

The Jatiya Sangsad brought low

Badmouthing and name-calling only undercut democracy

THE bedlam into which Parliament descended on Monday has left the nation deeply embarrassed. And that is only natural, for like any other society around the world, we expect our legislature to be the repository of our hopes and our aspirations and all our dreams about the future. We expect, as people in other nations expect of their lawmakers, that the men and women we send to the Jatiya Sangsad to speak for us will rise above self, above party, above vitriol through prioritising the myriad issues we face in our poverty-driven society. There are some particular reasons why, especially where the present JS is concerned, our expectations are a lot bigger and higher than on previous occasions. Suffice it to say, for now, that the present JS is the outcome of a concerted struggle on our part for a return to a meaningful and decent democratic political order after the chaos and the near slide into anarchy that was only prevented through the imposition of a state of emergency in January 2007.

The experience of those emergency times as also of the period preceding it would, we expected, be a lesson for all of us and particularly for our parliamentarians. That the ninth Jatiya Sangsad would truly turn out to be a thriving symbol of national politics was not too far-fetched a dream for the nation. And yet the badmouthing and the name-calling that dominated parliamentary proceedings on Monday have left an entire nation reeling from deep shock. We might add here that as a nation we are also outraged that our lawmakers did not at all feel or care that we were watching them, that indeed the rest of the world was watching them as they competed with one another to reach as much below the belt as they could in defence of their parties and leaders. It was plain and simple unparliamentary behaviour for MPs to raise the question of who had 'murdered' how many people during his stay in power. An opposition MP questioned the legitimacy of the 2008 elections. In all this pandemonium, Speaker Abdul Hamid was reduced, to our utter dismay, to a state of helplessness.

We appeal to our lawmakers across the spectrum to sit back for a while and reflect on the immense damage that their increasingly ferocious and tribal squabbling has been causing Parliament and indeed our fragile democratic polity as a whole. Where the nation should have by now moved on through a new spirit of cooperation between the parties in the JS, we observe with increasing levels of fear a slow clogging up of the very arteries that help democracy breathe and live. Parliamentary privileges are being abused through gross unparliamentary behaviour. In equal proportions, the spate of name-changing the government has been resorting to has only added to the flames which must be doused if ensuring people's welfare is the goal of the political classes.

To our lawmakers we say again: please do not undermine the trust the nation has placed in you. Please do not squander, through your words and deeds, this opportunity we have to reinvent ourselves as a democratic society. If you fail this time, it is a whole nation that will collapse in a heap. The resultant darkness can only be imagined.

A step in the right direction

No handle should be given to environmental degradation

IT is good to see the government taking note of an environmental concern aired through a report in this paper followed by an editorial over clearances given for industries to be set up in Bhawal National Park in breach of existing laws. What is more to the point is that the government has reacted promptly to the protestations by reimposing the ban on establishing industries or erecting other structures on 2500 acres of private lands inside the national park.

While this should stave off setting up of any new industries, the fact is that it's not a clean slate we are writing on, as 300 illegally set up industries already exist there. These are undoubtedly posing enormous environmental hazards to the natural environment of the forest and its surrounding areas. So, the reimposed ban for all practical purposes, should be directed against these industries and other illegal structures.

There is no gainsaying the fact that a carnivorous appetite for pristine land has been the trade mark of influential people over time and they have grabbed and encroached on these by inducing abuse of power to circumvent laws. Whereas ideally forests should cover 25 percent land area of a country in order that it strikes the right degree of ecological balance and biodiversity, in our unfortunate land the coverage of the wooded area is six to eight percent.

We, therefore, face a formidable challenge, all the more compounded by the predicted adverse effects of climate change, of expanding the tree cover at a fast pace. In this campaign the first axe should fall on the encroachers and grabbers and that is what the government appears to be doing but it must be at it persistently till the endangered forests and wetlands have been substantially reclaimed. In such a scheme of things, the importance of letting such a huge forest land as the Bhawal National Park breathe freely can hardly be overemphasised.

Isn't it time to govern?

It is time to govern. All this loud mouthing of principles and precepts must now give way to purposeful administration for every citizen of the country. You cannot be abrasive and yet expect to govern.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ADVISOR Mashiur Rahman has reasons to think anarchy is abroad in the land, that those behind it are on a mission to destabilise the government as well as the country. We do not disagree with him. In a land where for the better part of its independent existence conspiratorial politics has been the norm, it would be naïve to expect that those who have so long wielded authority and who today are outside the pale of power will rest easy in their discomfort. Not after the execution of five of Bangabandhu's assassins can you expect that those who patronised them for as long as twenty one years, maybe more than that stretch of time, will be happy at this

remarkable opportunity for us to return to rule of law.

Not after the judiciary has firmly upheld the notion that between August 1975 and April 1979 the country was hostage to illegal government must you expect that the beneficiaries of that sordid period in national life will be happy with you. Not after this fresh chance of going back to the 1972 constitution should you think that those who reaped advantages from an overturning of the essential secularism of the constitution will quietly move out of the scene and into oblivion.

So when the prime ministerial advisor speaks to us of anarchy, of moves to let it loose upon us, he is merely stating an obvious truth. The bigger point here, though, is

whether the government is ready to handle it in a way that makes all of us feel secure as citizens. In plain terms, can we now expect, more than a year after the general elections, governance to define our lives, irrespective of the political beliefs we uphold as individuals and as groups? The answer to that question is not easy to come by, seeing that what has lately been happening in the country does not in any way persuade us that we as a people are on the right track.

Of course, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies have come back to Parliament. They should stay there and they should be made to stay there, through making sure that the ammunition they need to go out of the chamber again is not easily provided to them. And yet it is Home Minister Sahara Khatun herself who inflames passions through her remarks in the House. The people of the country know only too well the history of the bloodletting, and the men behind them, that has often pushed us down the road to disaster. Parliament being a sacrosanct chamber, however, it is important that the language

employed by lawmakers and especially ministers be kept on a leash.

The BNP has demanded that the home minister's remarks on General Ziaur Rahman be expunged from the proceedings. Let the speaker go ahead and do it, for a cardinal rule about parliamentary politics is that we do not allow our individual sentiments to get the better of our judgement inside Parliament. When a ruling Awami League lawmaker who was once a minister raises, absolutely unnecessarily, question about the identity of the individual buried as Zia, one is outraged and then horrified. We subscribe to a cultural tradition where to speak ill of the dead goes against every grain of morality.

Now, to ask that a DNA test be carried out to ascertain if it is the late military ruler who is buried in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar is a most convenient way of taking attention away from all the issues the 150 million people of Bangladesh face today. Rising prices of food and other items of necessity, a deteriorating law and order situation, a gathering mess in the institutions of higher learning - these are our priorities. It is not Zia, it is not a renaming of airports and other institutions, it is not a raking up of the debilitating politics that has hit us below the knee every time we have tried to rise since our putative return to democracy in 1991 that is our challenge today.

The home minister tells us, without batting an eyelid, that there is no reason for her to resign because there has been no slide in law and order. We blink and we wonder if we have heard her all right. The government would have us know that the Shibir has been behind all this mischief in this past couple of weeks and must be brought to heel. We applaud the firmness of the ruling circles. But we notice too that little or nothing is being done to rope in those elements of the Chhatra League who have been on a rampage at such educational institutions as Kushtia government college. At the airport in the nation's capital, elements of the Jubo League control the car park, to a point where drivers operate in fear of them.

It is time to govern. All this loud mouthing of principles and precepts must now give way to purposeful administration for every citizen of the country. You cannot be abrasive and yet expect to govern. Government must reach out, to every man and woman and child, if it is to be a throbbing, thriving experience.



Bad governance leads to mayhem.

RAJ ANIKAT/DORK NEWS

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

Realignment in East Europe

Plans to sign a new Association Agreement have been repeatedly delayed, and Ukraine is now grouped together with countries like Belarus and Armenia, as part of the EU's Eastern Partnership, whose goals are, in the main, modest.

HARUN UR RASHID

IT was in 2004 that the Orange Revolution took place in Ukraine in the form of a pro-Western and anti-Kremlin movement. People saw that the movement would bring economic prosperity in the country because the western region of Ukraine was not far from the gates of the European Union.

Disunity among the movement leaders, mismanagement, bad governance and anti-Kremlin stance did not lead to outcomes that the people wanted from the Orange Revolution.

Geopolitics is a reality and no country can ignore it. Ukraine was a part of the former Soviet Union and in many ways the economy is linked to Russia. Energy is one of them.

On December 24, 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev said that relations between Russia and Ukraine had plunged to their lowest level in recent years.

"As to relations in general, I have to say again that unfortunately they have never been as low as they are now. This is extremely regrettable," Medvedev said in an interview with leading Russian television channels, blaming Kiev for the crisis.

Medvedev reiterated accusations against Kiev of supplying weapons to Georgia and sending its troops to fight against Russian forces. "This is a crime against Russian-Ukrainian relations, nothing else," he said.

A Ukrainian parliamentary commission led by an opposition lawmaker said in early December that President Viktor Yushchenko had sanctioned arms deliveries to Georgia during and after the Caucasus state's war with Russia in August. Other irritants in relations between the two former Soviet states include energy supplies and the drive by Ukraine's pro-Western leaders to join Nato.

In January 2009, Russia shut down a pipeline that crossed Ukraine, ostensibly over a dispute with Ukraine on pricing and tariffs.

The political scenario changed last month, when the pro-western President Yushchenko was third in the presidential election, making the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Ms. Yulia Tymoshenko candidates for a run-off election on February 7th since

none of them secured more than 50% votes.

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko were once allies but they are now so estranged that he refused to endorse her in the runoff and instead urged Ukrainians to vote "against all" on the ballot.

Yanukovich won the presidential election this time and his victory has completed his comeback after his humiliating defeat in 2004. Yanukovich received 48.76% of the votes, Tymoshenko managed to get 45.66 percent. Turnout was 69 percent.

The result appeared to reflect the geographic divide in Ukraine, with Ukrainian speakers in the west backing Tymoshenko and Russian speakers in the east voting for Yanukovich. The elected president said: "I will do everything to ensure that citizens of Ukraine, no matter where they live in the country, feel comfortable and calm in a stable country."

Earlier, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation and Development (OSCE) called the election fair and honest, undermining Tymoshenko's allegations of fraud and urging her to accept the result. It is reported that she might challenge the result in the court.

Yanukovich's victory will strengthen Kiev's relations with Moscow. This has already begun -- last month, Russia resumed diplomatic ties with Ukraine after a five-year lull. Talk about Russian ambitions, common under President Viktor Yushchenko, will probably cease.

Political observers say that Ukraine's possible shift toward a pro-Russia policy is troubling for Poland and the Czech Republic. Both have pointed to the Ukrainian gas dispute as evidence of Moscow's willingness to use economic resources as a foreign policy tool and of Russia's desire to re-establish its former sphere of influence.

Observers believe that the Obama administration has not shown the same enthusiastic support for Eastern European causes as the Bush administration did. It has cancelled plans for the missile shield, instead opting for a smaller missile detachment in Romania. The White House has also made efforts to mend relations with Russia.

Germany, which has cultivated deep ties with Russia during the last 10 years while largely dismissing Eastern European con-



Who will join which group?

cerns about Moscow's renewed ambitions, continues to strengthen its relationship with Russia.

"Europe is deeply divided in its approach to Russia," Kurt Volker, who served as US ambassador to Nato from 2008 to 2009 and is now managing director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, told German Radio (Deutsche Welle). "Eastern Europeans want protection while the Germans believe that stance is provocative and that the Russians should be engaged."

"I think Poland and the Czech Republic feel a bit abandoned," Volker continued. "The United States is doing deals with the Russians, Western Europe is doing deals with the Russians. Transatlantic relations are changing."

And how does the European Union look in all this? Is there actually a failure by the EU, to seize the opportunities presented by the Orange Revolution? After all, Poland pushed hard for the EU to provide Ukraine with some sort of viable roadmap towards membership.

Yet, the EU now appears to have finally discounted whatever membership aspirations Ukrainians (and, for that matter, Georgians or Moldovians) felt at the end of 2004.

Plans to sign a new Association Agreement have been repeatedly delayed, and Ukraine is now grouped together with countries like Belarus and Armenia, as part of the EU's Eastern Partnership, whose goals are, in the main, modest.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.