Making Parliament Effective

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN, MUSTAFA ZAMAN
AHMEDE HUSSAIN and SHAMIM AHSAN

PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN & STAR FILE

Bangladesh is about to step into its 35th year of being an independent nation. But it is a birthday that gives rise to mixed feelings. Of course we celebrate this day that marks our freedom from a fascist rule but it is also a reminder of all the vows our leaders have broken over these three and a half decades.

Immediately after its independence came the enactment of a liberal constitution under which the first elections were held. But the first four stormy years ended in disappointment, tragedy and disillusionment; the people of this nation faced a stifling period of military rule that had cast an ominous shadow on the glory of freedom. But the restoration of democracy in 1991 after about a two-decade long autocracy and military rule brought back the hope that finally our country was about to become the nation it was meant to be. In those early months of 1991 as the autocratic Ershad bowed down to a popular movement and handed over power to Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed-led caretaker government, political analysts declared what they termed the beginning of a new era, the democratic era. The common people started to have rosy dreams of a prosperous and peaceful future. Over the next 15 years those hopes have grown into a deep-seated disappointment.

Indeed we have got democracy, but it leaves a lot to be desired. We have also got a parliament, but if the last 15 years is anything to go by, the parliament has apparently failed to live up to people's expectation. In a parliamentary democracy the parliament is supposed to represent the people and be the centre of all activities. Experience has shown that it has mostly been bypassed and ignored by all the three successive governments since '91. In theory, the parliament provides the means to make the government accountable to people through their representatives, the Members of Parliament. In practice, it has played the role of silent spectator to the ruling party's mountainous corruption and fetish of squashing the opposition. Successive governments have used the parliament as a rubber stamp, reducing it to just a formality without any real worth.

So is there a way to revive the parliament and make it work for the people?

