to make hay while the sun of instability shines. The impoverished elected leadership would not even be able to tackle the environmental and ecological impact of two million cubic metres of Soviet era radioactive waste, buried at 23 different sites in Mayli-Say region. In short, Kyrgyzstan has all the seeds to become mayhem, unless the leadership of the free world shows sagacity and farsightedness.

The US President George Bush met with Ukrainian leader Viktor Yuschenko and made a point to visit Georgia to show solidarity with the people's revolution that brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power; his decision not to visit Kyrgyzstan, that could have been a morale booster for all the democratic forces in the region, is not something that could have missed the eye. The message is clear, democracy is not welcome at any place where the US has oil or gas interests. It is time that the opinion makers and intelligentsia of the world unite and cry for freedom. Moreover, to act as a deterrent for future adventurers and tyrants, the United Nations should be moved to work on a blue-print for an International Criminal Court to try ousted dictators for crimes against humanity.

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