

BNP's intention to join JS welcome

We look forward to an informed critique

THAT most lawmakers of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have reportedly indicated a willingness to attend parliament goes down as an auspicious piece of news. For with the principal opposition keeping out of parliament, the electorate were denied the oversight role of the opposition, which is an important component of a working democracy.

As the party's leaders told the press, they would register their protests against the accords that the ruling Awami League have reached with India both within and outside of the House because, what they perceived was done against Bangladesh's interest. Their express purpose is to press the Treasury Bench to hold discussion on those and other issues.

Somewhat bellicose as their tone might sound, it would undoubtedly be a wise political decision on the part of the main Opposition to engage the Treasury Bench in a debate in a bid to present their viewpoints across to the nation and benefit the government by any wise counsel they might have on offer. This is also an affirmative departure from the culture of distancing from the JS, while the burning issues keep piling on.

May we add, had they maintained the habit of attending parliamentary sessions, even if for critiquing the government for its failures on the different aspects of governance that would have benefited both the government and the people at large.

Only through keeping to this parliamentary practice they would have been better placed to avail themselves of the opportunity of demanding a discussion on what would be on the government's possible agenda ahead of the prime minister's scheduled visit to India. They could have given their inputs. Though it has not happened, still if on joining the parliament the BNP has a constructive say in the matter that will be a value addition to the parliamentary discourse on the subject.

Therefore, we hope that without any further ado, the BNP would see fit to join the JS and hold informed debates and not just indulge in shrill diatribes and protest for protest's sake.

For their joining parliament will enable the wider audience to judge for themselves the merits and demerits, if any, of the accords signed between the two prime ministers. In turn, people will be able to form their own informed opinion about the rationale or otherwise of the agreements.

The agony that Haiti goes through

Our heart-felt sympathies for quake victims

THE magnitude of the devastation wrought by the earthquake in Haiti calls for an immediate emergency response from around the world. And that is what has been happening. Governments across the globe as well as international and local relief organisations have been quick to answer the call. Bangladesh for its part is despatching medical teams to the ravaged country. With more than 100,000 people dead in Port au Prince, the capital, and elsewhere in the impoverished country, it is easy to imagine the totality of the destruction. The casualties will likely be a lot more than what is being estimated at this point. It is the sheer scale of the devastation that is mind-boggling. Almost all buildings in the capital have collapsed. The United Nations office has come down on sixteen of its employees, including the head and deputy head of the mission. There are reports of peace keepers from various nations having lost their lives in the tremor. Not even the presidential palace was spared and it was sheer good fortune that President Rene Preval and his wife managed to survive.

For Haiti, unfortunately, disasters of the natural as well as man-made kind have been part of life in these past many years. For decades it struggled to free itself from what then was an entrenched dictatorship under the Duvaliers. Subsequently, the elected presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown in a coup and was not restored to office until Bill Clinton, then US president, sent in soldiers to bring the military junta to heel. Aristide was again overthrown some years later. Last year, floods and storms ravaged the island nation. And now the earthquake, 7 points on the Richter scale, has silenced the country into shock and countless deaths. For the first time in two centuries, Haiti has seen disaster on such a scale bring it down.

It will be a tough job restoring a semblance of order in a country that has been subjected to near-apocalyptic doom. And yet the task of re-establishing some decent order in the lives of those who have survived is necessary. There is the need to ensure that those who have survived do not succumb to disease and pestilence as a result of the earthquake.

In large measure, Haiti's predicament is a wake-up call for other nations vulnerable to earthquakes and similar natural disasters. In Bangladesh, where tremors have been felt in recent times, it is particularly important that the general public be educated, on a continuous basis, on safety measures that could be resorted to if and when such a disaster strikes.

Our prayers go out for those who have perished in Haiti. And our hope is that those who have survived will, with global goodwill, find it possible to pick up the pieces and move on.

Who is right amongst the left?

Our political system functions like two buckets in a well: one goes up, and the other comes down. Every election is fought like a war. The winning party ignores the losing one. Electoral contest turns into a fight for elimination, not assimilation.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WAR doesn't determine who is right, says an anonymous quote. "Only who is left," it cryptically concludes. Four decades ago this country fought a war in 1971, and three million people died in it. But has it been able to determine who is right amongst us? Those who are left, meaning survived that war, are yet to make up their minds.

Of course, it was right for us to fight for our independence. Of course, Pakistan was wrong when its army cracked down on us. Then there's a slew of few other rights. Our mother tongue has been our state language. Our national identity has been our pride. Nobody can contest that we have done the right thing securing our rights.

Then why does a nation that fought united in 1971 stand divided now? Why is there such a rift between the ruling party and the opposition? It runs so deep that those two sides don't even like to face each other in the national parliament. The leaders don't talk between them. The cadres are even more zealously hostile to each other.

And, why does this larger division divide us in every walk of life? Students on the same campus draw each other's blood. Equally true for teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats and businessmen in their respective places of work.

Those who died in 1971 are dead, but those who lived proved deadly. In their fight to be right, they have ripped this country

roughly in the middle. Find any organisation, any institution, you will also find it split into halves.

History is also divided into two different streams. One party's treasure is another party's trash. The names of streets and buildings change with change of government. Fortunes of people rise and fall. One party's heroes are another party's zeroes. One government's promotees are OSDs in the next.

To sum it up, this nation is afflicted by conflict. The war in 1971 determined who was right between the enemy and us. But it hasn't been able to settle that question for us. Everybody is right when many things are wrong. Everybody counts the milestones, nobody knows the road. Everybody has assumptions, nobody has conclusions. We have converging aspirations, but diverging ambitions. We are a collective nation of individualistic notions, united to divide, not divided to unite.

Past 1971, when was the last time we agreed as a nation? When was the last time we found a common platform? Our political system functions like two buckets in a well: one goes up, and the other comes down. Every election is fought like a war. The winning party ignores the losing one. The ruling party forgets the opposition. Electoral contest turns into a fight for elimination, not assimilation.

Forty years after winning the war, what does it mean to win an election? It's supposed to give the popular mandate to a



Why take different paths?

political party or coalition of parties to rule the country. Instead what happens is amazing. It becomes mandatory for the ruling party or coalition to rule out the opposition. Perhaps the war in '71 was only the beginning. It never ended for us. We are still fighting.

We are now fighting over more things than before. Our textbooks change when there is a change in government. So does our calendar of national events. The songs we sing, poems we read, and speeches we give have the characteristic impression of the party in power. Even the dress we wear isn't immune to that madness. Mujib coat is for Mujib. Safari suit is for Zia.

Two generations of divide and rule is being escalated to a third. Lately, the posters on the walls show a cluster of three faces to mark the transition on both sides of the political divide. A news daily, while conducting a survey on the first year of this government, went the extra mile. It also surveyed

how people viewed the transition of power from the mothers to their sons. We have no dearth of people who believe they are right even when adding fuel to fire.

In fact, one half of this country is deeply convinced that the other half is wrong. The country is divided into two extremes, two different rights founded on extreme prejudice. What does it mean? It means two halves of the population are mutually exclusive.

It's an unfortunate democracy, if democracy is what we choose to call it. The political parties are intolerant. The leaders are indifferent. The followers are impatient. Hatred is rampant. Behind the façade of representative politics, it hides the soul of fascism.

Fierce loyalty to the leader, not the people, is the hallmark of this politics. Full of ideas and devoid of ideology, this is the politics of popular frenzy. Right and wrong are driven by passion, not by logic.

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New dimension to urban governance

It is high time for policy makers to decide whether to introduce metropolitan government with few separate cities or make groups of wards and decentralise the functions of governance, municipal finance and authorities accordingly.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE election schedule of Dhaka City Corporation might be announced soon by the Bangladesh Election Commission. Many possible candidates, old and new, are actively lobbying to reorganise their supporters for launching campaigns in their favour for the posts of mayor and councilors as nominees of their political party.

It is appreciated that politicians and veteran social workers are keen to provide the urban population with comfortable living in terms of health, sanitation, sewerage, disease control and, above all, utility services like gas, electricity, safe drinking water, solid waste disposal, unadulterated food etc., with reasonable taxation, while also ensuring public security.

All prospective candidates are not adequately informed about emerging issues of urban governance or possible ways of overcoming urban challenges for improving community living with social security, food safety and secure mobility. The quality of life in urban areas includes freedom from hunger, environment to live a healthy life, access to education, shelter and basic services and above all, a secure and livable environment at home and workplace.

Rapid urbanisation often disrupts the social, cultural and religious values and pattern of people's lives. The integration of

migrants from traditional life-styles to the more individualistic character of an urban community sometimes generates conflict and unrest -- as observed in Karachi, Jakarta or Manila. All these issues are important for understanding the realities of governance of cities and municipalities, which requires leadership with greater control over development that does not impinge upon the rights of others.

In Bangladesh, around 30% of the population lives in 6 city corporations and 309 municipalities. This may increase to more than 50% by 2040 as the demographic trend indicates. Dhaka shall be the 4th mega city of the world by 2025, with a population of 22 million, and Tokyo will be at the top (36.4 million) followed by Mumbai and Delhi. (Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division.)

The present density of population per square kilometer in Dhaka city, with 35% occupied by slums dwellers, is around 27,700, and around 7.8 lakh people are entering the city every year for settlement. A study reveals that there are at present 9,446 slums in the country, of which Dhaka accounts for 54.9%, Chittagong 20%, Rajshahi 8.3%, Khulna 7% and Barisal 3.9%.

With the growth of cities with slums and squatters, poverty is increasingly becoming urbanised, with many urban poor living in absolute poverty. So the scenario is alarming

and challenging too, since Dhaka is surrounded by rivers and has little possibility of expanding.

Maintaining the challenges as before, the prospective candidates contesting for election of Dhaka City Corporation have started campaigning without making commitments to turn this mega-city into one that is habitable, green, clean and free from fear of disease, congestion and pollution.

It is high time for policy makers to decide whether to introduce metropolitan government with few separate cities like Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Gulshan, Sutrapur, Sadarghat etc., or make groups of wards and decentralise the functions of governance, municipal finance and authorities accordingly.

The ministries of urban development in many countries formulate policy guidelines and coordinate activities relating to urban challenges -- political, technical, and administrative -- along with other public welfare issues. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives as at present, is a concept developed when 90% of the people were living in rural areas during the '70s and union council or thana council and district councils played pivotal roles in public welfare and development.

Now, it appears to be really difficult for it to address the issues of 482 upazila parishads and 4,550 union parishads with the integration of so many issues of rural development and public concern. Thus, creation of a new ministry of urban development would be a timely action. Government functionaries could look into urban development issues more closely and have better coordination with other actors responsible

for providing facility services, infrastructure development, municipal financing, environmental health.

The country has entered the urban millennium and cities shall flourish as engines of growth and incubators of civilisation. Cities shall emerge more strongly as places of politics, extensive intellectual effervescence and innovations. These cities could be places of exploitation, disease, violence, crime and, above all, extreme poverty. So it must be the choice of citizens to make their own cities more attractive and livable -- with reasonable comfort and sufficient security.

With more and more people preferring cities for settling in, the challenge lies not in stemming this trend of migration but in managing and governing cities better to improve quality of life and living standard.

Therefore, it is the right time to ponder very carefully how to manage the urban development issues from economic, political, social and environmental considerations. There should be electoral reforms and governance and administrative reorganisation. The critical issues shall be delivery of urban services, attracting investment in infrastructure development and inviting visitors. For these purposes, attention should be on managing risks and vulnerabilities, and assuring safety of lives with comfort of living and movement.

The leadership needs to state with firm conviction whether election is for political hegemony or for making the mega-city habitable for a large population, reflecting the tastes and choices of the city dwellers, rich and poor.

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Afghanistan to follow "privatised security?"

The company is aware of the pitfalls it still faces, beyond the recent court "victory." It is, therefore, keeping a low profile amid reports that it is bidding for a billion-dollar Pentagon contract for ensuring "security" in Afghanistan.

BUNN N AGARA

THE continuing occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is spawning more problems not just from the fact of occupation, but also by its manner.

Occupying an otherwise sovereign nation demands enormous resources from the occupying power. Even for the sole superpower, US, occupying two countries simultaneously has meant an inadequate supply of both military and police personnel for the "stabilisation" process.

That in turn has, apparently, made private security contracting a necessity. But the most prominent of these contracting firms in Iraq, the North Carolina-based Blackwater Worldwide, created so much havoc that it had to change its senior management and its name to Xe Services.

The company had been accused of repeatedly assaulting and murdering unarmed Iraqi civilians, besides using local people as target

practice when it was supposed to be ensuring "security." In one of these cases in September 2007, an entire family travelling in a van in Baghdad was shot dead in cold blood.

The Iraqi government protested and banned Blackwater from operating in the country. The US State Department had no choice but to stop further contracts with the company.

Six Blackwater guards identified at the scene were then arrested and put on trial back in US. For more than two years, the Iraqi people held back their anger to see how the trial would go.

Iraqi authorities conducted their own investigations and found that the guards had opened fire on people without justification. Gen. Ray Odierno, top commander of US forces in Iraq, limited his comments to saying that he was worried because "clearly there were innocent people killed in that attack."

However, any case against the guards would soon stumble on hurdles. When the

FBI began sweeping the site for clues, it found that the place had been picked clean.

During investigations, the State Department solicited statements from the accused guards in exchange for a promise of not using the statements against them at the trial. Prosecutors then built their case solely on those statements, against the advice of senior Justice Department officials.

On January 1, the federal judge hearing the case against five of the guards found it inadmissible and threw it out. Justice Ricardo Urbina found several missteps by US government and described official explanations as "unbelievable and lacking in credibility."

The judge said he found that the prosecutors had deliberately flouted learned advice, and in so doing ruined the case. The five Blackwater guards took the dismissal of the case as a New Year's Day present.

The fate of the sixth Blackwater guard arrested for the Baghdad family's killing, who had earlier implicated his colleagues, is still uncertain. But already Blackwater, as the renamed Xe, is looking ahead. Last Wednesday, it reached a settlement in a civil case brought by Iraqis. Then the next day, two former staff were arrested for the murder of two Afghans.

The company is aware of the pitfalls it still faces, beyond the recent court "victory." It is, therefore, keeping a low profile amid reports

that it is bidding for a billion-dollar Pentagon contract for ensuring "security" in Afghanistan.

Last year, the company saw profits of \$670 million (RM2.2bil). Reportedly, \$500 million (RM1.7bil) of that came from contract work with the US government in Iraq and Afghanistan. Officially, Xe has shifted the image of its activities to less controversial areas like aviation, logistics and training. The prospective billion-dollar Pentagon contract is supposed to be for training Afghan police.

There is a chance the company, among some half dozen contending contractors, might bag the deal. However, the chances of cleaning up the act of US foreign occupation -- and the image of the Obama administration -- are much dimmer.

Barack Obama was voted in on a wave of negative public reaction to the excesses of the George W. Bush years. While criticism of Obama has grown in tandem with a decline in public support in his first year in office, some of those excesses combining power and money are still in place.

Given the narrowed options for the administration, the fact that these excesses relate to power and money means that they are more likely than not to remain or grow.

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