

Offices for MPs by year-end

Lawmakers must fulfill public expectations

THE speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad has informed the country that all members of Parliament will be given individual offices before the year is out. It certainly makes sense. The fact that MPs need such space to do their work has been acknowledged especially since 1991 when democracy was restored in Bangladesh. There is hardly anyone who will disagree with the idea that lawmakers, like their counterparts in the US and at Westminster, must be provided with all the facilities that will enable them to perform their public responsibilities to the satisfaction of their constituents. One wonders, though, as to why such a long-felt need of our parliamentarians has not so long been addressed.

The question now is, with public expectations about the performance of the MPs always rather high, what returns can the people expect from them once they come by their new perks? Such questions come up given the unenviable record the lawmakers set for themselves in the recent past. Their telephone bills have gone unpaid; they have had tax-free cars procured for themselves. In their own collective interest, they have given themselves pay hikes and have come together in asserting their authority over local bodies. The general impression is that MPs have by and large gone for an enhancement and entrenchment of their powers and privileges without in turn fulfilling the people's expectations of them. Now, of course, such behaviour does not quite tally with the job they are expected to do once they are sworn in as lawmakers on a mandate for change.

At the other end, it has regularly been observed that the level of debate in Parliament is hugely frustrating owing to its indifferent quality. All too often, MPs have made statements that are either concerned with local issues or are paeans to their party leaders. Local issues are important, yes. Even so, lawmakers are expected to offer forward-looking visions to the country through their well-considered and wisdom-driven comments in Parliament on matters that affect the country as a whole. Sadly for us, that has not happened. Debate has been poor and MPs have instead generally engaged themselves in heaping praise, unwarranted or not, on their party chiefs. Such attitudes must change before the nation can convince itself that its lawmakers are serious about the work they must do under the constitution. They can make themselves relevant by mastering such issues of public concern as industrial and social development policies, foreign affairs, the economy, law and order, et al. A good grasp of subjects on their part is necessary, since MPs are expected to be ready with their questions and comments on them.

We will end on a simple note. Let the MPs have all the facilities and complements they need, but let them also remember that in return for all the perks and privileges they enjoy the electorate expects them to deliver. One last point: let the MPs take care that their offices do not dwindle into being party offices. Those offices and their occupants are expected to uphold the interests of the republic.

Flu screening at ZIA

Should be methodical, not harassing

IT is good to note that Bangladesh government has been quick to respond to early warnings issued by the WHO on swine flu which it has dubbed as 'public health emergency of international concern'. This virus capable of mutating into more dangerous strain and transmitting into humans as the growing number of victims has already proven needs surely to be guarded against.

In this context, it's only expected that our government would mount all forms of surveillance against the virus while keeping the antenna high on research information being currently pooled and analysed by the WHO to precisely determine the level of risk involved. To begin with, the government has decided to start screening inbound airport passengers. Well and good, however we must brace up to the task being fully clear in our mind as to what we are stepping into and then putting in place adequate arrangements so as to make the screening a worthwhile exercise. What we can readily conjure up is a long serpentine queue in front of the immigration desk as the health counter does the checking with gluts forming there, too. Depending on whether all the inbound flights are subjected to scrutiny, or just a select few, the congestion is likely to be that much challenging. And let's not forget that in recent times, ZIA has become something of a hub of international travel in the region, so that it requires fresh capacity building to cope with any additional but unavoidable task, such as pertaining to health screening.

Lately, there has been some welcome improvement in the immigration service at ZIA, a development that needs to be sustained by all means. That is precisely the reason why we urge the government to be structurally and technically prepared at the airport before introducing swine flu screening. The screening should scrupulously follow the standard procedures set out by the WHO, be systematic and well-spaced between flights. Otherwise, it could end up in harassment. The suspected cases would need to be quarantined, too.

As far as we know, a number of countries in Asia, Latin America and Europe have begun screening airport passengers for swine flu symptoms. We can take the cue from them, even though we don't seem quite at the frontline of the viral risk.

Ah, that national security thing!

But, yes, national security has been under threat for much of the time we have been a free nation since liberating ourselves from Pakistan in 1971. Sit back and we will try telling you of the moments when Bangladesh's security has been under a cloud, when the state felt shaky at its political base.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A group of individuals have made it known that national security is in a state of threat with the present government running the show. They are dead wrong. And how they are wrong is for the government to explain. But, yes, national security has been under threat for much of the time we have been a free nation since liberating ourselves from Pakistan in 1971. Sit back and we will try telling you of the moments when Bangladesh's security has been under a cloud, when the state felt shaky at its political base.

The very first instance of national security getting to be a wobbly affair is surely the coup of August 15, 1975, when an entire government was dislodged in a most reprehensible manner. And national security remained in a state of the precarious with Khondokar Moshtaque and his murderous cabal of majors and colonels ensconced at Bangabhaban for close to three months. And security took another huge mauling when the four national leaders, men who spearheaded the battlefield struggle for Bangladesh in 1971, were assassinated on November 3, 1975. The murder four days later of General Khaled Musharraf and his fellow officers dug another hole in the wall of national security. The "sepo-y-janata revolution" diffused indiscipline in the military, leaving the state in a grave condition of instability.

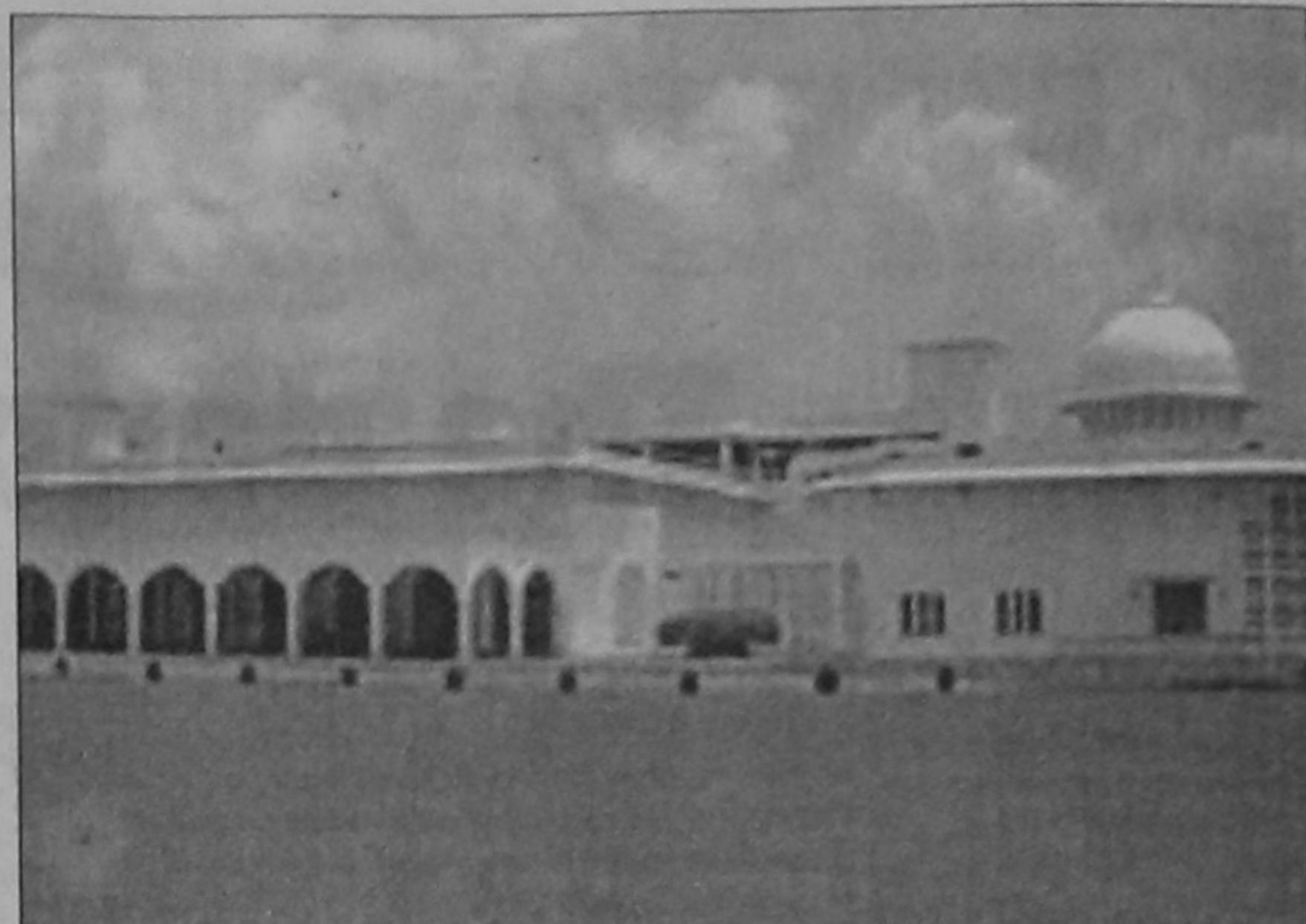
In 1975, therefore, it was an endangered state that Bangladesh was reduced to. The swift overturning of the four state principles and an overt attempt to convert the

state into a quasi-communal geographical entity, along with the adoption of the Indemnity Ordinance (later insidiously incorporated in the constitution) were steps that undermined this free Bengali state.

Accommodating Bangabandhu's killers in the nation's foreign service was the ultimate humiliation of the republic, a clear message that assassins could have the state mutate into the macabre. Indeed, following Bangabandhu's assassination, the state tottered along through a process of captivity at the hands of elements determined to divest it of its aesthetic and political values.

In the Zia era, the repeated coup attempts against the regime were patent pointers to the weakening structure of national security on the watch of those holding the reins of authority at the time. The Zia assassination itself and the terrible aftermath of it were once more signs of national security laid low. All too often it has been unbridled individual political aggrandisement that has left the state reeling. In the Ershad years, the assassins of the nation's founder strutted about as politicians behind the smokescreen of the Freedom Party.

Talk about threats to national security? We can keep talking, until the stars drop dead and powdery from the skies. When General Ershad demanded of President Sattar in 1981 that the head of state constitute a national security council, a move clearly aimed at reducing the president to a figurehead, it was again national security that came under the spotlight. Men in the service of the republic do not coerce the elected president of the country into



Withstanding all threats.

adopting positions that undermine the essential principles of governance. In similar manner, when a coup d'etat overthrows a legally constituted government, or attempts to do so, it is national security that takes a beating.

Mark, though, that national security may not always be about coups or murders of elected leaders going free. There are other ways in which men and women of evil intent may pose huge risks to national security. They do it by belittling the state, making it subservient to personal or party interests. And the belittling is done through having a pliant Election Commission produce on the voters' roll huge numbers of people who simply do not exist. It is done through placing at the Anti-Corruption Commission men willing to do the bidding of the powers that be. It is done through doing away with the Collaborators Act and allowing known enemies of the state to rear their heads in public once more, their sights fixed on an eventual seizure of power. It is done through placing at the top echelons of national security individuals

who assisted the government of Pakistan in prosecuting the Agartala conspiracy case in the late 1960s.

A state goes through severe haemorrhaging when elections are stolen, when the government of the day attempts diverting the course of investigations into grave instances of political calamity in order to protect itself from public humiliation. When policemen dwindle into being goons of the party in power and swoop on citizens demanding rule of law, it is national security which crumbles. National security develops cracks when civil servants gather, in clandestine fashion, in the nocturnal hours and then run from the media in full glare of the cameras.

It takes brave individuals and bold acts to solidify the base of national security. Think of the Chittagong Hill Tracts deal. Think of the water-sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India.

Need we say more?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.
E-mail: bahsan@rediffmail.com

Indonesians reject Islamic parties at polls

The 2009 outcome suggests that the surge of support for Islamists in the last polls in 2004, at a time of uproar in the Muslim world over America's "war on terror," may have died for Indonesia's secular democracy.

HARUN UR RASHID

WHILE, from Pakistan to Gaza and Lebanon, militant Islamic movements have gained ground largely because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, compounded by the gross injustices perpetrated on the Palestinians by Israel, it is reported that Islamic parties did poorly in the general elections held on April 9 in Indonesia.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority in the world with about 240 million people, of which 88% are Muslims.

Although elections were held on April 9, it will take about a month to know the result with certainty because Indonesia is an archipelagic country with more than 13,000 islands, covering a total area of 1,904,569 square kilometres divided into 33 provinces.

It is striking that early results from parliamentary elections in the largest Muslim-majority Indonesia have reaffirmed the appeal of broad-based secular parties over Islamic-oriented rivals. It is a repeat of what we witnessed earlier in the December

29 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh.

The three largest secular parties took more than half of the votes, according to projections based on poll sampling. The Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS, the most conservative Islamist party in the race, polled around 8%. Other Muslim parties vying for parliamentary seats saw their share of the national vote fall. A total of 38 parties contested the elections.

In the 2004 election, Islamic parties won more than 38% of the votes. This year they will end up with less than 26% according to the Indonesian Survey Institute, an independent polling firm.

The 2009 outcome suggests that the surge of support for Islamists in the last polls in 2004, at a time of uproar in the Muslim world over America's "war on terror," may have died for Indonesia's secular democracy. Furthermore, the ideology canvassed by Islamic parties does not appeal to the majority of voters.

Calls for Islamic-based justice and morality appear to have gone unheeded as most voters opted for politicians who campaigned on the economy and the battle

against poverty. Even before the vote, many Islamist politicians had begun moving to the center, downplaying divisive issues of faith and supporting programs to help the poor.

It appears that joining governing coalitions has tempered some of their zeal and forced Islamic parties into pragmatic alliances with secular partners. At the same time, the secular partners have put economic and social justice issues in the front.

The result of the parliamentary poll demonstrates that Indonesians have understood that secularism does not equate to atheism; indeed, many secularists have counted themselves as religious persons but they kept religion private. Secularism means a policy of avoiding entanglement between government and religion, of non-discrimination among religions, and of guaranteeing human rights of all citizens, regardless of faith.

Azyumardi Azra, Director of the Graduate School of Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic University said: "People in general do not feel that there should be an integration of faith and politics."

Some observers warn that Islamic orthodoxy still poses a threat to Indonesia, a patchwork of faiths and ethnicities. Greater piety in public life sows alarm among non-Muslims, who fear a gradual retreat from the nation's secular foundations. But the tepid support at the ballot box for Islamist parties suggests these groups face an uphill climb.

"Indonesia's Muslim electorate is not interested in an Islamist agenda. Indonesia is a very religious country, there's a lot of spirituality, and this is increasing in public life. But that doesn't mean that Indonesians want a religious state," says Robin Bush, country director of the Asia Foundation. On the other hand, Sidney Jones, an analyst with the International Crisis Group in Jakarta says: "Islamist politicians may have lost ground in the polls but their agenda hasn't gone away."

Indonesian scholars believe that on a deeper level some of the parties' fundamentalist measures are said to have alienated traditionally moderate Indonesians. Furthermore, once in office the pristine image of Islamic parties was tarnished after several of their lawmakers were prosecuted for corruption. One member of the hard-line Islamic party the Prosperous Justice Party is under investigation in a bribery case.

The country's major secular parties, including President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party, are strong believers in secular government. President Yudhoyono (59), a former general of the army with a Ph-D degree, has reportedly a strong lead over former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, seen as his main rival in the July 8 presidential election.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Let there be politics of 'give' not of 'take'

By leaving the house she may pay tribute to her husband's legendary image of selflessness, the moral burden of which primarily falls on her. As of now, she is tight-lipped, although some of her party leaders have threatened to launch a topple-the-government movement over the issue.

MD. ALI AKBAR

BEGUM Zia's cantonment house is being touted as the hottest issue (?) by the opposition to launch an anti-government movement while the government is concerned with hard issues of everyday life. Unfortunately, BNP is taking bad politics too far, a naked example of the politics of "take" rather than "give," because the government allotted 2-bigha Gulshan house is good enough to house the ex-president's family.

Here I am tempted to adduce the selflessness on the part of leaders in the not-too-distant past. When British Prime Minister Edward Heath -- upon completion of his stint at 10, Downing Street -- was departing, he said to the curious journalists that he would live in some modest rented house as he had no house of his own. Libya's President Gaddafi once said that

his parents' family would be the last to move out of the "tent house" to a modern accommodation he was determined to ensure for the Libyans in general. The austerity-loving Mahatma Gandhi lived in a hut all his life, and left behind no treasure other than his immortal idealism of serving humanity.

In the same vein, we should recall the plain living and high thinking traits of legendary Sher-e-Bangla, Bhashani and Bangabandhu, whose lives were illuminated by politics of "give," not "take." While at the helm, Bangabandhu lived in his Dhanmandi house instead of a posh government house. Assassinated President Zia had left a worn-out suitcase, and no other property.

These examples of selflessness are like an "oasis" in the desert. One wishes that these instances inspire the opposition leader to surrender the house of dispute.

Should she do so, it might go down as a sacrifice on her part, thus enabling her to score big in public estimation.

On the other side, there is the case of Bangabandhu's orphaned daughters, who had passed many years in extreme hardships. Never have they clamoured or gone fighting for a gift of state property, not even after the heartless cancellation by Begum Zia of the allotment of a modest house to Sk. Rehana.

By complying with the government notice the leader of the opposition may take the path of "give." She can demonstrate that the goal of her politics is much larger than a house.

We are dismayed at the political storm gathering over the house issue. It is widely surmised that she will not vacate the house without fighting a legal battle, and heating up the streets. As the military land directorate served a notice upon her to vacate the house within fifteen days, her lawyer has issued what he called a "demand for justice," asking the government to withdraw the notice.

Besides, BNP has called for a month-long protest movement. Many argue it devolves upon a leader of Begum Zia's stature to give up the property, given that she can live in the government allotted house at Gulshan. It would be simply beneath her dignity to foment political

trouble for keeping government property.

By leaving the house she may pay tribute to her husband's legendary image of selflessness, the moral burden of which primarily falls on her. As of now, she is tight-lipped, although some of her party leaders have threatened to launch a topple-the-government movement over the issue.

It is yet to be seen how much popular support the opposition will be able to muster for this issue, which, being solely to hold on to state property, has little to do with the welfare of the common masses that she claims she is working for. However, no one has discussed the likelihood of Begum Zia deciding to hand over the house to the government.

It may not also be weird to think, when it comes to her doing politics outside the cantonment as demanded by her opponents, that she might take it rather as a challenge to outsmart the latter by deciding to shift to a civilian location voluntarily.

Besides, this gesture may be the springboard of political dividends, as it will pave the way for her party leaders and activists as well as the commoners to have freer access to her than now. In that case, her free movement and interactions with the people may provide a shot in the arms to redeem BNP's seemingly battered image.

MD. ALI AKBAR is a Deputy Secretary.