

BNP's unfortunate decision to keep away from JS session

Such an attitude only raises worrying questions

THE continued refusal of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party to participate in the proceedings of the Jatiyo Sangsad is indeed perplexing. And it is because in all these months since it began to stay away from the House, it has never quite been able to explain to the country why it has taken no interest in the business of Parliament. Of course, it has come forth with one reason or another, none of which in political terms can be considered credible. A rather queer aspect of the BNP's position is that all the grievances it cites to advance its argument in favour of non-participation in the JS are those it could very well have raised in the House itself. That it has felt little need to do so can only have damaged its own credibility as a party. More worryingly, such an attitude has clearly been corroding the whole idea of democracy in Bangladesh.

The nation had expected, especially after the camaraderie demonstrated by both ruling party and opposition lawmakers at a recent anti-poverty rally, that the BNP would return to the JS and play its full, constructive part in legislative business. That hope has been dashed with the party now coming up with reasons that clearly do not look like reasons any more. Indeed, the party now appears to have taken a subjective position on its participation or otherwise in sessions of Parliament. It would have the nation know that the ruling Awami League cannot tolerate the presence of the opposition in the JS. Moreover, it would like guarantees that there will be a change in attitude on the part of the prime minister and others in the ruling party before it can consider going back to the JS. Ironically, the BNP leadership reminds people that its lawmakers have been attending the meetings of the various House committees, as if that can be a substitute for their full, vibrant presence in the House. The BNP's indifference to Parliament can be gauged from the figures. Of the 158 working days of this Jatiyo Sangsad, it has stayed away from the House for 114 days. The leader of the opposition, who in her days in power constantly berated the then opposition over its boycott of the JS, has attended sessions of the present legislature for a mere five days. Given such facts, questions could with justification arise as to whether the BNP really has any grievances or whether it is more interested in seeing the JS turn into a lame duck body. Either way, it is Bangladesh's fragile democracy that is placed at risk by the tantrums the BNP has been throwing.

We have urged the party repeatedly through these columns to return to the JS in the spirit of democracy and play its due role in promoting the growth of a strong pluralist political system. We appeal to the BNP again to go back to the House and for the particular reason that its lawmakers owe it to their constituencies to uphold their interests in the JS. There is a moral imperative here as well, which is that those elected on the BNP's ticket at the last polls were not given the authority to boycott Parliament over any issues, specific or non-specific. It is a matter the saner, moderate elements in the party must take note of. Finally, we are constrained to say that a party which cares about democracy when it is in power but loses interest in this principle when it loses elections does not offer much of a political alternative to the nation.

Recovering parking spaces

Enforce the law strictly and impartially

RAJUK'S planned drive to recover parking spaces from illegal occupation is no doubt a move that has been long overdue. Occupation of parking spaces for other purposes forces vehicles to park on the roads that are already cluttered with a much higher number of vehicles than they can actually accommodate.

Rajuk has done some preparatory work like reaching an understanding with the Dhaka Metropolitan Police that they will help implement its action against parking spaces rented out as shops or warehouses. It is mind-boggling statistic that at least one-third of the city streets and ninety per cent of the footpaths remain illegally occupied by parked cars, street vendors and piled up construction materials. So, the talk of containing traffic jam can only sound hollow without the freeing up of illegally occupied or used up parking spaces.

The traffic authorities have tried various tactics like dividing the roads into lanes and forcing ramshackle vehicles out of the street, but nothing has really worked. Now they are planning to evict illegal occupants of parking spaces and prevent unlawful use of the space. They can ill-afford any failure there. However, the success of the plan will depend on whether they can stop people from reoccupying the places within a week or so, after being evicted as they have done in case of previous eviction drives. In other words, the effort to keep the parking spaces clear must be a sustained one, and not a one-off affair having no real impact; even worse, a counter-productive effect. Nobody should get a waiver. For example, sparing important government buildings will set a bad example and call into question the purpose and impartiality of the whole scheme. Rather, the government owned structures should take the lead in making the parking spaces available for vehicles. The government has to take a neutral position in enforcing the rules.

Clearing parking spaces is a pressing need to ease traffic jam and also to bring back order to the streets. Occupied footpaths and parking spaces create serious problems for both pedestrians and vehicles, apart from being a major cause behind traffic jams.

The government agencies blame each other and complain that they do not have enough manpower and logistical support to accomplish the huge task of clearing parking spaces and footpath. Finally, they have also stated that they can make little headway without the political will on the part of the government. This is obviously something that the decision makers should take note of and make sure that the drive to improve the situation does not peter out because of lack of political will on their part.

Media-parliament relation

The MPs must accept criticism, which is part of the media's duty to the public. The media are certainly not above and beyond criticism. A strong professional relationship also requires the media to provide balanced coverage of public policy debates without trivialising or denigrating the parliamentary and governmental decision-making processes.



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THE unscheduled heated discussion in the parliament on September 21, running for nearly two hours, centering some newspaper reports, has once again put the media-parliament relation in a functioning democracy under the spotlight.

The media and the parliament are two essential actors for an effective and vibrant democracy. Along with parliament, the media share a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development in ways consistent with democratic norms and principles through carrying objective and substantiated reporting. Ultimately, economic development is best achieved and sustained in societies that are democratic and well-informed.

The media help in exposing the weaknesses of the democratic system and pointing out how they can be rectified. Often, the media struggle hard to unearth the lapses of the government and its shortcomings, and also give expression to public grievances and difficulties and report on how policies are being carried out. Simultaneously, the media maintain an important and strong link between the public and the parliament.

It is also of paramount importance that the media should impose their own professional integrity and obligation towards people while carrying any critical news coverage. They are obliged to carry reports on topics of public concern. They can discharge this function effectively only if they enjoy what is termed as "Freedom of the Press."

Considering their pivotal role in strengthening democracy, the media are often called an extension of parliament. The media fulfill a great need, felt alike by the members of parliament and the public. It is the newspaper and other mass media through which the parliament enjoys so much publicity and gathers information that helps it to effectively supervise and exercise control over the executive.

Therefore, the parliament should work to develop a culture to protect the media, as the presence of a free media is vital for a functioning democracy and good governance. Parliament should facilitate the media's operation by ensuring freedom of expression, the right to information and freedom of the press. It should participate in debates regarding how to achieve a balance between freedom of speech and standards of responsibility.

The key is to develop a strong profes-

sional relationship between the journalists and the parliamentarians, based on mutual respect and recognition, as both play a pivotal role for an effective democracy. The MPs as people's representatives possess ultimate legitimacy, while media assist the community in taking decisions about whether to give their continued support to their representative.

If the parliament and the media are antagonistic towards each other, the

bid to cover up their failures. The livestock minister said in parliament on September 22 that the media had created panic by providing wrong information on the spread of anthrax.

The ministers and the ruling BNP lawmakers of the 8th parliament also launched an attack on the country's media in parliament, accusing them of tarnishing the government's image by publishing what they called "fake news," and also demanded actions against those responsible. The president, prime minister and information minister also expressed their willingness to amend the provisions of the Press Council Act by adding a punitive provision to punish errant journalists.

So, it was not surprising when some ministers and MPs were extremely critical of the media in general and certain newspapers in particular. They even requested the speaker to summon the editor of a Bengali daily to the House to explain reports published in his newspaper. What has been equally disappointing and disturbing is that the whole exercise was marked by reproach, but not of pointing out any untruth.

If parliamentarians want to overcome any mistrust that may exist between the community and their elected representatives, the first step is to build trust between parliamentarians and those who convey their actions and opinions to the public. Both sides have a responsibility to overcome any mistrust that might exist.

Parliament and the media should respect each other's role in serving the community so that people in turn respect both the media and parliament as providers of accurate information and informed opinion. The clamour for controlling of the media by the parliamentarians, which appears to be part of an emerging pattern, may eventually lead to formulation and institution of external control over the media.

The MPs must accept criticism, which is part of the media's duty to the public. The media are certainly not above and beyond criticism. A strong professional relationship also requires the media to provide balanced coverage of public policy debates without trivialising or denigrating the parliamentary and governmental decision-making processes.

In recognition of the important role the media play in a democracy, and facilitating community involvement in debates relating to the business of parliament, journalists need to understand the issues crucial to all segments of the population and play their part in informing the public about the challenges facing society.

The media in Bangladesh have been playing a very vital role in their mission of unearthing all the problems the nation happens to be going through. It is the media that have kept our hopes alive by bringing to light the tales of torture, denial and violation of human rights. So, the media must be free and independent more than anything else in the country.

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A lonely success

The remarkable aspect of TARP, in retrospect, was the bipartisanship that made it possible. Hank Paulson and Barney Frank became comrades in arms. George W. Bush cooperated with Nancy Pelosi. Conservative Republicans endorsed a vast government appropriation. Liberal Democrats supported a bank bailout.

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SEPTEMBER is the month for anniversaries from hell. Last week we remembered 9/11, and this week it's time to recall the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Most of the discussion about the financial crisis has focused on a question that won't go away: could the fall of Lehman have been prevented? For many this was the cardinal error that sparked the crisis. Others believe that Lehman was the precipitating factor, but that the financial system was so highly leveraged that something or other would eventually have broken its back.

We will never know what would have happened if Lehman had not failed. But we can be fairly sure that without its collapse, it would have been impossible to shock the political system into action. In the month after the fall, the U.S. government made a series of massive moves to restore stability to the financial system. And it's clear that those actions saved the American -- and thus the global -- economy from total collapse.

Consider the facts. After the fall of Lehman, credit froze in the U.S. economy. Banks stopped lending to anyone, even Fortune 500 companies with gold-plated credit. People couldn't get consumer and car loans at any price, businesses couldn't get short-term loans to meet payroll. Private-sector borrowing -- the lifeblood of modern economies -- fell

from 15% of GDP in late 2007 to minus 1% of GDP in late 2008.

The effects on the broader economy were immediate. GDP shrank by 6% in one quarter. Some 1.7 million people lost their jobs, the biggest drop in employment in 65 years, which was then exceeded in the next quarter when 2.1 million jobs evaporated. The net worth of American households decreased by \$5 trillion, falling at the unprecedented rate of 30% a year.

The worldwide numbers did not look much better. The contraction in global trade in late 2008 and early 2009 was worse than in 1929 and 1930. In other words, we were surely headed for something that looked like a Great Depression.

The U.S. government's actions stopped the fall. Between the passage of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and the massive quantitative easing of the Federal Reserve, markets realised that the government was backstopping the financial system, that credit was beginning to flow again, and that if no one else was going to inject capital into the system, the U.S. government would do so.

Part substance, part symbolism, the effect was to restore confidence and stability to the system. In fact, the financial system bounced back so fast that the government will likely recover almost 90% of the funds it committed during those months, making this one of the cheapest financial bailouts in history.

The best evidence that TARP worked is



Working together during a crisis.

that now, most people think it was unnecessary. In fact, about 60% of the country thinks it was a bad idea. Congressmen and senators who supported it now distance themselves; the most powerful line of attack against any of them tends to be that they voted for the bailouts. JFK said that victory has 100 fathers, and defeat is an orphan. But this is the strange case of a success that no one wants to claim.

Bank bailouts have always been unpopular. People hate to pay the bills for other people's improvidence, and they detest having to do so for rich people. Viewed in moral terms, TARP is unconscionable. Financial institutions created the mess, and yet they were the ones being bailed out. But governance is sometimes about practical realities. Had the financial system gone under, the American economy would have come to a standstill. It very nearly did. We had to save the banks to save the economy.

The remarkable aspect of TARP, in retrospect, was the bipartisanship that made it possible. Hank Paulson and Barney Frank

became comrades in arms. George W. Bush cooperated with Nancy Pelosi. Conservative Republicans endorsed a vast government appropriation. Liberal Democrats supported a bank bailout. The fact that people of wildly differing political persuasions all came to the conclusion that this was the right policy should be some proof that it was not ideologically motivated. For a moment in September 2008, Washington worked.

Alas, it won't happen again. It took a crisis to concentrate the minds of politicians. The American system had a heart attack and we responded fast and well. Unfortunately, the problems we face in the future are less like heart attacks and more like cancer -- problems that if unattended will grow and metastasise. In the long run, though, they'll have the same effect on the patient.

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