

## Making parliament functional still elusive

More sincerity needed on both sides

THE ninth parliament is going to complete its first year of existence on January 6. What has it achieved so far. On the positive side, to begin with, the parliamentary standing committees were constituted in record quick time and the opposition MPs were given chairmanship of some of the committees. The committee system has worked well. On the other hand though, the ruling party's promise of offering deputy speakership to the opposition remained unfulfilled. Even the middle road solution to have two deputy speakers and give one post to the opposition didn't materialise.

But on the principal issue of the opposition's participation in parliament which is crucial to the effective functioning of the JS, no headway could be made in the last almost one year. The opposition's boycott of parliament continues.

Against such a backdrop, the speaker's reported fresh initiative to bring the BNP back to parliament, by offering one more front row seat comes as too little too late. The ruling party with its vast majority in the parliament could be more generous earlier on to draw the opposition into the parliament. On the other hand, we see little reason for the opposition to have made seat arrangement a sticking point for this long a period conveying a sense of irresponsibility to the electorate.

We find the opposition chief whip's response to the speaker's offer baffling. He has stated that the seating arrangement is no longer an issue for the BNP! Now, the party is asking for unconditional withdrawal of all cases against its chairperson and her son. Whatever might be the logic behind such a demand, it is obvious that the opposition is more interested in wresting out as much as it can from the ruling party than joining JS sessions. They appear to be blissfully oblivious of the fact that the people voted for them, however limited the mandate, to speak on their behalf in parliament. The JS is the house of the people and not of the ruling party, so both owe it to the electorate to make the parliament the centre of national affairs. Speaking of the opposition, it cannot be made its attendance in parliament conditional upon fulfillment of its demands having nothing to do with the electorate as such.

The government, by withdrawing the cases against the ruling party political leaders through an administrative edict, has apparently given the opposition a handle to make a demand of their own that cases against its leader and her son be withdrawn. Actually, the whole thing should have been left to the court to settle if the government's intention was to uphold fair play untinged by any perceived political bias. We, therefore, believe that just as the government had no moral grounds to drop the cases against ruling party leaders without subjecting these to a legal process so is the opposition's demand for withdrawal of cases against its leaders morally indefensible.

In the ultimate analysis, the task of making parliament functional has to be shared by the major players without resorting to tough bargaining and brinkmanship that tend to be counter-productive as we witnessed many times in the past.

## There is no substitute to national river protection commission

Government should constitute it

G RABBING and pollution of the rivers have been going on with gay abandon. To all appearances, the quarters involved in this illegal and environment-destroying activity are beyond the reach of law. The encroachers have meanwhile raised permanent structures on the parts of different rivers they have under their control. The industries and other sources of pollution, on the other hand, are continuing with their dirty work.

Earlier, in response to media reports on such mindless encroachment of riverbeds, we saw some attempts by the administration to reclaim parts of the rivers thus illegally occupied by some powerful quarters. Oddly though, in almost every case of such government action to rein in the river-grabbers and retrieve the lands from them, it was found that the occupiers returned to their business as usual soon after the government people left the scene.

One may also recall that the prime minister had made repeated calls and directives to this end and how those, too, could not produce any significant result.

The government has embarked on a drive to reclaim and retrieve the water bodies from illegal occupation and pollution. But the pertinent point is what would be the retrieval mission worth, unless the root causes that necessitated it had been eliminated in the first place?

The High Court last June had issued a verdict directing the government to constitute a National River Protection Commission involving experts within three months in order to preserve and protect the rivers. The High Court order further said that the government should take short and long term plans for river protection based on the recommendations made by the Commission to be so formed. But so far, no move was visible on the part of the government to form such Commission within the deadline of the court order.

The Shipping minister, however, has informed of forming a 50-member taskforce committee for what he said protecting and developing the rivers of the country. Earlier there was a taskforce force also and the present one seems to be an extended version of it. A taskforce which is for coordinating work of the various ministries cannot be a substitute for a fully-fledged National River Protection Commission with a given writ, mandate and resources to save and protect our endangered rivers and other water-bodies.

So, we hope the government will come up with a fully-fledged River Protection Commission in the spirit of the High Court directive and take focused, energetic and determined action to put an end to the encroachment and pollution of the rivers once and for all.

## Why BNP should join Parliament

BNP may have some genuine grievances, which should be redressed by the ruling AL. In order to raise those grievances as well as to discuss issues of national and public interest, BNP should not have a better choice than to join the forthcoming winter session of Parliament.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE main opposition BNP's joining the winter session of Parliament, beginning January 4, 2010, is still uncertain. Both the secretary general and the senior joint secretary general of the party said on December 23, that the BNP would join the upcoming session of parliament if the government created a congenial environment. BNP has been refraining from attending parliament sessions after the first session over a row over seating arrangement in the House.

There have been mixed reactions to BNP's absence from Parliament sessions. Many people feel that with every day passing, BNP's preconditions for joining parliament are accreting. Initially, it was the number of seats in the front row. Several more demands, including the demand for withdrawal of all cases filed against the party chairperson, Khaleda Zia, and the senior vice-chairman, Tarique Rahman, have since then been added. Further, BNP, which received more than thirty percent of the votes in the ninth general election, has been abstaining from Parliament sessions, paying no attention to its pledges made to the electorate before the election.

Others see a "go it alone" attitude in the ruling AL for running the Parliament. It has not taken any serious initiative to bring the

main opposition BNP back to the Parliament sessions by removing some of its genuine grievances.

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The views expressed by a member of the standing committee of BNP, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, and AL presidium member Matia Chowdhury at a BBC dialogue on December 26, that the culture of boycotting parliamentary sessions should come to an end for the sake of democracy have emboldened our hope for BNP's participation in the upcoming winter session.

In pursuance of Article 73(2) of the constitution of Bangladesh, President Zillur Rahman will address the Parliament's first session of 2010. A major portion of the president's speech will cover the success story of the AL government in the past one year. By joining the upcoming winter session, BNP lawmakers may scrutinise the president's speech and give their considered views.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is scheduled to pay an official visit to India in the second week of January. High level sources in both the countries suggest that sharing of waters of the common rivers, including

Teesta, connectivity, increase of trade and commerce, mutual cooperation in power and energy and security related matters would dominate the forthcoming meeting of the prime ministers of the two countries. It is expected that a number of agreements on some of these issues will be signed between the two countries during her visit. BNP should attend the forthcoming Parliament session to tell the house that it would not accept any agreement that goes against national interest.

The 2008 election manifesto of AL identified five priority issues, which include, inter alia, controlling commodity price hike, and taking effective action against corruption.

The AL election manifesto pledged to take measures "to reduce the unbearable burden of price hike and keep it in tune with the purchasing power of the people." Has the ruling AL been able to control prices of essential commodities? The rising prices of food and other essential commodities during the last one month have made the life of the people, particularly of low and middle-income groups, miserable. While attending the winter session, BNP may raise the issue in the house by furnishing a price list that compares the prices of food and other essentials during the rule of the BNP-led alliance and the AL-led alliance.

Bangladesh's position in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of 2009 released by Transparency International has slightly improved. The credit mainly goes to the immediate past caretaker government. The reconstitution of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) by the post 1/11 caretaker government and amendments made to the ACC Act 2004, provided the ACC some degree of dynamism and vibrancy, and aimed at making corruption a punishable offence and challenging the culture of impunity.

Although the AL election manifesto pledged multi-pronged measures to fight corruption, the AL-led alliance government has not yet taken any effective measure to combat corruption. Rather, the government has initiated a move to clip the wings of the ACC by reducing some of its powers. BNP, which passed the ACC Act and established the ACC during its immediate past rule, may forcefully protest in the House the government move to reduce the powers of the country's only anti-corruption watchdog.

Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Shafique Ahmed, recently disclosed that the government would appoint an ombudsman by January to establish the rule of law. According to the Ombudsman Act 1980, an ombudsman shall be appointed by the president on the recommendation of the Parliament. Parliament shall recommend for appointment as ombudsman a person of known legal or administrative ability and conspicuous integrity. By attending the winter session, BNP lawmakers can help appoint a person who fulfills the criteria determined by the Act.

To conclude, the BNP leadership should decide that their lawmakers join the upcoming winter session of Parliament to raise their voice on the issues mentioned above as well as to discharge their responsibilities entrusted by the constitution and rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament.

The BNP leadership should remember that the absence of their lawmakers from the Parliament sessions would only benefit the ruling AL. Simultaneously, the ruling AL has to realise that a functional and vibrant parliament is possible only with the participation of treasury and opposition bench members.

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## Higher education policy

To increase the capacity of HE, we can establish more new public universities, reviving and extending the last AL government's initiative of establishing 12 S&T universities.

ABDUS SATTAR MOLLA

ALONG with proposals on lower levels, the education policy committee put forward reform proposals to improve higher education (HE) as well. But all the policy directives do not seem positive. In this article, I will analyse both the positive and negative aspects of those policy directives.

Extending the duration of usual Bachelor courses to four years for Honours (abolishing the 3-year Pass Degree course), decentralising the National University (NU) with a centre in each division, elevating the Madrassa Education Board (MEB) to the status of an Islamic University (IU) and provision for a full-time education commission are remarkable positive directives.

The first proposal (abolishing 3-year Pass Degree course) would end the age-old problem of Pass Degree holders who have little scope for employment. With the introduction of Honours courses in over 100 bigger colleges, accommodating most of the low-grade HE-seekers (who find themselves incapable of enrollment in universities) wouldn't be a problem. The other benefit of such a uniform Bachelor course would be that most graduates would be inspired to have a Master's degree in the same institution, thus elevating the national status in education.

The second directive (decentralising NU) is an essential one considering the heavy burden of dealing with the huge number of HE students by a centralised single institution. The divisional centers (as proposed) will later turn into affiliating universities for the respective areas. However, another committee on NU reform suggested renaming NU as

"National Affiliating University," which is totally pointless; everybody readily knows its affiliating status. The committee also suggested that this university must work only as affiliating colleges for which it was created and should be deprived of its right of awarding higher degrees.

True that the purpose of establishing NU was to affiliate colleges with the aim that the general universities that were doing this job before could be relieved of this extra burden so that they could concentrate on their own business. However, few years back, an attempt was made to elevate the status of NU as a higher seat of learning and research. Some "teachers" (having no scope of teaching) were appointed and the university introduced M.Phil and PhD courses having provisions of scholarship for college teachers to enrich themselves with knowledge and skills aiming at developing better teaching capability. There was nothing wrong in that policy; but some appointments were made based on standards other than merit.

Ensuring only merit-based appointments, NU's status as a centre of excellence must continue (and rather be enhanced further), apart from its coordinating the activities of regional six higher education boards. The central campus in Gazipur can concentrate on training of college teachers through continuing higher studies (M.Phil, PhD).

The third proposal (elevating MEB to IU) is also appreciable because this would deal with the proposed modernisation of madrassa education as well as with issuance of certificates for higher degrees in Islamic education. Some critics put a counter proposal of elevating the Aliya Madrassa to that status. I find

nothing wrong in either of the options.

The fourth directive of establishing a full-time education commission is not only applicable to HE but also to the education system as a whole. Education being the single most robust government enterprise, it deserves to be managed through an independent body -- the Education Commission.

I would like to single out terming the 4-year long Honours course "terminal" for most HE-seekers as an unwise negative proposal. What was wrong with Mazid Khan Commission (1983) report that the student community rejected? Besides, how will this policy of "termination" be materialised? Let's look into the case of a student enrolled in a university or college in 4-year Honours course, who would have eligibility to compete for a job -- including the BCS -- but not be eligible for a teaching/professional cadre job. So why will s/he finish four years just one year before obtaining a Master's degree?

Although I don't like this proposal at all, the chance of realising this policy can be increased by materialising my proposal of extending Master's course from the present 1-year to a 2-year one and making research mandatory (first proposed in my previous article in Forum of September). Such a provision can stop unworthy students from advancing towards Master's course.

Besides, the said "terminating" proposal has a similarity with Mr. Maswood Alam Khan's suggestion of HSC graduates to be largely absorbed in the job market (see The New Age:04/10/2009). I would term this a prescription for a nation of clerks since youths having education only up to HSC, having not much decision-making capability, can do the clerical jobs "loyally" (echoing Macaulay's 1835 minutes!). However, Mr. Khan rightly emphasised on job-oriented education since we have long been encouraging gaining of Honours and Master's certificates, focusing less on what the certificate

holders would be doing. That was an undeclared one-sided policy. Now if we put emphasis only on job, defying the need of opening up mental avenues, the proposal would again be narrow. There must be a balance between job-orientation and scope for enriching the mental faculties.

Therefore, I argue that instead of shrinking HE, we need to further increase its capacity for the greater benefit of the nation. It may be mentioned here that Japan, having about 70% of Bangladesh's population, has about 1,000 universities. We still have less than 10% of that number! The USA has over 2,000 universities for less than double of Bangladesh's population.

To increase capacity of HE, we can establish more new public universities, reviving and extending the last AL government's initiative of establishing 12 S&T universities. Besides, putting emphasis on technical education (as suggested in the policy committee report), polytechnic diploma holders should have greater chance of further studies in technological universities (why only in DUET?). In addition, there must be greater scope of lateral mobility among streams, especially from technical/madrassa to general education, according to the learners' ability and choice.

Furthermore, the mushroom-growth of low-grade and business-oriented private universities should be pulled back by strictly applying the UGC rules for maintaining standards. The provision of HE in colleges can be made meaningful by creating posts and appointing sufficient numbers of qualified teachers in those institutions.

Lastly, the government plan of "Digital Bangladesh" can start being implemented by first digitalising the universities, thus providing enough scope for using the internet for learning and research purposes.

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## No room for complacency with security

Airport authorities will have to be extra vigilant in their security checks because any passenger intent on a suicide-bomb mission could board a plane at an airport with lax security and then transfer to a flight destined for any airport, Western or otherwise.

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INTERNATIONAL airline passengers thought it was safe to travel again, but then came the news last week that a young Nigerian, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, had tried unsuccessfully to blow up a plane en route from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan. The Christmas Day drama quickly heightened fears once more.

Obviously, the attacker planned to cause maximum damage and kill all 285 passengers and crew on board. By attempting to detonate the explosive device as the plane came into land, he also hoped that the debris would also cause casualties around the airport and its surrounding areas. It was fortunate that fellow passengers and the cabin crew did a heroic job in preventing him from carrying out his suicidal mission.

But, how about next time?

After nearly eight years on the run, al-Qaeda is back with rigour and apparently with new ideas and plans to wage war against the West. Indeed, the al-Qaeda network has been able to relocate to new hideouts such as Yemen and other places less well known to the world. In the case of Abdulmutallab, he was trained in Yemen after a long residential period in London. Even a background of a good education and family did not stop him from joining al-Qaeda.

Some of al-Qaeda's new recruits harbour personal grudges due to bad experiences in Western environments and societies, and this compelled them to join the terrorist group. The Nigerian was a case in point. Indeed, dozens of educated youngsters have been apprehended in Britain in recent months due to suspicious activities.

The fact that Abdulmutallab was able to pass through all security checks at airports at home and in Europe, even though he was carrying explosive powder and devices, begs many questions. Further investigations must be rigorous.

What is the real situation at security checkpoints around the world? Of course, al-Qaeda is going after westerners, especially Americans. But nobody doubted the security level at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, which has one of the highest security standards in Europe.

All countries must cooperate to ensure that would-be terrorists are not able to carry out their plots. For al-Qaeda, any airport that is careless or has shortcomings in its security procedures can easily be exploited. In this case, it seemed that the attacker knew exactly the best way to hide the explosive components.

Some reports said he hid the powder in his anus, which would be difficult to detect in normal airport security checks. This is, of course, a popular method used by drug traffickers all over the world for decades. Each year, hundreds of Nigerians and people of other nationalities are caught by Thai and regional airport authorities trying to smuggle heroin or

cocaine in this fashion.

If this is the future operating method of al-Qaeda, it poses a serious threat. Airport authorities will have to be extra vigilant in their security checks because any passenger intent on a suicide-bomb mission could board a plane at an airport with lax security and then transfer to a flight destined for any airport, Western or otherwise.

Security reviews at all airports, big or small, are important. Al-Qaeda operatives will stop at nothing. Prior to September 11, 2001, Thailand was considered a rendezvous haven for terrorists and regional militants. Recent changes at Suvarnabhumi Airport, which have reduced double security checks to a single check, need to be looked at again.

More time and patience are needed to guarantee safety in the air for all passengers. This latest incident indicates that al-Qaeda will do everything it can to inflict damage in any circumstance. Timely cooperation and the exchange of security intelligence are prerequisites for efficient preventative measures to counter terrorist acts such as Abdulmutallab's.

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