

# An appropriate arena

Dialogue and agreement may seem airy-fairy, but they have produced ostensible results. No doubt that both the major parties will retain their visceral opposition to each other, you want them to, but at least they are finding ways to conduct parliamentary business.

A. W. KHAN

I'M happy about what's been happening in the Bangladesh Parliament over the last two weeks. Not ecstatic. Happy. This is why; politicians shouting obscenities at each other in parliament is far superior to them shooting at each other on the streets.

Contrary to the raft of articles lamenting parliamentary behaviour, the past two weeks have witnessed some of the most significant strides towards a functioning parliament since the December 2008 elections.

Yes, they were yelling at each other. Yes, they were shouting the sort of obscenities that would make the filthiest ear curl. Yes, they were charging at each other with the sort of passion you see in the street corner riots on a lazy hartal day. Yes, Shammi Akhtar even pretended to shoot the treasury bench with her finger. But, let's face it; wouldn't the politicians rather be facing her finger than staring down the barrel of a 9mm revolver?

Political violence, not parliamentary debate, is the currency of Bangladeshi politics. The recent deaths of students and political operatives in Rajshahi are a grisly reminder of the real consequences of Bangladeshi realpolitik. Usually, disputes over the historical contributions of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman lead to several deaths, this a wrap on the knuckles from the speaker. Not is all the MPs got. That's the way it should be; keep the MPs off the streets and let them shout all they want, but it has to be in parliament.

But, far too often and far too easily, opposition parties have boycotted the parliament. Be it over the alleged distortion of history, election rigging or even over the high crime of not being allocated enough seats on the front bench! Forget the fact that the BNP won only ten per cent of the seats in the 2008 elections, they just

want more seats on the front row!

The boycotts on the front row! According to a report in *The Daily Star*, since 1991, the opposition has boycotted parliament 584 of the 1,241 days of sitting. Both of the major parties have been equally guilty. The Awami Leaguers started this whole business by boycotting 135 of the 400 sittings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Parliament between 1991 and 1996.

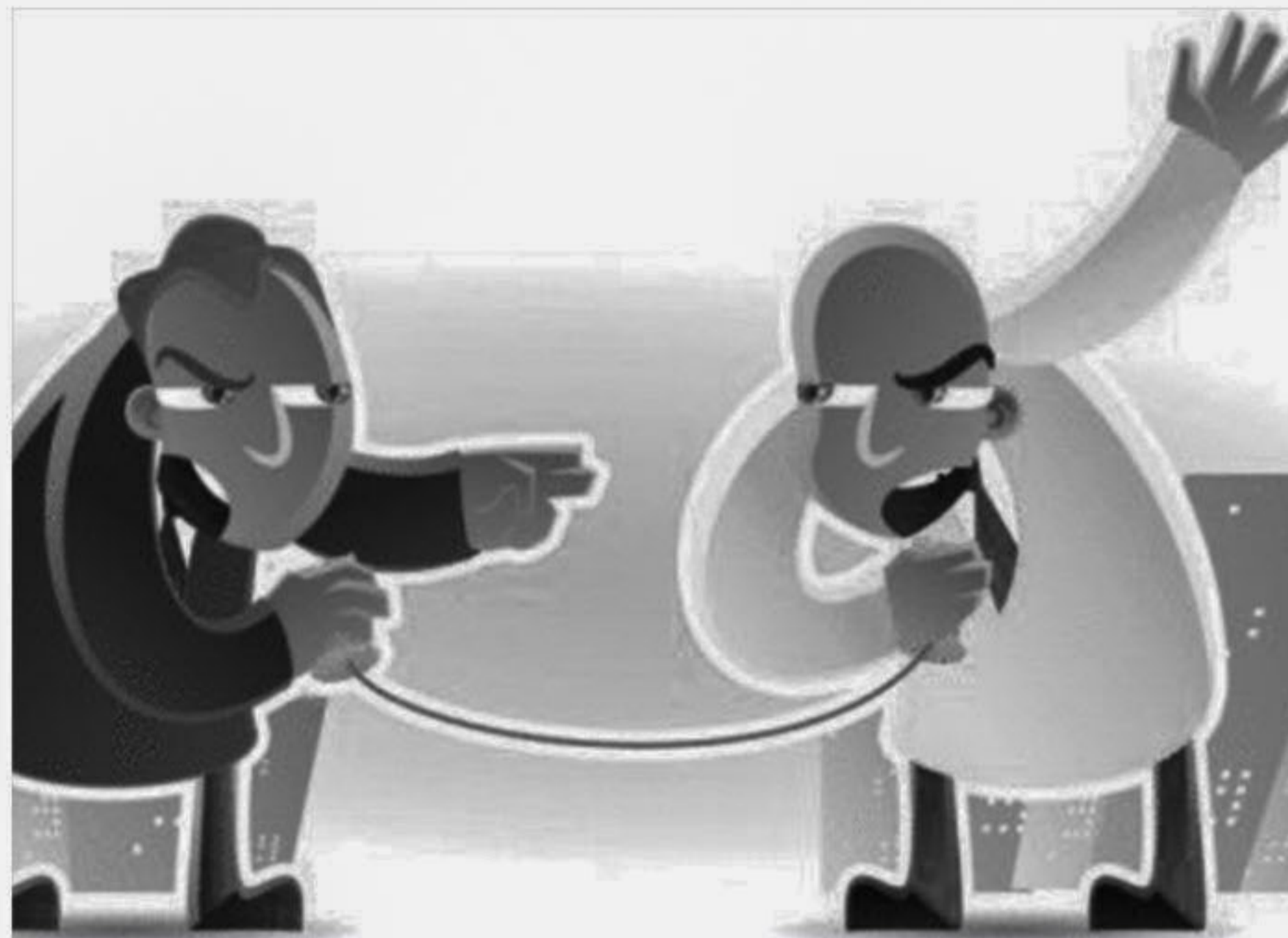
The BNP-led coalition followed it up by boycotting 163 of the 382 sittings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Parliament between 1996 and 2001. The Leaguers then boycotted the first 77 of the 8<sup>th</sup> Parliament and so on and so forth.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament hasn't been any better. There may be only 32 of them, but they are essential to Bangladesh's democratic governance. In the past, parliamentary boycotts have been largely followed by strikes and violence. As such, the fact that the opposition came back to the parliament should be applauded until your hands go sore.

Sure, it's great that we should expect more from our MPs than just to turn up in parliament. But, even by global standards of parliamentary misbehaviour, the behaviour of Bangladeshi MPs was a little quaint. The Italians, Taiwanese and South Koreans have made a habit of punching each other in parliament.

It was great television. Our MPs just couldn't get there. The Indians haven't been far behind. An MP in Maharashtra was punched when taking his oath late last year. BNP's Shahiduddin Chowdhury Anee could only muster a charge and a yelp.

What would be great about these little verbal violence is that these could perhaps be stepping-stones to establishing parliamentary codes of conduct. Sure you may have procedures in writing, but the informal and unspo-



Shouting is better than shooting.

ken rules are being set every time these two warring parties reach a consensus.

Dialogue and agreement may seem airy-fairy, but they have produced ostensible results. No doubt that both the major parties will retain their visceral opposition to each other, you want them to, but at least they are finding ways to conduct parliamentary business.

Sure, this doesn't mean the end of political deaths or hartals, but this is a start.

Take two small but significant examples.

On March 4, a day after the infamous Shammi Akhtar incident, Speaker Abdul Hamid received bipartisan support in condemning the previous day's actions. Both parties realised that public outrage over the incident was understandable and the public demand has to be met. No one gave solid assurances of better future behaviour, but this was a sign of what bipartisan agreement could look like.

A far more encouraging sign came on March 11. After both sides of the aisle demonstrated

impeccably responsible behaviour by trading pleas to "shut up" over floor-time, MPs gave Bangladesh the rare pleasure of reaching a bipartisan agreement. Although Bangladesh Parliament is a long, long way from bipartisan deals to pass legislation, opposition MPs cut a deal with the speaker to let Moudud Ahmed speak for 35 minutes. It's useful to reprint the last paragraphs of *The Daily Star's* report on the incident:

"The deputy speaker finally asked Moudud to determine the time he wanted to speak for. The BNP lawmaker said he wanted to speak for 35 minutes.

"All right. That's a deal. You will speak for 35 minutes and will finish your speech within the time," he said.

When Moudud started speaking order returned."

Dialogue, compromise, order then result. Not bad. There may be hope yet.

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# Why not?

Joy is Bangabandhu's grandson. He has big shoes to fill. Instead of making all kinds of gloomy predictions from early on, let us see what this young man has planned for his country's future.

ZEENAT KHAN

ON March 10, *The Daily Star's* Op-Ed page article, "A new face," caught my attention. The article discussed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's decision to enroll her only son Joy as a primary member of the ruling Awami League in Rangpur. The second line of the article posed the question: "But was this in any way a surprise to anyone?" Be that as it may, my question is: Why not? This young man comes from a legacy of political leaders and his grandfather Bangabandhu is the founder of our nation. Who better than him, if he has the charisma paired with intelligence and a desire to move the country along to a modern era?

His IT background doesn't disqualify him from joining politics, nor should one assume that he is bound to fail as a politician. In this age of information technology, one has to be knowledgeable in that field if he is to compete with the rest of the world. This thus joy in a better place than others who would want to pursue politics.

No one is a born politician. It is a choice one makes as an adult. A person with an upbringing in which democratic ideals are instilled, and who is taught in right from wrong, is someone who may do well in politics. His or her family affiliation with any current or past political families doesn't define him or her as a good politician. True, in Bangladesh, people are sceptical when another member of the ruling political party enters the stage. In some cases, a decision is made by the family, irrespective of the politician's desire to become a politician. Here, the assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi comes to mind.

In the recent US senatorial race assassinated president JFK's daughter, Caroline Kennedy, entered the race for the Senate seat which was left vacant after Hillary Clinton became the secretary of state. Caroline did not get her party's nomination. I have read and re-read how she opted for family life on the West Coast, and there was no way she would ever enter politics after the way her father and uncle were assassinated. The choice to enter the arena was not wholly hers; the idea here is that politics runs in the blood of those who come from political families.

Joy is Bangabandhu's grandson. He has big shoes to fill. Instead of making all kinds of gloomy predictions from early on, let us see what this young man has planned for his country's future. It is unfair to compare Joy with Tarique Rahman. I don't think Joy's agenda is to desecrate the sacred entity of the parliament.

Joy mostly grew up abroad. In this new era of globalisation, Bangladesh will only benefit from Joy's experience from abroad. He could have chosen a comfortable life abroad, but chose to come back to Bangladesh to serve his country. That is commendable. Whether Joy holds an American or a Bangladeshi passport should not be a major point of discussion. Joy is a Bangladeshi citizen, and changing the colour of his passport should be a mere technicality.

At this stage, the analysts and the columnists should not give into pessimism and question all that Joy is up against. He is aware that he will be watched closely and each misstep will be covered in the media. We all agree that in politics there will be two kinds of people: one being Dr. Kamal Hossain, who was Bangabandhu's confidante and a superb politician. The other kind is entangled in greed and does not care about any ideals.

Moreover, it makes no sense to suggest that Joy should be doing what Rahul Gandhi is doing. It may very well be a carefully orchestrated plan by the Congress party to keep Rahul away from active politics through his work for the welfare of his fellow Indians. Rahul's dedication to public service in the future will put him on a pedestal, if it hasn't already, and he will be a very likely candidate for an upcoming election. The public will support his nomination and assume he will secure a landslide victory.

Joy hasn't proven himself yet. All we can do is give him time and see what he does. As long as any member of the current or the past political party decides to play by democratic rule and does everything in his/her power to take Bangladesh ahead, he/she will have my vote. Joy knows very well what happens to our politicians who don't play by the democratic rule. He has a difficult road ahead and should be watching his step. I wish him all the best.

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# Corruption, shame and embarrassment

The point of no return is reached when society accommodates the corrupt and wealthy, and people feel proud to be related to, or friends of, those who are visibly corrupt, and even feel elevated if they are only acquainted with them.

MUNIM CHOWDHURY

IT is rather sad when a community or a nation becomes degenerated and reaches a stage where people do not feel shame or embarrassment for having accumulated dirty wealth. The point of no return is reached when society accommodates the corrupt and wealthy, and people feel proud to be related to, or friends of, those who are visibly corrupt, and even feel elevated if they are only acquainted with them.

Many of the blatantly corrupt are socially accepted, in some cases even respected feared and revered, instead of being avoided. Until such time society changes its attitude and starts socially boycotting, at least silently, those corrupt people, no law, no anti-corruption drive will have meaningful impact on the life of the people. It is the people, and not the government alone, who need to change their attitude towards those who destroy the basic values of life. At such a stage it becomes a necessity to look deeply and re-examine the dignity of life and value of existence.

Accumulation of wealth is not necessarily a crime, but the means adopted need to be examined and society needs to be aware of the means and methods used in reaching the super-rich status. People need not be terrified by the wealth of their relatives, friends and acquaintances, who might not have achieved it through transparent means.

When their source of wealth is not transparent/accountable and remains questionable, society can express its revulsion and distaste by distancing itself from the company of those corrupt giants of the society. Those giants feel no shame in demonstrating their wealth by building massive luxury houses and apartments, driving expensive vehicles, sending their children to expensive universities overseas and even investing in real estate abroad. We take pride, instead of feeling shame and embarrassment, in talking about those people's acquisitions, knowing full well the source of their income and the grossly disproportionate wealth they possess.

The value system changed with the emergence of a new class of people in 1947 and

again in 1971. The class that emerged after 1971 no longer attaches sufficient weight to the values of our forefathers, who took pride in good manners, achievements, success, knowledge, learning and academic performance and, above all, strong moral character.

The society no longer values the behaviour pattern of our forefathers, and is impressed by the crude and rude and demonstrative wealthy though knowing full well the source of the wealth. Not even expressing implied distaste towards those individuals is equal to condoning the crime against the people, society and the country at large. Until the society is ready to at least express its disgust and tacit disapproval, nothing will change in the life of ordinary Bangladeshis. The dream will remain a dream and the nation will continue to degenerate.

In present day Bangladesh, the seed of corruption is sown from the day a child gets admitted to school. The poor parents are forced to pay bribe to get their children admitted. The corrupt process of education starts from day one and continues till getting of the degree by cheating in the examinations. Years ago, good students would select, not settle for, teaching as a noble profession. Today, mostly low-calibre students who somehow get a degree through nokol are the one's who select teaching, and they get into the profession through giving bribe.

Teachers today are rarely engaged in build-

ing morally strong students -- which used to be the tradition of the Bengali Hindu gentry in pre-partition India. Today, the parents dictate and the students select a subject that guarantees them a place in the bribery and corruption system. Parents do not have the patience to spend time in pursuit of a good honest life for their children. They want a quick return on what they invest in the education of their wards. They look for the fastest route to shift their residence from downtown to uptown, move up from rickshaw to four wheeler and, at least once a year, take a trip overseas.

The same parents and children perform umra few times a year, without even once considering if their expenditure on such a holy pilgrimage was generated from halal income. This is extreme corruption of God's prescribed way of life.

Quite a good number of corrupt kings become admirers of art, culture and literature. Some enrol themselves as members of shushil samaj, spreading words of wisdom. They participate in talk shows and appear in TV interviews positioning themselves in front of colourful bookshelves which would have embarrassed Karl Marx, who spent 12 to 18 hours a day reading books in the British Museum for many years. This is how some highly corrupt individuals camouflage themselves.

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