

Six months of Grand Alliance government

Time to take stock, adjust course for improvement

IT is now six months since the current government took office, and we would like to take this opportunity to both commend it on reaching this milestone as well as to assess its performance during this time period.

To start with its successes: the pre-eminent achievement of this government has been its initial handling of prices of essentials. It has thus far shielded the economy from the ill-effects of the global down-turn, and managed to arrest the rise in price. The boro harvest was handled with aplomb, and the support the farmers were given is translating into concrete benefits for us all. The recently-passed budget was a tough-minded and praise-worthy one, for the most part, and we are confident that the economy will show positive trends in the near future.

Not only that, but we reiterate our praise for the government's, and specifically the prime minister's, handling of the siege at Pithkhana, which, though it led to appalling carnage, could have been far worse had the government not acted with prudence and sagacity.

In addition, we see positive steps being taken in terms of improving, however marginally, the power supply, combating environmental problems, and building major infrastructure. This paper is particularly impressed by the PM's commitment to clean up the rivers. Similarly, while the promise of digital Bangladesh remains unfulfilled, we also see positive steps in this direction.

Of course, that is not the whole picture. One signal failure of this government so far has been the law and order situation. Petty crimes, extortion, and tender-related violence are on the rise, and the AL still has not succeeded in reining in its own hoodlum elements, keeping the government on the back-foot.

The performance of the cabinet has also been uneven, with very little co-ordination apparent, and ministers even often seeming to be at odds with one another. This unruly disorganisation must be put right or the government will continue to lose credibility. Here, we would like to point out that, in our opinion, the Home Ministry has performed particularly poorly.

Finally, we do not see much in the way of reform of our political culture or of the ruling party's internal organisation, that was expected, and, indeed, pledged in the run-up to the election. The image of the ruling party thus leaves much to be desired, and this is good neither for the government nor the country.

The time has long passed for taking stock, assessing the government's performance, and taking whatever corrective measures are necessary. No longer is the plea that the government is still finding its feet acceptable. What is important is that the government now takes decisive action to pull up its performance in areas that it is under-performing.

The prime minister has talked of a reshuffle, but this is not sufficient. We feel that the time has come for under-performing ministers to be relieved of their portfolios and ushered out of the cabinet.

Such severe action has been promised by the prime minister and is in both her government's and the public's interest. The people's mandate obliges the PM to ensure that her government performs at the highest possible level. We hope that she will continue to build on the government's successes and not hesitate to adjust course where necessary, and not shy away from decisive, and even harsh actions.

Six months on, the state of the opposition

The BNP has failed to rise to the occasion

SIX months into the inauguration of the Awami League-led grand alliance government and our evaluation of its performance, we believe that we should take stock of how the parliamentary opposition has performed so far. We are constrained to say, as we have said on earlier occasions, that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has failed to demonstrate the sagacity the nation expected from it after its debacle at the December 2008 elections. Its defeat notwithstanding, it was able to win the support of no fewer than 38 per cent of the electorate. That should have been good enough cause for it to make its presence felt in the Jatiyo Sangsad, through speaking for its constituents. Unfortunately, the opposition has shown a degree of irresponsibility that can only raise questions about its ability to play in the near future a positive role in parliament.

The BNP has seen time whittling away through its stubborn insistence on getting front row seats in the House according to its wishes. It has ignored the fact that the speaker has so far allocated it more seats on the front benches than its present strength in the JS entitles it to. And with that position of the party has come its demand that the government drop all moves to have the leader of the opposition vacate her cantonment residence. In other words, an adamant stance on the seats issue has now combined with another that has no bearing on the working of parliament to make the BNP stay away from the legislative body. The fact that the opposition has consciously been looking away from the purely moral imperative of speaking for its constituents by raising extraneous issues has left the nation stupefied. For a party that has been in government more than once, such behaviour is mind-boggling and therefore untenable. The sanctity that underlines the whole idea of getting elected to parliament has thus been swiftly undermined by a decision to boycott that very parliament.

The simple fact today is that if the Awami League has left quite a few things to be desired, the BNP has left everything to be desired by its inability to rise to the occasion as a responsible opposition able to put the treasury bench on the defensive over the issues. Its boycott of such significant occasions as the budget session has given rise to the question of whether it is at all responsive to the needs of those who sent its representatives to the JS. It must not forget that the people, as the ultimate arbiters of political destiny, are not loth to judge politicians and parties harshly when the need arises.

All said and done, it is now time for the opposition to look inward, reinvent itself as it were and return to parliament to play the role the nation expects it to. Petulance in politics is unacceptable.

What impedes neutrality?

Unless corrective measures are taken, the speakers of the Bangladesh parliament will continue to be partisan in their responsibilities, and this will only hinder the growth of parliamentary democracy in the country.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

BNP has been abstaining from attending parliamentary proceedings since the budget-sessions began. Their demands include "a graceful solution" to the dispute over seating arrangements within the House, restoration of certain facilities of Khaleda Zia, and ending the "smear campaign" against her on BTV over her Dhaka cantonment house.

There have been mixed reactions to BNP's absence in the budget session. Many feel that BNP has been abstaining from the budget session over "silly issues," paying no attention to their electoral pledges made to the people before the December 29 parliamentary election. The opposition could have played an important role by participating in the discussions on the budget. As the "shadow cabinet," the opposition could critique the current government as well as offer alternative policies.

However, others have found both the ruling and opposition benches responsible for this situation. They see an autocratic attitude in AL, which could have been more accommodative.

Are the problems insuperable? Has the speaker played his role to bring back the opposition to the House?

In Bangladesh, the political parties, particularly the ruling party, must do whatever it takes towards developing a political culture that can contribute to a successful democracy.

To attain this objective, the ruling leadership must respect the opinions of the opposition, resolve all political disputes in the spirit of democracy, and take all steps to make the parliament more effective. Unfortunately, this has not been happening.

The sky would not have fallen if one more front-bench seat was given to BNP. The Awami League could have easily left the fate of the Dhaka cantonment house,

occupied by Khaleda Zia, to the court's decision.

Failure of the speaker to play his role neutrally during the period of successive political governments has been an important reason for the parliament's ineffectiveness. Available sources suggest that the speaker has always played a blatantly partisan role.

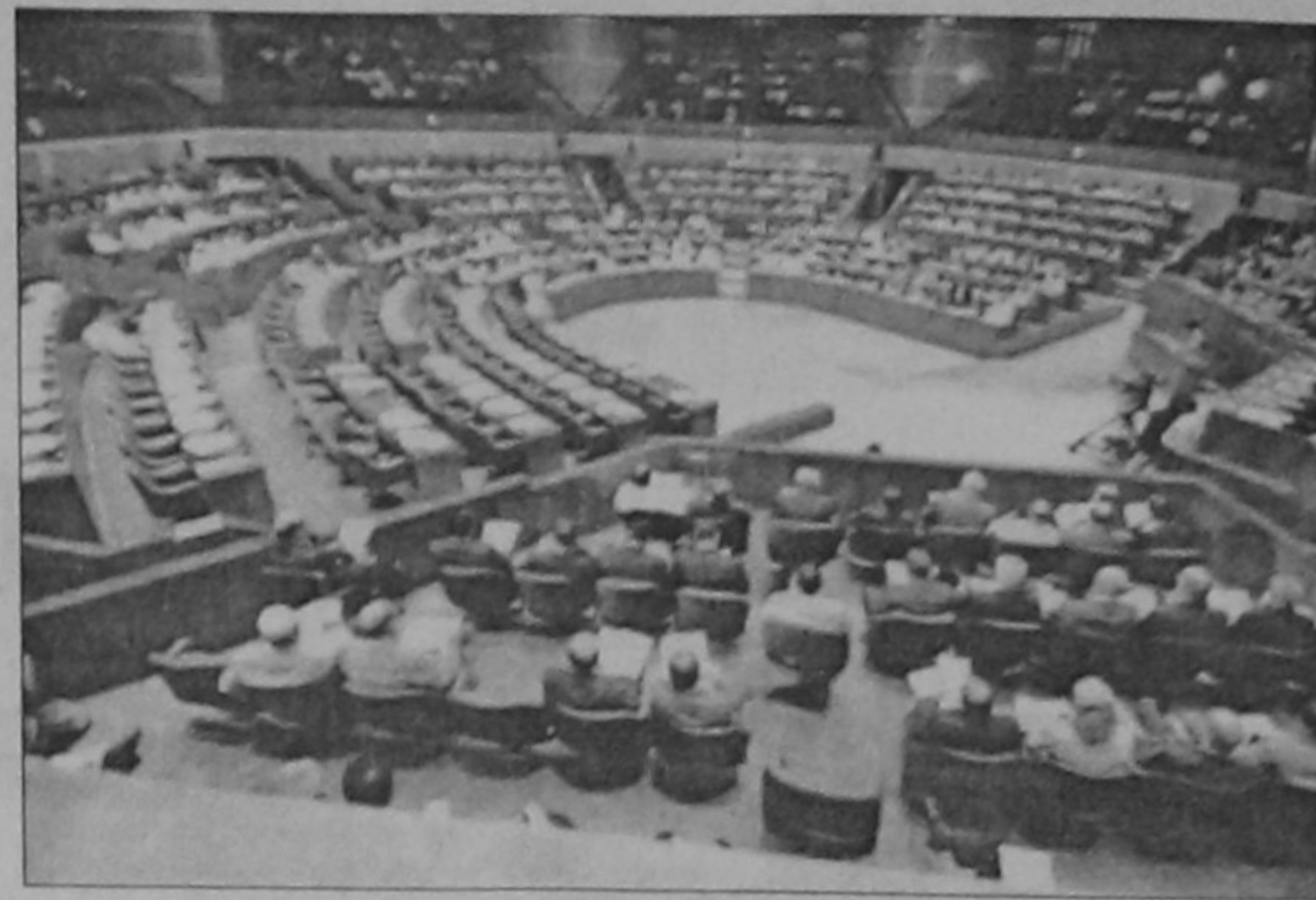
Take the case of the speakers of the BNP and Awami League between 1991 and 2006. They were both under constant political pressure, failing to act independently. They only fulfilled the desire of the ruling party.

The situation has not changed under the incumbent speaker. Many of the allegations levelled against the immediate past speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar, can be levelled against the present speaker, Abdul Hamid. As the guardian of parliament, his role has not been non-partisan:

- The rules of procedure of parliament (ROP) have fully empowered the speaker to decide the distribution of seats among lawmakers in the House. He has succumbed to the pressure of the treasury bench not to allocate one more seat to BNP.

- Speaker Abdul Hamid turned down all five notices from BNP-led opposition legislators asking for discussion on issues like scarcity of relief materials in Aila-affected areas, the February rebellion at BDR headquarters, things allegedly taken away by the speaker of the 7th parliament, and privileges enjoyed by the chief whip of the same parliament. The speaker refused to accept any of these notices, as the treasury bench did not agree to discuss those issues.

- The Daily Star on June 11 reported that the House proceedings on June 10 could not be resumed on schedule due to a quorum crisis, meaning that not even 60 lawmakers were present in the House on



Working towards developing a culture that can contribute to a successful democracy.

time, despite over 260 of them being from the ruling alliance. This speaks of the speaker's inability to run the House smoothly.

- The speaker did not rebuff the statement of a senior ruling party leader in the House on June 29 asking the absentee opposition to quit parliament by tendering resignation.
- The speaker has not yet taken any serious initiative to bring the main opposition BNP back to the House.

What impedes the neutrality of the speaker?

A close look into the procedure of the election of the speaker reveals that only the MP who is proposed and seconded by the majority party is sure to be elected as the speaker. So only an MP with unquestionable loyalty to the majority party can expect to be nominated by his party for the post of the speaker.

The speaker's position is not very secure. According to Article 74(2) of the constitution, the speaker may be removed by parliament by the votes of a majority of all the MPs. This means that the speaker's continuation in his office depends on his allegiance to the party in power.

Unlike his counterpart in the House of Commons, he cannot continue in office for as long as he wants, no matter whether

the party which first proposed him for the speakership has returned with a majority or not.

The speaker of the House of Commons becomes a non-party man after his election and does not participate in politics. He is recognised as the impartial custodian of the rights of the members on the treasury and opposition benches. In general elections, it is customary for the speaker to stand without party affiliation. Since parties began being listed on ballot papers, the speaker's affiliation is shown as "Speaker Seeking Re-election."

But not in Bangladesh. Here, the speaker's neutrality in the discharge of his functions and responsibilities in the parliament may incur the displeasure of the prime minister and other high-ups of the party in power. He may not get the ticket to contest in the next parliamentary election, so he stands to lose his parliamentary seat.

Unless corrective measures are taken, the speakers of the Bangladesh parliament will continue to be partisan in their responsibilities, and this will only hinder the growth of parliamentary democracy in the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government. E-mail: latim43@yahoo.com.

The dangers of political capitalism

Mamata Banerjee pulled off a spectacular budget on Friday. There is no doubt about that. She was always a master populist. She has now rounded off this quintessential virtue with just that touch of maturity that enables a politician to pole-vault over the rest of the tribe.

M.J. AKBAR

POWER is the pre-eminent value in Delhi's value system. I was tempted to write "only" instead of "pre-eminent," when some passing sympathy for exceptions interfered with the syntax. A sidelight of this week's main event reminded me of this basic principle of what might be called political capitalism (how else should we describe the culture of a capital?).

But first to the highlight; a sidelight can only follow.

Mamata Banerjee pulled off a spectacular budget on Friday. There is no doubt about that. She was always a master populist. She has now rounded off this quintessential virtue with just that touch of maturity that enables a politician to pole-vault over the rest of the tribe.

Her visage was blooming with the confidence that victory brings; what used to be dismissed as querulous once had transformed into good humour. She might still jump a little over the top while pole-vaulting, but that is a manageable and even agreeable excess. She was very much a Bengali railway minister, distributing as much largesse as she possibly could to the people who made her railway minister, and reminding her voters back home that a successor to A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury had finally turned up in parliament.

But she also made sure that it registered that she was the nation's minister as well, parking a gift in every corner. Her railway budget was drawn up on a map of India much more than on a ledger. Politics was written all over it, and why not?

A decisive turn in the Muslim vote had brought her to power, and she remembered that children of the country's madrasas are also students who deserve discounted tickets. Her cultural appeasement (the Urdu couplet at the end, accompanied by the mention that she was speaking on a Friday) fell a bit flat, but who cared?

You can bet that even if some of her promises remain paper decorations a year later, the train line between Nandigram and Singur will be completed. The much-dedicated freight corridor might remain dedicated to the future rather than the present, and those SMS that the Railways

have so grandly promised could end up as no more than a theoretical blessing, but that power station near Lalgurh will materialise. (Check this out: for how many decades now has Indian Railways taken your telephone number for further communication? Has anyone got a single call helping the customer in all these years?)

Mamata Banerjee has many points to prove in Bengal. Her strategy is uncomplicated: she is sending her voter a simple message: "If I can do so much for Bengal with control of just one portfolio, how much more will I be able to achieve if you give me the state government!"

She remembered that she was a member of the House in addition to being a member of the cabinet. Every MP was given a chance to distribute some largesse through her ticket scheme for the poor. Sharp. There is no easier way of getting the support of the House.

Amethi and Rae Bareilly were mentioned more than once when the Santa Claus bag was opened. That was appropriate. She knew that all last-minute hitches in the Trinamool-Congress alliance were cleared by the direct intervention of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. It is always good in public life to make your gratitude public.

Her triumph was visible on the ashen faces of the Left Front MPs. She reversed their attempts to disturb with a potent jibe: "What have you done in 32 years?" Since they did not have a credible answer, they opted for retreat.

They knew that this speech, being watched avidly in Bengal, was a major leap forward in the credibility stakes as Mamata Banerjee strides towards her real goal: to enter Writers Building in the heart of Kolkata as chief minister of West Bengal. With such nimble political virtuosity, it will be difficult to stop her.

The great adage of political capitalism was not at work in the budget speech, but in a derivative. One cannot easily comprehend why Lalu Prasad Yadav chose to become the Left's chief ally during the railway budget. Surely he does not believe that he is the permanent superstar of railway ministers, nonpareil and beyond emulation.

Has he become a victim of the Harvard hype -- the adulation of economic capitalists who lured him into believing that he had turned into a miracle CEO because he



A very simple message for her voters.

fell into the trap of believing that profits were the only criterion of success? That is one man's folly.

But the political capitalism story lay askance of Lalu's cracking self-image. It was amazing to behold all those suit-and-tie types who till yesterday were pumping Lalu Yadav up as the biggest balloon since man invented a ledger book, the middlemen who thought that Lalu Yadav deserved a separate chapter in the Harvard curriculum, the tour operators who ferried American students to guided tours of Lalu Yadav's office and cattle-packed Patna grounds, suddenly seeing merit in the announcement that a white paper on his last five years was the compulsion of the hour.

When the mighty fall there is a thud

gleefully recorded by media and transmitted to millions who take vicarious pleasure in the pop and crackle of a bursting ego. Why are there no questions when the sycophants who have inflated any ego into a monstrosity switch their attentions to the next object on their agenda?

When Lalu Yadav became railway minister, Harvard simply did not exist in his thoughts. On Friday afternoon in parliament he was possibly thinking of nothing else. Who were the misleaders of this leader?

The misleaders are part of the record. Unfortunately, they are not part of our attention span.

M.J. Akbar is Chairman and Director of Publications of the fortnightly newsmagazine *Cover*.