

Truant MPs

How are they different from boycotters?

SPEAKER Abdul Hamid could not hide his annoyance and indignation at the absence of a large number of MPs in the JS session on Sunday, which forced him to postpone the scheduled discussion on the draft of the PRSP.

It is easy to see the Speaker's point, for there was no way for him to accept such a sparsely populated JS session, where barely one fifth of the seats in the first three rows were occupied by the lawmakers! And this happened when the PRSP, an issue high on the government's agenda, was supposed to be the focal point of discussion.

It has transpired that the Honourable MPs were busy elsewhere. That however does not sound convincing, if only because such absence from the House is nothing new. The noticeable development, if any, is that it was carried a bit too far on this occasion. The MPs have certainly failed to do justice to their avowed position of serving the nation through parliament.

The ruling party has blamed the opposition many times for rendering parliament non-functional through boycotts. And the loud fight between the treasury bench and the opposition over sharing of front row seats is still fresh in our memories. The opposition did not budge, while the ruling party made it clear that it won't concede anything. The result was a near stalemate. But what we watch now makes it pretty much clear that the sole objective was to prevail over political adversaries; making parliament functional was a matter of secondary or no importance. One might conclude rather logically that the ruling party did not retain control over the front row seats only to leave them empty. But what we witnessed on Sunday tells us a different story.

The opposition MPs might feel relieved to be out of focus as the ruling party itself is not doing its bit to keep parliament on track. But the truth of the matter is that those MPs are to blame equally for this poor JS show. One thing is very clear: all the lawmakers are enjoying the remunerations, perks and other facilities given to them for acting as lawmakers. If they fail to have time for performing their primary job, they are actually doing a disservice to the JS and the nation.

Even Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sounded a bit lenient as she tried to explain the absence of a minister in the session. However, as the leader of the House she has to "convince her party lawmakers that they have to give up this habit of not attending JS sessions.

Student-police clash

Why can't such incidents be prevented?

THE sight of police chasing students and students setting upon innocent passersby and on private and public vehicles as a result, and the consequent closing down of shops and businesses of the locality is a common spectacle that we watch with disgust and abomination. And the location is also a very common place of occurrence, Dhaka College and the surrounding area, which witnesses and indeed suffers from such violence off and on.

This time, reportedly, the protesting students were prevented from bringing out a procession from within the premises of Dhaka College to ventilate their grievance against the government order fixing the equivalence of GPA grade, that is determined in terms of points attained, and the public exams that are graded in terms of division gained.

The result was that there was a long traffic holdup on a very busy street apart from a large number of vehicles being damaged and many students injured. As for the students, they were prevented from bringing out, according to them, a peaceful procession in support of their demand for cancellation of the gazette notification of the ministry of education. The notification, according to them, differentiates in terms of value the SSC and HSC exams taken in 2001 and 2003 respectively and those taken after 2004. Understandably, it was necessary to draw a parallel. But why was it not done at the very beginning when the system was introduced in 2001?

While there may be merit in the claim of the students regarding the inequality in the equivalence, the fact that the students went berserk on being told to disperse dilutes the merit of their case. Nothing can justify the violence that the students indulged in, and from what we saw in the electronic media, of students going after private and public vehicles, hardly conveys a peaceful attitude on their part. A just cause does not need numbers but rationale to convince the authorities.

Of equal importance is the role of the law enforcing agencies under the circumstances. Reportedly, the police had asked the students to disperse and had taken away their microphone anticipating a violent situation. Did the students turn violent *ab initio*? Is it not one's right to express one's views in a peaceful manner?

It is disconcerting to see unwarranted and uncalled for violence, whatever the pretext and provocation that might be behind it. It is also absolutely unacceptable that innocent passersby should be made objects of wrath of the protesters.

We feel that the situation could have been tackled more tactfully and the sufferings of the motorists and pedestrians and businessmen alike in the locality could have been avoided with both parties exercising restraint.

Blame-game will take us nowhere

So, our request is, please do something tangible yourself before blaming one another. Abide by the law yourself before blaming others for violating them. Attend the parliament sessions if you really want to serve the people. And please do not suffer from the delusion that you are greater than parliament, individually or collectively.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

BLAME-game is what politics is all about at present. It's the old game they are good at. When they are not in power they blame the rulers for getting neck-deep in corruption. But the same people when in power do the same thing, allow corruption to find expression in their own fashion. It's just a matter of branding corruption, that's all. Today, Delwar shahab blames the government for exactly what they had done, even more, during their tenure.

Today, we do not hear the AL men talking in thundering voice in the Paltan Maidan about the reign of terror in Hatiya, allegedly let loose by the men of an MP. The man seems not to care anything or anybody. His past records would put many hardened criminals to shame. Yet, he is the public representative and he treads on the sacred precincts of our parliament. They don't talk much about the hundreds of *jhau* trees cut and looted by the men of a political leader. The trees were left unharmed even by the

gachh-khekos of the immediate past political government.

There is more. The seashore at Patenga has been barbed-wired by the men of a local *manonio neta* to set up a business. Structures have been built on Cox's Bazar seashore by the goons of political people to grab portions of it. The CBA leader of WDB has cut down 60 trees on the premises of Barisal Medical College Hospital. MPs do not turn up during parliament sessions. The speaker is helpless and gets frustrated, as he can do nothing better than that. So, what do they actually do during sessions? Play golf? Watch Hindi serials on TV?

Well, these are some of the "public services" going on at the moment. Don't they remind us of similar public services happening during the rule of the 4-party alliance government? Don't they remind us of classic tales of the era of grabbing of public toilets and graveyards, travelling with a hundred suitcases and so on? Ah! Political power is so cool, man! It's like having the magic lamp. Ask and the genii will comply.

In every organisation, institution and

department, including the armed forces, there are laws to take stern action against officials and staff members for engaging in unlawful activities. What is the system to instil discipline in the MPs? Surely, just because they were elected by the people does not put them above the laws of the land? Some of the MPs have good records and have the intention to do something good for the country. But look at many others! They are simply out there to make a fortune for themselves! Just what the "great leaders" of the 4-party alliance did during their heydays.

Interestingly, there are tale-tell signs and concrete evidences of the corruption of the political elements during the rule of the 4-party alliance and also of the corrupt ones today. The known thugs are out of jails and going about doing same things they did all along. Yet, the state cannot build a case against them because of the political and legal system of the country.

Once free and emboldened by the support of their party men, those clearly identified thieves and robbers of the past are now on a smear campaign against the caretaker government, caretaker government system, Election Commission, commissioners, Anti-Corruption Commission and even some members of the armed forces. In public and in private they are spreading hatred and confusion in public mind about the positive roles played by these institutions.

We know that no institution is hundred percent free of corrupt people but the law

says that one must come up with tangible evidence to pin them down. Today, some disgruntled politicians are trying their best to pull down the good name of the ACC just because it had undertaken the task of exposing the dark side of their cohorts. Unfortunately, it is because of the existing faulty system that we could not keep many of those marauders in jail.

We have to give the EC due credit for conducting a free and fair election. But the defeated ones are raising the question of the institution's neutrality. Then again, about the positive role of the armed forces, let us remember how the people of some villages known as Bhabodhao near Jessor were delivered from their decade-long suffering in stagnant water by the armed forces during the tenure of the caretaker government. People are growing paddy there after more than a decade. Let us acknowledge how some important new roads were built by the armed forces in one year that are being used by the same political elements who find every opportunity to criticise them. So, our request is, please do something tangible yourself before blaming one another. Abide by the law yourself before blaming others for violating them. Attend the parliament sessions if you really want to serve the people. And please do not suffer from the delusion that you are greater than parliament, individually or collectively.

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The hope hype

It broadens the scope for future winners. All you have to do is hope, and possibly pray, that the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba have reinvented themselves into vegetarian Gandhians and your post box might have a nice letter from Oslo in October 2010.

M.J. AKBAR

THE only serious danger in Barack Obama's Nobel Prize for Peace is that he might take it seriously. The early indications are that he will. Obama might have saved himself a great deal of trouble by saying thanks, but no thanks. But he could not resist an award whose credibility collapsed the moment he got it.

After the obligatory reference to humility, he added, a little more grandly: "I will accept this award as a call to action." At least he admitted that there had been no action so far. What on earth did the fatuous Nobel Committee see when they surveyed the map of the world in the last six months? Did they find that Mahmoud Abbas, Benjamin Netanyahu and Obama had created an independent Palestine while Hamas was engrossed in playing Patience and Hezbollah had gone for a conference in Tehran? Or that India and Pakistan had signed a treaty solving Kashmir while benign Barack hovered gently in the background, always within camera range?

The only substantive decision that Obama has taken in terms of war and peace is to ramp up the war in Afghanistan far above George Bush's scale of intervention. He is on the point of sending upwards of

50,000 more American troops so that Viceroy-Lord Dick Holbrooke, and his bevy of Pentagon generals, can fight for another decade on the killing rocks of a battlefield that saw serious action during Alexander the Great's time and has not paused since. If outsiders do not turn up, Afghans simply go to war against one another.

Alfred Nobel thought that his Peace Prize should go to leaders who disband standing armies. Obama may be perfectly justified in upgrading the still largely somnolent American presence in Afghanistan into a full-scale fighting force, but the chaps in Oslo might have waited till the shooting stopped. They waited for Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa to grow old. Why couldn't they have waited for Obama to become middle-aged?

Their official excuse is that Obama symbolises hope. That's nice. It broadens the scope for future winners. All you have to do is hope, and possibly pray, that the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba have reinvented themselves into vegetarian Gandhians and your post box might have a nice letter from Oslo in October 2010.

The big-ticket hope is non-proliferation. If you think about it coolly -- very coolly -- one chap who has done far more than Obama for non-proliferation in the recent

past is Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. He actually dismantled a nuclear weapons facility. He may have done so under pressure, but he has done something. Obama has given a few pretty speeches and knocked on the table at the United Nations. Obama has made no effort to rein in the most powerful nuclear weapons power in history, a nation that refused to accept any international control or convention and continues to develop the most sophisticated nuclear weapons technology. That country is, of course, the United States of America.

I suppose Oslo did not think of a Peace Prize for Gaddafi for fear of ridicule. Gaddafi does not belong, as it were, to the right sort of country, plus his acceptance speech might have taken a full day. But does anyone have any idea when the ridicule for the Obama decision will begin to ebb?

Obama is too sharp not to understand this, and it will further whet the temptation to lend some substance to the hype. He is not going to withdraw from Afghanistan because of this medal; and climate change is Al Gore's parish. So his big push is likely to be on non-proliferation. He dare not do anything about America's nuclear muscle; and he has assured Tel Aviv that he will continue the policy of ignoring Israel's secret cache. There is little he can do about the Big Five, and North Korea is Hillary Clinton's show. Pakistan is too much of a military pal at a time of dire need, and Pakistan has a good excuse as well. India. So his options boil down to just this: abort Iran's programme and bully India into as much compliance as possible. If warrior Bush was dangerous for the region between the Nile and the Indus,

peacenik Obama could be troublesome for the land of the Ganges.

Is it possible that the Oslo peace mafia had run out of people to hand this prize to? Not every recipient is going to get a chapter in the history books, even though they might be worthy enough. It is not easy to recall the name of the winner in 2008. But the range of the prize has been expanded from reformed warriors to humanitarians. We all know of course that Mahatma Gandhi was never found worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize, but then they would have probably considered Jesus Christ too good to be true as well. [Jesus was a non-violent opponent of European colonisation as well, in his case, Roman.]

But we have not completely run out of worthy individuals or institutions. The doctors who do selfless work in conditions of utmost misery, like Darfur or other conflict zones in Africa, deserve both the applause and the money. The Aga Khan might not need the money, but there should be some recognition of the extraordinary restoration work his foundation has done to preserve the great monuments of human civilisation -- that too is a commitment to peace.

But there is one good, even great, reason for giving Barack Obama the 2009 prize, although it was omitted from the citation. Barack Obama threw out Bush Republicans, the biggest band of warmongers in recent American history, from power in Washington. This must surely count as a signal contribution to world peace.

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The future of Bangladesh

Someone should be courageous enough to begin the tough task of nation building. In a parliamentary democracy, the prime minister, who is the chief executive and who, according to Sir Ivor Jennings, "wields an authority that a Roman emperor might envy," is the right person to begin.

ABDUR RAZZAQ

UNLIKE many countries, Bangladesh was lucky that it got its independence only in 9 short months of armed struggle. The international situation was favourable. If one reads Henry Kissinger's *White House Years*, one is amazed to see how in 1971, at the height of the Cold War, the relationship between the two superpowers -- the US and the Soviet Union -- became strained on the Bangladesh issue. Bangladesh is unlucky that it has not been able to get out of its sick politics in the 38 long years of its independence.

38 years in a nation's life is not a long period, one may argue, and therefore, the nation needs more time to settle down. This is partially true. Although Bangladesh became independent in 1971, it has been practising democracy since at least the enactment of the Government of India Act 1935. The British colonised India, but built institutions like the legislative assembly and the judiciary.

In 1937, Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq had the honour of becoming United Bengal's first chief minister. Subsequently, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy also became the chief minister of United Bengal. In 1956, Suhrawardy, the Awami League's president,

-- with a view to clinging to power or coming back to power, have been destroying the institutions -- the Parliament, civil and military bureaucracy, and the judiciary.

Today, the country is facing a number of complicated issues -- the aftermath of the Pilkhana tragedy, the Tipaimukh Dam issue, joining the Asian Highway, giving transit facilities to India, demarcating the international maritime boundary, etc. On these issues we need a national consensus. But the nation is divided.

In a parliamentary democracy, it is the prime minister's duty to invite the opposition leader for talks on such issues, with a view to reaching a national consensus. This did not happen in the past. It is unlikely to happen now. A bipartisan foreign policy would have strengthened the government's hand.

Like all Parliaments since 1991, the present Parliament has also become dysfunctional. The opposition should attend Parliament, because not attending is bad political culture. It is an abuse of a privilege, a trust reposed on the people's representative by the people. Likewise, the treasury bench should not only give lip-service in inviting the opposition to Parliament. It is always a lot easier to govern when the opposition is not in Parliament. President John F Kennedy once said: "I feel comfortable when Congress is not in town." But the opposition's absence in Parliament may pose a danger to democracy.

Today the nation is divided between "us" and "them." If he is one of "us" -- no matter how incompetent or dishonest he may be -- he needs to be protected and promoted, whether he is in the city or in industry or the bureaucracy, or holding any constitutional post. The word "we" is fast disappearing.

There cannot be an Awami League Bangladesh, a BNP Bangladesh, a Jatiyo Party Bangladesh or a Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh. There is only one Bangladesh: The People's Republic of Bangladesh, which belongs to 150 million Bangladeshis, irrespective of race, religion, creed or colour. Every citizen is entitled to equal opportunity and equal treatment. The party in power, the men and women in power, should be imbued with this political philosophy.

To expect this to happen in a divided nation is to "ask for the moon." But to make our independence meaningful, we need such a "moon." Someone should be courageous enough to begin the tough task of nation building. In a parliamentary democracy, the prime minister, who is the chief executive and who, according to Sir Ivor Jennings, "wields an authority that a Roman emperor might envy," is the right person to begin.

So let us wait for the day when the chief executive of the country will say: "Enough is enough. There will be no more division in Bangladesh. There will be no more humiliation to Bangladesh. The nation has stood up. Let us unite on common grounds."

On that day will begin the nation building. On that day our new generation's aspirations will begin to be fulfilled. On that day a bright young graduate, standing on the green grass of the Dhaka University compound, will look at the sky and say: "I can go as far as I can see."

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