

## Good thinking by Sheikh Hasina

Comprehensive initiative needed to make parliament effective

WE note with a degree of appreciation Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina's idea that the post of deputy speaker should go to the opposition. Such thinking on her part ought to be reciprocated by BNP leader Begum Zia. Having said that, and reading it as a flicker of rethinking on the entire issue of making the parliament effective, we are constrained to say that giving the deputy speaker's slot to the opposition is only a symbolic, even a measly step. This falls far short of what is required to make the parliament functional, let alone effective.

A whole range of measures will have to be put in place if we are to make a paradigm qualitative change from the dysfunctional parliaments of yesteryears the electorate had to put up with. To AL's credit, during its rule, the practice of ministers becoming chairmen of parliamentary standing committees was discontinued. This was a step in the right direction. But the real issue of opposition members heading some of the crucial standing committees having to do with accountability and answerability of the government invariably got pushed on to the backburner. As a matter of fact, the concept of effective bipartisan committees as the cornerstone of a strong committee system has always received lip service.

The role of the business advisory committee headed by the Speaker should have been to synthesize the demands for slots of the ruling party and the opposition thereby reflecting a consensus on the business to be transacted in the House on a given day. This mechanism never worked.

The Speaker's role is central to the issue of making parliament effective. We recall here the common stance reached between AL and BNP in their talks with former US president Jimmy Carter centring around making the Speaker's office fully neutral and the parliament vibrant, which should now be looked into again. A suggestion that had made the rounds then related to both the AL and BNP chiefs offering assured reelection to an incumbent Speaker as MP the next time around.

All things considered, rather than any piecemeal gesture, the AL chief should come out with a comprehensive plan covering all parameters involved in making the parliament fully functional and effective drawing upon the previous experience with failed parliaments. We, in the media, can then lend our support to the reform package, bring it to the centre stage of public discourse, and convince others to adopt it.

## Bangkok brouhaha

A tale of democratic miscarriage?

THE chaos into which Thailand has descended in the last few days, with the Thai government going into hiding and operating from an undisclosed location in order to avoid protesters who have surrounded the prime minister's temporary offices as well as worked to disrupt other government meetings, demonstrates clearly the dangers of extreme political polarisation.

The lesson to be learned here is that a country suffers when democratic culture does not take root and that there can be no alternative to a healthy culture of democratic debate and respect for one another's point of view.

What we see in Thailand is the end result of a breakdown in the ability of the two opposing political streams to work together with even a semblance of compromise and co-operation. Where there is a lack of basic democratic political culture, democracy invariably descends into chaos.

We carry no brief in this editorial either for the Thai government or for the protesters. We proffer no opinion on the legitimacy of the current government, the accusations of corruption that have been leveled against it by the opposition, or the merits of the opposition movement. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of this editorial, that there are persuasive arguments and grievances on both sides of the political divide.

What we are arguing for here is that these differences should be settled in an open and co-operative manner and we regret that the communication and trust breakdown between the two sides is so absolute that there seems to be no ground for compromise. When politics descends into the kind of farce that we are seeing the true loser is the voter.

Indeed, things could get still worse. Thailand has long had a tradition of military rule and it is clear that one result of these bouts of military rule is the poorly developed democratic culture that we are seeing today.

The real danger is that if the opposing political streams continue to be unable to practice the politics of compromise, that this will end up undermining democracy and paving the way, yet again, for an authoritarian government to come to the helm. This, in turn, will set democracy back even further and further delay the day democracy fully takes root in Thailand. Ultimately it will be the people who lose.

## Penny saved, pound gained

### BENEATH THE SURFACE

Facing the attacks of munga is not a daunting challenge as it is deemed to be. The pathways are technology (a proxy for natural capital), human capital (training, skill development), financial capital (group savings), and innovative institutions (social norms and networking).

ABDUL BAYES

FOR the people of Kurigram, the month of *Kartik* (November) had been a curse since time immemorial. In fact, larger part of greater Rongpur district is occasionally caught by the curse of *mora kartik*. It is a period when the gap between mouths and meals shoots up following shortage of labour demand and output supply.

Again, it is the time when just to meet a day's meal, households are forced to sell assets and advance labour, borrow money at exorbitant rate of interest from *mohajons*. Many of the earning members also migrate to other places. Admittedly, over the years, various projects and programs from government as well as from donors have been advanced to mitigate the menace from *munga*. But I shall pick up today a relatively innovative and, hopefully, sustainable one.

Actionaid Bangladesh had been working with some *munga-prone* households for last few years. Its programs are basically group based where collective actions are at the cockpit of concerns. It appears to me that Actionaid attempts to address the "missing markets" through the development of collective wisdom and efforts rather than helping individuals in isolation.

The idea is to build capital of the poor, by the poor, and for the poor. And by poor they mean resource-constrained poor who are heavily dependent on agriculture, but fail to fight famine due to shortage of necessary inputs available in the market under the current arrays of anti-poor arrangements. In fact, the main thrust of Food Security for Sustainable Household Livelihood (Foshol) project, under the aegis of EC/IRRI, everywhere is like that.

A few kilometres drive from Kurigram town is Sarkar Para. The 25 resource-poor households that I met recently have a meeting room in their own premises. The signboard bears the name of Foshol and the group's name. Entering, I observed posters hung on walls pointing to the members of various sub-committees. I also noticed one plastic container that can store 50 kg of rice. Members have to contribute one handful of rice each week.

I was told that about 20 kg has been given to fellow comrades who are in dire

need this month, but will return the rice after the *amon* crop is harvested. So, penny they saved during plenty, pound they gained during poverty. The relatively more enterprising households seem to have cultivated BR-33 -- a paddy crop that has already been harvested before *munga* could unleash its attack.

After BR-33, they now grow potato before going for irrigated crop (scheme crops). Meantime, they have learnt that BR-28 and 29 increase yield. Thus, introduction of early matured crop helped them avert *munga*-led misery to a some extent. Added to this was the knowledge gained on-line -- sowing, preparation of seedbeds and scientific preservation of seeds.

As a result of this kind of technological take up, total paddy production, reportedly, increased by 3-4 *maunds/bigha*. In rice equivalence, this amounts to about 73 kg of rice or 1.5 month requirement of a 5-member household. For pure tenants, it is 25 days after paying the rent to the landlord. Increased land productivity thus led to augmentation of natural capital.

But adoption of modern technology also needs working capital. These resource poor households had either no access to credit or had it from *mohajons* and quasi-*mohajons* at exorbitant rate of interest. Besides, some of them borrowed from NGOs in the past but gave up due to heavy burden in repayment. As a substitute of that source, they have developed an innovative mechanism to generate their own capital.

Every week, for the last few years, each household has been depositing Tk.5 to the group fund. A president, secretary and cashier are elected by them. There are five register khata to record resolutions and transactions arising out of every meeting. The total deposit of about Tk. 20,000 so far (half from own savings and half from Actionaid) lies in local Krishi Bank branch. The presence of deposit slips and check books made them more managerial than before. Members could draw upon their own savings for a season. Say for Tk.1,000, they pay Tk.100 after the season. The projects are scrutinised by the group.

Recently, the group has invested the money in fish culture, leasing-in 100 decimals of local water shed. It is a two-



Hungry no more.

year project and the group expects to gain a net profit of Tk. 2-3 lakhs to be added to the group's kitty. That means, after two years, each member could access to Tk 10,000-15,000 without being at the mercy of money lenders or NGOs.

The amount is much higher than the average amount of credit generally accessed by a poor rural household in Bangladesh each year. Access to credit is tagged with productive pursuits. Credit to them would then be a means to an end, not end in itself. Just a few years back, all of these 25 households had one meal in *Kartik* month; now they have three meals. The problem of financial capital is apparently resolved.

I met a group formed by women in Kuriar Par, few kilometres from Sarkar Para. Mrs. Morjina, Bokul and Laily impressed me with an anecdote to their livelihood patterns. They hardly knew before that homestead based food crops could bring for them some income. Actionaid trained them on growing food crops in and around homestead.

I observed that not an inch of the space left fallow in their homestead. "When children ask for a pen or pencil or for a *khata*, we sell one papaya (Tk.40) or two eggs (Tk.10) and make them happy. We never valued vegetables as food items before. Now we eat sufficient amount of vegetables and sell the surplus in the market. The money is spent on children's education or entertainment... In the past, our poultry and ducks died due to the lack of vaccination; now we ourselves know how to do it and are having good returns from rearing chicks and ducks. Few years back, even in *Kartik* month, we were too poor to meet the demand of our children. We could not arrange even a single meal;

now we can manage food well."

The group has already saved Tk.10,000 and deposited it in banks. "Now our husbands think that we are productive and hence they began to value our decisions. Earlier, we were idle to invite the indignity; knowledge on homestead based crops raised our ratings to husbands..." The same kind of story I heard in Islampur village where another group of twenty was fighting against *munga* through helps -- not of cash but of kind.

So, facing the attacks of *munga* is not a daunting challenge as it is deemed to be. The pathways are technology (a proxy for natural capital), human capital (training, skill development), financial capital (group savings), and innovative institutions (social norms and networking).

The resource-poor households have at their disposal all of these inputs covered under the shades of ignorance and apathy. What they need is discovering their potentials; an induction of knowledge as to how to optimally utilise their indigenous endowments. They should be taught about saving a penny today to gain a pound tomorrow, not the other way round.

### Epilogue

As I was driving back to Dhaka, the sun was setting. I was pondering over a women's point: "*Shahajjo palito valo hoi*" (it is good to have helps). "*What is shahajjo?*" I wanted to know from her. "*Kaimne chole bachimo*" (how to lead the life). Quite obviously, she was referring to the knowledge that she gained to have a smile in her face even during the month of *munga*.

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## How to fight the Taliban

### PLAIN WORDS

Many Pakistanis are now convinced that Americans are looking to stay on indefinitely in Afghanistan for doing whatever they might have to do in Central Asia, and for them Pakistan is only an extension of the same problem, an accessory. Treating them as one theatre of war would eventually facilitate big new requisite actions to be taken.

M.B. NAQVI

PAKISTAN'S struggle against Islamic extremists is a worrying matter. There is pessimism abroad; most think that the Taliban will eventually overcome the security apparatus of Pakistan. That might leave most of Pakistan engulfed in multiple civil wars and conflicts. Its federation might snap and Balkanisation may not be stoppable then.

The worries are not confined to Pakistanis; most foreign countries, particularly the leading Nato ones, including the not so loquacious Moscow and Beijing, share these concerns. Most voluble is the US. Since its involvement in Pakistan's policy-making is deep, its thinking and actions are among the determinants of possible outcomes.

For virtually two years, America's security thinkers have more or less pronounced Pakistan to be a failing state that might collapse any time. Their starting point is based on America's short-term interests. The American government's overriding worry is the presence of nuclear weapons, in considerable numbers, in Pakistan. Should they fall into the hands of al-Qaeda and Taliban, it would pose a grave threat to America in particular and the West in general.

But American thinking is confined to what can be done to prevent these nukes falling into undesirable hands. Moreover, it is mainly militaristic: go in, do the rescuing job of either taking away the nukes to America or putting them in an inaccessible corner of Pakistan, to be guarded by Pakistani troops loyal to America, and probably supervised by an international force.

That would be the solution. What really happens in, or to, Pakistan is not the worry.

Pakistan's possible disappearance has been in the news for some years and the backroom boys in most capitals seem to have accepted it as anyhow likely.

The Zardari regime is too craven and weak to resist any American action, including virtually constant bombardment of the supposedly al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in NWFP's tribal as well as settled areas.

The inevitable conclusion is that Islamabad seems to be content with making pathetic protests, while the Americans continue to merrily do their job. It may be only a matter of time before Americans land their troops in Pakistan on the pretext of either training Pakistanis or some other excuse.

It is too late in the day to fear foreign aggression with a view to colonising Pakistan. Since they fear that Pakistan will be Talibanised, US troops are intended to be there to tackle any emerging exigencies. There is, however, an element of doubt: this was the Bush government's plan. Would the Obama administration also share this thinking? It is not yet certain. What Pakistanis say has not been accepted in Washington, London or Brussels: the more predator attacks on Pakistan, or what the US troops did on September 3 last, would only produce more Taliban.

The latter will go on becoming more popular despite their despicable actions in the Pushtoon areas and by resisting foreigners. They are sure to spread into the rest of Pakistan.

To repeat, the Americans know well what Pakistanis of most persuasions are saying. And yet, the campaign the Americans are running in Afghanistan and Pakistan would strengthen Taliban and even al-Qaeda. Why are they, then, doing this? One sim-

plistic answer is that America is a hyper power and its thinking is primarily militaristic; its military strength was thought to be capable of achieving whatever objective the US may want.

Many Pakistanis are now convinced that Americans are looking to stay on indefinitely in Afghanistan for doing whatever they might have to do in Central Asia, and for them Pakistan is only an extension of the same problem, an accessory. Treating them as one theatre of war would eventually facilitate big new requisite actions to be taken.

How the people of Pakistan or of other states fare is not America's worry; its forces would be around and since they have wonderful relations with India, and should BJP form another government in Delhi soon, they have no great fear. India can greatly help in looking after these areas. Who can forget the BJP government's offers to the US following 9/11? The US would be able to reorder things to its heart's content, then.

But what would happen if Pakistan is won over by Taliban? Its federation will snap with the disappearance of federal authority. The US and India will feel a lot of responsibility while the Pakistan army will be on its own.

And can it stay united? Pakistan army has been in a bad shape since 2004; its state of morale can scarcely be high. It should be tired of fighting its own people. Which expert can take its unending unity for granted? Few can be nonchalant. Foreigners would only think of possible options in the context of expected scenarios. What they are likely to do is to latch on to their supporting army faction, or factions, and rely on them to help achieve their nuke-removal objective.

Taliban are an anti-civilisational and actually an Islam-abusing force that threaten Muslim Pakistan. They have to be fought. But where most Pakistanis differ with the West is in approach.

Taliban are moved by an ideology, no matter how misconceived. You cannot shoot an idea in the brain; no gun has been invented to kill an idea. This war will, therefore, have to be primarily ideological. Thus, an ideology will have to be fought ideologically.

One has had occasion to underline the Taliban ideology to be a new politically-motivated construct designed by western and pro-western intelligence services since 1970s; it is at variance with the sub-

continent's more tolerant and peaceable Islam.

That immediately suggests what needs to be done. Democratic means have to be adopted. One assumes, for argument's sake, that Islamabad government is committed to democracy and its methodology. Therefore, what is needed is that the whole NWFP, extending to all of Pakistan, promotes as many ideologies and programs of social, political and economic reforms as possible, to be widely debated. Let more debates and arguments be centre-staged.

For survival, Pakistan itself needs to be further democratised and in all discussions the emphasis should be on democratising the tribal society. Assuming that economic deprivation and social backwardness are the real causes that favour Taliban ideology, the means are at hand: more democracy.

Give them maximum possible rights with accompanying citizenship duties; start as intense a program of economic development as possible, with a view to giving almost everyone a job. General acceptance of rule of law, tolerance of all views, and a program for real economic progress will do the main job. No doubt, the organised militant armies and militias have to be disarmed and fought with where necessary, mostly for defensive purposes. The offensive should be ideological. This is the way to go about the business.

Can we do it? No South Asian state has been able to do it so far. We know that using overly militaristic approach would aggravate the problem rather than solve it. Democracy itself has to be given an orientation that gives more job opportunities and equality in law for all by ending old privileges.

If, and when, a state is able to provide from its own resources for investments in job-creating development, consider half the battle won. Whether the new Obama leadership looks likely to share this view cannot be said with certainty. However, so far, taking a more optimistic view of the situation has been possible.

Pakistan may have to fall back eventually only on its own resources with a greater dose of egalitarianism. A lot more money has to be invested in tribal areas. It has to be found along with a democratic dispensation. The West is irrelevant. Tackling Taliban's Islam is Pakistan's own responsibility.

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