

The BNP's boycott of parliament

It owes it to its constituents to speak for them in JS

THE continuing absence of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its erstwhile ally in government, the Jamaat-e-Islami, threatens to put at risk the new phase of democracy inaugurated through the general elections of December last year. Indeed, the BNP had pledged in its election manifesto that if voted to power it would go for laws that would put an end to the pervasive culture of a boycott of parliament by political parties. Obviously, the BNP did not get back to power. But should that be any reason for it now to stay away from a legislative body in which it castigated the opposition in its own days in power? The BNP, in line with its manifesto, could on its own take the initiative of proposing legislation aimed at doing away with the boycott culture. That way, it will not only convince people that it has gone for a reinvention of itself but also encourage them into believing that change in the political mindset is also in the offing.

The reality today is that by deliberately ignoring parliament, the BNP has not been making matters easier for itself as well as for democratic governance. Its continued insistence on more front row seats for its lawmakers, despite the fact that the speaker has already allocated it seats beyond what its present numerical position in the JS entitles it to, has put a damper on the proceedings of the JS. It sends out a bad signal to its local constituents as well as the international community. If a party which has more than once in the past been in government, its pique at its present status can only raise questions about the mindset of its leading figures. Add to that an extraneous issue the BNP has raised as a justification for not taking part in parliamentary proceedings. It has demanded that, along with the front row seat allocation issue, the government put a stop to the move to have Begum Khaleida Zia vacate her cantonment residence. There are a couple of points to be made here. First, the issue of the opposition leader's home has no bearing whatsoever on the functioning of parliament. Second, the matter is now within the jurisdiction of the court, which will have the final say on it. The BNP, in its own interest, must rethink its politics where its position on the two issues is concerned.

The party has also begun to peddle the notion that the ruling Awami League is determined on turning the Jatiyo Sangsad into a one-party parliament by keeping the BNP out. That assessment is not only sad but also preposterous because the BNP has, despite the appeals of the treasury bench and the speaker, chosen to stay out of the House. To boycott parliament and then to suggest that it is becoming a one-party show is a flimsy pretext that does the opposition little good.

It is our view, one we believe is shared by everyone holding faith in democracy, that in order for pluralist politics to be sustained and strengthened, the BNP should reconsider its position and return to the House. It garnered no less than 38 per cent of the popular vote at the last elections, which certainly imposes on it a grave responsibility to speak for its supporters.

Why cloud the atmospherics for better ties?

Indian envoy should have been discreet

FOREIGN Minister Dipu Moni has said she feels that Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty might have breached diplomatic norms by commenting to the effect that Bangladeshi water experts were making uninformed observations on Tipaimukh dam. Besides referring to them as 'so-called experts' he has also characterised them, obviously sweepingly, as being politically motivated.

Since the Indian envoy did not contradict such attributions appearing in the national press we can assume that he had made such remarks.

This is unfortunate. We wonder why create an unhelpful situation, even unwittingly, especially at a time when two governments have taken charge of their countries on convincing mandates giving rise to fresh hopes of taking Indo-Bangla relationship to a new height. When the vista of a new possibility can be seen on the horizon for improved ties between the two countries, why indiscreet comments would emanate leaving the atmospherics beclouded, even if temporarily?

To be candid, even if unintentional, the comments made by the Indian High Commissioner on our experts have had pejorative overtones amounting to casting aspersions on them. We accept the right of envoy to express displeasure. An experienced envoy of Mr. Chakravarty's stature could definitely have found a better manner and language of doing so.

It is beyond question that there is an issue with Tipaimukh, even the Monipur state of India has expressed concern over its possible deleterious effects. Bangladesh being a co-riparian country, the minds of our experts have been profoundly exercised over it and rightly so. That they would express concerns over it, especially in a context of unavailability of full details was to be only expected. Politics in Bangladesh is confrontational and some remarks may be politically oriented. But does it call for a sweeping characterisation of all our experts by an envoy? He might have had things to say; but he could have done so maintaining the standard diplomatic decorum. By sadly over-speaking, the Indian High Commissioner has hardly contributed to the atmospherics that must be congenial to fostering better ties. In fact by making sweeping judgmental comments he has created a situation which was eminently avoidable.

Our Pterygoid Walk

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MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE growing influence of black money in our life is comparable to how a snake swallows its prey. Once the prey is inside its wide-open mouth, it drenches its mouth with saliva and begins to transport the prey into the digestive tract. The snake has two extra rows of teeth on the roof of its mouth, which ratchet over the outer surface of the prey and gradually work it into the belly. These teeth are called Pterygoid teeth, and this process of swallowing is known as the Pterygoid Walk.

In this budget season, when there is so much controversy over black money, we need to realise that we have already walked that walk. Many years ago we entered the coils of the serpent when it was argued that dirty money washed could give our economy a shot in the arm. The serpent took us into its mouth when the first amnesty was offered. Then, like those Pterygoid teeth, budget after budget delivered us further into its gorge.

In a nutshell if black money was nibbling before, it has now swallowed us. The finance minister has recently confessed to its tremendous clout, when explaining why he couldn't but propose an amnesty scheme that should allow anyone with undisclosed income to pay only 10% as taxes and legalise his money within the next three years. Even he wasn't surprised that the scheme has drawn so much flak.

Because, it sounds like the government is offering a three-year tax-holiday as stimulus to a new growth sector. It might sound ridic-

ulous but black money has turned into an industry unto itself. We may not have an estimate of the black money circulating in this market, but in 2000, the Kenyans ascertained that crime and corruption combined was the fourth factor of production in Kenya.

In the same year, a study conducted by the Series on Alternative Research in East Africa (SAREAT) showed that this fourth factor generated much more than most sectors of the formal economy in Kenya. The activities under this thriving sector included carjacking, land grabbing, government corruption, bank robberies, cattle rustling, drug and arms trafficking.

For example, carjackers alone earned a whopping amount, which could pay for the rehabilitation of all urban roads in the country. In another instance, bank robbers had robbed from one bank what was nearly equivalent of the 1999-2000 budget for the country's police force.

The reason why another amnesty is being proposed in next year's budget is because previous amnesties didn't work. It's for the same reason we can't be sure that another amnesty will be seriously taken and the flow of black money will run dry after three years. Then, what is the justification of repeating it?

This is where the serpent drenches us with saliva. It shows temptations that the release of black money will be a miracle tonic for the economy. It will be invested in capital market, start-up industries and physical infrastructure, invigorating an economy that should otherwise wobble on



On the way to a Pterygoid Walk?

its foundation.

Fortuitously, the exponents of renewed amnesty have got an extra angle this time. Surfacing of black money will be a cushion against the fallouts of global recession, they argue.

Now that's pretty much how a Thieves' Market operates. If an item is stolen from you, chances are you will be able to buy it back from that market. If you analyse carefully, the same deal is being offered to us. People who stole money from the economy are being lionised as saviours. They have killed our cows, and now we are being asked to thank our lucky stars if they should donate shoes to us.

The shame of it is that nobody is saying what should have been said long ago. The black money is our money, stolen from us. It has been raked in through bribery, extortion, tax dodging, smuggling, hoarding and misappropriation of government funds. This money would have been spent

in the economy, if not swindled by the less honorable amongst us.

Instead of asking them to refund this money with interest in arrears and taking legal actions against them, they are being placed on the pedestal. And imagine what that should do to our moral conviction. Jail to small thieves, hail to big ones.

There is a German proverb that says that he who holds the ladder is as bad as the thief. Why should government after government try to rehabilitate black money? Simple. They want this money to be invested in the economy.

What will happen if that's done? It will invigorate the economy and raise our standard of living. But it will also lower the standard by which we live. Theft is the mother of all mischief. If we don't mind others stealing from us today, why should we mind stealing from them tomorrow?

Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.

The invisible side

How far has the women's cause been represented in the current fiscal year's budget? Or of the other marginalised groups like hardcore poor, people with disabilities and the indigenous people?

AUDITY FALGUNI

HOW far has the women's cause been represented in the current fiscal year's budget? Or of the other marginalised groups like hardcore poor, people with disabilities and the indigenous people?

Let us deal with the issue of women's representation first. Although Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith, in his budget speech on June 11, said that the government would initiate positive steps to ensure gender equity across the economy, incorporation of gender and poverty disaggregated data in the budget still waits for the medium term budget framework period (The Daily Star, June 12).

The budget of the fiscal year 2009-10 proposes to give priority to providing credit to women entrepreneurs, increasing allowance for the lactating mothers from Tk.50 to Tk.350 (total allocation behind this particular category would amount to Tk.33.60 crore), allocating Tk.25 crore as allowance for lactating low-income work-

ing mothers in urban areas and Tk.70 crore for maternity health voucher scheme (The Daily Star, June 12).

The new budget has also proposed Tk.75.60 crore for employment generation in the char or shoal areas, where most of the workers under the scheme would be women. The promises really sound good; if only they can get implemented!

The finance minister underscored the necessity of reinstating the women development policy formulated by the Awami League government in 1997. Despite "political will" of the present government and pro-active initiatives on part of the women's organisations, implementation of the policy might face serious obstacles from the clerics and hardcore rightist forces of Bangladesh, whose influence in shaping the people's sentiment cannot be ignored.

When we glance at the budget allocation for the hardcore poor, the situation looks even worse. Among the total 28 million hard-core poor, each will receive only Tk.420 annually, while the government will be able

to manage work only for five days a year for each of them under a project meant for them, experts commented in another report published in the Daily Star on June 17.

The report says that Prantik Manusher Sanghati, a platform of 11 organisations working with the hard-core poor, organised a seminar in the city on June 16 and presented a key-note paper. The paper has revealed that the current year's budget attempts to create employment for 49 lakh man-months, which means work for five man-days for each of them. The budget provides allocation of Tk.1,176 crore for 28 million hard-core poor, but each of them will receive only Tk.420.

The situation of people with disabilities is the worst. According to the statistics provided by certain rights based organisations on disability, around 98% of the people with disability are jobless while 96% of them do not have any opportunity to get an education. With these people outside the development program, the Vision 2021 goal of the present government seems to be a distant cry.

The disability rights-based organisations, in addition, implored the government to raise the monthly allowance of poor people with disabilities from Tk.300 to Tk.500, and to make provision for specific budgetary allocation for people with disabilities during natural disasters and par-

ticular allocation for the mothers of people with disabilities.

They also demanded 16 seats in the National Parliament for people with disabilities, and implementation of their 10% quota in government service, including 5% quota in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) cadre.

Newspapers are yet to publish the categorically separated allocation for indigenous people in the budget. So far, we could only know that the highest allocation of Tk.5,877 crore has been proposed for the Food for Work Program, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Test Relief (TR-Food), Gratuitous Relief (GR-Food) and also for food assistance in CHT.

But, where is the provision for food assistance for the indigenous people of North Bengal, Sylhet and broader Mymensingh region, and the disaster-prone coastal belt region? The recent attack on and forceful eviction of 56 landless Santal families in Naogaon, North Bengal, warns us to think more cautiously on this issue, and the government should also consider the safety and welfare of indigenous people through budgetary intervention.

Audity Falguni is a development activist and free-lance writer.

Have we forgotten Iraq?

Obama's approval ratings on Iraq are among his highest on any issue he is dealing with. The decision to withdraw the sharp reduction in American casualties after six years of involvement there have combined to create a political calm over the issue that so convulsed the country.

DAN BALZ

THE celebrations in Iraq marking the pullback of US combat forces from Baghdad and other cities stand in contrast to the reaction in America. The transfer of power has been met almost with public indifference, overshadowed by everything from Michael Jackson's death to the fate of Obama's domestic agenda.

A year ago, the issue of whether US forces should stay or go produced pointed debate and disagreement between Obama and McCain. Now, the transfer of authority for protecting the cities from US to Iraqi forces has been greeted with near-universal acceptance.

Obama marked the moment with brief remarks at the White House, saying that the Iraqi people were "rightly treating this day as a cause for celebration," while noting that Iraqi leaders have many political issues to resolve. He praised US forces for all they have done.

Obama also took note of the recent attacks and killings in Iraq. "There will be difficult days ahead," he said. "We know the violence in Iraq will continue." But he remained confident that the forces behind

the bombings will fail. He said, "There is more work to be done, but we've made important progress."

The pullback from the cities is not a withdrawal. US still has roughly 130,000 troops in Iraq. The real drawdown will not begin in earnest until after the national elections in January 2010. But symbolically, yesterday's handoff marks the beginning of a new phase more than six years after US forces invaded.

Public opinion showed that a majority of Americans had concluded that the invasion ordered by Bush was a mistake. Bush's troop increase has been judged successful in contributing to a reduction in violence. But the Bush administration's management of the war between the invasion and the "surge" has been widely judged a failure.

Debate may continue to rage over the war and the roles Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld played in what became the most politically divisive conflict since Vietnam. Critics remain unforgiving of what that trio did. But the debate is no longer at the centre of American politics. The nation grew weary of Iraq.

As a political issue, Iraq has faded into

the background. The war's potency as a flash point in the political debate diminished rapidly in 2008 as the economy went into a tailspin. McCain made little headway in trying to discredit Obama as unready to be commander in chief, and the Arizona Republican's resistance to setting a timetable for withdrawal generated no traction for his candidacy.

Obama's ordered troop withdrawal has stirred little public debate. In part that's because the Iraqis are as anxious for US to leave as many Americans are to see the end of the US commitment. Under Obama's plan, combat forces will be gone by the end of August 2010. The remainder of US forces will leave Iraq by the end of 2011 under an agreement with the Iraqi government.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki signalled his desire to establish a timetable for the departure of US forces last summer. That hastened the ultimate agreement between the two countries. Maliki's statements, in which he has claimed victory in ending the "occupation" of his country, underscore the mutuality of interest in drastically reducing US footprint in Iraq, even if his remarks were targeted to his own country.

The fact that the deadline passed with so little public comment does not negate the fact that it represents the first big test for Obama's policy. In the days leading up to the deadline, there were a series of bombings and attacks, leaving more than 250 people dead.

Administration officials have insisted that the spike in violence was expected as the handoff took place and insurgents

attempted to exploit the transition. Gen. Ray Odierno has publicly expressed his confidence that Iraqi forces can keep their cities secure. Other military leaders have done the same in private to the White House. If they are wrong, there may be questions about what kind of country Americans are preparing to leave behind. Obama could find himself under pressure to adjust the withdrawal timetable.

The president needs a quiet transition in Iraq. He and his advisers are continuing to wrestle with whether and how to adapt their Iran strategy in the wake of the post-election demonstrations there. Encouraging opponents of Ahmadinejad while trying to engage the Iranian leadership over its nuclear ambitions is more complicated now than it was a few weeks ago.

Obama's approval ratings on Iraq are among his highest on any issue he is dealing with. The decision to withdraw, on whatever timetable, the sharp reduction in American casualties and the general war-weariness after six years of involvement there have combined to create a political calm over the issue that so convulsed the country.

Unless there is a spectacular reversal there, what happens in Iraq may play out largely outside the consciousness of the American public, despite the lives lost in the war and the fact that so many troops remain stationed there. Who would have thought that was possible not so very long ago?

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