

MPs' role and local govt functioning

Should be mutually helpful rather than conflicting

It seems that the AL-led alliance government is drifting from its professed commitment towards a decentralised development model that is a prized goal, especially in a unitary system of government. For, it is showing increasing signs of yielding to pressures from within to give a hands-on developmental role to the MPs thereby diluting their legitimate lawmaking and oversight functions.

As a result, the line of distinction between legislative including oversight functions of the MPs and the participatory planning and developmental roles of the elected local body functionaries stands blurred. What is more to the point is a negativity in the equation between the two sets of elected public representatives with rivalry and conflict being bred into what should have been a relationship of coexistence and mutual re-enforcement and value addition.

As a matter of fact, it's a decentralised and empowered Bangladesh we should be striving for where powers devolve on to the local self-governing institutions and a local government-centred development model is vigorously pursued. We seem to be opting out of this course judging by the way we are undermining the process by a shrinkage in the developmental role of the local bodies. For instance, the law-makers are to 'propose' projects worth Tk 15 crore for each constituency which is basically choosing projects but the question is will such projects be technically vetted? Will the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) have a role to play here? For all we know, the ECNEC has approved a project granting Tk 15 crore for rural infrastructure development work in each constituency. It is based on the lists provided by the MPs as the planning minister suggests. We wonder, whether the local body functionaries were consulted; perhaps not. Were these projects integrated into the overall infrastructure development planning, perhaps in a way they were as the ECNEC has been involved. We have also learned that the LGED will implement the projects. Will it do so with the help of the local bodies? We don't know.

We believe, the MPs role ideally should have been to make sure that the local government institutions have had enough allocations to implement projects for their constituencies and are adequately empowered to implement them.

What we have to make sure is that political expediency doesn't overtake long-term development priorities of the government.

Rajuk's demolition drive

Evict the encroachers permanently

RAJUK demolished around 100 illegal structures on Gulshan Lake on Tuesday as part of its plan to recover the lake land lost to encroachers. Obviously, there is no good alternative to enforcing the law to remove the shanties growing endlessly along the lake shoreline.

The matter, however, has some other aspects that need to be examined critically. The big, influential encroachers are actually renting out the shanties to poor people to retain their hold on the illegally grabbed land. When the shanties are demolished a large number of the residents become homeless and a humanitarian crisis looms large. But nobody seems to delve deep into and question why the shanties were allowed to be built on the lake land, in the first place. There is reason to believe that the law enforcers made no serious attempt to nip it in the bud and more and more structures were raised. Now, the real culprits who used the lake land to earn money are not being punished. Rather, the poor residents of the shanties suddenly find themselves pitted against the law enforcers. Rajuk owes an explanation to the city dwellers why it failed to act when the encroachers started taking possession of lake land. The encroachers are actually exploiting the vulnerability of the poor who are forced to live in those makeshift structures.

Regrettably, the break-and-make game never comes to an end. Usually, the encroachers return soon after the law enforcers leave the place. How long will the game continue? Rajuk, or the law enforcers for that matter, have to identify the powerful groups of encroachers who are occupying government land in many places. They are known to have enough political and financial clout to thwart any move by Rajuk to dislodge them. So, it is the political will of the government which is needed more than anything else to deal firmly with the encroachers and corrupt government officials responsible for loss of government land.

The High court directive on the issue has to be followed in letter and spirit. It is difficult to give eviction and demolition operations a more human face because lack of tough action will only embolden the land grabbers. However, the question of rehabilitating the poor residents of shanties is also very important because every citizen has the right to have a shelter.

Rajuk and law enforcers have to drive away the real encroachers and prevent them from coming back.

If you are bad I can be worse

There were provocations in the comments of senior leaders of the two major parties that implied many things behind the abuses that were wrapped in a patina of insult that aggravated matters.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

It seems that there is a race in the Parliament among the members to outdo their opponents on the other side of the aisle in unparliamentary pronouncements and uncivil behaviour. There was very little to be proud of in the proceedings of the Parliament of the last few weeks, when all that the honourable members indulged in was hurling of unprintable expletives and unutterable diatribes at the opponents.

The speaker's intervention might have come sooner, and his proposal that the MPs could very well replicate WWF contest on the lawns of the Jatiyo Sangsad if they so wished, even suggesting the type of dress they could wear, clearly betrayed his frustration at the way things had gone.

When the BNP chose to rejoin the Sangsad, one looked forward to a functional parliament. But hopes were dashed by the way the business of the house has been run. And the members' behaviour has belied the honorific prefixed to their names.

It was disappointing that the time of the House and the money of the people have not been used for any productive purpose. One finds it hard to believe that there was nothing of public interest that the MPs could think of to discuss in the Parliament. Why was there no frank and serious discussion on law and order, or on the killings in Dhaka and Rajshahi universities, or the situation in the CHT?

It is regrettable that the Parliament members, and they belonged to both sides of the floor, were taken up with the dead rather than the living. Admittedly, it is safer to ill-treat the memory of the dead, they cannot respond. But if they were alive I am certain they would have been more gracious, courteous and polite in replying to

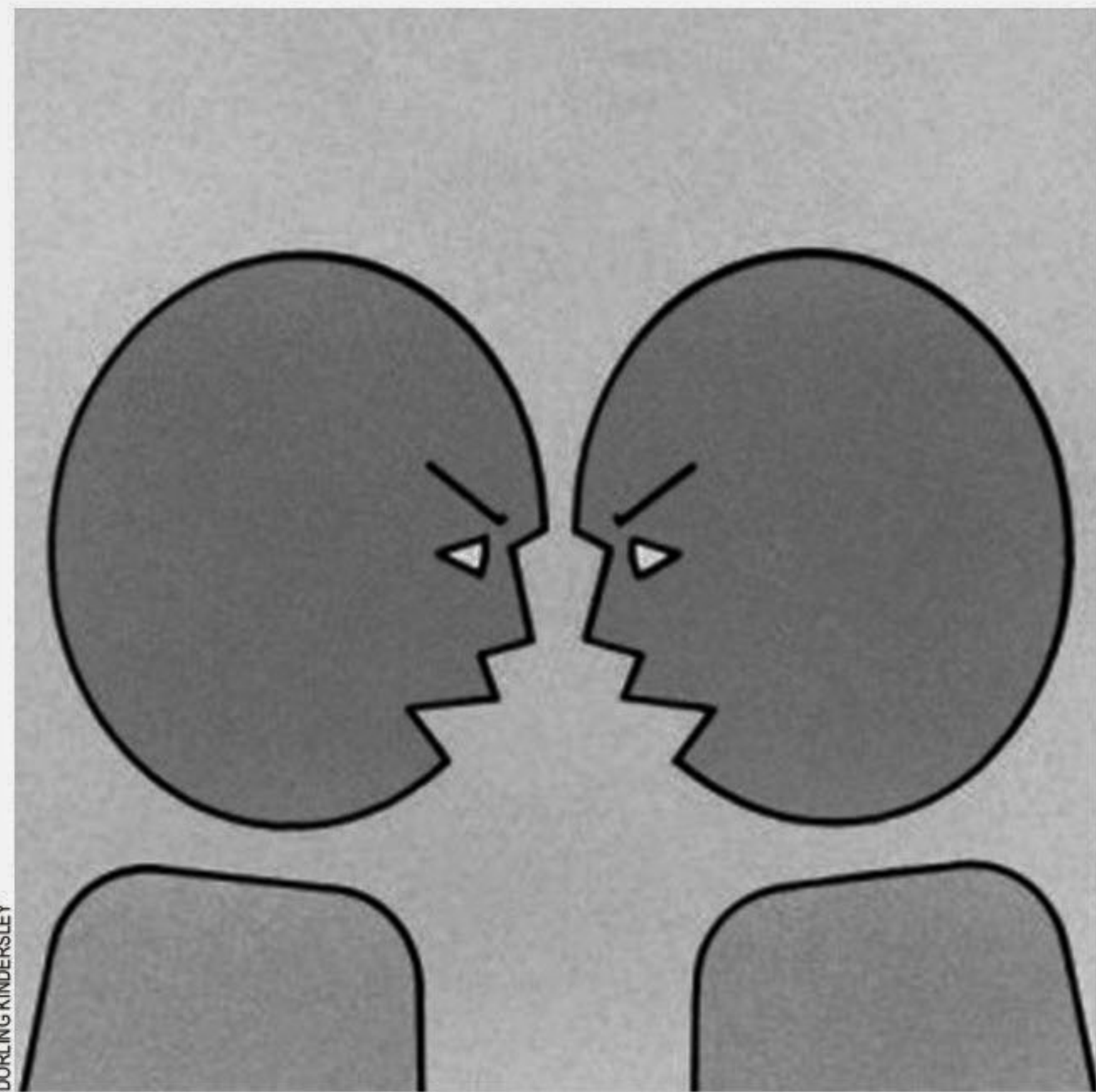
even the vilest criticisms. Their political heirs have disappointed us by their demeanour.

I was brought up with two very worthy values inculcated in my mind. I was told that there are two things in the world that are exclusively for gentlemen, the rest could be participated by all, and rogues and ruffians were not excluded. One was cricket and the other was politics. Later on in life I came to also believe that there is yet a third -- golf. These are the three areas that are exclusive preserve of women and men with impeccable character, of which integrity is the main component. Sadly, all three have been defiled by money, muscle and might in our country.

It is more shocking when politics falls victim to bad practice. There were provocations in the comments of senior leaders of the two major parties that implied many things behind the abuses that were wrapped in a patina of insult that aggravated matters. The unruly display in the Parliament that one had the misfortune to witness recently causes us great distress. It certainly influences negatively the minds of aspiring politicians, particularly those with intelligence, wit and honesty and imbued with the desire to serve the people.

The two issues that started the furore were, expressing doubts about whether Zia's body is actually interred in the grave, and changing the names of places, institutions and establishments bearing the general's name.

I feel that the former was in very bad taste and should never have been allowed to be spoken on the floor of the House. As for the name change, there is continuity in the practice -- as has been the continuity in naming of things in the country. Unfortunately, naming or renaming has often had a political angle and not a national perspective. However, the recent



I can outdo you.

change is devious because it exploits people's religious sentiments.

As for immortalising leaders, a joke I was told by an Iraqi while I was serving there with the Blue Helmets in 1991 may be worth repeating.

It was said that at that time the population of Iraq was 17 million but there were only 16 million Iraqis -- the rest one million was Saddam's photographs, statues and murals. And there was a unique way of giving direction -- go right half a kilometer and you will come to a Saddam statue on horseback, turn right and go another kilo and you will find a painting of Saddam in his Arab attire, keep going till you come to a mural of a smiling Saddam holding a baby. Are we any different?

And look at the way many of the MPs are

using his or her time allotted by the speaker. Of the eight minutes half is spent in extolling the virtues of one's past and present leaders and the other half in abusing the opposition leaders, past and present. And nothing is left to speak on the topic they were given the floor for.

One hopes that the people's representatives would use the time in the House more conscientiously. While it is only natural that party members will be grateful to their party leaders and express their gratitude and be sincere to them it will be well to remember that over-abundance of sincerity can be absolutely fatal -- both for one's self and for the country.

Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (retd) is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

How to get a bumper boro crop

Groundwater is the main source of irrigation. But concerns have been expressed by different quarters, including water experts and environmentalists, about over-extraction of ground water for agricultural purposes, particularly for irrigation of *boro* crop.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

AMONG the three rice crops (*aus*, *aman* and *boro*), *aman* continued to top the list until 1997-98. In 1998-99, *aman* was replaced by *boro* as the highest producing rice. Since then, *boro* has continued to top the list.

Since 1998-99, *boro* has been contributing more than 50 percent of total rice production in the country. Government sources reveal that total food grain (rice

and wheat) production target for 2009-10 is 34.37 million tonnes, of which the share of *boro* is 19 million tonnes, which means 56.8 percent of the total production target in the year 2009-10. The total area to be brought under *boro* cultivation has been estimated at 4.8 million ha land.



The importance of boro cannot be overstated.

and wheat) production target for 2009-10 is 34.37 million tonnes, of which the share of *boro* is 19 million tonnes, which means 56.8 percent of the total production target in the year 2009-10. The total area to be brought under *boro* cultivation has been estimated at 4.8 million ha land.

Boro crop requires maximum care during the month of March. In this month the plants of *boro* rice mature, and the ears of corn come out.

Boro is primarily an irrigation-based crop. Water requirement is maximum during the rooting and flowering stages and sufficient water should be maintained in the plot to get a good harvest.

Groundwater is the main source of irrigation. But concerns have been expressed by different quarters, including water experts and environmentalists, about over-extraction of ground water for agricultural purposes, particularly for irrigation of *boro* crop. In its editorial of February 7, *The Daily Star* wrote: "According to recent press reports, over-extraction of ground water through hand-operated and power pumps is drastically depleting the country's water resources and threat-

ening the long-term irrigation potential. This has happened mainly as a result of expanding the cultivation of *boro* paddy in the last three decades by using ground water. The latest findings of a Washington-based research organisation also shows that expansion of irrigated *boro* cultivation has raised a few environmental concerns, including decline in soil fertility for growing more than one crop on the same land every year. The International Food Policy Research Institute has noted that the groundwater resources have already been over-exploited."

The situation demands special attention of the government for bringing back to life the national grid through installation of 8 rental power plants to ease power supply situation during *boro* season is not going to materialise as per schedule.

So the alternative available at the moment is to supply more electricity to rural areas for ensuring irrigation of *boro* by causing inconvenience to urban people. It goes without saying that food production is a priority of the state and so electricity supply must be ensured for irrigation.

It is good to see that under the newly introduced Agri-input Assistance Card and Cash Assistance program the government has decided to provide cash subsidy to

farmers (Tk.800 to a marginal farmer and Tk.1,000 to a big farmer) through banks to buy diesel for diesel-run power pumps in the peak *boro* season. The Energy Regulatory Commission deserves thanks for deciding to keep agriculture outside the purview of the recent upward revision of electricity prices. After all, farmers do require all the support that they can get from the state to produce more food.

The major fertilisers required for *boro* crop are urea, TSP, MOP, gypsum and zinc sulfate. Urea tops the demand list. Till date, there have been no reports about non-availability of fertilisers at the field level. But, a study conducted by a non-government organisation forecasts shortage of more than 0.3 million tonnes of urea during the total growing season against its present stock position. Since the demand from farmers for urea will increase heavily in March, the government will have to remain alert to ensure availability and timely supply of urea and other fertilisers to farmers.

We had a bumper *boro* crop last year. As a result, soaring price of rice came down significantly in the first eight or nine months of 2009. But the prices of different varieties of rice have been continuously rising since October of the current fiscal year. According to the BBS, the food inflation at national level reached 9.50 percent in December, 2009. The overall inflation rate on a point-to-point basis reached 8.51 percent in December last. According to Bangladesh Bank sources, inflation has been going up in recent times primarily due to price hike of rice. Food inflation at national level of rural and urban areas also reached at 9.50 percent in December, 2009 against 6.83 percent in December 2008, the BBS statistics said.

The June, 2009 issue of *Food Outlook*, a biannual publication of Fao, forecasted a modest growth in rice production in Asia in 2009-10 after two years of fast growth. The December, 2009 issue says that the global paddy production outlook had worsened substantially since the release of the June issue, and stands at 675 million tonnes, 13 million tonnes or 1.9 percent less than 2008. There is concern about a possible return to another round of high prices.

Rice is the staple food of Bangladesh and provides about 93 percent of the country's total cereal intake, and about 75 percent of the calories in our diet. Rice accounts for more than 50 percent of our household expenditure.

In view of what has been stated above, the need for another bumper *boro* crop in 2010 can hardly be over-emphasised. The authorities concerned must provide all possible assistance to farmers in order to make it a reality.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a Former Secretary. E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com