

## Opposition's preconditions to joining parliament

*Are these in public interest?*

THE main opposition seems not to have buried the hatchet, but is raising demand after demand as a precondition for joining the parliamentary sessions. Interestingly, in their latest disclosure on the demands, they made no mention of rearrangement and increasing the number of front row seats for which they started their continuous boycott of Jatiya Sangsad (JS) from its second session in June last year in the first place.

Through their continuous boycott of JS, the BNP has virtually made its constituents a hostage of their demands, which are escalating without let-up and now those stand at 10. The question is how does the opposition relate these demands to public interest in general what they are supposed to speak for in the JS (parliament)?

If one looks through the demands, it would become clear that those are concerned mostly with individual-centric matters such as maintaining the status quo on the opposition leader's cantonment house, her personal security, the cases, alleged to be 'politically motivated' against her lying with the court, withdrawal of similar cases against her eldest son Tarique Rahman as well as other leaders.

The issue of withdrawing the 'political cases' does, of course, merit serious attention for some cogent reasons. The issue should have been left to the discretion of the court. What the ruling party has done instead by quashing the cases against its own leaders through executive fiat is nothing but a mockery of the rule of law. To all intents and purposes, their action is morally indefensible. But BNP's demand on this score, too, is equally repugnant to moral sensibilities and we have already expressed our stand on this through our editorial comments.

The Opposition's points of contention with the ruling party, whatever their merits, deserve a good hearing from the Treasury Bench. But for that to happen they (the Opposition) need to make the most of the provisions on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad. That is only fair in a parliamentary democracy. Once that option is exhausted without any result, they may well go for exercising their democratic right to bring the issues to the street. But without taking that constitutional path, on the contrary, the Opposition has established a negative culture of continuous boycotting of parliament, thereby reneging on their responsibility towards the electorate.

It is hoped the opposition would shun this negativism and join parliamentary sessions and thereby make the Jatiya Sangsad functional.

## Protecting guest birds

*Moulvibazar district administration shows the way*

THE Moulvibazar district administration has decided to go beyond just appealing to people to refrain from poaching migratory birds. They have announced that anyone catching a bird poacher will be monetarily rewarded for the service rendered to the guests flying all the way from sub-arctic zones to our water bodies and marshlands. The district administration aims to protect the birds in Hakaluki haor, where they are found aplenty during the winter.

The guest birds, beautiful and loveable creatures as they are, do not usually find their winter abodes in a warmer clime trouble-free as poachers are always ready to finish them off. Much has been said and written about the birds that are still an integral part of our winter landscape. The scene of a huge number of large ducks taking off and vanishing in the horizon is truly majestic, and their role in maintaining biodiversity is also very important. But there is nobody to listen to the bird lovers' desperate appeal to allow the birds to have a peaceful stay in our country.

Guest birds are sold regularly in the roads of the capital itself. They are found dangling at the hands of the sellers asking for prohibitive prices. Still, there is no dearth of buyers. This only shows that the concern for guest birds is yet to be shared by the vast majority of the people totally insensitive to the issue.

The number of guest birds visiting the country is declining as marshlands are shrinking at an alarming pace. The situation gets worse when poachers chase them almost everywhere. If the trend is not reversed, guest birds will not be found in the very near future.

The Moulvibazar district administration is, at least, showing a strong resolve to stop poaching of birds. Tough measures are indeed necessary as all the exhortations and sermons have apparently failed to bring about any change for the better. So, the departments and agencies in charge of overseeing the matter should think likewise and deal firmly with poachers.

Similarly, an attitudinal change is imperative to allow birds and other animals to survive, particularly in the vicinity of human habitation.

The Moulvibazar district administration has taken a commendable decision, which, we believe, will encourage people to take a position against poaching of birds.

## One year on

I am disappointed that our political leaders have not displayed the sagacity and acumen that was expected from them, particularly in view of the political turmoil that the country emerged from only recently.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IT is only natural that a government's one year in office will come under scrutiny, perhaps more vigorously than before because of the two year interregnum that almost put democracy on a permanent hold. And that interregnum was necessitated by the way things developed in the political arena before October 2006.

The media and the civil society have offered their views on how the AL led coalition has fared in their one year in office. And naturally critics have differed, depending on their particular political preferences and inclinations, in their opinions. I for one, however, would not like to see the past one year as merely a year of the coalition rule alone but rather as how democracy was served and how the main objectives of strengthening the democratic institutions and good governance have been perused by all concerned.

Regrettably, for me it has been disappointing year as far as politics was concerned. We saw the same old attitude repeated to the point of being nauseating.

Except for the opening session of the 9th Parliament, the House has been without the opposition. A parliament without the opposition does not only disgrace the people's house, it demeans the very essence of democracy also. And while the major share of the blame must fall on the BNP and its partners, the AL and the coalition cannot absolve themselves of the responsibility of making the parliament dysfunctional.

One feels that the AL has lost a good opportunity to gain political mileage by not delivering on the promises made to the opposition after election. I can hardly keep myself from quoting from an article appearing in the same column exactly a year ago to the month that, "it would have been very statesmanlike on the part of someone with the political pedigree as Sheikh Hasina to have kept her word -- but perhaps our political leaders are a long way from becoming statesmen."

I am disappointed, too, by the puerile behaviour of the opposition in so far as their being an effective opposition is concerned. Not only have the number of preconditions for joining the parliament accreted over the last one year, (of the ten in the latest list of conditions there is none that is related to public interest) sub justice matters have also been included in the list of demands. The message is quite clear; the BNP will do the same as was done to them by the AL when it was in opposition. If this is the political culture that we will have to endure in future where does that leave us?

I am disappointed that our political leaders have not displayed the sagacity and acumen that was expected from them, particularly in view of the political turmoil that the country emerged from only recently.

One would have liked to see initiation of at least the groundwork for both political and party reforms given the vast mandate that the AL was given by the voters. Political reform was also a popular demand, notwithstanding the different views on 1/11. It didn't happen.

I am disappointed that there was no



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effort on the part of the political parties, particularly the two major ones, to bring in democratisation within the party. The party councils may have been very grandiose and largely attended, but the issue of election to party posts leaves me with the impression that the councilors have very little opinion of their own, and those who have the intellect to form their own opinion, and would like to express it, have very little pluck to do so. It is discouraging to see the party chiefs invested with absolute power to choose members of the various committees -- that makes room for the pliant and the pliable only. The quality and past record of some of those inducted in various committees leaves us wondering.

I am disappointed, too, by the way the issue of extrajudicial killings was handled. While it is reprehensible for the state agencies to be the judge, jury and executioner, all at the same time, at times justification of the killings while at other times denial that this ever happens, by ministers, is indefensible.

I am disappointed, too, that the Anti-Corruption Commission has been given the short shrift. Even the ACC chief's disappointment at the prospect of the anti-graft body turning into a "toothless tiger" was palpable.

What has frustrated the anti-corruption drive is the wholesale withdrawal of cases, mostly those instituted against the ruling party men. While one cannot rule out the fact that some of the cases may have been politically motivated, to label all these cases as political needs more convincing arguments. If that is so, then we feel that the ACC should be made to account for its action. And the only way to have ensured that was to let the matter run its course. Needless to say, withdrawal of cases through administrative fiat does little to uphold the principle of rule of law.

Looking back to the politics of 2009 one can only hope that things would get better in 2010.

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## Regional cooperation in water management

Of course, we can achieve what people have achieved in other regions of the world -- if there is the required political will and the required effort. This is applicable for all countries of the region.

M. A. QUASSEM

VISION for 2021, the water challenges and regional cooperation Bangladesh Vision for 2021 aims at self-sufficiency in food production by 2012, increase of electricity supply to 7,000 MW in 2013, 8,000 MW by 2015 and 20,000 MW by 2021, annual economic growth of 8% by 2013 and 10% by 2017, and reduction of poverty level from 45% to 15% by 2021.

Fulfillment of these aspirations is possible although difficult, but appears impossible without addressing the water challenges. The challenges are: (a) ensuring mitigation of the damages and losses occurring from flood, drought, river erosion, salinity intrusion, effects of climate change; and, (b) sustainable development of available water resources.

To mitigate or reduce the damages and losses mentioned in (a) on a sustainable basis, intervention in the upstream is essential (Bangladesh does not have that possibility). For sustainable development of available water resources, accord on our share of the trans-boundary rivers is necessary. So, regional cooperation of the co-riparian countries is crucial for Bangladesh to address its water challenges.

Upstream intervention (like reservoirs) in addressing the water challenges (flood moderation, irrigation expansion, navigation etc.) may also provide hydropower generation. The hydropower potential of the countries in the Eastern Himalayan region is vast. Nepal's techno-economically feasible hydropower potential is estimated at about 42,000 MW, India's is 34,000 MW and Bhutan's is 20,000 MW.

With regional cooperation, Bangladesh may meet its long-term energy require-

ment, especially since the gas and coal reserves may not meet the demand beyond 2030. Mention may be made of the Saptakoshi Project, which may be extremely important for Bangladesh towards augmentation of the Ganges flow and availability of electricity for us.

One may recall that -- because of the imperativeness of regional cooperation for mutual benefit -- many regional and international water treaties are in existence in different parts of the world, like the Nile Basin Agreement, the Mekong River Forum, many bilateral and multi-lateral agreements among the co-riparian countries on the Rhine, Danube, Meuse in Europe and Mississippi in the US. Water treaties exist between Pakistan and India also.

At international level, the regional cooperation concept is gaining momentum, especially in the context of facing the challenges of climate change. The Ministerial Declaration of the World Water Forum in Istanbul (2009) declared to "support the implementation of integrated water resources management at the river-basin level (Para 2), "improve and promote cooperation on sustainable use and protection of trans-boundary water resources to address the impact of global climate changes (Para 16) and to scale up "investment efforts to establish necessary infrastructure, to increase storage and .... (Para 9)."

### For meaningful cooperation

Any meaningful cooperation should meet a few essential conditions, such as: (a) a win-win situation, (b) institutional arrangements, (c) enabling environment.

### Win-win situation

Cooperation takes place when there is

benefit for all the parties from such cooperation, direct or indirect, and there exists a win-win situation. Pious wishes are not enough. However, such benefits may differ in scale for different countries; at the same time, such cooperation, in addition to the envisaged benefits, may facilitate a broader economic regional co-operation.

There are many examples of bilateral and regional cooperation in water management at regional and international levels that were driven by mutual interest and respect for other's need.

### Institutional arrangements

There is a long-standing institutional arrangement between Bangladesh and India -- the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), headed by the ministers of water resources of Bangladesh and India, which was established in 1972 in New Delhi. It facilitated the Ganges Treaty in 1996 and the treaties in 1975 and 1978. However, the efficiency and effectiveness of this Commission largely -- in fact, solely -- depend on the political will of the participating governments. This institutional arrangement may be further strengthened and expanded, if it is considered necessary.

### Enabling environment

An enabling environment, both at country level and at international level, is an extremely important factor for the sustainability of effective regional cooperation. There are a number of initiatives in this respect. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue initiated in 2006, which includes Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, is one for facilitating regional cooperation in water management in the Himalayan region.

An enabling environment at the international level can only facilitate, but not make, agreements. Prevalence of an enabling environment at the country level is absolutely necessary as an indispensable requisite for any cooperation. In this case, the role of the government and political quarters (political will) is essential. Such a role will include:

- Mutual respect for each other's legitimate rights;
- Mutual understanding of each other's needs;
- Mutual trust on commitments;
- Implementation of commitments;
- Refraining from confusing statements and actions.

Mutual appreciation of each other's limitations and difficulties is crucial for any understanding and cooperation. For example, during the dry season, both Bangladesh and India run short of water. While the many distributaries of the Ganges in Bangladesh dry out due to lack of water and there is a hue and cry, various states in India like West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh compete with each other to extract water from the Ganges. We

sometimes read in newspaper about water-riots in India.

Civil society, engineering and other forums, non-governmental organisations, researchers -- in what had earlier been called the Track-2 initiative -- can play an important role in raising public awareness about the need for, and the right perspective of, regional cooperation, and thereby promote and maintain a congenial environment for co-operation.

Use of regional water issue(s) for political expediency can neither bring improvement nor foster an enabling environment for sustainable cooperation -- the ultimate sufferer being the country.

### Way forward

What is the way forward? The answer is not easy. Any answer can raise serious debates. Anyway, one can confidently refer to the "Spirit Leading To Ganges Treaty" and the "Principles of Farakka Agreement," which have been enunciated in the Treaty on Sharing of The Ganga/Ganges Waters at Farakka in December 1996. Those are as follows:

"Spirit Leading To Ganges Treaty" are:

- Promoting and strengthening friendship and good neighbourliness;
- Promoting well-being of their peoples;
- Sharing the waters of international rivers by mutual agreement;
- Finding a fair and just solution without affecting the rights and entitlements of either country.

"Principles of Farakka Agreement" are:

- Equity;
- Fairness;
- No harm to either party.

Right or wrong, one may raise a debate on the outcome of the Ganges Treaty about the water quantities shared by the two countries, but there may hardly be any debate on Article-IX of the Agreement, which says: "Guided by the principles of equity, fairness and no harm to either party, both the governments agree to conclude water sharing Treaties/Agreements with regard to other common rivers." This is bilaterally agreed. Perusing this Article, the spirit of the Farakka Treaty and the principles laid down there can be the starting point of our pathway for future regional cooperation in an enabling environment and with mutual respect for each other's needs.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it may again be mentioned that Pakistan and India have fought a number of wars; nevertheless, they can negotiate and reach agreements on water sharing. Why we shall not be able to reach agreements? Of course, we can achieve what people have achieved in other regions of the world -- if there is the required political will and the required effort. This is applicable for all countries of the region.

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Rivers belong to all nations.