

## PM's grand rally pronouncements

*We wish these had not been more of the same*

It was a massive rally of a truly ruling party character, impressive with mobilisation of people, vibrant with resolute chants and slogans and somewhat festive in a show of strength in an election year. It had all the makings of a historic occasion though, for the PM, to reach out to the broader audience by focusing on a contemporary challenge, the like of which this nation has seldom faced after her independence. Since the recent accelerated rise in the incidence of militant bombings, the entire nation has been living in dire distress looking for a directional change.

Our expectations were high when the PM rose to address the mammoth public gathering at Paltan Maidan that she would indeed provide the nation with a comprehensive programme for effectively dealing with ideological extremism that casts a shadow on the immediate future of the country. Far from anything substantive coming from her on the issue, we heard more of the same old diatribe against the opposition, perhaps in a more virulent form. More to the point, and unfortunately at that, her address sidetracked the single most important need of the moment, that for national reconciliation and unity without which terrorism cannot be effectively faced up to.

The entire nation including the media, on several occasions, has repeatedly supported PM's call for an all-party dialogue, especially inclusive of the main opposition. It also tried to prevail upon the opposition the need to take the dialogue offer. Admittedly, the opposition has acted irresponsibly by turning down the call for a dialogue, but this speech, if anything, has not advanced the cause in any way. On the contrary, we feel that deliberations like these merely help in further damaging whatever prospect may have existed for a dialogue and consensus building.

On the whole, the speech appeared to be rather unduly provocative, reflective of a rather narrow perspective and aimed at sending stern signals to the opposition. We fail to understand that when some arrested extremists admitted to a plot for replacing the constitution of the country by an obscurantist version and a handful of their ilk openly talk of desecrating our national flag and threatened to banish our national anthem, their acts are not regarded as seditious but some 'provocative' remarks of the leader of the opposition so much as evoke a prime ministerial reaction to the effect that if the former didn't stop saying those things, sedition charges might be pressed against her.

Time is fast running out. We hope good sense will prevail all around. Unity and not division is the call of the time.

## Violating height limits

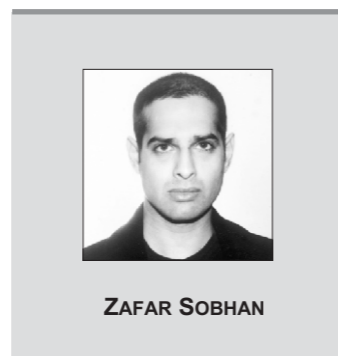
*A nightmare we can no longer live with*

OVERSHOOTING the height ceilings set for high-rise buildings has been going on for years. It is more pronounced in certain areas than in others. The violations in most cases involve commercial buildings. Without exception, whenever the landowner and the developer involved in the construction work are questioned, they respond by saying that they have had the permission of RAJUK, the government agency responsible for overseeing the implementation of the restriction. Day by day, the problem is getting more and more complicated. No less than the minister in charge of public housing himself said the other day, that "corruption" amongst the officials concerned was the problem. It is indeed shockingly revealing that some retired officials were detected to have been providing backdated approvals. We find it rather absurd that authorities of the government are aware of the problem and have also identified individuals and the organisation responsible for flagrant violations of building codes, yet no one is made accountable for lapses. The problem is further complicated due to the ambiguity of existing laws making it easier for the perpetrators to wriggle out of the offence.

Additional buildings with additional heights mean more people, more vehicles, creating problems for the already ever-growing population. More than most of the high-rise buildings either have no parking facilities or if any, it is simply inadequate. On top of it some owners are even renting out whatever specified parking areas are there. High-rise buildings are posing a threat to existing capacities of our sewerage systems. It is also bound to have a severe impact on our already burdened water supply network. The level of our ground water has already plummeted due to excessive drawing of water for household uses.

As it is, the overall state of the high-rise buildings is a major threat to our existing civic amenities as well as to our environment not just for now but for our future generations, too. We wish to see some real actions on the ground by the administration.

# Season's greetings from PM to opposition



ZAFAR SOBHAN

HERE is still a week left but it seems fair to say that the year appears to be ending on a combative note. Talk of compromise or cooperation between the government and the opposition — on the terror threat or any other subject — looks like a far cry today, and the relationship between the two sides is as distant and distrustful as it has ever been.

The speech given by the prime minister at the BNP grand rally at Paltan Maidan on December 21 was certainly a disquieting one for those who were hoping for some kind of rapprochement or reconciliation between the government and the opposition with which to celebrate the end of another difficult year for the country.

Instead, what we heard was an unmistakable shot across the bow of the AL leadership that sent the clear message to the opposition to watch its step. Speaking obliquely, but clearly referencing the leader of the opposition, the prime minister warned that she could face sedition charges if she did not "restrain her tongue" and "refrain from creating anarchy."

Excoriating the AL-led main opposition for its refusal to participate in a national dialogue to combat terror, the prime minister and

other senior cabinet ministers directly pointed the finger of blame at the opposition, stating forthrightly for the record that those who stayed out of the dialogue were the accomplices of the militants.

This is nothing new. Even in the run up to the national dialogue, senior members of the government, including the prime minister, did not hesitate to openly and publicly lay the blame for the rise of extremism at the door of the main opposition.

It should be noted that thus far

erment and at worst be used as a set-up to turn the tables on the opposition.

"In what capacity are we being invited to attend the dialogue," questioned senior AL leader Saber Hossain Chowdhury, "are we being invited as the prime accused to face charges of complicity and terrorism or are we being invited as participants in the dialogue on an equal footing?"

So long as the prime minister and other senior ruling alliance leaders,

Today I am not so sure.

The speech made by the prime minister at Paltan Maidan seemed to signal that a threshold has been crossed and that the government is determined to take action against its enemies. The government's enemies being defined as the opposition and not the extremists.

The prime minister's fire-breathing speech is not the only reason to suspect the government is moving into high gear when it comes to attempting to turn around its

ratified in parliament early next year. As with the campaign to silence the press, this move seems aimed more at intimidating and harassing the political opponents of the government than as a legitimate effort to tackle the terror threat.

Finally, in the aftermath of the twin suicide bombings on Chittagong and Gazipur court premises on November 29, it was reported that the government is considering an army-led combing operation similar to Operation Clean

tions. The leader of the opposition's statements might be incendiary, and even unhelpful, but there is no need to fear that they will form the template for state action.

The government does control the state machinery, and that is why the statements made by the prime minister implicating the opposition are that much more alarming than the very similar statements made by the leader of the opposition implicating the government. This is more than a tit-for-tat blame game.

Secondly, there is abundant evidence, from confessional statements of those arrested in connection with the bombings, to documented ties between the extremists and members of the ruling alliance, to statements made by concerned members of the ruling alliance itself about the links between the extremists and elements within the government, to back up the opposition claim that there is a nexus between the militants and a section of the government.

I would prefer it if the leader of the opposition made her claims of government complicity in terrorism in a national dialogue rather than at public meetings. I think that both the country and indeed the opposition would have been better served by such an approach, which would both put the government on the spot and give it the opportunity to respond.

However, the prime minister's claims of opposition complicity in terrorism are, for the reasons stated above, far more worrisome, and concern for what it all means for the future of the nation hangs over our head as the year comes to a close.

Meanwhile, let us not forget that the terrorists are still out there planning their next attack.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

The prime minister's fire-breathing speech is not the only reason to suspect the government is moving into high gear when it comes to attempting to turn around its political fortunes. However, as with the PM's speech, the other measures put in place or contemplated by the high command seem more calculated to restrain the administration's political enemies than to counter terrorism.

not one of the JMB cadres who have been arrested pursuant to the drive against extremism has been charged with sedition, even though the stated mission of the organization is to replace the country's entire democratic system of governance with a religious theocracy, and that they had been involved in bombings and other acts of violence in pursuit of this goal.

When I spoke to senior opposition leaders prior to the decision to decline to attend the national dialogue on terror convened by the government, the principal reason they gave for their refusal to attend was their belief that the government was acting in bad faith and had no intention of entering into a meaningful discourse on the issue or of taking the steps necessary to counter the threat.

The dialogue would at best provide political cover for the gov-

continued to point the finger at the AL without one shred of supporting evidence or substantiation, there could be no scope for discussion, he told me.

The senior AL leadership claimed to be genuinely concerned that if they participated in the dialogue, and that it went poorly as anticipated, that the government might try to use this failure to demonstrate that the opposition were the ones behind the militancy and use the breakdown in the talks as an excuse to send the law enforcement authorities after them.

I thought that it was a mistake for the main opposition to boycott the dialogue and did not find this line of reasoning persuasive. I did not think at the time that the government would move beyond its rhetoric of implicating the opposition to take actual steps to bring them to book for their supposed crimes.

political fortunes. However, as with the PM's speech, the other measures put in place or contemplated by the high command seem more calculated to restrain the administration's political enemies than to counter terrorism.

Senior members of the government continue to rail at the media at every opportunity and there is serious discussion on the table to amend the Press Council Act to bring the press into line. This proposal comes hard on the heels of a systematic campaign on the part of the government to discredit the press due to its reporting on the failures and the misdeeds of the administration, specifically with respect to the unchecked rise of extremism during its tenure.

In addition to this, last week the president promulgated an ordinance legalizing the tapping of telephone lines, which is set to be

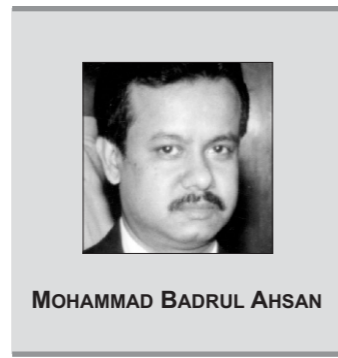
Heart to combat the militants who were responsible for the recurring bomb blasts and suicide attacks across the country.

These developments, when taken together with the prime minister's recent speech, do seem to indicate that perhaps there is something to the opposition's fears of being targeted by the government. It is clear that at the very least the government is determined to silence or intimidate its critics and opponents.

For its part, the opposition has been equally vocal in implicating the government in the rise of extremism and the bomb blasts and suicide bombings that have brought such anxiety and apprehension to the nation.

However, in the first place, the opposition does not have at hand the machinery of the state to take any action pursuant to its allega-

# Our fiddling Neros



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NERO fiddled in a burning Rome. If you know that, then you also know that leaders don't always look after their people. Multiply this reality by the number of political parties, and you will get the magnitude of our misfortune. There are four political parties in the ruling alliance, fourteen in the opposition, and several others floating around. Too many leaders are fiddling in politics, while people go on suffering.

If the politics of the past few weeks should remind us of anything, it is as if the parents of bride and groom were fighting over a proper invitation to the wedding. The Prime Minister called the political parties to a dialogue with the government. The opposition spurned that call because they claimed it was not a proper invitation. Then a messenger from the PM's office hand-carried a letter from the Prime Minister to the Leader of the Opposition, which was received by none other than a security guard who said there was nobody in the house and that he had no prior knowledge that the letter was coming.

All of that high drama would

have been cute if we weren't living in exceptional times. The country was reeling under suicide bombs, and the politicians were looking for deals. That is where the Neroesque mentality sets in. The leaders stick to their guns no matter what. Now you know why Nero fiddled in a burning Rome. Power has nothing to do with the plight of people.

H.L. Mencken, American journalist and literary critic, once joked that the US President Calvin Coolidge slept more than any other President, whether by day or night,

politicians are somehow incapacitated, their passion ingrained in their profession, everything they do being part of the game, every move, every word, crafted to gain tactical mileage.

But it is obnoxious to see that happening right in the middle of a national crisis. It is almost like this country has been invaded by an alien force, which is threatening to disrupt our security and freedom. Perhaps it's the most crucial time in our history since independence, yet the circus hasn't stopped for a

has been call for the ouster of Jamaat-e-Islam from the ruling alliance. All of that is fine. But how is that going to solve the problem? How is it going to dampen the kegs of gunpowder, detonators, and explosives, which lie around in the nooks and corners of this country? How is it going to rein in the madness that has seized the hearts of countless men, who are convinced that the world can be changed if they blow up everything?

If anybody cares to read, there is clear sign of defiance in the vic-

there is a limit to everything, that rotting stops when it becomes fertilizer. Only if you will look at this contradiction! Our self-serving politics has met with its nemesis. There are selfless people who are ready to die in order to change it.

In 1770, Edmund Burke wrote in Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents, "When bad men combine, the good must associate, else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle." Let us face it, we are currently engaged in a contemptible

cause, admirably setting aside any concern for their own well-being, even life, to propagate their message.

It is silly that both politicians and militants have one thing in common. They don't have any consideration for the people. On every other matter, they stand on opposite ends. The politicians hanker after life, the militants blow it away. The politicians want earthly recognition, the militants want a place in heaven. The politicians are calculative, the militants are decisive. The politicians use the world in the hope to embellish their lives; the militants use their lives in the hope to embellish the world.

The purpose of the peroration is to make a point. Today's militancy is an outburst of yesterday's politics. Politics of confrontation has nourished the rage which has invoked the militant response. If politicians are fighting today to blame each other it is only intensifying the confrontation amongst them, which will only help the growth of militancy instead of bringing it to an end.

The opposition has given a fresh deadline for the fall of government. The ruling party gathered in a grandstand last Wednesday to show that it was ready for show-down. What will happen to the militancy? How can you cure cirrhosis if you can't stop drinking? Neros of the country are least bothered. They are fiddling in the burning Rome, so long as they can walk in the corridors of power. Until the day comes when the militants will turn upon them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

Today's militancy is an outburst of yesterday's politics. Politics of confrontation has nourished the rage which has invoked the militant response. If politicians are fighting today to blame each other it is only intensifying the confrontation amongst them, which will only help the growth of militancy instead of bringing it to an end.

but while Nero fiddled, Coolidge only snored. One of the dismal businesses of politics in our part of the world is that it doesn't always guarantee that leaders will be wakeful to the needs of their people. From the times of Nero when people were ruled in the name of God to modern-day democracy when the country is ruled in the name of people, this is one thing which hasn't changed. The leader comes before the party and the party comes before the people. People are the means of power, not its end.

Take it or leave it, that's how politics works. Politicians are different animals. We have weekends, festivals, obligations and duties when we are able to set aside occupational calling to make personal considerations. But the

minute. It's business as usual for our politicians. It's the same intransigence, same arrogance, same clever maneuvering to fish in the troubled water.

Perhaps the timing is bad, a national crisis coinciding with election-year extravaganza. Every party needs to stand up and stand out, roll up their sleeves to reach out and touch the voters. Perhaps our politicians don't know how to keep things separate, subsuming the larger national cause within their habitually narrow political interests. Yet it is hard to believe that such is the case, that even at the time of grave national danger they must act for political gain.

That is what has happened though. There has been call for the government to step down. There

lence imprecated by the militants. People are blowing up to make that point, to denounce the degeneration, to renounce the recklessness that marks the state of our politics. It has taken time to arrive at that extreme, to undergo the upheaval that sends death-bound souls to their sacrificial frenzy. There is a trajectory of transformation about the whole thing. Between exploitation and explosion, the militants are seething with the fervent fury to strike at the fetid fulcrum of our putrid politics.

In fact the militants are the by-product of our mindless politics, a reaction to the infraction in the moral discourse of our public life where we have pushed the envelope too far to condone all mischief. The militants are a reminder that

struggle but the good aren't willing to associate with the bad. Yet the question is who is good and who is bad between politicians and militants? One slowly kills hundreds of thousands, another kills dozens in a bang. One is clever, another is committed. One is opportunistic, another is fundamentalist. One exploits, another explodes.

Without any intention of glorifying the militants, we must ponder how they are different from the erstwhile rebels of earlier centuries, except that here the ideology is religion as opposed to some man-made doctrine. Rightly or wrongly, these people are killing and dying for their belief, their well-meaning intention obfuscated by the means they have adopted. But these people are fighting for a larger

# The Speaker and our parliament

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

A recent front-page item in The Daily Star ("Four years of Jamiruddin Sircar: Putting party before parliament," October 30, 2005) expressed serious disillusionment with the performance of the honourable Speaker of our Jatiya Sangsad. The writup pointed out that during the last four years of his tenure as the Speaker, Sircar could not rise above partisan interests and clearly compromising the sovereignty and effectiveness of the legislature. It cited several incidents and quoted Sircar's parliamentary colleagues in support of the contentions. Such contentions, if true, are clear threats to our nascent democracy.

Democracy is a rule by the ruled. Consent of the people is its basis. Parliament essentially embodies democracy. It is a pivotal institution through which the will of the people is expressed, laws are enacted and government is held to account. Through it, the popular self-government is established in practice. Thus, the functioning of parliament, or lack of it, truly reflects the effectiveness of a democracy.

A truly democratic parliament has several essential characteristics. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), it is one that:

**Representative:** The parliament must include representation of/by all sectors of society with a view towards reflecting national and gender diversity. It must ensure representation of marginalised or excluded groups. As the elected body that represents society in all its diversity, parliaments have a unique responsibility for reconciling the conflicting interests and expectations of different groups and communities through the democratic means of dialogue and compromise.

**Transparent:** The proceedings of the parliament must be open to the nation through different media. There must also be transparency in the conduct of its business, which can be ensured through dissemination of relevant information about its activities.

**Accessible:** The parliament must ensure public participation in pre-legislative scrutiny and provide for open consultation for interested parties on matters of their interest. It must also allow lobbying within the limits of agreed legal provisions consistent with the principle of transparency.

**Accountable:** Members of the parliament must be accountable to the electorate for their performance in office. Such accountability must be ensured through proper monitor-

The effectiveness of our parliament has been deteriorating over the years. According to some observers, it has increasingly become a lame and tame body. Sircar, as the speaker of our eighth parliament, failed to provide effective leadership to prevent this slide toward dysfunction. In fact, during his tenure the slide has become perhaps more obvious and serious. Our parliament, in the face of continued boycott of the opposition, has now become more or less a rubber-stamp body, giving stamps of approval to executive actions without intervention or scrutiny.

ing and reporting procedures. There must also be strict ethical standards, codes of conduct, and limits on election expenses for them. They must also report outside interests and incomes to avoid conflicts of interest.

**Independent:** There must be mechanisms and resources to ensure the independence and autonomy of parliament, including its control over own budget and its own committees. It must also have non-partisan professional staff separate from the executive wing and capability for independent research and information gathering.

**Effective:** There must be effective organisation of parliamentary business in accordance with democratic values and norms to achieve efficiency. It must have systematic procedures for ensuring executive accountability and adequate powers and resources for enforcing such accountability. It must be able

to shape national policies. Parliament must also have effective engagement in the national budget, including the subsequent auditing of accounts. In addition, it must have the ability and powers to address issues of concern to the society, to mediate in the event of tensions and prevent violent conflicts, and to shape public institutions that cater to the needs of the entire population rather than a few. Furthermore, parliament must approve senior ranking appointments and international treaties.

It is clear that parliament is the nerve centre of a democracy. The Speaker is the guardian of the parliament. Thus, the role of the Speaker should be to ensure that the characteristics of a democratic parliament prevail in reality. On a day-to-day basis, more specifically, his job is to preside over the meetings of the parliament, to maintain order and decorum in legislative

proceedings, to ensure parliamentary oversight, to represent the legislature in dealing with the government, and to oversee the parliament's administration. He must ensure fair and inclusive parliamentary procedures to turn it into a truly deliberative, rationalist, open and consensual body. He must also maintain an atmosphere of collegiality and cohesiveness rather than a hostile environment, which is sometimes the case in mindless adversarial politics.

Another important role of the Speaker is to engage in inter-party dialogue and also negotiations for executive-legislative balance. In Nordic countries, for example, where minority governments have essentially become the norm and "bargaining democracy" is regularly practiced, frequent negotiations are needed for compromised solutions to many issues of importance. In our country, the negotiating role of the

Speaker is particularly important because of the intolerant and confrontational attitudes of our political parties.

In order to successfully perform these roles, the Speaker's neutrality must be beyond questions. Sincerity, wisdom and courage must be his/her demonstrated qualities. He must also be a skilful facilitator.

The conduct of Sircar and the way of his conducting the Jatiya Sangsad as its Speaker must be judged against his ability to ensure the characteristics of a democratic parliament. His performance must be assessed with respect to his success, or lack of it, in carrying out effective negotiations between our combative political parties. He must also be evaluated in terms of his personal qualities of head and heart. Readers can judge the justifications of the senior concerns raised in the Daily Star article

against these criteria and easily make their own judgment.

However, one thing is clear, Sircar, like his predecessors, has not been able to improve the quality of debates in the parliament. Mudslinging and irrelevant rancorous rhetoric are still the norm of the discussions in the floor of the house. More seriously, his inability to strengthen parliamentary oversight functions in the face of accusations of rampant corruptions and sleaziness by members of the executive branch is a matter of serious and far-reaching consequences. Many of our lawmakers have also become lawbreakers and are engaged in the naked pursuit of selfish interests to the detriment of national interests. The parliament has clearly failed to police itself against unethical and corrupt conducts, and thus has largely become a body devoid of accountability. What is most disturbing is Sircar's contention, reported in the daily Prothom Alo (October 28, 2005), that a parliament can function effectively in spite of the ongoing absence of the opposition from its proceedings.

Another important issue. The speaker is only a heartbeat away from becoming the head of the state. In fact, Sircar had the unique opportunity to become the acting President for 73 days. Thus, he

needs to demonstrate the highest ethical standard — higher than what is called for an ordinary citizen. National interest, rather than the coterie interests, must also be his highest priority. Many thoughtful citizens have been greatly surprised by our honourable Speaker's role, or lack of it, in the sordid incident of building the two houses for the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker, defacing our Sangsad Bhaban, which is a world-renowned architectural masterpiece.

To conclude, the effectiveness of our parliament has been deteriorating over the years. According to some observers, it has increasingly become a lame and tame body. Sircar, as the speaker of our eighth parliament, failed to provide effective leadership to prevent this slide toward dysfunction. In fact, during his tenure the slide has become perhaps more obvious and serious. Our parliament, in the face of continued boycott of the opposition, has now become more or less a rubber-stamp body, giving stamps of approval to executive actions without intervention or scrutiny. This clearly does not bode well for our budding democracy.

The author is Member-Secretary, SHUJAN, and Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project-Bangladesh.