

Empowering parliamentary standing committees

To conclude, parliamentary standing committees could be the most effective instruments of parliamentary oversight if they could discharge their assigned functions and responsibilities effectively. But such an environment has not yet been created. The earlier it is done, the better it will be for democracy and the country.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE ninth parliament has excelled in appointing all the parliamentary standing committees at its first session, and they have already started their work. This is a significant departure from the practices that we had noticed in the previous parliaments.

The guidance provided by the rules of procedure (ROP) of the parliament to appoint committees on ministries "as soon as may be, after the inauguration of each new parliament" was not followed in the past parliaments.

Parliamentary standing committees without incorporation of lawmakers from the then main opposition party Awami League (AL) were formed a year after the inauguration (October 28, 2001) of the eighth parliament. After submission of names of the AL lawmakers, the committees came to be reconstituted in their full shape in September 2004.

A few parliamentary standing committees without the inclusion of lawmakers from the main opposition BNP were appointed sixteen months after the inauguration (July 14, 1996) of the seventh parliament. After submission of names of

BNP lawmakers, all the committees, including the previously appointed fourteen committees, came to be constituted in full shape in May 1998.

Parliamentary standing committees are generally grouped into categories like ministerial committees, finance and audit committees, and a number of other committees of standing nature. The functions of a standing committee on a ministry, such as the committee on the commerce ministry, are to examine any bill or other matters referred to it by the House; to review the works relating to the ministry which falls within its jurisdiction; to enquire into any activity or irregularity and serious complaint in respect of the ministry; to examine, if it deems fit, any such matter as may fall within its jurisdiction and to make recommendations.

Finance and audit committees, such as committee on public accounts, committee on estimates, and committee on public undertakings, are considered as special mechanisms of the parliament to perform its supervisory role over the government expenditures. There are other committees such as committee on private members' bills and resolutions, committee on ROP, committee on gov-

ernment assurances, etc., and they perform their assigned functions of specific nature.

Since their composition in the first session, most of the parliamentary standing committees, particularly the standing committees on ministries, have become active in the discharge of their responsibilities. Newspaper reports suggest that the parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry has asked the ministries of industry and environment to act with urgency to save the country's rivers, particularly the four -- Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Sitalakhy -- that serve as the lifeline of the capital.

The parliamentary standing committee on the environment and forest ministry has formed a sub-committee to take necessary action to save the country's rivers, especially the above-mentioned four rivers. The parliamentary standing committee on the defence ministry has initiated steps to formulate the defence policy.

The parliamentary standing committee on the jute and textile ministry has recommended scrapping of deals made by the four-party alliance government to privatise three state-run cotton mills -- Olympia Textile Mills, Monno Textile Mills and National Cotton Mills -- as the buyers failed to comply with the terms and conditions.

The parliamentary standing committee on the housing and public works ministry has decided to investigate anomalies, if any, in allotment of plots to a number of media firms owners and BNP loyalists and leaders during the regime of the four-party alliance government. The parliamentary standing com-

mittee on the shipping ministry has formed a sub-committee to investigate alleged corruption and irregularities against the caretaker government's shipping adviser Major General M. A. Matin in awarding contract of container handling at Chittagong Port. More instances may be cited.

The functions of parliamentary standing committees have given them the responsibility of working without any bias. The overwhelming majority of the AL-led ruling alliance in the parliamentary standing committees should not be used for "witch-hunting" as alleged by the main opposition BNP. Secondly, parliamentary standing committees' investigation may not be limited to the alleged irregularities of the BNP-led four party alliance government and the caretaker government, they may go beyond that if necessary. It will be highly appreciated by the people.

The parliamentary standing committees on ministries have to work under certain limitations. They submit their reports with findings and recommendations to the House. The committees are thus recommending entities. This establishes the fact that unless accepted by the House, implementation of recommendations made by the committees in the meetings is not obligatory on the ministries and agencies. This prompted some chairmen of the standing committees on ministries of the eighth parliament to observe that their inability to implement the decisions made the committees "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

The recent debate between the parliamentary standing committee on the



Committee: Backbone of government.

finance ministry and the finance minister on tax holiday is a case in point. Secondly, since the MPs of the ruling alliance generally act as the chairmen of these committees, they remain under pressure of the government high ups. This happened in the past when inquiry against the alleged irregularities of any establishment of the government was started.

To conclude, parliamentary standing

committees could be the most effective instruments of parliamentary oversight if they could discharge their assigned functions and responsibilities effectively. But such an environment has not yet been created. The earlier it is done, the better it will be for democracy and the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government. E-mail: latifm43@yahoo.com

How neighbours view the elephant

India must be the elder, not the big, brother, with a special responsibility. It must not only be the largest country in the heart of South Asia, but also the country with the largest heart. It is as simple, or as difficult, as that.

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE Indians have spoken electorally. In what has been the largest election ever, at any time anywhere, in the world's biggest democracy, they have returned to power one of the world's oldest political parties, the Indian National Congress. They have displayed their willingness to continue to be led by a wise man, Dr. Manmohan Singh, and an experienced woman Sonia Gandhi, till such time change and youth come, as will happen inexorably, in the form of Rahul Gandhi. In the same breath, therefore this vast electorate has opted for continuity and change, welcoming the old and the new, displaying the maturity of the common voter. Also, demonstrating the efficacy of democracy as the most effective form of human organisation.

India, of course, is the region's "pre-eminent" power, politically, economically and militarily. Indians eschew the term "pre-dominant" as it smacks of "hegemonism." Raymond Aron defined "power" as the capacity of a political unit to impose its will over others. More recently, Joseph Nye has propounded the concept of "soft" or "smart" power,

entailing consultations, understanding, patience, yet firmness and a modicum of sacrifice. It is hoped the Indian leadership will choose this course.

The signs so far are that they will. Though foreign policy figured little during the election campaign, the Congress manifesto emphasised the need to be particularly "engaged and connected" with Asia, naming most immediate neighbours. The great international relations theorist Hedley Bull had written: "The deepest fears of smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours." So how do we see, as of now, the rest of South Asia behave towards India, whom they view as the "elephant" in the region? In three main ways.

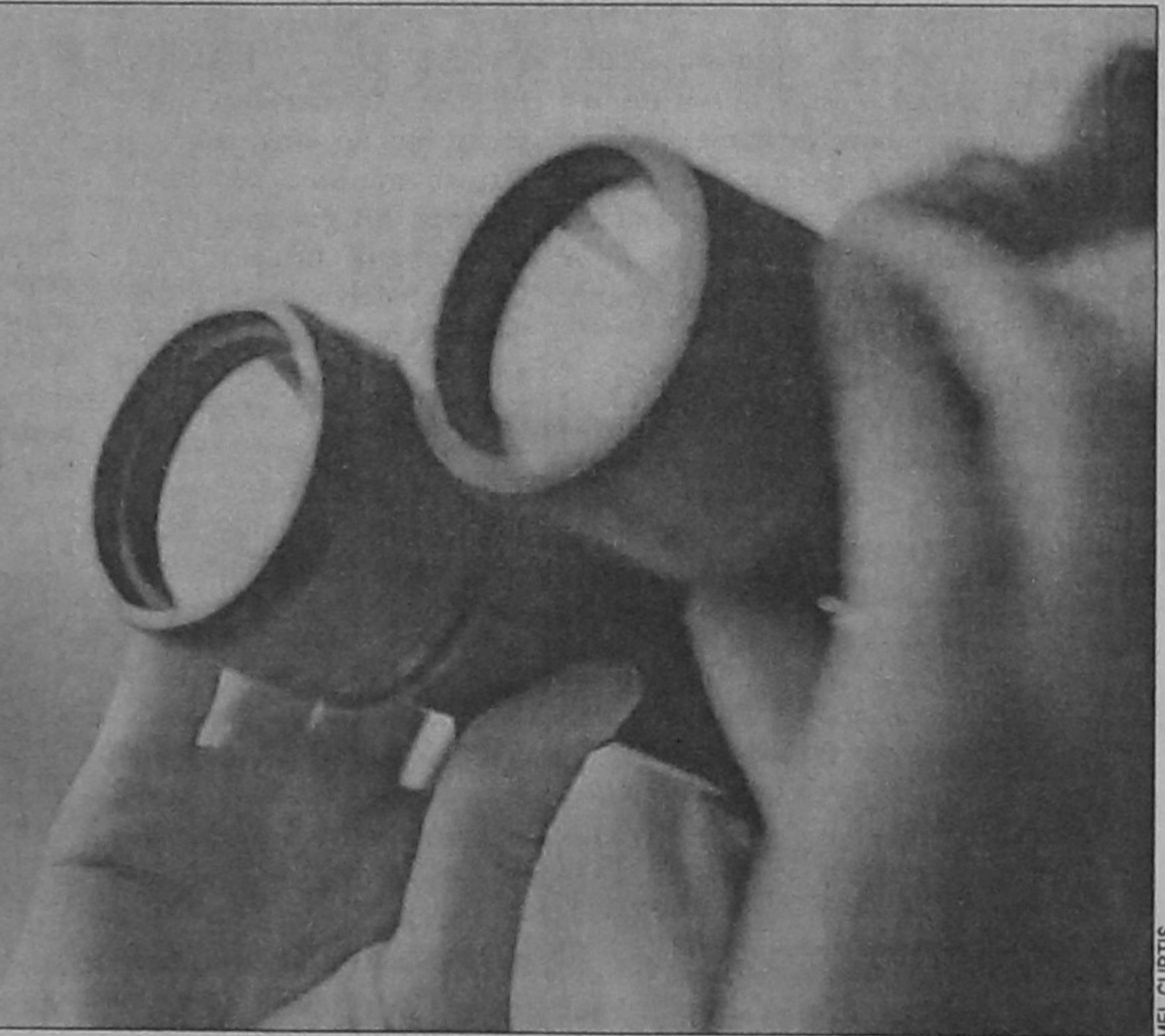
One is the "pilot-fish" behaviour, an expression used by the Scandinavian Erling Bjol to describe post-World War attitude of Finland towards the USSR. It implies keeping close to the shark in order to avoid being eaten. Bhutan and Maldives probably fit the bill. According to the 1949 Treaty of Friendship between Bhutan and India, Bhutan's foreign policy was to be "guided" by India. In 2007, Bhutan managed to renegotiate a change to the treaty, particularly that

requirement, perhaps as a reward for conducting operations against Bhutan-based anti-Indian insurgents.

In Maldives India had earned the gratitude of former president Gayoom by propping him up against coup attempts. No major change is expected under President Nasheed.

A second way is by making itself difficult to be overcome militarily by India. Pakistan has chosen to follow this route

by acquiring "minimum deterrent capability" through its nuclear arms and ever expanding arsenal. However, analysts have argued that this situation creates a state of equilibrium that provides scope for stable relations. But for India, non-state actors in Pakistan, such as the Taliban and other Islamists, remain a source of anxiety. This understanding, buttressed by US pressure, appears to be leading Islamabad toward some positive



What do they see?

action, something that Delhi will factor into the relationship.

The third way is by seeking to live "in concord with but distinct from" India. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal appear to be choosing this path. With Bangladesh's new Awami League led government of Sheikh Hasina there are some shared values with the Congress in terms of secularism, modernisation and market orientation, which should help bilateral relations. Yet, there persists in Bangladesh, including its very vibrant civil society, some deep-rooted suspicions of India. These involve issues of water-sharing, transit, non-trade barriers on the part of India, and unresolved maritime boundaries. They must be addressed. More work will need to be done by the Indian leadership to restore confidence in Indian actions among the common Bangladeshis.

In Sri Lanka, a civil war has just ended, with the government crushing the bloody insurrection for a separate homeland for the Tamil minority. India had turned a blind-eye to President Rajapakse's actions, despite the pro-Tamil sentiments in its own state of Tamil Nadu. Now the new coalition government will be obliged to seek a role in the resolution of the minority problem. If Colombo is uncooperative, Delhi will perhaps exert some firmness, but not such that will cause Colombo to completely veer towards Beijing.

Beijing will also be a factor in India's relations with Nepal, which is in chaos. The Maoist leader Prachanda, who has just resigned, has accused India of aiding

rivals. And the Maoists will remain a force in Nepal in the foreseeable future.

All these challenges will test the deftness of India's diplomacy, and also its policy-making capabilities. However, if India is to play the role it aspires to in the world beyond it must carry the region with it. It includes the goal of a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations, for opposition to all aspirants in this regard -- India, Germany, Japan, Brazil and South Africa -- appear to be coming from their neighbours.

In the Bhagavad Gita, which is a small section of the epic Mahabharata, Krishna, a divine incarnation in human form, argues with the hero Arjuna, urging him to fight the adversaries no matter what the consequences because the cause is just. Arjuna dithers, pondering over the possible resultant misery and slaughter.

Amartya Sen asserts that this debate between perceived duty and consequence is as valid now as then. Indeed, it is the philosophical capacity of the Indian psyche to be able to objectively weigh considerations on both sides of a debate that must drive India's policy in the region. India must be the elder, not the big, brother, with a special responsibility. It must not only be the largest country in the heart of South Asia, but also the country with the largest heart. It is as simple, or as difficult, as that.

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury was former Advisor on Foreign Affairs to the caretaker government. He is currently Visiting Senior Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore National University.

Beware of bureaucracy!

Many of the bureaucrats are like chameleons, capable of changing colours and camouflaging themselves. Now, as AL is in the power, they seem to be more Awami Leaguer than even a veteran Awami Leaguer. The government has to be aware of that.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

AFTER a two-year suspension, a new phase of democracy has started in Bangladesh, with new hopes and pledges. The electoral slogan of the AL, "a charter for change," has encouraged the common people. Now it is the responsibility of the pledge-bound government to deliver accordingly. However, without proper performance of the bureaucrats, the government will fail to achieve the goal.

The people are eager to see the course of the promised digital Bangladesh, or e-Governance, as proper implementation will bring the much-awaited good governance. For this, the government must take an initiative to align the bureaucracy towards e-Governance. e-Governance speeds up the government's delivery system by eliminating red-tapism. It also ensures social equity by reducing corruption and increasing

transparency. So, it can be expected that many corrupt bureaucrats will try to resist proper implementation of e-Governance.

No doubt, corruption is the most detrimental factor that hinders our national development. Though corrupt politicians put the country at stake, their partners are bureaucrats. At the state level, no government can get involved in corruption without the help of the bureaucrats. In the past, the nation saw that although some politicians were tried and punished for their involvement in corruption, their counterparts in the bureaucracy, in most cases, escaped.

To reduce state level corruption, an efficient and effective ACC is a must. It must have the authority to bring corrupt government officials to trial. Fortunately, the ACC Act 2004 has provided it with the power to file corruption cases and issue arrest warrants against corrupt officials. However, some of the top bureaucrats are now trying

to take away this power of the ACC.

In this context, the cabinet secretary said: "Some of the secretaries have discussed the issue and recommended amending the existing law to curtail the ACC's such power." What audacity! In fact, for establishing good governance, nobody should be immunised by law, especially if it is a case of corruption. Hopefully, the honourable PM will not step into the trap of the bureaucrats.

One of the major problems in bureaucracy is cultural, as it has failed to sever its British colonial legacy. Like the then British Indian bureaucrats, our bureaucrats too assume that they are the masters, not the servants, of the citizens. In fact, the British introduced bureaucracy in the then British India with a view to exploiting people, so they gave enormous power to bureaucrats to rule the country on their behalf.

With regard to bureaucracy at that time, the British followed a double standard. For their home country, they installed a relatively people-friendly bureaucracy, whereas for their colonies they created oppressive bureaucracies for obvious reasons. However, in this context, we must salute the PM as she is concerned about this and has warned the bureaucrats. She said: "Keep in mind that you are the servants of the people,

not their masters."

In dealing with bureaucracy, the government is in a dilemma due to the bureaucracy's inclination towards the parties that ran the immediate past political government. For the smooth running of the government the bureaucracy must be depoliticised. To resolve this problem the government should take pragmatic steps. Just making some politicised bureaucrats OSDs will not work, rather it will be a waste of public money. The best policy should be to engage and motivate them to work for the nation building endeavours of the government under the close supervision of the concerned ministers.

Many of the bureaucrats are like chameleons, capable of changing colours and camouflaging themselves. Now, as AL is in the power, they seem to be more Awami Leaguer than even a veteran Awami Leaguer. The government has to be aware of that. The government does not need any politicised bureaucrats, rather it requires effective and efficient bureaucrats who objectively execute the government's policies.

To get the desired output, the ministers must maintain supremacy over the bureaucrats in their ministries. Unfortunately, in the past, most ministers became easy prey of the corrupt bureau-



crats. However, if a minister is honest, sincere, patriotic and prudent then, even on part of the most corrupt and cunning bureaucrats, it becomes impossible to be derailed.

In this context, Matia Chowdhury who ran the ministry of agriculture during 1996-2001 AL regime can be cited as a role model. During that regime, Matia was an exception and ran her ministry efficiently, keeping supremacy over the bureaucrats by dint of her personal integrity, honesty,

and commitment to the people.

Ideally, for rendering good governance, a minister should be the key policy maker of his/her ministry and the bureaucrats should act as mere executors of the policy. It is encouraging that all the ministers are now under surveillance of the PM. It will be appreciated if she emphasises on the issues discussed in appraising the individual performance of the cabinet members.

Md. Anwarul Kabir is a contributor to The Daily Star. Email: kabiranwar@yahoo.com.