

BNP to join parliament?

It should not be conditional

At least the BNP has expressed its intention of joining the parliament, and it is to be welcomed as far as it goes. What must surely be disappointing to all, particularly its supporters, is its attaching conditions for attending the House.

Regrettably, the list of BNP conditions and demands has accreted over time. This time they would join the parliament only if Mr. S.Q. Choudhury, who is facing several charges of crimes against humanity under the War Crimes Act, and is now incarcerated, is allowed to attend the parliament.

We thought that good sense has prevailed in the BNP as the expression of willingness to join parliament indicated, particularly in the backdrop of a positive motivation derived from a good showing in the polls. But all that has been spoiled by setting qualifiers to their joining.

The Speaker has a valid point when he says that unless the BNP puts up their demand in the House for allowing Mr. Choudhury to attend the parliament session, he will not be in a position to take up the matter with the government. We feel that the argument is unavailable if the BNP wants the intervention of the Speaker.

Indeed, there are instances of members of the parliament attending the sessions from jail. It is not a unique situation, but the matter can only be addressed if the BNP implored the Speaker from within the House and not make it a sole condition for attending parliament. Setting conditions for fulfilling their political obligation as representatives of the voters, smacks of an inherently negative outlook. It's time to shed it. For, can one be faulted for seeing this as playing politics with what is a given obligation for them to join parliament?

BNP's position is as untenable as it is ludicrous. Clearly it does not feel like living up to the renewed faith that the voters in the local elections have reposed on the party.

Amendment of Forest Act

Address indigenous people's concerns

THE National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has expressed apprehension over the issue of the protection of the rights of indigenous communities under the Forest Act, 1927, currently being amended. Previously, indigenous groups voiced their concern over the fact that, being direct stakeholders of the process, neither they nor their leaders in the CHT Regional Council or Hill Districts Council have been consulted with regard to the proposed amendments. This directly contradicts the principle of "free, prior and informed consent" of indigenous peoples regarding potential development projects or other activities carried out on their lands, under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The indigenous people are, in fact, custodians of the forests, having inherited age-old knowledge about caring for the forests from their ancestors. However, they have been treated with neglect at best and, at the extreme, been subjected to violence when protesting the grabbing and destruction of their land. The Modhupur protests are a stark reminder of how far both sides -- the authorities and the indigenous groups -- are prepared to go.

The authorities, including the Forest Department, have often faced allegations of destroying the land with plantations such as eucalyptus monoculture and tobacco cultivation and the proposed establishment of eco-parks, under the pretext of protecting the forest and environment. The authorities must understand that no plantation, reserve forest or eco-park is worth the social, cultural and environmental cost of uprooting the indigenous people from their land and destroying their homes of generations. We urge the government -- under whom the CHT Accord of 1997 was signed to ensure and protect the rights of our indigenous people -- to keep this in mind and to include them in the decision-making process that will affect their survival.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- 1884

The first volume (A to Ant) of the Oxford English Dictionary is published.
- 1946

Trygve Lie of Norway is picked to be the first United Nations Secretary General.
- 1979

Exiled Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran. Religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini makes a triumphant return to Iran after 14 years in exile, greeting over 5 million supporters.
- 1991

Cold War ends. With the Berlin Wall down, free elections ousted Communist regimes in Eastern Europe where the Soviet Union itself dissolved into its component republics thus lifting the Iron Curtain.
- BIRTHS

1930

Shahabuddin Ahmed, President of Bangladesh. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was head of the first Caretaker Government formed after a popular uprising forced President Hossain Mohammad Ershad to hand over power in 1991.
- 1931

Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin came to power with 57% of the vote, making him the first popularly elected president of the Russian Federation.

We want them punished

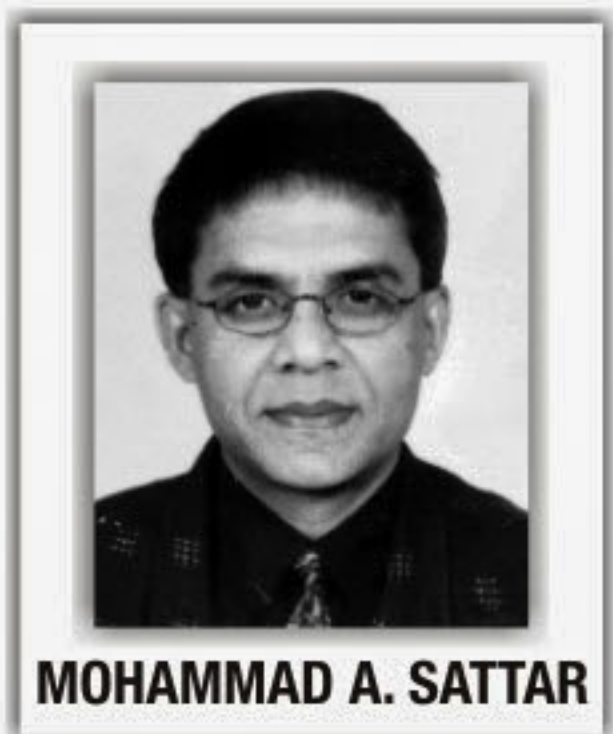
ENIG MATTERS

We are typically good at delaying things. We shoot our heads off with senseless debates only after things have happened. We act only when we are pushed by circumstances. The latest instance is the stock market debacle. Subsequent events pushed us with a great deal of force until we were compelled to form a 3-member probe committee.

We have had scores of big events of national and global import, demanding timely attention from the highest authorities of the government, but appropriate attention in due time was not paid. Some cases demanded investigation, but the investigation or probing caused us more concern and frustration. The outcome and the recommendations of these bodies or teams could seldom see the light of the day. Seldom could we see the guilty taken to task. There's always reports and apprehension of letting the culprit off the hook. Usual lazy-boy approach and cunning tactic of dillydallying with evidences by people sans name made things easy for the perpetrators.

The stock market crash is a national tragedy that maimed millions financially. It's more or less a replay of 1996 scam. Alas! Till date we have not heard anything about the fate of investigation carried out then. How do you explain the callous oversight by the government and all others involved in it? How could we forget all our losses and get on with life and fall into another trap set up by members of same or similar consortium?

A 3-member probe committee to find out the reasons of stock market crash has been formed, but not before the catastrophe. This is another instance of foot-dragging. Authorities took time to realise that the situation does need enquiry. The SEC and all related, looked the other way while the investors' fortune was played with. With each passing day, the situation turned worse until it blew. No one cared when the market was heating up. It is hard to believe that no one felt the heat. The winter



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chill may have made the heat a pleasant comfort for them as they counted the millions that filled their coffers.

I would like to see the committee not forget its main task of finding the reason and identifying the culprits. Its purpose should not lose way in the time frame that it has been provided with. The committee should not create a drama for television to play around with. I fear the frequency of reports on the broadcasting media on the issue.

Another fear is, the probe commit-

tee and the firms' involved in trading may not be comfortable with each other. The committee and the government should not forget that the public doesn't want to see political leaders intervening to influence the probe and take it their way.

Speculations are making the rounds. The timing of the probe period is thought to be too long. Anything can happen in this time, the probe might not even see the light of the day or to make it look credible it might sum up its conclusion rather quickly. The finance minister should take personal note of things and see that public and national interest is protected and any attempt to meddle with the query by way of suppression of facts and figures ought to be thwarted.



IMAGEZOO

Many would still expect that with a competent person as head of the probe team the entire process will not be a routine affair this time round. It happened in the past many a time. We hope the members will hold together and brave the storm however strong it may be. Let's hope that they don't abandon the chase out of fear or favour.

The perpetrators are strong in their ranks. Their blueprint of manipulation is done with precision, they have the invisible souls around to tamper with anything they like and of course they have the blessings of the godfathers. They have active networking. They work 24/7. Only one thing that bogs them down -- they work against the people, and mind you, people are

a huge majority. Each time a new committee is formed with an agenda, it is blessed with new opportunity to create good instances and also instill hope of the victims to see their grievances addressed.

We haven't seen concrete report of any queries, or implementation of the recommendations made by the committees thus far. If we find an exception, it will be wonders! We live with hope, some day, something will change. Let's hope the daylight robbers will not escape unscathed and emerge again at an opportune moment as quasi-financial entrepreneurs.

We don't want a report that will eventually be extruded. We want a clear picture and of course the names of the gangsters. We want the law

allowed to run its full course. We want them to be in the dock without hoods on their faces. We don't need a show trial, we've had enough. We want admission of guilt from all in the chain.

May be this is not our way; but we can always mend our ways. There are already important lessons to be learned about our recent stock market and banking history and the way financial sector has been treated. The thing is that we don't have to wait for the report to understand what happened; we want clear identification of the culprits. And in future, we want to see timely action by SEC to prevent further deception.

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Manifesto for change in Egypt

Each day it gets harder to work with Mubarak's government, even for a transition, and for many of the people you talk to in Egypt, that is no longer an option. They think he has been there 30 years, he is 83 years old, and it is time for a change. For them, the only option is a new beginning.



sion, and we do not hear anything from you, the Americans, or for that matter from the Europeans.

So when you say the Egyptian government is looking for ways to respond to the needs of the Egyptian people, I feel like saying: "Well, it's too late!" This isn't even good realpolitik. We have seen what happened in Tunisia, and before that in Iran. That should teach people there is no stability except when you have government freely chosen by its own people.

Of course, you in the West have been sold the idea that the only options in the Arab world are between authoritarian regimes and Islamic jihadists. That's obviously bogus. If we are talking about Egypt, there is a whole rainbow variety of people who are secular, liberal, market-oriented, and if you give them a chance they will organise themselves to elect a government that is modern and moderate. They want desperately to catch up with the rest of the world.

Instead of equating political Islam with al Qaeda all the time, take a closer look. Historically, Islam was hijacked about 20 or 30 years after the Prophet, and interpreted in such a way that the ruler has absolute power and is accountable only to God. That,

of course, was a very convenient interpretation for whoever was the ruler.

Only a few weeks ago, the leader of a group of ultra-conservative Muslims in Egypt issued a fatwa (a religious edict) calling for me to "repent" for inciting public opposition to President Hosni Mubarak, and declare that the ruler has a right to kill me if I do not desist. This sort of thing moves us towards the dark ages. But did we hear a single word of protest or denunciation from the Egyptian government? No.

Despite all of this, I have hoped to find a way toward change through peaceful means. In a country like Egypt, it's not easy to get people to put down their names and government ID numbers on a document calling for fundamental democratic reforms, yet a million people have done just that. The regime, like the monkey that sees nothing and hears nothing, simply ignored us.

As a result, the young people of Egypt have lost patience, and what you've seen in the streets these last few days has all been organised by them. I have been out of Egypt because that is the only way I can be heard. I have been totally cut off from

the local media when I am there. But I am going back to Cairo, and back onto the streets because, really, there is no choice. You go out there with this massive number of people, and you hope things will not turn ugly, but so far, the regime does not seem to have gotten that message.

Each day it gets harder to work with Mubarak's government, even for a transition, and for many of the people you talk to in Egypt, that is no longer an option. They think he has been there 30 years, he is 83 years old, and it is time for a change. For them, the only option is a new beginning.

How long this can go on, I don't know. In Egypt, as in Tunisia, there are other forces than just the president and the people. The army has been quite neutral so far, and I would expect it to remain that way. The soldiers and officers are part of the Egyptian people. They know the frustrations. They want to protect the nation.

But this week the Egyptian people broke the barrier of fear, and once that is broken, there is no stopping them.

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