

Jatiya Sangsad begins...

Good example set in Chittagong and Khulna

THE ninth national Parliament has got off to an encouraging start. A new Speaker and Deputy Speaker have been elected by the lawmakers. At the same time, the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition have taken their places in the House. The country, therefore, can now look forward to a productive first session of the new Parliament, one that is expected to set the right tone and tenor for the future of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh.

On the ground, some encouraging moves have been noticed. Ministers and lawmakers elected to the Jatiyo Sangsad from the Chittagong region made a solemn promise to one another and to their constituents on Saturday to work collectively for the development of the region. If that is a sign of bipartisanship (and we believe it is), we cannot but welcome it wholeheartedly. Politics has always been described as the art of the possible. Translated, it is a matter of how much cooperation and accommodation politicians and their parties can agree on among themselves that will ensure public welfare. What the elected politicians from Chittagong have therefore pledged to do is a clear hint of the change they mean to bring about in national politics.

And in this happy endeavour they have others for company. A few days ago, it was for lawmakers from different parties elected from Khulna to come together before the public and take a vow to undertake development programmes for the region in a spirit of cooperation. What we have before us, therefore, is an image of politics about to undergo some positive changes, of the kind that should have been there long ago. Indeed, when democratic politics was re-inaugurated back in 1991, it was the natural expectation of the nation that constructive, cooperative politics would be a hallmark of governance. The failure of the political parties to follow through on that expectation was to lead to results that were not conducive to democracy. It is a truth that the political parties as well as the nation by and large acknowledge. It is against such a background of national politics that the present endeavour of political leaders in Chittagong and Khulna and other places in the country takes on significance. The goal of politics being the promotion of public welfare, it stands to reason that lawmakers of all parties will in the truest spirit of democracy and modern political ethics bring their intelligence and their abilities to bear on the service they mean to provide to the citizens of this country.

Bipartisan politics, despite the number of seats political parties may hold in Parliament, is a surefire way of carrying democracy forward. It is so because it ensures a troubleshooting mechanism in the event of problems arising within and outside the House. Let this spirit be emulated all across the country and, most importantly, on the floor of Parliament.

Greeting spree in DU

Why should teachers do it during class hours?

IT is disconcerting news that about 200 teachers of Dhaka University (DU) left their students sitting in the classrooms for hours as they scrambled for paying compliments to the newly elected Pro-Vice Chancellor and Treasurer in the Registrar building on Saturday. Teachers queued up with flower bouquets to congratulate the two senior officials who took office that day on being appointed by the new government. The angst of the students can be well understood since many of them had come from peripheral townships to attend classes. They are reported to have complained aloud that no notice was served earlier about teachers having to attend such an 'unofficial' programme of greeting. Indeed it was a glaring act of irresponsibility on the part of the teachers of the prime educational institution of the country which must adhere to a strict routine to break out of the sessions jam cycle. The teachers could have assembled after class hours to go and congratulate the newly appointed colleagues.

The incident on Saturday at DU clearly reflected the unhealthy culture of sycophancy that prevails in the university no less than it does elsewhere. We cannot but endorse the view of a senior teacher when he said that such conduct was 'morally unacceptable.' It is common understanding that teachers and officials of DU are expected to set examples of dutifulness, integrity, professionalism, commitment and non-partisanship, but, unfortunately, on many occasions they have failed to live up to such principles that make one an ideal teacher. The political divide among fellow teachers has intensified to a rather alarming level forcing professionalism to the back seat. We have noted with concern that in the past, appointments and promotions of teachers on DU campus were given on political consideration, thereby depriving meritorious candidates of their rightful place. The partisan teachers are also known to cast their ignoble shadow on examination papers and result sheets to promote students belonging to certain party background. We are aware that investigations are going on at this moment to unearth leaking of question papers and other irregularities in a number of departments.

We hope the new administration and academic council of DU under the leadership of the new Vice Chancellor will ensure healthy pursuit of academic activities on the campus and thereby uphold the good name of Dhaka University. Why have we to tell the teachers, the most respected segment in society, that their foremost duty is to their students? They cannot be oblivious of the fact that their personal examples help shape the personalities of students who will be future leaders of the country.

Time to move beyond the rhetoric

A bit of rhetoric is indeed a part of democratic politics, where it works more as an electoral gimmick. But a state is reached in the roller coaster journey of a political party, particularly for the winner in an election, when it can continue with the rhetoric only at an exorbitant political cost. It is always wise to be able to identify the precise time when one must move beyond the rhetoric.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE new AL-Led dispensation has set off with a jerky start amid a spurt of dismal events on several fronts. It may be recalled that soon after AL's assumption of power in 1996, turbulences erupted across the country. As then, so also now, the government refrained from putting up a conspiracy theory, not even a veiled one, thus showing signs of maturity.

However, the puzzling developments obtaining in the country marked downturn in the Stock Exchange, sudden rise in extortion, theft and murder, unrest in the campuses, activities desecrating the sanctity of the national mosque, an influx of small arms, return of terrorists, and the weird theft in the Railway Headquarters are all in sharp contrast to a peaceful election, an orderly transfer of power and the expectations they generated only two weeks earlier.

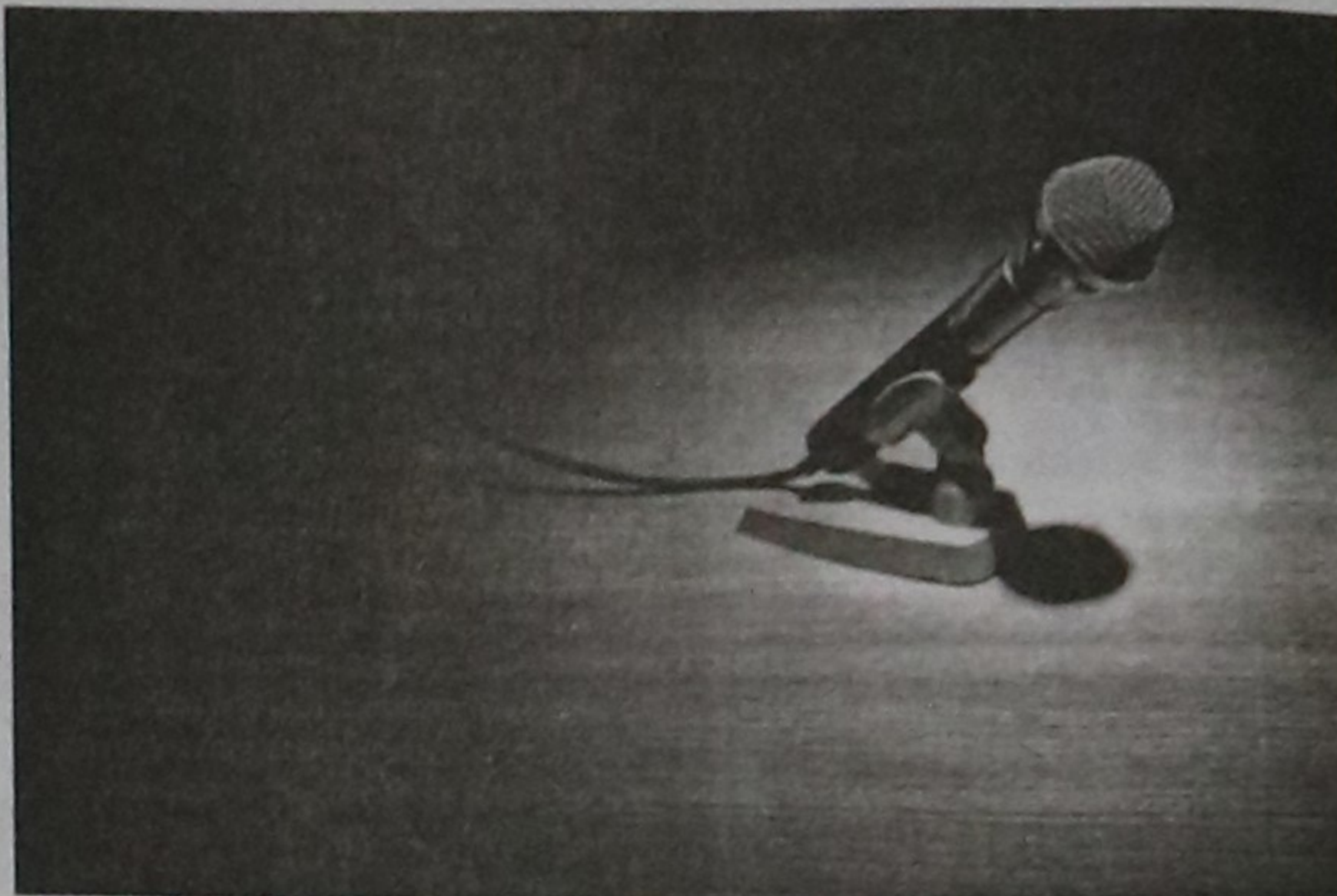
In the meantime, although the price spiral has been arrested for some essentials, the relief does not extend to most other items. Moreover, in spite of the reduction, prices are still above the purchasing power of the vast majority of the consumers. This is in spite of our assertive commerce minister making his weight felt both in the market as well as in the business community.

An embarrassed and exasperated authority is seized with the situation in

right earnest, and is assiduously grappling with the problems to tackle them to the satisfaction of the concerned quarters. The people also know that there is no quick-fix to the myriad problems facing the country, and that any phase of transition is always fraught with difficulties. They seem prepared to grant the government reasonable time to first settle down before addressing the problems. But then, the complex and piled up problems are deep-rooted, and can be resolved only with extraordinary efforts and changed perception of politics and power play.

This change is more about being sympathetic to the suffering millions, providing them succor, and relieving their pain of being dispossessed. This is certainly not about having access to perks and privileges; neither is it about hankering after luxury and a consumerist life style. All that the people want at this stage is reflection of that changed mindset among the politicians and bureaucrats, and a modest beginning in keeping with the spirit of dedication and service as exhorted by none other than the prime minister herself.

The realisation of this prompted Sheikh Hasina at the very outset to give a clarion call for a change. Apart from a change in outlook, it also involved dismantling of entrenched and vested interests in the higher echelons of the establishment. She unmistakably wanted the politicians and officials to shun luxury and resort to simple



Time for work not talk.

living, and to dedicate themselves to the service of the country's underdogs, the destitute and dispossessed.

There are no signs that the prime minister's pious call has made much difference, either among the politicians or among the bureaucracy, who are more interested in designer suits, luxury cars and consumerist lifestyle. According to a news report, the ministers squabble over the official cars provided to them from the government transport pools and some are reported to be unhappy over the quality of the cars. As a result, the government is planning to import luxury cars for the ministers a plan shelved earlier even by an unrepresentative, and thus unanswerable, caretaker government. This being the state of change prevailing in the power circle, obviously the much-hyped change takes a backseat at least for the time being.

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Hope, but carefully

Muslims across the world are taking comfort in the semantics of Obama's initial remarks. Some of them have taken partial ownership of his presidency because he used his middle name, Hussein, while taking the oath. But the issue is not what Obama says. It is what he does.

M.J. AKBAR

FOREIGN policy is not made in a day. The smiles in Delhi when President Obama cautioned Pakistan that non-military aid would be cut if it did not curb domestic terrorism were premature. It is military aid to Islamabad which should be of concern to Delhi, but the government has become so dependent on the US that it gets pleased with very little. An inaugural speech can only have markers that will be fleshed into policy. But amateurs in Delhi have rushed to judgment where professionals fear to tread.

There was simulation in the bluster with which Pakistan reacted. The boys of Islamabad know a charade when they see it; they are experts in the game themselves, after all. They don't need spectacles to read between the lines of Obama's South Asia policy.

Obama has promised peace all over the world and war in one corner: Afghanistan. Pakistan is not very competent in the dis-

bursement of peace. Its expertise lies in the dissemination of war on enemy territory or the land of friends. And now it is fighting more than one war on its own soil.

Pakistan knows that America cannot fight in Afghanistan without support provided by Pakistan. As long as this situation lasts, America needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs America. Pakistan wants to not merely extract a financial price, but also a political price.

London and Washington are preparing to pay the price in some form. Pakistan has an advantage over India in the Washington diplomatic game. It engaged with the Obama campaign and the transition team, while Indian diplomats concentrated on Bush and the Republicans.

This has been a failure of foreign policy for which we have begun to suffer. Pakistan has persuaded advisers of Obama that it cannot fight the Taliban as long as it has to defend its border with India. The Indian threat can only be lowered with a resolution of the Kashmir issue. Therefore, it is time

America and Britain persuaded India to settle Kashmir.

In an extraordinary manoeuvre, Pakistan turned around the Mumbai terror attack, organised on its soil. From predator, it refashioned itself into a victim. It used the war rhetoric from India to warn the West that it would pull out of the war against the Taliban.

Delhi's hot air did not frighten Pakistan one bit but scared Washington and London, who leaned on Delhi. Delhi succumbed. India has lost twice through Mumbai. It has become a laughing stock at security conferences. And it has allowed what could have been a diplomatic coup against Pakistan to become a diplomatic coup against India. This is incompetent governance, not just abysmal security.

David Miliband was audacious enough to contradict India's prime minister on Indian soil, by saying that the terrorist attack was not sponsored by the Pakistan government, and that India had better do something about Kashmir. Instead of snubbing him, Rahul Gandhi took Miliband for some private tourism of poverty. British correspondents in Delhi have applauded Miliband for telling it like it is, saying that this is going to be Obama's line as well.

Hillary Clinton has already enunciated the Obama doctrine at her confirmation hearings in the Senate. "Hard power" will be replaced by "smart power." This has been defined as the application of a "full range of tools diplomatic, economic, mili-

tary, political, legal and cultural" in the pursuit of American interests. Pentagon awe will be accompanied by nudge and arm-twist. By the time the twisting is over, Delhi might need a heavy bandage.

Obama's policy towards South Asia will be controlled by the compulsions of a war he wants to win in a hurry. The battlefield will not be Afghanistan alone. American forces might soon have to fight in the western half of Pakistan, which is already being christened Talibanistan (the eastern half still remains Pakistan).

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Will he be able to get a resolution to Palestine except on harsh Israeli terms? Even if we ignore his campaign rhetoric, there are powerful interests protecting the expansionist reach of Israel. At all events, it will not be easy. Neither will be a victory in Afghanistan. As pressure mounts on him, he will be tempted to mount pressure on India through Kashmir.

It is going to be a complicated game, which might drift to a point where every side looks like a loser. Hope needs to be handled very carefully if it wants to remain audacious.

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Parliamentary niceties

The quality of democracy prevailing in a country is ultimately judged by the performance of the parliament and the accommodative attitude and respect for the opponents' view shown by the treasury bench.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT is not that much, but nevertheless it is a sign of growth of a decent and sophisticated political culture in the country, that BNP has decided to join the inaugural session of the ninth parliament on January 25.

It is also a significant development in the political history of Bangladesh that the prime minister and leader of the house, Sheikh Hasina has, on more than one occasion since her party's resounding victory, said that her government would not only listen to the views of the opposition but would also work with them to lead the country towards prosperity.

Sheikh Hasina's pledge to treat the opposition in parliament not on numerical strength but on its overall political weight has demonstrated the spirit of parliamentary democracy. The AL, in its election manifesto, pledged to offer the post of deputy speaker to the opposition to make the parliament effective.

The whole nation is enthusiastically

waiting for the 9th parliament to go into session to embody the hopes and aspiration of the people, as it had seen the 8th parliament end its five-year journey as a dysfunctional body with continuous boycott by the opposition.

The 9th parliament faces many and varied tasks that need debates between the treasury bench and the opposition. The caretaker government has handed over power with at least 117 ordinances, which include many landmark ones, to be decided about in the first 30 days in the parliament. The first task of this parliament is to ratify the relevant and necessary ones.

Besides voting for a new president of the country, this parliament will have to pass many bills as laws to strengthen the process of good governance and to ensure the rule of law.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) released a sensational report on the 8th parliament, saying that it had failed to ensure the accountability of the government and the parliamentary standing committees on different ministries, and to

investigate corruption and irregularities in different organisations under the ministries concerned.

The parliamentary standing committees, which are major weapons to make the government accountable for all its deeds, must be equipped with competent MPs.

MPs from the opposition should be chairmen of some of the important parliamentary standing committees, as has been promised by the prime minister, to make them effective in investigating lapses by public bodies.

The quality of democracy prevailing in a country is ultimately judged by the performance of the parliament and the accommodative attitude and respect for the opponents' view shown by the treasury bench.

The ruling party members, therefore, should bear in mind that it is their responsibility to allow the opposition to voice their views and also to be accommodating to their views, as the opposition is a crucial component of the parliament.

The history of our national parliament had sadly been a story of dashed hopes and aspirations in all these years after democracy was restored in 1991. But, this time, the people are quite happy with the attitude so far shown by leaders of both the treasury bench and the opposition.

The formation of the 9th parliament with many new-comers in politics on both sides of the divide is unprecedented in the

political history of Bangladesh. Therefore, this parliament has ample scope for putting in place a system of governance that can truly reflect the people's will.

In this changed political scenario, there are reasons to be hopeful that the new prime minister will stick to her promise to provide the opposition with the opportunity of playing a meaningful role in the parliament, and the opposition, on the other hand, could play a pivotal role despite having little parliamentary strength.

Parliament, the heart of democracy, must be made to function properly for making laws reflecting the changed situation and times to materialise the democratic dreams of the people. The nation's aspiration for the efficacy of parliament will remain a mirage unless both the ruling and the opposition MPs are given equal opportunity to ventilate their point of views, which are the points of view of the people.

The responsibility lies on the speaker to explore and devise ways in which MPs from both sides can take full part in debates on significant public issues. The speaker's wisdom and neutral role can not only make the parliament's deliberations meaningful but also can help a lot in dismantling the wall that divides political parties in the parliament.

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