

Unsatisfactory start to the 9th Parliament

Be generous to the opposition

WE cannot but be disappointed at the way the business of the 9th parliament has gone so far bereft of the opposition from the very first day, except for the opening sitting. We wonder, much as we would not like to, whether we are witnessing the first signs of a replication of the 8th Parliament, in which the opposition was left out of the scene through the partisan conduct of the then Speaker, for the greater part of the five years of its tenure. This, after two years of democracy in the limbo, makes the situation even more undesirable.

To be specific, there are three issues that cause us to feel frustrated. Firstly, it was very disappointing to see the AL chief renege on her public commitment (though not in the AL election manifesto) to offer the post of Deputy Speaker to the Opposition. The AL would have gained much political ground by demonstrating its generosity towards the opposition. We feel the AL has perhaps missed a golden opportunity to reduce the psychological distance between it and the BNP by not living up to its pledge.

And the seat row is even more baffling. The absence of the Opposition from the House after the first sitting, for not being allotted the number of seats that it wanted in the front row, appears to be rather puerile. We feel that this needless squabble can be sorted out if both the parties display some degree of accommodation. However, we must point out that the outgoing Speaker Sirkar's unjustified manner of allotting seats to the BNP-led opposition in the front row, which was not proportional to their representation in the House, disregarding the suggestion of the Chief Whip, which has caused the wrangle in the first place.

Even if we are to accept that the BNP's demand of seats in the front row is unjustified, the AL's position is also neither necessary nor justified. We are constrained to say that the Speaker's attitude belies completely the statement of the Prime Minister who had said that it was not the number of the opposition MPs that would be the main criterion in its dealings with them. The AL promised "change," even called its manifesto "Charter of Change." May we ask where the much promised change is?

Unfortunately, BNP for its part is clearly crossing the line by threatening to go for agitation against the government for not living up to its pledge. Such a move has the potential of making the parliament dysfunctional.

Lastly, in the Speaker's rejection of all the 21 notices given by the BNP-led opposition for discussion we see a repetition of Jamiruddin Sirkar's dismissive attitude towards the opposition in the last parliament. Issues like law and order, post election violence etc., merit discussion on the floor of the House. Regrettably, to our mind, the current Speaker has failed the very first test.

Would it be too much to ask the two the major parties to act more responsibly so as not to belie the hopes and aspirations of the people, and make the voters repent for having elected them as their representatives to the Jatiyo Sangsad?

Trade liberalisation facilities

Are the benefits reaching workers?

WE take note of the fact that Bangladesh is allowed zero tariff facilities by various developed countries on consideration that such benefits would ultimately help reduce poverty and contribute to national development. To be more specific, these countries are offering duty-free access to some of our exportable items with the sole aim to raise the income level and living standards of the poor populace and workers who are struggling to survive with an earning of US dollar 30 to 40 a month. This no-tariff regime has come following trade liberalisation that was adopted to remove barriers to free trade and reach benefits to the poor in least developed and developing countries.

But, the question is whether this is happening in real life. Are the business houses getting the benefits actually share their profits with the workers who toil day and night to produce goods? Are the workers aware of such benefits at all?

The issues were pertinently raised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in a two-day regional seminar on Mainstreaming International Trade into National Development from South Asian Perspective. One of the papers suggested that in Bangladesh, both readymade garments and remittances have contributed to a drop in poverty by 2.6 percentage points between 2000 and 2005. But, it was clearly pointed out that Bangladesh could not make a second round adjustment in wages for workers in the name of competition. We understand, because of this inability to make adjustments, workers remain least benefited no matter how much profit the owners make. It was further noted that although incomes from the garment and textile industry have increased, social and health security issues of about 2 million workers have remained unresolved. There is no doubt that opportunities should be created for the workers to help them take part in the value addition process and that the trading system should be reorganised so that it works for the poor.

We believe a nation can make overall progress only when the government can ensure equitable distribution of wealth among its population. When tariff facilities are offered by the developed economies to help increase the wage rate of the poor workers, the owners of enterprises should announce the profits earned and distribute them among the beneficiaries. Such practice would not only help improve the standard of living of the workers, it would also help create a productive bond between them and the employers as well.

Passport office, new roads, et cetera

At the same time, take the railway tracks away from the heart of the city. These are not only causing regular jams, they are taking human lives at regular intervals too. Since railway travel is picking up with better services, the government should seek funds to construct the tracks elsewhere. With the tracks gone, we can build some parallel roads to make travel easy and faster.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WE have heard a lot about chasing the *dalals* (middlemen) from the premises of the passport offices in the country, especially the one in Dhaka, but to our mortification they exist with all the might. You go to Dhaka passport office at Agargaon, you carefully scan the premise, and seeing no one near the counter you quickly go there.

But, like the vultures circling high above in a seemingly blue sky, they appear from nowhere and surround you. As you begin to feel your space narrowing dangerously you hear them saying... "sir, brother, uncle, I can get it done in three hours...in two hours...in four hours...genuine sir...no hassle...you just go home and relax"...and so on.

This is exactly what happened to this writer on Monday morning at Agargaon. No matter how you try to look somber and obtrusively uninterested in their offer they would follow you up to your car and even block the door repeating the same offer.

You thank your lucky star that it is broad

daylight and not late afternoon. These *dalals* definitely look like rogues and they operate right before the eyes of the policemen on duty in the area.

The most annoying part that they work in cahoots with the officials and clerks in the passport offices, who get a cut of the extra money people pay to get their passports within two or three hours to travel on an emergency basis. The price tag is unlimited. It depends on how fast you want it or how vulnerable you look to them.

A tough looking customer may get away by paying half the amount a susceptible one will have to pay. The passport *baniya* (business), we heard, had almost disappeared during the two-year period of the caretaker government. But now they are back with a bang. So, next time you go there be sure to look tough.

Roads worthy of comments

Some new roads have come up in the capital and some more are coming up, built by the army. A drive down those roads will make one feel quite happy, as one will be able to avoid a longer journey and at the same time avoid traffic jams. For example,

the new road that takes a turn towards the west from in front of the office of the former prime minister and former chief adviser of the caretaker government, takes you to Rokeya Shoroni in a jiffy, from where you can go towards Mohammadpur and Mirpur.

This makes you avoid the long wait at the Bijoy Shoroni roundabout. Now, we should not hesitate to thank the caretaker government and the army for this brilliant idea, should we? There is more.

On Monday morning, while coming towards Karwan Bazar, I noticed that the roundabout at Agargaon is being widened to allow free flow of vehicles from Mohammadpur towards Circle 10 at Mirpur, and towards Mohammadpur/Shishu Hospital from Rokeya Shoroni.

It is another brilliant idea being implemented by the army. And once the Bijoy Shoroni-Tejgaon link road and the Hatirjheel-Rampura link road are completed, we will see less of traffic jams at various points.

Traffic congestions and some suggestions

This writer, in many previous articles on why traffic jams are caused, had given the suggestion of widening the roads and roundabouts by breaking down existing shops or offices. Many such structures have been constructed violating the laws and bylaws. It may hurt some people for some time but will solve traffic congestions to a considerable degree.

And to avoid vehicles dropping or picking up people and thereby hindering

free flow of traffic, it is most essential not to allow any more shops and shopping malls to be constructed on main thoroughfares. Dhaka city has more shops and malls than required, therefore advise enthusiasts to invest in other sectors.

It is also true that we need many more flyovers in the capital. Frankly, we need not think of long ones. Shorter ones like the one on Mahakhali railway tracks will be good enough. Isn't that serving the purpose? Why do we have to always think of big ones? At the same time, take the railway tracks away from the heart of the city.

These are not only causing regular jams, they are taking human lives at regular intervals too. Since railway travel is picking up with better services, the government should seek funds to construct the tracks elsewhere. With the tracks gone, we can build some parallel roads to make travel easy and faster.

While we are addressing the traffic jam issue, we may at the same time suggest no more import vehicles for the next five years. We believe thousands of cars still remain unsold, and the Chittagong Port also has thousands of them waiting to be cleared. At the same time, please take forty-year old cars and buses off to make the roads and highways safer.

Once thousands of such vehicles are sent to dump yards, we can allow new ones to hit the roads. I hope someone at the policy making level is reading this stuff.

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Training local government officials

The MPs should do what they're elected for lawmaking and providing "checks and balances" in governmental operations. The PM talked about the much-needed training and orientation of the MPs. I believe similar orientation is even more imperative for all local government officials (LGOs).

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

IT is now obvious that the idea of holding local government elections ahead of national elections wasn't conspiracy driven; it was precisely to circumvent what a cabinet minister and an AL lawmakerviolate the election codes notwithstanding repeated warnings from the Election Commission (EC). The lawmaker also allegedly abused and beat up poll officials.

Although they both tried to convince the prime minister of their innocence while accusing the EC of victimising them and "making a big fuss for no good reason," the EC and the AL are investigating the incidents independently. I recommend that if they're found guilty, they should also be chastised for lying to and misleading the PM.

"Their actions have brought blemish upon her (Sheikh Hasina) and the party's brilliant electoral victory and raised unnecessary doubts in the public mind as to how serious is AL chief's commitment to bring change in politics and in governance," wrote Mahfuz Anam in his January 25, *The Daily Star* commentary.

The allegations against the minister and lawmaker weren't isolated incidents.

The *Daily Star* reported "Clashes, ruling party activists influencing polling, snatching of ballot boxes and, preventing voters from going to the polling centers, forcing voters to vote openly." Nine miscreants were condemned to incarceration in instant judgment by judicial magistrates and several dozens were also arrested for criminal violations.

Mahfuz Anam further observed, "such indiscipline and self-serving political culture" won't be hospitable to the realisation of "Digital Bangladesh."

As all politics is local so are all urban and rural development activities. The caretaker government promulgated Local Government Ordinance barring elected officials from holding party portfolio to depoliticise local governance not the society as explicated by the LGRD minister. Proscribing MPs involvement in the functioning of *upazila parishads* was also well intentioned. Why scrap them before even trying to see how well they work?

Block allocation of Tk 2 crore to MPs for carrying out development activities in their constituencies will breed corruption, nepotism, and may conflict with local government plans by perpetuating sitting MPs' influence in their constituencies while putting new contestants from

opposition parties at a disadvantage.

Block allocation of funds for MPs is politicisation of taxpayers' money. Eliminating milk and honey from the political process, wherever possible, may discourage the rent-seeking politicians from running for MP and other public offices. It will also strengthen local government's independence in decision-making and implementation of development plans. The MPs should do what they're elected for lawmaking and providing "checks and balances" in governmental operations.

The PM talked about the much-needed training and orientation of the MPs. I believe similar orientation is even more imperative for all local government officials (LGOs) along the following lines:

Staff effectiveness: Any organisation must promote the development and performance of employees. This requires knowledge of developing interpersonal relationship (collegiality); motivation to perform effectively; the ability and skill to identify co-workers' strengths and weaknesses.

Policy facilitation: To implement policies, elected officials must get full cooperation from their staff in identifying bottlenecks, and work toward removing them to facilitate reaching common goals and objectives. This requires an aptitude for group interactions and political mannerism, articulation skill, and ability to engage others in identifying issues and outcomes.

Administering service delivery: Elected officials must ensure that the citizens receive services promptly. The LGA staff must have clear knowledge of service areas and delivery options; skill in

assessing community needs and allocating resources.

Adherence to democratic principles: LGOs must show commitment to democratic principles by respecting elected officials and the decision-making process. They should educate citizens about local government; democratic principles, political processes, and local government laws and regulations.

Planning and management: Given resource constraints, it is imperative that the LGOs have the expertise to sort out short-term and long-term acquisitions, allocation and analysis of financial and human resources. These can be achieved by giving them the knowledge and skill in budgeting, financial analysis, and human resources management.

Honesty and integrity: Politicians in all societies are reckless spenders, and in the process they tend to indulge in activities in which delivery of public service becomes subordinate to self-service. As a result, the disjunction between fairness and integrity, dishonesty and ethicality, and personal and professional relationships becomes blurred. Providing knowledge of business and personal ethics, and ability to understand issues of ethics and integrity in specific situations would be very helpful in keeping LGOs managing local government administration.

For lifting Bangladesh to the status of a developed country by 2021, building an efficient and corruption free local government system is an indispensable prerequisite.

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Broadcast parliament activities

It is imperative to make all activities of the parliament transparent to ensure an effective and accountable parliamentary democracy system. Broadcasting of those activities would be helpful in informing the people about the business of the parliament because, after electing the Members of Parliament (MPs), the voters have no idea about what is being done by their representatives.

DELWAR HOSSAIN ARIFF

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There are special television and radio channels in many countries to broadcast the activities of their parliaments. For example, in the United States, Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) is designed to air activities of the House of Representatives (Congress) and the Senate.

C-SPAN also covers proceedings of parliamentary committees and programs related to public affairs. There are several

television and radio channels and a website of C-SPAN. Owners of cable companies launched the channel as a non-profit media organisation. It also broadcasts programs related to meetings and press conferences of government and non-government organisations.

Moreover, C-SPAN covers news and events about parliaments and governments of the UK and Canada. The channel is intended to inform people about the activities of the parliament and government, and thus build public opinion. Even though the legislators are responsible to the electorates in the United States and most western countries, by broadcasting activities of senators and congressmen C-SPAN has been playing a very critical role in informing the voters about the performance of elected representatives. The significant feature of C-SPAN is that it also broadcasts not only live sessions but also meetings and hearings of parliamentary

committees.

In a parliamentary democracy, parliamentary committees on different subject are imperative. As ministers, secretaries and civil servants of concerned ministries are accountable to the parliament, parliamentary committees are responsible for checking those activities.

Though Bangladesh Television (BTV) broadcasts some sessions of the parliament, it is not a regular practice. Sometimes BTV interrupts this live broadcasting for commercials and other programs.

BTV and the private television channels never broadcast proceedings of meetings of parliamentary committees, but only cover news about those meetings. I think the time has come to broadcast all activities of the parliamentary committees. In doing so, it will be feasible to make parliamentary committees stronger and the concerned ministries more accountable to the parliamentary committees.

To make our democracy and parliamentary system effective, parliament must be the epicenter of politics, administration and every aspect of state affairs. This will not be possible by keeping parliament activities out of reach of general people of the country. If the government takes the initiative to broadcast live sessions and all activities of the parliamentary committees then it would act as a catalyst to make an effective parliament.

Now, the question is whether it will be

possible to telecast all sessions and activities of the parliamentary committees live because BTV, the lone state-run television channel, should also broadcast other programs and news.

The government can start a second channel of BTV for this purpose. This channel will broadcast all sessions of the parliament live and also cover meetings of parliamentary committees. If several meetings of parliamentary committees are held at a time, it can cover those meetings also by recording them. I would like to urge the present government to take this issue sincerely as it would fulfill the dream of the people for "days of change."

If the government is concerned about financial limitations in starting a second channel, then I would propose looking for funds from donor agencies. The UNDP has been financing a project for strengthening the parliamentary system of Bangladesh. The government can request them to provide funds for the second channel, that will be mainly focused on activities and proceedings of parliament and public affairs of government, autonomous and, if possible, non-government organisations of Bangladesh.

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