

Parliamentarians take a dig at media

We wish the criticism had been advisory rather than hostile

The unscheduled heated debate in the JS on Tuesday centering around some media reports was regrettably largely marked by imputation of motives instead of pointing out any factual inaccuracy, error or indeed any other inadequacy in them. Almost the entire exercise was unfortunately denunciatory rather than constructive -- until the very end when the Speaker called upon the media to expose wrongdoing based on truth and demonstrative maturity.

Finger-pointing at motives that are farfetched, well beyond the contents of the report, was regrettable. It left the impression, for the first time perhaps, that the parliament was looking at the media as a foe, not as a partner in building democracy. The legislature, judiciary and press play a mutually reinforcing role in relation to answerability of the executive and are thus vital pillars for an effective and vibrant democracy.

The newspaper reports that spurred the debate were on privileges and perks being enjoyed by members of parliament in terms of salary, allowances, collection of financial entitlements despite long absence from parliament for political reasons, overseas trips and the level of their interest in lawmaking. It is only natural for the public to have questions as to why members of parliament should be drawing remuneration and allowances although they did not discharge their given responsibilities through participation in parliament. As a matter of fact, the erosion of the prestige of parliament has not been the handiwork of outsiders but of the members of parliament themselves through boycott of JS sessions and frequent lack of quorum, of which both the political parties are guilty by turn. Also, the public wonder why the MPs accumulate arrears in utility bills even though they have been regularly drawing allowances to pay for these.

Newspapers are obliged to carry reports on such issues driven entirely by considerations of public concern and curiosity as well as of giving a certain perspective to the lawmakers of the public sentiments about such matters. They must know what the nation is sacrificing for them so that they are motivated to give their best in lawmaking and oversight roles through substantive debates and enriched contributions.

Instead of looking at any critical news coverage or analysis positively, they seem fixated on the notion that journalists are up and about castigating them. Thereby, they think the journalists are weakening them, undermining their dignity and weakening the institution of parliament. But before spewing out sweeping innuendoes against newspapers had the lawmakers judged for themselves whether the reports are factually correct or fabricated, it would have not only benefited the media but also the nation. Just where the reports went wrong and how ought to have been the thrust of their debate rather than engaging in vitriol against some reports.

The legislators seem to think that being elected by the people they are above scrutiny. But because they are elected, it's all the more reason why they must, of their own volition, subject themselves to public scrutiny by way of receiving valuable feedback from time to time in the discharge of their constitutional duties.

The administrative mess in Pabna

Let everything be guided by rules

The deputy commissioner of Pabna and the local ruling party MP appear to be on a war footing, as they are accusing each other of being extremely uncooperative or even hostile. The situation reached such a pass that the officials of the district administration decided to submit a petition for mass transfer.

The disputes between the district administration and the local public representatives are indeed a matter of concern. Such a state of affairs can only demoralize the government officials as they fail to discharge their duties without fear or favour when the local leaders try to influence their decisions. The political diktats cannot always be acceded to without violating the rules and regulations. This is an extremely embarrassing situation for the officers who care about the rules and have a modicum of faith in professional ethics and principles. For example, it has been reported from Pabna that the local MP had been pressing hard for withdrawal of cases against his men which he termed politically motivated. He allegedly intervened in the process of recruiting some employees for the district administration. Apparently, the MP wanted things to go his way as the elected representative of the people.

The latest row between the bureaucrat and the politician once again raises the issue of what precisely the relations between them should be. While, politicization of the administration is a charge that almost all the governments faced in the past, it now appears that MPs and other local leaders are trying to meddle in day-to-day governmental activities. Obviously, the civil servants have to respect the public representatives, but the two sides should have clearly demarcated areas of jurisdiction and respect for each other.

The trouble must be nipped in the bud. It is imperative that a high level intervening mechanism for resolving all such disputes is evolved and made to work. There must be no rivalry between the people's representatives and the government functionaries. The Pabna situation in particular calls for a probe. The ruling party high-ups have to take note of what is happening in Pabna and rein in the elements trying to exercise influence over administrative officials who are required to work professionally and according to rules.

Free ride on public money!



It is the principles followed and the criterion applied in selecting the members of a delegation, of now and the past, that are being called to question. A delegation such as this is supposed to be a working delegation -- and one would hope that the government has all the arguments to justify the inclusion of each of the members that are on the official team as well the others included in the delegation.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IN Bangladesh economic theories and principles of good governance are respected, but only in their disregard rather than observance. Where the state of the economy should necessitate tightening of the belt, in our case it is the reverse, with public spending increasing unnecessarily everyday. One more example of this rather callous indifference to public interest is the highly bloated entourage of the PM in her annual UN sojourn.

The size of a government retinue in our case, it seems, is inversely proportional to the affluence of the country. The poorer you are the larger is the size of the delegation, whether it is a bilateral state visit or an international confer-

ence. And the trend looks rather ominous.

The size of the prime minister's delegation has been growing over time. The erstwhile 4-Party alliance government did not fall far behind; looking at the list of delegations of two visits, to Pakistan and India, in 2006, the figures touch the nineties. On her India visit this year the size of the delegation was 73; and 89 persons had accompanied the PM on her trip to China; and on this 65th UNGA session, the figure has crossed the hundred mark. And New York is a costly place indeed!

It will not be out of place to point out that in this regard the democratically elected governments have been outdoing the unelected, autocrats and pseudo-democratic regimes. Why so, I

often wonder. And whereas, the political parties and the many shades of public opinions, and the many colours of civil society and intellectuals, do not miss an opportunity to excoriate the autocrats for their anti-people acts and policies, and rightly so, these elements, particularly the guardians of our conscience, seem to become tongue tied when it comes to democratically elected governments doing things that border on the irrational.

One is sure that we are the butt of jokes of our development partners, seeing the way we go about panhandling for loans while at the same time waste the hard-earned foreign exchange that betrays our spendthrift propensities; and all this when we are trying to pull out a large segment of our people from the morass of poverty. Such a large delegation is a rude reminder of the gap between examples and precepts, between the government's call for austerity and the reflection of it in its actions.

This is the largest delegation, reportedly, since independence, numbering more than 100, and with a few exceptions the bill is being borne by the poor people of Bangladesh. We often overlook the fact that the state's coffer actually belongs to the people, and like so many interests of the state that the people's representative have been entrusted with

to protect, it is for the government to ensure that public money is not frittered away imprudently.

Admittedly, the PM, or for that matter the president, has the right to choose who the members of a state-level delegation should be, and much of its composition is dictated by the nature of the visit. It has also been a practice in the past to take people on board, particularly on bilateral visits, those who have excelled in their own fields in the country, including literateurs, teachers artists and the like, and their inclusion was an acknowledgement of their achievement although we could not manage to rise beyond partisan consideration even then while selecting such persons. The idea of including a few meritorious students, who had topped the SSC and HSC merit list, in the prime ministers delegation in one or two occasions in the past, was one that was appreciated by all.

But it would be wrong to get away with the impression that the money should be the only factor in determining the size of a delegation. In fact its composition should be relevant to the visit and the presence of the members of the delegation should contribute indirectly and directly to the success of the mission. And this is even more so on a visit which involves matters such as the MDG, terrorism and extremism, and climate change among other very technical and specialised issues. But looking at the list it appears that the notion of political patronisation has been taken to an absurd level.

In this regard one would be remiss if one did not acknowledge the sense of wisdom of three of the delegation members, famous in their own rights as literateurs, who decided to forgo the comforts of luxury travel, and instead take the economy class and thereby save some money of the state. Good examples for us to emulate.

It is the principles followed and the criterion applied in selecting the members of a delegation, of now and the past, that are being called to question. A delegation such as this is supposed to be a working delegation -- and one would hope that the government has all the arguments to justify the inclusion of each of the members that are on the official team as well the others included in the delegation. We can only hope that the return from the output of each member of the delegation will far outweigh the money spent on their visit.

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We're safer than we think



Al Qaeda "central" -- Osama bin Laden and his gang -- has been whittled down to about 400 fighters. It has been unable to execute large-scale attacks of the kind that were at the core of its strategy -- to hit high-value American targets that held military or political symbolism.

FAREED ZAKARIA

ARE we safer now than we were on 9/11? It sounds like a simple question, amenable to an answer or at least a serious conversation. But we are so polarised in America these days that it almost seems more difficult now than it was in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Let me try and answer the

question as fairly as I know how.

Of course we are safer. During the 1990s, Al Qaeda ran training camps through which as many as 20,000 fighters may have passed. It was able to operate successfully during that decade and into the next because most governments treated the group as an annoyance rather than a major national-security challenge.

After the attacks, the world's attitude changed dramatically, and the series of security measures instituted since then have proved effective. Take one example: sealing cockpit doors has made it highly unlikely that an airplane could be used ever again as a missile.

In addition, U.S. forces went on the offensive in Afghanistan, toppling the regime that supported Al Qaeda, destroying its camps, and chasing its recruits around the mountains of the region. Washington, in partnership with other governments, has tracked the communications, travel, and -- most important -- money that fuels terrorist operations, blocking these at every turn.

As I wrote at the time and subsequently, and as I continue to believe, the Bush administration deserves credit for these measures. Whatever one may think

of its subsequent decisions, its policies to secure the homeland and go after Al Qaeda in 2001 and 2002 were mostly smart and successful. President Obama's decision to amp up the campaign against Al Qaeda in Pakistan has further fractured the group.

As a result, Al Qaeda "central" -- Osama bin Laden and his gang -- has been whittled down to about 400 fighters. It has been unable to execute large-scale attacks of the kind that were at the core of its strategy -- to hit high-value American targets that held military or political symbolism.

Instead, the terrorist attacks after 9/11 have been launched by smaller local groups, self-identified as affiliates of Al Qaeda, against much easier sites -- the nightclub in Bali; cafés in Casablanca and Istanbul; hotels in Amman, Jordan; train stations in Madrid and London. The problem with these kinds of attacks is that they kill ordinary civilians -- not U.S. soldiers or diplomats -- and turn the local population against Islamic radicals.

The real threat of Al Qaeda was that it would inspire some percent-age of the world's 1.57 billion Muslims, sending out unstoppable waves of jihadis. In fact, across the Muslim world, militant Islam's appeal has plunged. In the half of the Muslim world that holds elections, parties that are in any way associated with Islamic jihad tend to fare miserably, even in Pakistan, which has the most serious terrorism problem of any country in the world today. Over the last few years, imams and Muslim leaders across the world have been denouncing suicide bombings, terrorism, and Al Qaeda with regularity.

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