

Parliament and media: Bangladesh perspective



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EDMUND Burke, an Irish statesman and social and political philosopher of the 18th century, said that there were three estates in parliament; but in the reporters' gallery yonder, there sat a fourth estate far more important than them all.

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish writer, essayist and historian of 19th century, famously wrote: "It [Burke's observation] signifies the pivotal link in the relationship between Parliament and the Press."

Relying on political philosophy of both Burke and Thomas, now in the 21st century, Somnath Chatterjee, former speaker of Lok Sabha, observed: "In a parliamentary democracy, parliament, people and the media are all integrally linked."

"It is one of the well-recognised

maxims of democracy that it cannot function effectively without a free media. The media is a natural ally to a democratic society as it is through the media that the people are made aware of the functions of the polity," he asserted.

The former speaker of Lok Sabha, India, the largest democratic country in the world, made this critical observation in the eighth Pranabesh Sen memorial lecture, on, "Parliament, People and the Media," delivered in January 2009 in Kolkata.

The political philosophy of Burke, Thomas and Somnath on relationship between the parliament and media seems to have disappeared again from Bangladesh's current parliamentary democracy on September 21 for over one and half hours.

On that day in parliament, a number of ruling AL-led alliance MPs including two ministers launched a blistering attack on media, accusing

them of tarnishing the image of the parliament and its members by publishing "false" news reports.

Unfortunately, the speaker not only uninterruptedly allowed the ruling alliance lawmakers to bash the media but also joined the verbal attack, putting bizarre records in the parliamentary proceedings as none of the words uttered by the MPs against the media was expunged.

What was the fault of the media? What were the offences they committed which compelled MPs including the speaker to launch the attack?

The daily *Prothom Alo* recently published some reports on duty free cars for MPs, tax-free remuneration and allowances and lawmakers' half-hearted interests in law-making process. Another daily *Samokal* recently published a news report on MPs' foreign tours.

Those news reports severely irked the ruling alliance MPs, who whipped the media to ventilate their grievances.

However, they could have made efforts to prove all those news reports "false" and "motivated" by providing "accurate information," if they have any. [There might be some weakness in those reports due to constraint of access to information.]

Instead, they opted for bashing the

media, accusing them of conspiring against country's democratic process and creating grounds for unconstitutional rule again.

Some of them, including Jute and Textile Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui, advised the media not to "misuse freedom" and be "self-restrained."

Interestingly, while bashing the media, they forgot where they should have stopped. They also demanded for taking legal actions against *Prothom Alo* and its editor Matinur Rahman, pronouncing his name, for publishing those reports and attacked him personally.

In doing so, they merrily violated the rules of procedure of parliament that strictly bars a lawmaker from naming a person who is not present in the House and who does not have scope to clarify his position in face of allegations raised against him.

But the speaker "forgot" to remind the lawmakers to abide by the rules of procedure while delivering speeches on that day in parliament.

The September 21 crusade against the media was not new in our political culture. It has become a fashion and common phenomenon to attack media to hide weaknesses and faults as "denial is the best policy" in our political culture.

In the past eighth parliament, the

then BNP-led ruling alliance did it frequently. At that time, the most nefarious accusation against the media was that "Bangla Bhai" was a "creation of media." They accused the media of engaging in conspiracy to tarnish the country's image by publishing "fictitious" news reports on Islamic militants' activities.

However, the media was proved right later when dreaded militant Bangla Bhai and other top kingpins of militant organisations were nabbed and hanged to death on their conviction by the court.

During the last eighth parliament, newspapers made numberless reports on alleged financial corruption occurring in the parliament secretariat. The then speaker always denied the allegations and castigated the media for "making false news reports."

For example, *The Daily Star* published a report on July 12, 2007, revealing that the then speaker, Jamiruddin Sircar unlawfully took over Tk.27 lakh as medical allowance.

On the day the report was published, the speaker held a press conference at his official residence and castigated *The Daily Star* for publishing the news item. "It has violated all the norms of journalism. The news was published only to undermine me and the office of the Speaker," Sircar claimed.

The media again was proved right when a parliamentary probe body formed by the present House investigated into all those allegations and came up with its findings on massive corruption that took place in the Jatiya Sangsad secretariat from the end of 2001 to 2008. The probe body also found that the former speaker took the medical allowance of over Tk.27 lakh unlawfully.

Parliament depends on the media to inform the people of its functions. The media always tries to make special coverage of parliamentary proceedings although it does not have any legal protection from any possible adversary while doing so.

An MP is protected by the constitution for what he says in parliament. He has unqualified and absolute immunity in respect of any speech made by him in parliament and in any committee thereof. The court has no

jurisdiction to proceed against him for what he said in parliament or in any committee or parliament, whether the statement is true or false and whether the statement is made in good faith or maliciously.

According to the constitution, an MP cannot criticise a judge of the Supreme Court in respect of his judicial functions in parliament. But if he transgresses this limit he cannot be charged with contempt of court.

Officers of the parliament are also protected by the constitution in discharging their duties -- to regulate the procedure in parliament, or to conduct its business or to maintain order in parliament.

A publication of reports, papers, votes or other proceedings is also protected when it is done by or under the authority of parliament.

But a newspaper, not being a publication authorised by parliament, is not protected if it publishes a report of a debate in parliament which contains matters disparaging to the character of any individual or amounting to contempt of court.

In efforts to protect media from any possible adverse situation in case of publishing of reports on parliamentary proceedings, the Indian parliament itself enacted the Parliamentary Proceedings (Protection of Publication) Act, 1977.

It provided media with the privilege of publishing substantially true proceedings in parliament without being exposed to any civil or criminal action.

We expect that our parliament will enact such a law providing the media with protection and ensure their access to information, enabling them to publish and report the parliamentary proceedings extensively to inform the people of parliament's function.

As former Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath observed: "Freedom of access to sources of information, freedom of publication and freedom of circulation, which are essential components of freedom of the press, have to be ensured in a parliamentary democracy because it cannot function effectively without a free media."

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New airport at Trishal: Flight of fancy or urban nightmare?

If the authorities are unable to run a small airport efficiently, how would they do any better with a large one? And if the solution is seen as privatisation or public-private partnership, why don't they do the same with the operations of the existing airport?

RASHIDUDDIN AHMAD

HOW realistic is the proposal for a new international airport 60 miles outside the capital, with respect to travel time to and from the airport, given our appalling record of road and traffic management?

"Top priority" for location of the new airport is being given to a 6,000 acre site at Trishal in Mymensingh, 97 kilometres from the capital, as it includes about 1200 acres of government land, according to an announcement in July by the civil aviation minister.

The government has said construction of the new Tk.50,000 crore (\$7 billion) airport will incorporate all required infrastructure support, including an elevated expressway and monorail. The project will begin next year and its first phase, with two runways, is to be completed by 2013, i.e. in under three years, according to media reports. Presumably this entails an entire 50 to 60-mile elevated expressway being in place too by this time, with all associated public transport standing by?

Just as a comparison, Heathrow's Terminal 5 took over 20 years from inception to completion, in a country with a century of experience in building airports (the first London airport in Croydon being built in 1915).

Hopefully, this puts our projected flight of fancy -- of building a super airport in just three years -- into perspective. Especially when we take into account the chronic and unresolved issues in every corner of our communications sector -- and the unavoidable

fact that it took almost five years to complete the half-kilometre (550m) Tongi Flyover.

It also appears that the masses, as usual, are being left out of the equation. A great cross-section of the population now fly abroad for study or work, as well as pleasure. While rich people, with private cars, will no doubt complain about the unreasonable distance to the proposed new airport, their plight will be nothing compared to the suffering for ordinary car-less people who need to fly.

Even in developed countries, with decent public transport, how many capital cities have international airports 60 miles away? The world's busiest international airport, again Heathrow, is situated just 15 miles from the city centre and served by excellent road and rail links. Travel time from the centre of London can take as little as half an hour. New York's JFK International Airport is likewise just 15 miles from Manhattan. A bit closer to home, Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, newly expanded, is only 10 miles out, taking as little as 45-60 minutes travel time.

Given the sorry state of Bangladesh's public transport system to date, it's quite a leap to imagine that a new "mega-airport," even with the actual proposed road and monorail in place, will uniquely and miraculously be served by efficient bus and train links. And the fact that it now takes up to three hours just to reach the city outskirts is not so easily swept aside by the promise of a "mega-highway" to cut travel time to a new airport that would be situated up to six times further away than the norm.

Another fundamental question is: why the need even for a brand new international airport? The authorities have given various reasons in their proposal, the main one being ever-greater numbers of air passengers and cargo. With air traffic in Bangladesh growing rapidly, they claim, Dhaka's existing Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, with just one runway, will fail to meet growing demand within the next few years.

No numbers have been released for the projected growth of air traffic, although such studies do apparently exist. However, in its great enthusiasm, the government reportedly envisions that the new airport at Trishal will be similar to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport that handles 76 flights an hour, 45 million passengers a year (international and domestic) and three million tonnes of cargo annually!

Yet, the reality is, to date, three decades since it opened, Shahjalal still only handles around six flights an hour and 4 million international passengers a year (plus 1 million domestic).

And, according to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), Shahjalal's actual handling capacity of 8 million passengers is enough to "go on meeting well the needs for further 20 years or more" (in CAAB's own words on its website as of Sept 1, 2010).

The cargo issue, we'll come back to later, but let's look first at some other justifications mentioned in the proposal for the new airport, such as residential build-up around Shahjalal and impossibility of its expansion.

Further expansion of Shahjalal is not feasible due to land constraints, and therefore the most obvious and urgent solution clearly is the building of an entirely new airport, say the authorities. Many unapproved houses built around the airport stand in the way of building a second runway. There is also risk of running airport operations because of installations around the airport. Officials have also reportedly said that hundreds of buildings of Uttara and Nikunja may be

listed "risky" if a second runway is built at Shahjalal airport.

The proposal also mentioned that a modern five-level airport security system, which is mandatory under the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) guidelines, cannot be employed due to space constraint in the Shahjalal terminal building.

But the basic premise that expansion is impossible should be questioned. In fact, Shahjalal is undergoing various expansion projects right now. It certainly makes economic sense, if at all possible, to try and continue expansion against the immense cost of a new airport.

It is also the climate-friendly route to take.

Every modern country in the world has to deal with the problem of expanding existing airports in responsible ways. They have contingency plans in place, such as not building vast residential areas nearby, with a view to avoiding expensive relocation of an airport an unfeasible distance away. Such foresight or planning was too much to expect of our governments, obviously.

There are still other ways to expand - responsibly shifting nearby residential populations or use of non-residential land. In the latter case, the government, if willing, could annex Dhaka Cantonment land near the airport. In fact, there has already in the past been talk of relocating Dhaka Cantonment.

And, needless to say, unapproved buildings should not at all stand in the way of necessary airport expansion. Illegal structures should not impede such urban planning, especially if it's a case of cost-effective green expansion versus a hugely expensive new airport.

One last, and rather odd, suggestion in favour of the new airport was that it could rectify the current airport's awful reputation for corruption and malpractice, which creates problems for passengers and losses for the government. I can't quite see the logic of



the argument, unless the missing detail here is the proposed public-private partnership for the new airport.

If the authorities are unable to run a small airport efficiently, how would they do any better with a large one? And if the solution is seen as privatisation or public-private partnership, why don't they do the same with the operations of the existing airport?

As for the cargo problem mentioned earlier -- and one of the worst areas of graft and ineptitude -- there is at least an available growth projection. According to CAAB, 150,000 tonnes of airfreight were transported through Shahjalal Airport in 2009, with 20% annual growth. There should be no doubt, if one reads the papers, that the responsible body, Biman, has an abysmal cargo-handling record, while current facilities at Shahjalal are terribly inadequate.

It absolutely should be a serious concern for the government when major export industries are so poorly

served. But previous plans to build a proper cargo village at Shahjalal were never realised at great cost to our businesses. This is a real issue that should be focused and expanded on.

While an expansion of airport facilities is clearly necessary, for all sorts of reasons, building a "state-of-the-art" airport 60 miles from the capital is not necessarily the answer.

Let's be realistic here, Suvarnabhumi is among the top 10 busiest airports of the world, according to international airport authorities. So what earthly reason could there be for us to be looking to it as our model? As a regional comparison, none of India's airports even make the top 30.

Imagining that Bangladesh needs to spend Tk50,000 crore on a new airport, with a proposed capacity 10 times the current requirement, could be a case of over-reaching, to say the least.

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