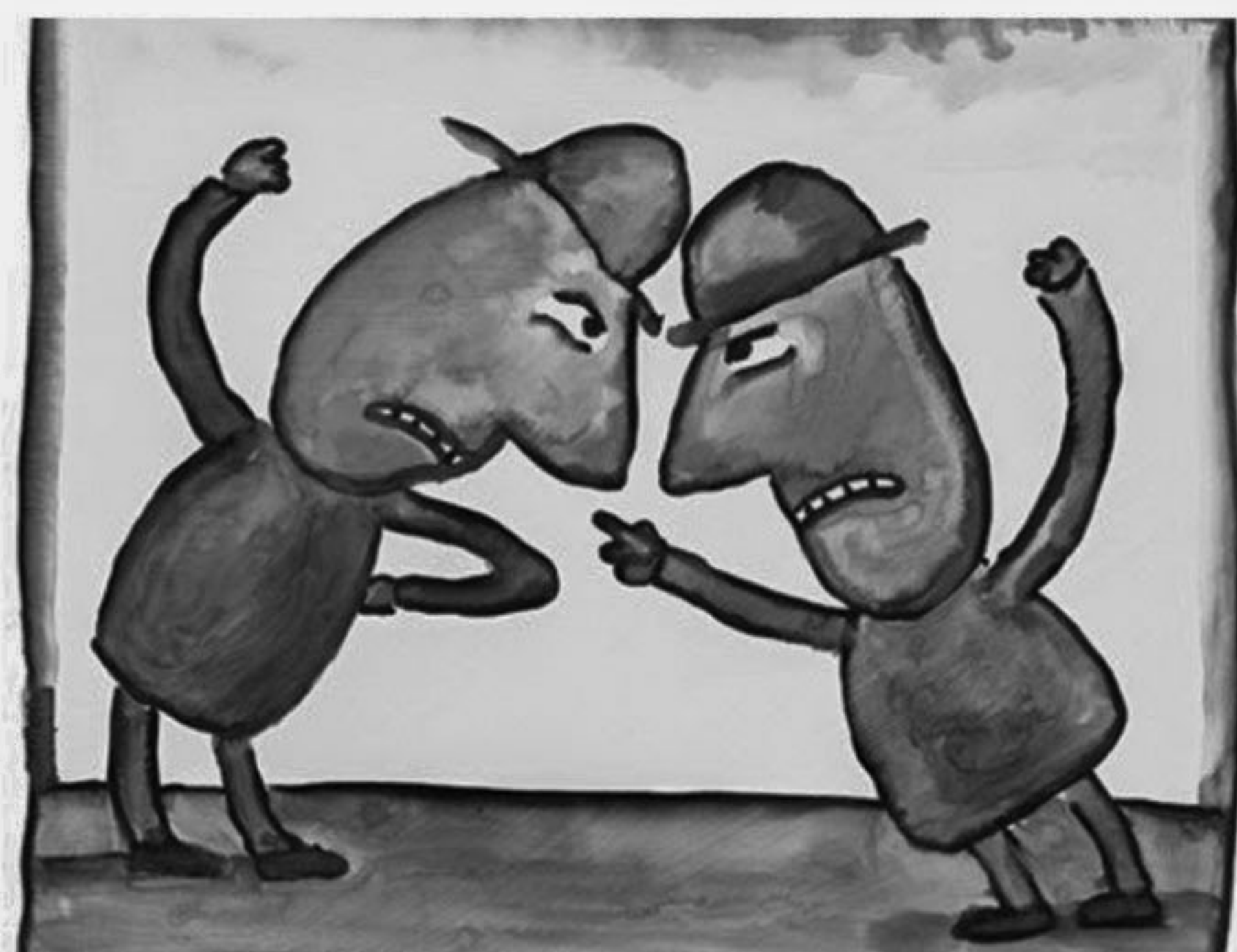


## From a citizen to the Honourable Speaker

The message is loud and clear, a handful of rough members cannot be allowed to destroy the hard earned democracy. The nation does not want any more interruptions in the democratic process.



MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

YOUR response to the drama staged in the Parliament last week has been praised by your learned colleagues of both sides. It was also well received by the voters. Certainly, you have shown the courage needed of a genuine guardian and custodian of the sanctity of the House. Make no mistake sir the whole nation is behind you in this regard.

Having said that, if one looks into the causes of the democracy crisis in this nation, threats like switching-off of the microphones of the offenders will, unfortunately, not work. The crisis is too serious to be overcome by merely controlling the

House microphones. Why? There are numerous reasons, however, let me list the most important ones.

One, the democracy we had been practicing in this nation since 1991 has failed to make even the slightest dent in the age-old rivalry between the two major political parties. One may ask how many members of parliament remember the oath they took from the speaker of the 8th Parliament. If they had remembered, the sanctity of this august House would not have been violated by them over and over again.

Two, it has been abundantly clear over the last 20 years that the backbenchers of both parties had been restless in and out of the House. Why? It appears that the offend-

ers had been busy with appeasing their respective leaders with a view to gaining attention and rewards in exchange.

Three, it is no more a secret that the opposition in the 9th Parliament has lost all the characters of a parliamentary party. The reasons cannot be difficult to fathom. However, the most important among them is the view the opposition holds that the 1/11 episode and its benefits had been taken away from its mouth. The table, thus, has to be turned by all means.

Four, politicians, for a long time, have been putting self-interest ahead of the interest of the nation. How? Observing the so-called birth anniversary of the present leader of the opposition on the national day of mourning (August 15) is certainly in bad taste, to say the least. With this move, the opposition party has lost the respect of the people. Even if the anniversary was a genuine one, a selfless leader would not have celebrated it publicly. This move generated numerous controversies surrounding this leader in the House.

Sir, the list goes on. However, one recognises that your style of managing the House is much more conciliatory than the style of your predecessors. Your predecessor unceremoniously brought down the portrait of the nation's architect from the very House you are presiding over today. In the past, with the courtesy of the present day opposition, this House was polluted by the war criminals of the liberation war, self-professed killers of the father of the nation, and by the corrupt politicians.

With all this in mind, how members such as these can restrain themselves from behaving the way they did is certainly a million dollar question.

Honourable Speaker, I humbly beg to differ with you on the punitive measures you outlined for the offenders in the future. Under the Westminster type of governance, it is possible that some unwarranted incidents may occur from time to time (but

certainly not violent ones like ours). It is on record that members were thrown out during sessions from the Australian lower chamber because of their rough behaviour.

Offenders in the House always had to pay a price for their unacceptable behaviour. Expulsion from the House for a limited period is a suitable punishment for the offenders. It is not the duration that is important here, it is the insult inflicted to the offenders that matters.

Recently, through the courtesy of a senior MP, I had the opportunity to visit the House. The architecture is certainly world class, both in and outside the building, and the open space will catch anyone's eyes. I must say, your secretariat has been doing an excellent job by keeping the site maintained to a high standard.

The story does not end here. When we entered the VIP Gallery I immediately felt peace and tranquillity. Incidentally, a visitor sitting cross-legged drew the attention of the House guard. He was told by the guard not to sit cross-legged because it spoiled the sanctity of the House. Unfortunately, inside the House, the story is different. The MPs seem to think that, because they are the people's representatives, they are above the law. Huge contrast, isn't it?

In view of the above, I request you, sir, to not only control the microphones of the unruly members but also to expel them from the House, regardless of party affiliation. The message is loud and clear, a handful of rough members cannot be allowed to destroy the hard earned democracy. The nation does not want any more interruptions in the democratic process. You must act without delay after a genuine and bipartisan investigation of the incident, which has certainly tarnished the image of this nation.

Yours faithfully,  
Moazzem Hossain.

Dr Moazzem Hossain is author of *Democracy's Roller Coaster Ride in Bangladesh*.

## A new face

Dynastic politics is here to stay with us. It is imperative that Joy become a full-time Bangladeshi citizen, in which case he may have to give up his US citizenship. This is more pertinent from the sovereignty perspective.



HASANUZZAMAN

SHEIKH Hasina has perhaps made the right choice by enrolling an IT professional as a primary member of the ruling AL in Rangpur. But was this in any way a surprise to anyone?

Perhaps not to many. But for a political analyst like myself, Joy's enrolment was during a moment when democracy, in all its forms, was being once more silenced by its own default design. In other words, whilst Hasina and Khaleda's entry into politics was required to prevent the disintegration of the AL and BNP, the same cannot apply in case of either Joy or Tarique. Their entry into politics has been a result in the default design of the party politics system. Both cases, nevertheless, share one common feature -- fortune at the top of the pyramid.

If Joy is serious in his commitment to work towards the benefit of the public at large, as his compatriot I am obliged to make him aware of one of the most critical issues of contemporary times, which, if addressed, can entail significant positive spill-over effects in other key areas of cooperation which can help consolidate democracy -- the parliament.

First and foremost, both Joy and Tarique need to accept and appreciate the fact that the Parliament is a sacred entity. Like the heart of a human body, it is the most important organ of a properly functioning democracy. In recent days, however, there has been much chaos in the Jatiyo Sangsad over irrelevant issues.

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy where the executive power is exercised by the government, and the legislature by both the government and the parliament. Similar to the executive branch, where ministers are drawn from the legislature, the judicial system is also being politicised for fulfilling partisan needs. After all, if all lawyers started aspiring to become a part of the executive, political scientists would really have a hard time deciphering who is guarding whom.

To address this intra-party politics problem, one has to understand the nature of political parties in such systems where Joy is a new, but key, player. The formation of political parties is a "necessary evil" for running a representative democracy where combined resources -- financial capital and social networks -- are the determinant factors to get candidates nominated. It is to be noted here that Dr. Kamal Hossain's Making democracy work: What we need to do elaborated the adverse impact of intra-party politics on the democratic system.

Hossain, one of the few fortunate enough to have stood by Bangabandhu on many occasions both during and after the liberation war, observed that potential candidates need not fulfil any criteria of qualifications or show how they were equipped to serve their constituents; rather, the "fatness" of their wallets decided their candidacy.

Joy needs to realise that this deficiency has made the parliament dysfunctional, whereby social and economic reforms as a basic national goal have remained an illusion. As Dr. Kamal Hossain puts it: "People cannot resign themselves to the fate of the Greek hero, Sisyphus, who was engaged in pushing a boulder to the top of the mountain. But every time he reached the mountain top, the boulder would roll down again." Who is going to be the Bangladeshi Sisyphus?

Dynastic politics is here to stay with us. It is imperative that Joy become a full-time Bangladeshi citizen, in which case he may have to give up his US citizenship. This is more pertinent from the sovereignty perspective. Perhaps the future leaders of both the Awami League and the BNP can take lessons from Rahul Gandhi, who has refused to enter mainstream politics. He wants to concentrate on building the Congress's unity and cohesiveness, especially at the grassroots level. Indeed, Rahul can be seen to be a sincere leader who is aware of his people's welfare and determined to work for them. Bless democracy!

(The views expressed here are the writer's own.)

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## UPA retreats from inclusive growth

The UPA's economic policies in its second coming -- and the Union budget -- don't aim for inclusive growth. Tax breaks to corporations and exporters continue even after the Indian recession ended and a devalued rupee made exports competitive.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE United Progressive Alliance was re-elected to power in 2009 primarily because it promised inclusive growth. Its victory stood in sharp contrast to the Bharatiya Janata Party's 2004 rout, attributable principally to the Gujarat pogrom and its "India Shining" campaign, which claimed that growth without equity is good enough.

The UPA pledged to keep the 2004 National Common Minimum Programme promises, including 7-8 percent growth, such that "each family is assured of a safe and viable livelihood" and support for employment-intensive household and artisanal production.

The NCMP had promised a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to provide "at least 100 days of employment... every year at minimum wages for at least one able-bodied person in every rural, urban poor and lower middle-class household." It pledged to double rural credit, especially to small farmers; and to raise public spending on health "to at least 2-3 percent of GDP over the next five years" and that on education "to at least 6 percent of GDP."

Some of these commitments were diluted. The NREGA was launched in 2006, in only 200 rural districts (of about 600). It excluded the lower middle-classes and all urban households. And the Rs.100 minimum wage clause was included only after people's mobilisation and pressure from the Left parties.

The UPA's economic policies in its second coming -- and the Union budget -- don't aim for inclusive growth. Tax breaks to corporations and exporters continue even after the Indian recession ended and a devalued rupee made exports competitive. UPA-II persisted with Special Economic Zones and measures, which transfer mineral, forest and hydroelectricity resources to predatory corporations.

Meanwhile, agriculture is in acute distress and farmers' suicides are rising sharply. Food prices have risen nearly 20 percent, and the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers by over 30 percent.

The unabashedly pro-rich 2010-11 budget will accelerate the privatisation of pub-

lic property and widen already-high wealth and income inequities and regional disparities.

First, consider the budget's allegedly "positive" features: fiscal consolidation, and increased social spending. The government will cut spending to reduce the fiscal deficit by 1.2 percent of GDP. Total expenditure will only grow by 8.5 percent.

This means stagnation in real terms -- despite the bonanza through disinvestments of public sector enterprises (Rs.40,000 crores), telecom spectrum sale (Rs.30,000 crores), and additional indirect taxes (Rs.70,000 crores). Worse, the revenue deficit will only fall by 1.3 percent of GDP. So, 73 percent of the government's borrowing will finance wasteful spending.

The real priority was to cut unproductive expenditure -- namely, the revenue deficit, and raise capital expenditure, besides social spending, to boost investment and growth. This hasn't happened.

Slightly raised social sector expenditure won't deliver real services to the public. The NREGA's allocation is only 2.5 percent above last year's. This won't even match the effect of inflation. It compares poorly with the expected 12.5 percent nominal increase in GDP.

Worse, central health spending has fallen by 0.01 percent. If the states' expenditure stagnates, as is likely, national public health spending will be under 1.4 percent of GDP, less than the promised 2-3 percent. This will further privatise healthcare. Already, 68 percent of India's hospitals and 75 percent of health-related technological resources are privately owned and unaffordable for the poor. This is a grave social crisis.

Similarly, spending on literacy, education, rural development, agriculture, and women and child development won't rise in real terms. Non-plan spending on social services will fall by 16 percent. The rural development budget will only rise by 6.3 percent -- a decline in real terms.

The additional allocation to crisis-ridden agriculture is paltry -- Rs.900 crores. Much of this, including agricultural credit, will finance big business cold storage projects or corporate farm loans. The budget promises private banking in every village with a population of 2,000. But private

banks won't finance small farmers.

The budget hasn't delivered on the promised Food Security Act and social security schemes for the underprivileged, who were largely excluded from the benefits of high GDP growth for two decades. Under "the Hindu rate of growth" of 3-3.5 percent, employment increased by about 2 percent. Now, even with 7 percent GDP growth, employment increases by only 1.3 percent.

Worse, the budget has given away Rs.540,268 crores in subsidies and exemptions to the rich. The private corporate sector gets concessions worth Rs.79,554 crores although it pays among the lowest tax in the world, just 22 percent of profits -- compared to 27 percent for PSEs.

Concessions worth Rs.26,000 crores have been given to the 30 million elite income-tax payers (of 1,100 million people). So, a person earning 10-20 times the average per capita income will pay just 6-10 percent of his income as tax. The super-rich will be gifted Rs.51,500.

The rich in the developed countries are taxed 40-70 percent of their income. India's elite gets away with 10.6 percent (for all those assessed in 2002, the latest year for which official data is available). The poor

bear a disproportionate burden of indirect taxes like excise duty and sales tax. This is a recipe for social chaos.

The government's expenditure has fallen to 15.5 percent of GDP, from its 1987 peak of 22.2 percent. This cannot adequately finance public services. Neo-liberal governments prefer disinvesting in PSEs to taxing the rich. The latest plan, to raise Rs.40,000 crores from disinvestments, makes no sense. The PSEs' market capitalisation is at its lowest in five years.

The tragedy is that the Indian government is better placed than ever before to do some good by the poor. Central revenues have risen 2.57 times since 2004. The government can now create a social security system, comprising provision of affordable food, healthcare, education, employment at reasonable minimum wages, modern energy services for all, labour welfare and old-age pensions.

This could transform India into an inclusive and cohesive society. If only the government had the will to fulfil its duty by the poor!

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The rich are getting richer.