

Jamaat should stand down

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KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

JAMAAT-e-Islami (Bangladesh) should stand down. The opposition parties' refusal to discuss their reform proposals on caretaker government, election commission and electoral laws with people who opposed the creation of Bangladesh, collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army in 1971, and some of whose leaders are possibly guilty of crimes against humanity, is a defensible position.

Jamaat's insistence to remain in the government's negotiating team will frustrate the expectation of the nation to bring to an end multiple crises now being faced by Bangladesh. No responsible political party, least of all an Islamist party with transnational connections, has the moral right to keep a nation hostage indefinitely to political and economic uncertainty.

Jamaat should be reminded that one of the reasons that its leaders could not be tried for genocidal acts in 1971 was because the Genocide Convention which came into force as international law in 1951 was ratified by only two of the permanent members of the UN Security Council and it was not until after the last of the five permanent members ratified the treaty in 1988 and the Cold War came to an end, that the international law on the crime of genocide began.

As such, an international tribunal never investigated allegations of genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. Had it not been so, then Jamaat could have found itself on the dock along with Slobodan Milosevic and Rwandan war criminals.

Christopher Hitchens in his book *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* used the term "genocide" as appropriate for the war crimes committed in Bangladesh in 1971 and castigated Henry Kissinger for downplaying the aspirations of the Bengali nation for independence. Susan Brown Miller and Pierre Stephen and Robert Payne in their books *Massacre and Against Our Will* and the *Archer*

Blood telegrams to the US State Department (now declassified) have documented the genocidal acts by the occupation army and Jamaat's anti-liberation wings: namely Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, etc.

If the worry of the international community is to safeguard its values and its way of life against the onslaught by Islamic fundamentalists' inflexible and nihilistic war of attrition, then care should be taken of Jamaat's politics in Bangladesh.

One can argue that Jamaat's representation in the parliament has been through democratic elections and its inclusion in the government is a prerogative of the parties which won the elections; but then the world, and no less the Islamic world, with intermittent democracy, should be made aware of the so-called Islamic Free Election Trap in which the fundamentalists use democratic means to get to power only to abolish democratic practices through legislation.

Fusion of military and spiritual authority and Quranic literalism as opposed to the concept of the separation of the Church and the State is intrinsic to Jamaat's political philosophy. Problem with Islamic political parties like Jamaat in Bangladesh is "the persistence of ambiguity" suffered by Islamists almost everywhere.

Marina Ottaway and others define this ambiguity as "tensions remaining between the old goals of creating Islamic states and enacting uncompromising versions of the Sharia and the new goal of becoming influential players in a pluralistic, democratic system."

Jamaat's spiritual Guru Maulana Maududi described the movement's purpose "to initiate the deen in the form of a movement so that religiosity does not become static in our personal lives, but we struggle to implement this deen and also try to crush those forces that are against its implementation."

On another occasion, Maulana Maududi declared "we take a per-

son in Jamaat when he understands the meaning on Kalima-e-Tayyiba and makes it mandatory that he fulfills the minimum criteria of Islam."

Evidently Jamaat's philosophy does not allow inclusiveness of other religions or democratic norms. This partly explains Jamaat's initial opposition to the Muslim League's demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims in British India, and its opposition to Bangladesh liberation movement can be seen from Jamaat's perspective as dismemberment of a Muslim state caused by the machination of a Hindu India. That the occupying Pakistani army was brutalizing Bengali Muslims (along with Hindus) was seen as "collateral damage" that must be borne if the Bengali Muslims were to be freed from the contagion of Hindu influence.

Jamaat's current acceptance of democratic pluralism and female leadership in the stewardship of the country is tactical and was undertaken when Jamaat was convinced of the irreversibility of the existence of Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent state.

The character of Jamaat-e-Islami is not only apocalyptic, it is nihilistic. The confessional statements made by the terrorists relating to terrorism committed on August 17 have proved unambiguously their connection with Jamaat or its student wing at some point during their political career.

Many of these terrorists were trained by Pakistan Intelligence and the CIA through President Zia-ul-Huq of Pakistan to fight the Soviet invasion resulting in the placement of brutal Taliban regime that swore to forsake modernity in favor of a return to a sacred past with disastrous consequences for Afghanistan and beyond.

Effectively Taliban supported Al-Qaida attacks on the US mainland have practically defined the dawning of a new era in world politics and placed Islamist extremism at the centre stage of international political

conversation.

One suspects that the Western psyche, nourished by centuries of opulence may not be adept to detect the serpentine and subterranean Eastern way of thinking not borne out of moral vacuity but resultant of interminable struggle with poverty. A case in point could be the recent advice given by the EU ambassadors that it is not important with whom the 14 party combine conducts the political dialogue but that dialogue has to take place to break the current impasse.

While the advice is well intentioned, its simplicity beguiles the Bangladeshi mind. It is difficult to accord further legitimacy to the governance of the country to a group which reluctantly accepted the emergence of Bangladesh but may very well be behind the Islamist terrorism in the country. Perhaps the Europeans, more than others, are acutely aware of the fact that religion has been often used to justify violation of human rights by postponing temporal justice to divine judgment.

In sum, the problems faced by Bangladesh today, though political in nature, have blocked our economic growth and progress to a knowledge-based society so essential to exist in the 21st century.

In order to encourage a process to arrive at an overlapping consensus, avoidable obduracy on inclusion of political elements -- about which a large number of Bangladeshis holding a variety of socially embedded, reasonable, but widely divergent views, have serious reservation -- should be avoided.

One hopes that good sense will prevail on the authorities to positively consider and implement the proposals made by the opposition combine which are essentially meant to create a level playing field for all political parties in the next general elections.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Plundering of the public exchequer

The MPs of both the ruling and opposition parties agreed to increase their privileges through enacting a law. One can truly raise here the issue that the MPs in the treasury bench and in opposition agree on their own interest only, but never in the public interest. Both the ruling and opposition party MPs earlier united for increasing their monthly allowances and for duty-free cars, but never on any national issue, however crucial it may be.

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE High Court in a verdict on April 27 directed the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB) to take appropriate measures to realise outstanding telephone bills of Tk 60,000,000 from the 427 defaulting MPs of the 5th and 7th parliament within six months.

The High Court issued the verdict on a public interest litigation writ on a petition filed by the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (Blast) seeking the court's directive for realisation of arrear telephone bills from the MPs. The court's ruling also said that, if the defaulting MPs fail to pay the arrear bills, the BTB would take appropriate action against them.

Total outstanding telephone bill of 619 MPs of all the eight parliaments is over Tk 83,700,000 while Tk 4,777,000 is outstanding for 110 MPs of the current parliament. Most of the MPs do not pay telephone bills despite they receive a ceiling of Tk 6,000 per month for payment of their telephone bills. This is no doubt a classic case of corruption. A common citizen having a telephone usually could not get away with non-payment of telephone bills for more than three months, as the BTB disconnects the line. But the MPs did not face any such action by the BTB, though the quantum of their default is much higher.

The law is not a respecter of the people and it does not discriminate between the ordinary citizens and the functionaries of state. However high and mighty they may be, no one is above the law of the land," the High Court said in its verdict. When the poor farmers defaulting a small amount of loan, are made to repay by selling their livestock, then the MPs must not be spared for deliberate defaulting on their gargantuan telephone bills.

At least 30 members of the Indian parliament, including some

senior leaders, were forced to go without power and water for non-payment of utility bills. It should be an instance in the case of our defaulting MPs.

Quorum crisis is another crucial factor in our parliament. Most of the MPs are businessmen by profession and like to stay away from the House on various excuses. The MPs of the opposition parties have made it their business for continuous boycotting of parliament. A particular point of agony for the country has been that in a very large number of instances the Speaker could not start sessions in time due to quorum failure.

The reality, as reported in the survey report of TIB, that keeps tabs on the working of parliaments in emerging democracies, is however sadly different. The report on functioning of our parliament revealed that a total amount of Taka 23,500,000 was wasted in three (4th, 5th and 6th) sessions of the current 8th parliament due to quorum crisis. The time lost in quorum failure amounted to 26.15 hours of the total session time of 127.50 hours. Only 22 hours were spent on legislative business. Interestingly, the MPs uttered the names of their party leaders at least 493 times during their deliberations.

The perks and privileges of the MPs have been increased several times. All possible assistance including office and two assistants have also been provided to them, so that they can contribute to the law making process and enrich the proceedings of the House. Naturally the people of the country expected better performance of their representatives in the parliament. But most of the MPs have failed to fulfill the aspiration and huge public money spent for their capacity building was a sheer wastage.

Duty-free car privilege is another way of plundering the public exchequer. The MPs of the current parliament brought in 275 luxury cars

from abroad, costing the NBR over Tk 2,800,000,000 in tax. They pocketed at least Tk 500,000,000 through selling these luxury cars to businessmen at a profit of Tk 1,000,000 to 2,500,000 for each car.

"Giving the lawmakers the benefit to import duty-free cars is against the natural justice and discriminatory. It's illegal and it should be scrapped. And then it's a corruption when the lawmakers sell those cars," M Hafizuddin Khan, former advisor of the caretaker government told *The Daily Star* on April 6.

In a latest development of the predicament, eleven ruling BNP MPs, of them ten female, are soon getting the privilege of importing duty-free cars on special consideration, evading the criteria that a lawmaker qualifies for this privilege only after completion of two years as MP. The rest of the female MPs, elected to the current parliament in the women's reserved seats last year, are also lobbying for the privilege.

This discriminatory privilege was provided during the despotic rule of Ershad only to gain the favour of the MPs, and it has added another point in the criminal records of many of the MPs, which are often already quite long. Perhaps the legislators nowhere in the world enjoy such an unjust privilege as in Bangladesh.

A powerful member of the Indian parliament had to recently face dismissal for holding other profitable public position. Even the Indian ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi resigned from the parliament amid charges of holding too salaried position. Blast should also bring the issue of misuse of MPs duty-free car privilege to the notice of the High Court.

The VIP cafeteria of the JS is nothing but a "cash cow" where all the whips spent around Tk 2,700,000 under the entertainment head in the last fiscal year. According to a media report, the

chief whip has already drawn more than Tk 800,000 as entertainment in the current fiscal year in addition to his pay package of Tk 50,000 a month.

Who knows how much money is being spent by the MPs each year from the public exchequer for their entertainment in the VIP cafeteria of JS? The AG officials deputed there for audit have to pretend not to notice the irregularities for fear of consequences.

The MPs of both the ruling and opposition parties agreed to increase their privileges through enacting a law. They observed that, though they are provided with facilities like accommodation, car, and telephone at the expense of the public coffers, there is no legal protection for them in the existing provisions of the law.

One can truly raise here the issue that the MPs in the treasury bench and in opposition agree on their own interest only, but never in the public interest. Both the ruling and opposition party MPs earlier united for increasing their monthly allowances and for duty-free cars, but never on any national issue, however crucial it may be.

The demand for clean candidates for next parliamentary election is growing forceful with the people having serious doubt about the cleanliness of many of the MPs. What leaves us all with a very disturbing feeling is that no public interest is being served by those who have been placed in public position by the nation.

On the contrary, they have been plundering the public exchequer through non-payment of bills, misuse of duty-free car privilege, and grabbing premium plots of land at throwaway prices. Sadly, these are the legislators into whose hands the fate of the nation is leased out. The citizens' group should give shape to its "Vision for Bangladesh" to salvage the nation from the abyss of despair.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of *The Daily Star*.

Tourism in Saarc countries

To ease intra-regional international tourist movement, the Saarc countries need to get rid of the cumbersome border formalities for the non-Saarc tourists. A group of tourists comprising 12-15 persons needs more than three hours to get immigration and custom clearance at Haridaspur, a transit point on the Indian side of the border. The group needs about two hours for the same purpose at Benapole, a transit point on the Bangladesh side of the border, opposite to Haridaspur. This kind of unusual delay at border crossing discourages tourists to take Saarc regional tour. For the development of tourism in Saarc countries, this industry does not need lip service from the governments, but needs pragmatic initiatives on their part.

FARUQUE HASAN

TOURISM is the largest industry in the present-day world in terms of its total annual turn out as well as in terms of employment created. This industry is at different levels of development in the Saarc countries; some are doing very well, others are lagging far behind.

Among the seven member countries of the South Asian organization, tourism is the most developed in Maldives. This country has been able to develop world-class tourism. But the tourist-carrying capacity of this tiny country is limited. With vision and proper planning, Maldives has been able to keep tourism at a sustainable level, and to attract high-spending tourists to its blue water beaches. Due to tourism, the per capita income in Maldives is the highest among the Saarc countries. The economy of this country now solely depends on tourism. In the near past its economy depended on fishing only.

The other two Saarc members, which could be most benefited from tourism are Sri Lanka and Nepal. But internal disturbances have greatly hampered the development of tourism in these two countries. A few years back, tourists in Nepal hit almost half a million. The arrivals reduced to less than two hundred thousand in the year of 2003.

The tourism industry in Nepal has been now showing the sign of recovery. This country can boast of having the tallest peak in the world, the Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest), along with seven others among the eleven tallest peaks in the Himalayan mountain range. The people, government, bureaucracy, national tourism organization and private tour operators of this country -- all of them have pro-tourism orientation. Even the Maoist guerrillas during their ten years of insurgency have never touched a tourist. The economy of Nepal almost solely depends on earnings from tourism.

The white sand beaches of Sri Lanka have all the charms to attract a lot of international tourists. Now these beaches look almost deserted. Before the civil war,

tourism in Sri Lanka was the most advanced in South Asia. Unfortunately, there is no sign that the internal disturbance in this country will cease in the foreseeable future.

During the last two years, India's performance in tourism has been amazing. The well-orchestrated "Incredible India" campaign has increased tourist arrivals in that country by more than one million in two years. In recent years, the number of tourists visiting India was about four million. This number may seem not big enough for a vast country like India, but when we consider the average stay of a tourist in India is 21 days, the number speaks well.

All the credit for the success of the "Incredible India" campaign goes to the policy-makers of the Indian government as well as to the bureaucrats and employees of the Ministry of Tourism of that country, who work with missionary zeal for the development of tourism in their motherland.

It seems to me that the highways in Bangladesh are better than the highways in India in terms of quality. The highway from Delhi to the Taj Mahal -- the unique tourist attraction in India -- could be better. In 2004, I visited a part of Buddhist circuit in India. I went from Bod-Gaya to Nalanda Mahavihara via Rajgir by a private car, and started the journey from my hotel at 4 am. The distance between Bod-Gaya to Rajgir is 78 kms, and it took me three and half hours to cover that distance, so bad was the condition of the road used by so many tourists.

That said, the vast Indian railway service is really appreciable. One can travel through India's tourist attractions by train comfortably, especially when one travels upper class.

Bhutan, another Saarc country, is a tiny Himalayan kingdom. Bhutanese government follows the policy of limited tourism to keep the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and society of the country under control. Bhutan's concern about its nature and environment is understandable. At present, five thousand tourists, sans

visitors from Saarc countries, are allowed to visit annually this country. They are high-spending tourists, as a non-Saarc would-be visitor to that country needs to make a deposit of \$200 with the Bhutanese government, for each intended day's stay in that country to get the visa.

The mountainous roads in Bhutan are narrow and serpentine, with blood-curdling very steep edges. Still one feels safe while traveling on those roads due to their quality and the caution of the drivers. Same is the case in Nepal. Driving in North India, except in West Bengal, is more or less OK. Driving in South India maintains standard.

But the driving in Bangladesh is so bad that it works as one of the main deterrents to the development of tourism in this country. Our high hills with lush green forest in Chittagong Hill Tracts are more attractive than the almost rugged mountains in Bhutan. But a foreign tourist, who has once traveled on the road to Rangamati, will not recommend his friends and relatives to visit Rangamati due to the extremely reckless driving on that road.

In spite of the continuous efforts on the part of the international news media to portray Pakistan as a hotbed of religious orthodoxy, the tourism in Pakistan has been gaining momentum for the last few years. This has been happening for the deep interest taken by the highest policy-makers of Pakistan for the development of tourism in the country.

The total tourist arrivals in Pakistan in 2005, which was about 650,000, was more than double of the total tourist arrivals in Bangladesh in the same year. The profound understanding by the highest body of that country of the importance of tourism in national economy will help the tourism industry of Pakistan to leap forward in the coming years.

The tourism industry in India or Pakistan is lagging far behind the tourism industry of not so far a neighbour, Malaysia, where tourist arrivals were about 15 million in 2005. Still these two countries, more

precisely India, are moving forward in the field of tourism in big strides.

The total tourist arrivals in Bangladesh was a little bit more than 244,000 in 2003, which marked a positive change of 17.98 percent on the performance of the previous year. The Bangladesh economy is showing the sign of better progress in recent years. The export growth rate of the country was at 19 percent last year.

Due to the robust growth in export trade, increasing number of foreign businessmen are now visiting Bangladesh. Counting the number of the visiting businessmen and Bangladeshi expatriates who come to visit their relatives in the tourist arrivals statistics, we feel satisfied with the growth of our tourism industry, though this should not be the case.

Tourism industry in Bangladesh lacks proper planning and motivation. A simple example may be cited here. The Paharpur Buddhist Monastery, a world heritage site designated by Unesco, attracts most of the leisure tourists, who come to visit Bangladesh. There is no toilet facility for the tourists at this site.

Without much research, Bangladesh government is now planning to develop exclusive beaches for foreign tourists, which is a step toward a wrong direction. Exclusive beach resorts means "sand, sun, and sex." There should be nightclubs, bars, message parlours, prostitution, and casinos in that beach resort if we want to contest with popular beach resorts in other countries. Do we want that?

I talked to many tourists who visited Bangladesh and who traveled through many other countries in the world; they liked Bangladesh more than many countries they visited. The sunset in Bangladesh is the most beautiful sunset in the world -- this is the candid opinion of many tourists. In Bangladesh we have got the largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, in the world; the ruins of the single largest Buddhist monastery in the world, the Paharpur Mahavihara; the longest sea beach, Cox's Bazar; and the country itself is the largest delta in the world.

The people of Bangladesh are remarkably hospitable to tourists. We have the potential to develop tourism in our country; what we urgently need is the motivation on the part of our national policy makers and those who work in the ministry of tourism and in the national tourism organization, as well as in the people working in the private sector of this industry.

In coming years, the international tourists in their 50s and 60s will pour into the Saarc countries, because they have already visited almost all the other regions and

countries of the world. It will depend on us whether we will be able to tap this opportunity to boost tourism in our countries, and thus help our national economies through tourism.

The main hindrance to the pouring in of the international tourists in three member countries of Saarc, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, will be the policy of reciprocity followed by the governments of these countries in issuing the visa to the tourists.

For different reasons, the governments of the developed countries, which generate almost all the international tourists (their number was more than 750 million in the year of 2005), follow very strict policy to issue visa to the citizens of Saarc countries.

In the name of the policy of reciprocity, the governments of the aforementioned countries follow the same strict policy to issue visa to the citizens of the developed countries. When these three governments do not follow the policy of reciprocity in other fields, why should they follow this policy in case of issuance of visa?

For example, Bangladesh has been given the preference of duty-free access for its many products in the markets of developed countries. To follow the policy of reciprocity, do we allow the duty-free access of their goods in our country?

To ease intra-regional international tourist movement, the Saarc countries need to get rid of the cumbersome border formalities for the non-Saarc tourists. A group of tourists comprising 12-15 persons needs more than three hours to get immigration and custom clearance at Haridaspur, a transit point on the Indian side of the border. The group needs about two hours for the same purpose at Benapole, a transit point on the Bangladesh side of the border, opposite to Haridaspur. This kind of unusual delay at border crossing discourages tourists to take Saarc regional tour.

For the development of tourism in Saarc countries, this industry does not need lip service from the governments, but needs pragmatic initiatives on their part.

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Quest for clean candidates

The "civil society" select members who gathered on March 20 to discuss the need for a clean and competent parliament and formed the Citizens' Group owe a moral obligation to the nation to offer themselves, at their own initiative, to be candidates in the next election. Besides this obligation, this writer humbly submits to them to please come forward right now so that others feel encouraged to follow their lead, provided both the pioneers and others are clean and competent. Their conscience at this stage is the best judge. Let us see how far the electorate themselves feel the need for good governance. A process has been initiated. Let us hope and pray the nation will reap the rich harvest and that our future generations benefit.

MOHAMMAD AMERUZ ZAMAN

SOME civil society members have recently floated a citizens group to campaign for electing honest and competent candidates to the next parliament. Any such initiative is always welcome -- more so since it is in the national interest.

However, the quest for candidates who are both clean and competent could be a chase after a mirage given the fact that the next general election is due as soon as January 2007.

Let us take into account certain ground realities. Bangladesh has the unenviable distinction of having achieved almost double hat-trick of being the most corrupt country in the world -- and even if one disputes the methodology of coming to this conclusion, at the minimum it tells us that corruption is a major problem in Bangladesh.

Chapter and verse has been written on how polluted our national environment has become as corrupt practices have filtered into all spheres of life. This may explain why we are unlikely to have any Sonia Gandhi amongst us.

The asset declaration that she provided shows that she owns no car, has around Rs 2,100,000 in monetized assets, a share of an ancestral home and some jewelry -- all of which can be accounted for. Another relevant ground reality is that post-1971 Bangladesh has been suffering from widening disparity in meaningful/productive opportunity and income and asset inequality.

Despite the preceding paragraph, the elections will have to be held in order to have a parliament and a government, which enjoys the mandate of the people. The members of the parliament will legislate and some of them govern in our democratic system. There is no escape from this unless the country is again obliged to suffer extra-constitutional governance. Hence our electoral democracy is the only way of gradual progression, however messy it may occasionally be. Having established this, let us turn to prerequisites of good candidates.

Given the constitutional imperative to periodically hold elections, the quest for honest and competent candidates is indeed a necessity. But how does one judge who is honest and whose face is not a mask? Mercifully a potential candidate's financial record exists -- and similar to Sonia Gandhi's asset declaration, it just needs to be made public. The Citizens' Group could publicize each candidate's income and wealth statements, income tax returns, and so on.

In addition to financial transparency, a candidate's competence can be assessed on the basis of his/her track record in parliament or in public office. This could include demonstrated competence of the candidate to contribute in the legislative process -- for instance drafting a new act, amending existing ones, and so on. This is an expertise or skill specifically required for the national parliament. The other critical area is the competence of the candidates for good governance at the national level -- a badly felt need in Bangladesh today.

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Besides this obligation, this writer humbly submits to them to please come forward right now so that others feel encouraged to follow their lead, provided both the pioneers and others are clean and competent. Their conscience at this stage is the best judge. Let us see how far the electorate themselves feel the need for good governance.

A process has been initiated. Let us hope and pray the nation will reap the rich harvest and that our future generations benefit.

The writer is a resident of Dhaka.