

## Parliament sans opposition

*Isn't it a disservice to democracy?*

COME next January it will be one year of the new parliament. And by all indications emanating from the BNP, it may continue to abstain from joining the next session starting from 4<sup>th</sup> January 2010. The prospect of the parliament continuing without the opposition comes as bad news, and the excuse as usual is that the atmosphere is not conducive to the BNP rejoining the Jatiya Sangsad.

The BNP should realise that the boycott neither serves their cause nor the country nor our democracy. While the party never fails to espouse the need for an effective parliament it seems that it does not feel motivated enough even after having boycotted the parliament for long to be joining it.

And as for the BNP's preconditions, let us restate what we have said so many times in these columns in the past. For a party that has received more than thirty percent of the votes in the election, it is doing a great injustice to the electorate because the voice of the people that the BNP MPs are representing is not being heard in the parliament. Did they stand for election with preconditions? If not, then they are in breach of commitment that they had made to their supporters and are certainly abdicating the responsibility that their voters have reposed on them.

What is interesting also, insofar as the BNP preconditions are concerned, is that the number of demands is accreting everyday. To start with it was the number of seats in the front row, to this have been added several more since then including demand for withdrawing cases lodged against BNP leaders.

No democracy can be credible with the main opposition staying away from the parliament. Many important national issues remain virtually unaddressed in the absence of the opposition. If the BNP feels that it is being subjected to harassment or that the government is making unwarranted comments on its past and present leaders it is the floor of the House that is the best and the only place that the criticisms are countered. But these can, and should never, take precedence over the interest of the voters.

We also feel the AL must do all within its capacity, and if necessary, go the extra mile, to engage the BNP and get them to join the parliament. For, it takes the ruling and the opposition to make a functional democracy. We cannot afford to have a non-functional parliament any longer and we are concerned about what indefinite boycott of the parliament might do to the country's politics.

## Clashes in Bogra university college

*Campus violence bodes ill for all students*

CAMPUS violence, a festering wound that shows no sign of healing, once again brought academic life at Bogra Azizul Haque University College to a standstill on Sunday, when BCL and Shibir activists got embroiled in a bloody clash. Apparently, the whole thing was triggered by the two student groups taking out processions and counter processions following a news item in a Bangla daily, a copy of which was burnt by BCL elements.

It is the use of firearms and other lethal weapons that is cause for great concern when it comes to strident student politics. While the two sides have claimed that many of their supporters were injured in the clashes, it has been reported that at least two of them sustained bullet wounds. As many as 22 students landed in hospital, several with serious injuries.

The university-college authorities have done what is usually resorted to under such circumstances. Classes have been suspended and dormitories vacated to defuse tension. Well, such actions might indeed be necessary when gunfights take place on the campus. But a deeper look into the matter will surely reveal that such defensive postures actually amount to a capitulation to the forces out to spoil the academic atmosphere on the campus. If a section of unruly elements can force the closure of the university, then general students can only bemoan their fate.

And it is these general students who stand to lose when academic activities are suspended. When classes are not held, session jams become unavoidable. And the poor guardians of the innocent students have to pay heavily for academic sessions being unduly prolonged. Besides, such clashes may have spillage effects over other educational institutions.

The hazards associated with turning the academic arena into a testing ground of political strength are too obvious. The leaders of political parties, who have committed themselves time and again to ending campus violence, would have to step in to restore academic atmosphere on the campus.

## Billion-dollar projects and poverty...

Sitting in that mist one is left to wonder how much worthwhile progress has been made in clearing the problems in many vital sectors that affect everyday lives of the masses. The problems have accumulated over the decades to become malignant in nature, but, instead of hearing of some cost-effective and home-grown solutions, we see powerful officials, politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen running to and fro to get billion-dollar projects cleared by high-ups.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE fear lurks within many of us that politics in Bangladesh, once again, despite all our hopes and prayers, despite all their promises and prophecies, is about to make a 180 degree turn. The language is back. The innuendoes are back. The insinuations are back. The polemics are back. The harangues are back. The tirades are back. The blame game is back. And the name game is back. These are all in the elementary books of politics. But none has graduated beyond that.

People in general, who had remained steadfast like sentinels and carried out campaigns and suffered abuses for pointing out the evil-doing, to see the end of party autocracy that ravaged the country for five years and to see a genuine people's government in power, are beginning to look like exhausted warriors having no battle plan. A mist of confusion is slowing thickening out in the fields.

Sitting in that mist one is left to wonder how much worthwhile progress has been made in clearing the problems in many vital sectors that affect everyday lives of the masses. The problems have accumulated over the decades to become malignant in nature, but, instead of hearing of some cost-effective and home-grown solutions, we see powerful officials, politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen running to and fro to get billion-dollar projects cleared by high-ups. You see, from traffic congestion to technology transfer, it is billion-dollar deals that our brothers are interested in. A new crop of millionaires is emerging very soon. The gap between poor and rich is widening.

Cynics at coffee table drew a sketch showing how underground tunnel roads could be built under the main roads (so called VIP roads) to go East-West or West-East. These tunnel roads for vehicles (like the underpass at Karwan Bazar for humans) could be built within one year and at a much lesser cost than elevated expressways or any other billion-dollar projects. All the engineers

would have to do is elevate the main road (bump up) at the crossing points, such as Hotel Sonargaon point or Bijoy Sharan point or Bangla Motor point, and build the tunnel underneath. With such underpass or tunnel roads commissioned, there would be no need for green signals or traffic sergeants at the crossing points anymore.

Two or three similar tunnel roads could be built to take East-West and West-East bound traffic on Mirpur Road across to either side. But the question that remains to be answered is, will such simple and less costly solutions interest our politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen? Because, the bigger the project money, the fatter the commission. But I can say for sure that this surely would make our poor people happy because they would not have to pay huge interest on loan for the next three to four generations if those billion-dollar projects are implemented.

Our own people are causing more damage to our own environment and ecology, but we do not dare to catch them and put them behind bars. Why? Because they belong to a political party, one or the other, that's why. When we go and argue our case at international forums, we never think about what we are doing to our own country. And now we hear of big money being discussed at those forums, where we are pleading for billions, as compensation from the rich countries. It sounds good. Billion dollars always sound good. But the cynics at the coffee table say that not a single poor man in Bangladesh, a victim of greenhouse gas emission and sea-level rise, will get a single penny from that compensation money.

They strongly contend that that money

would go into the pockets of various NGOs and consultants who are adept at creating fantastic documents and convincing the government/donors for the release of funds for the "poor." The really affected people in the coastal areas or in the pristine rainforests will not get a single penny they say. And while they will struggle with all sorts of odds to survive, the same NGOs and consultants and politicians will continue to grab their last tree or land or whatever is left to them to push them to the edge.

So, the billion-dollar binge has started for the nexus of politicians, government officials and businessmen, and we shall hear everyday of such projects being undertaken for the alleviation of poverty. Well, good luck guys with your ambitious projects. But remember one thing, many governments, many NGOs, many consultants and many political parties have experimented with poverty and the poor in last thirty years.

Today, a huge majority of them are in terrible health condition; tuberculosis claims the lives of nearly 70,000 people every year; maternal and child mortality situation has not improved significantly; nutrition level of the general population is alarmingly low, and a large chunk of rural poor is ensnared in debt they would never be able to pay back. The dropout rate in rural schools is increasing steadily because of poverty. And this is the only reason why rural to urban migration is contributing to the rise in slum population in the cities and towns. So can we have affordable projects to be done with our own money?

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## Adopting the right strategy

So far, we have been concentrating only on one side of what should be a two-prong strategy. While carefully projecting the potential negative impacts of global warming, we must also delineate our solutions to the problem by identifying appropriate technology, implementable projects and strategies.

AHSAN H. MANSUR and BAZLUL HOQUE KHANDKER

ALTHOUGH the debate on the impact of global warming is not yet fully resolved, as scientific evidence failed to capture the extent of the adverse effects of the global warming, potential deleterious impacts are well recognised by the international community. The world leaders had gathered in Copenhagen to find out lasting solutions to the problems of global warming by reducing the emission levels of the polluting nations and providing financial compensation to the victim nations.

Our prime minister was also in Copenhagen to draw attention to the potential adverse impacts of global warming on Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh and the organisers of the conference have been successful in projecting Bangladesh as one of the worst victims of climate change. The fear that one-third of Bangladesh will go under the sea and tens of millions of people will lose their homes and livelihood certainly drew sympathy from the audience and from the demonstrators who ruled the streets of Copenhagen.

The disappearance of Maldives and a large part of Bangladesh will soon make excellent poster pictures for the proponents fighting against global warming. While the threat of global warming is likely to be real, we need to ask ourselves whether we want Bangladesh to be projected in that manner. Our main concern is what kind of signal

such poster pictures will project to the people and investors who must believe in the long-term future of Bangladesh.

What message is Bangladesh currently projecting to the global community? Although Bangladesh's coastal land mass is expanding, our politicians, intellectuals, and media are projecting the picture of a sinking Bangladesh. Everyday, newspaper articles and TV talk shows and news items are presenting various aspects of the plights being caused by or will be inflicted upon Bangladesh due to global warming.

We understand that, based on the scenarios being painted, not only will the centuries old process of expanding landmass in the Bay of Bengal stop but over time a significant part of the country would be threatened by the rising sea. Certainly the threats are real and nobody should ignore the scientific basis underpinning this scary outlook. On the basis of this threat, the Bangladeshi government is rightly demanding compensation from the global community in general and the responsible industrial countries in particular.

While fully sharing the concern and endorsing the demand for compensation that Bangladesh government has made to the global community and highlighted at the Copenhagen Climate Summit, we are however also concerned about the collateral damage that the current strategy may entail for Bangladesh's economic outlook even in the medium term, well before the serious

impacts of global warming become real.

Is the current approach adopted by Bangladesh appropriate? So far the government's focus has been singularly on the threats posed by the global warming and seeking compensation for the damages caused or will be caused by this phenomenon. The current approach does not even mention what kind of mitigating measures Bangladesh is contemplating to contain and cope with the global warming on a sustainable basis. If we only focus on the submergence of the country and the destructive cyclones and floods, and do not talk about the mitigating measures, why would potential investors at home and abroad be interested in investing in Bangladesh?

Thus, Bangladesh's approach to global warming needs to be balanced very skillfully. We must refrain from projecting any image at home and abroad that the country is going under water. Stereotyping global warming through images like a poor Bangladeshi woman holding a child in her arm and walking carefully on a bamboo bridge to cross an inundated land (which we saw in BBC a few days back) will definitely not help the long-term cause of Bangladesh. Such images will only diminish the hopes and aspirations of Bangladeshis as a nation and diminish the country's growth prospects by driving away future investment. Long-term costs of the current approach would far outweigh the limited financial gains/compensations we may obtain from foreign donors.

What should Bangladesh do then? Bangladesh should opt for a two-pronged approach. While legitimately campaigning for compensation, we must highlight solutions to the problem through identification of appropriate technology, implementable projects and strategies. The projects, strategies and technology adoption should be backed by commitments from the government and the civil society in general in such

a forceful manner that global community is reassured that the country will be able to withstand the deleterious impacts of global warming.

The strategy would entail projecting a determined Bangladesh ready to cope with the adverse impacts of global warming. We must not endorse any poster of sinking Bangladesh but posters with ambitious efforts/projects projecting Bangladesh's fight against the impacts of global warming. We must assure our citizens and potential investors at home and abroad that we would never allow one-third of the country to go under water and Bangladesh's march toward a prosperous future will not be undermined. Moreover, it is well known that any compensation claim without putting together a series of implementable projects and strategies would yield very little.

Bangladesh must adopt a balanced and comprehensive approach to the issues/concerns associated with global warming. So far we have been concentrating only on one side of what should be a two-prong strategy. While carefully projecting the potential negative impacts of global warming, we must also delineate our solutions to the problem by identifying appropriate technology, implementable projects and strategies.

We believe such a balanced approach will also help persuade the global community to provide financial assistance against our claims as well as encourage potential investors from home and abroad to invest in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is just about to come out of the label of "bottomless basket" coined by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, and the last thing we would like see is being labeled as "a sinking nation with displaced millions."

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## Don't forget America's other war

The basic challenge is simple to state but extremely difficult to meet. Iraq needs a stable power-sharing deal that keeps all three groups invested in the new country. To make this happen, all three will need to compromise. And the central positive force in all of this can be US.

FAREED ZAKARIA

REMEMBER Iraq? For months our attention has been focused on Afghanistan, and you can be sure that the surge will be covered exhaustively as it unfolds in 2010. But the coming year could be even more pivotal in Iraq. The country will hold elections in March to determine its political future. Months of parliamentary horse-trading will likely ensue, which could provoke a return to violence. US still has 120,000 troops stationed in Iraq, and all combat forces are scheduled to leave by August, further testing the country's ability to handle its own security. How we draw down in Iraq is just as critical as how we ramp up in Afghanistan: If handled badly, this withdrawal could be a disaster. Handled well, it could leave behind a significant success.

Let's review some history. The surge in Iraq was a success in military terms. It defeated a nasty insurgency, reduced

violence substantially, and stabilised the country. But the purpose of the surge was, in President Bush's formulation, to give Iraq's leaders a chance to resolve their major political differences. It was these differences -- particularly between Sunnis and Shias -- that were fuelling the civil war in the first place. If they were not resolved, the war might well begin anew or take some other form that would doom Iraq to a breakup or breakdown.

Iraq's political differences have not been resolved. The most fraught remains the tussle between the Shias, the country's majority sect, and the Sunnis, a minority that has traditionally been the country's elite. The simplest indication that issues between these two communities are still unsettled is the fact that only a few of the 2 million Iraqis who fled the country between 2003 and 2007 -- the vast majority of whom were Sunnis -- have returned. (Firm numbers are hard to come by, but they did not add up to more than a few tens

of thousands as of this summer.)

This month the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reaffirmed that Iraq remains a dangerous place for members of minority groups, and that they should therefore not be forced to return to Iraq.

Sunnis in Iraq remain marginalised politically. And there are growing tensions with the Kurds, who run an autonomous quasi state in Iraq's north. The Kurds control three of Iraq's provinces but lay claim to three important cities just across the border that have mixed populations. They have also been flouting the central government's authority regarding oil contracts, negotiating 30 separate deals of their own and blocking the flow of oil out of the Kurdish region. Add to these problems disputes over the drawing of boundaries and election rules.

The basic challenge is simple to state but extremely difficult to meet. Iraq needs a stable power-sharing deal that keeps all three groups invested in the new country. To make this happen, all three will need to compromise. And the central positive force in all of this can be US. In the early years of the occupation, the Bush administration never pushed the Iraqi government enough to force it to cut deals. This was a historic error because US had enormous political leverage with the Iraqis at the time. Even later, the Bush administration shied away

from pressing the Iraqis too hard, a common thread in its relations with the Afghans and Pakistanis, too.

Yet US continues to have considerable influence in Iraq. By all accounts, the US diplomacy has been crucial to getting the Kurds to agree to the March elections. Obama is reported to have called Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani and pressed him to withdraw his objections, removing the final obstacle. As American troops draw down, American diplomacy should get aggressive and persistent, pushing the three groups to resolve the basic issues of power sharing.

The costs of the Iraq war have been great and perhaps indefensible. But Iraq could still turn out to be an extraordinary model for the Arab world. Its people are negotiating their differences for the most part peacefully; its politics is becoming more pluralistic and democratic; its press is free; its provinces have autonomy; its focus has shifted to business and wealth creation, not religion and jihad. The Obama administration has a window of opportunity to cement these gains in 2010.

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