

Un-parliamentary exchanges

KAMAL UDDIN AHMED

UNDESIRABLE erosion of parliamentary practice, political culture and democratic values are being witnessed in the proceedings of the Bangladesh Parliament. Thus, Quamrul Alam and Julian Tei (2010) noted that "the nature of parliamentary practice has caused a serious erosion of formal accountability mechanisms affecting political governance" in Bangladesh. Muhammad Zamir, a former secretary and ambassador also highlighted the issue of the erosion of parliamentary practice in his paper "Responsibilities of majority rule" (The Daily Star 2004). Others, too, cite evidence of ineffectiveness of the parliamentary accountability practice as the conventions and rules of procedure have not been properly followed in the meetings (Institute of Governance Studies 2009). Besides quorum crisis, disgracefully, the Parliament has increasingly heard some "vulgar" and "indecent" words used by MPs during its February 2010 and March 2011 sessions. Distinguished political scientists, such as, Almond, Verba, Lipset, and Dahl have argued that political culture, i.e. political values of toleration, moderation and accommodation, is essential for the development of democracy (Almond and Verba 1963, Dahl 1966, Lipset 1960). However, in recent years, some parliamentarians used "indecent" and "aggressive" words against each

other, ignoring the speaker's repeated requests. Upset by the recurring use of offensive words, Speaker Hamid was constrained to state: "Every time they use un-parliamentary words, I expunge those. But it looks indecent to frequently expunge (words). As if it is my only duty (The Daily Star, News One, and Zeenews, March 21)." In addition, he cautioned that "if anyone uses un-parliamentary or aggressive words, his or her microphone would be switched off." Even after the speaker's warning, the opposition chief whip Zainul Abidin Faruque alleged that un-parliamentary words were frequently used in the Parliament. Speaker Hamid said: "I have already requested the lawmakers not to use un-parliamentary language. No one can call anyone a killer unless it is proved by the Court." Of the total 293 MPs elected from 299 seats in the 9th Parliament of 2008, 163 (56%) are fresh to the Parliament and represent the newly emerged dominant big-business and trading class (Majumdar: 2009). Alam and Tei held: "The composition of the Bangladesh Parliament and the number of new MPs elected in the 9th Parliament have changed the demography of the political elites, further strengthening the power of the nexus dominated by the new rich who accumulated wealth using the state as an instrument of wealth creation." Despite the fact that the over-

whelming majority of the MPs (about 82%) are educated, they have repeatedly used indecent and abusive language in the parliamentary sessions. As a result, debates and discussions in the Parliament often degenerated into a fracas. The civil society expects substantive debate, courteous approach, and politeness from both the treasury bench and the opposition MPs.

MPs need to develop the art of dialogue, legislative adroitness and tolerant outlook to promote and maintain democracy. The quality of the political discourse needs to be further improved to foster democratic culture and governance.

The speaker is supposedly the neutral office holder in a parliament, who supervises rather than participates in the proceedings. The speaker ensures that proceedings are run in an orderly manner and according to the provisions of the Constitution. He is invested with

the authority to expunge phrases which, in his/her judgment, are defamatory or indecent or un-parliamentary. The traditional procedure is that the speaker insists that the abusive words and phrases be withdrawn by the concerned MP, failing which he/she is asked for apology or is temporarily dismissed from the assembly. The MPs represent their constitu-

tion in proceedings. McGee's *Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand* states that speakers regularly remind members that they share accountability to decorum so that the House can function in a manner that does not tarnish its image. Parliamentary practice involves showing mutual respect, moderation, compassion, care, and consideration. The use of abusive words or phrases by the members of the parliament may be attributed to the inherent hostility between the two largest political parties of the country (BNP and the AL). These not only destroy the dignity of the parliament but also impede smooth running of the parliament and good governance. The civil society leaders desire a fundamental change in the existing political culture. MPs need to develop the art of dialogue, legislative adroitness and tolerant outlook to promote and maintain democracy. The quality of the political discourse needs to be further improved to foster democratic culture and governance. The question is: when and how soon our will honourable members of Parliament be tolerant, mutually respectful and prudent enough to bring qualitative changes in the proceedings of the parliament and play a decisive role in strengthening democracy?

The members of the parliament should uphold the decorum and standards of the parliament. They may well keep in mind that politeness and courtesy cost nothing but gain everything. Use of un-parliamentary language not only reflects on themselves but also diminishes their effective participa-



AMJADUL HUQ/DRIK NEWS

Free fall

JAMAL KHAN

I thought I was watching Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, savouring some quick-cutting surreal sequences and delectable montages. But it was not so, as harsh and banal organisational reality rudely kicked in. The other day, someone who knew his way around, and I had to go a public sector agency where I needed something done in order to meet certain deadlines. Located in a densely populated business district of the capital with no car park and unlawfully-occupied sidewalks, the first sight was dismayingly jolting and jarring. With the access road choking with scores of cars and drivers, there were literally hundreds of people customers, visitors, security operatives, personnel, brokers, idlers, and curiosity-seekers. Uncertain, and somewhat dubious, about

being curtly told we were at the wrong section of the office and that we were barking up the wrong tree. We walked down a grimy and dimly-lit corridor, took an overcrowded elevator, walked past crowded hallways and numerous pensive customers, and got into an adjacent office-block. Something unexpected, at least for me, was awaiting us. On approaching a working area, we confronted three or four waiting lines with roughly 10 restless people in each queue, more people were sitting pensively and passively in a waiting area, two or three windows were open, and an oversized locked/chained door stared every visitor in the face menacingly. Looking like a Mafioso, my resourceful contact spoke sotto voce to an employee behind a small window something quite attractive, or perhaps lucrative, I thought and

we quickly filled the forms we were handed and rushed to yet another building housing a bank and accepting fees for any or all anticipated services. Needless to mention, tired-looking customers in several lines were vying with each other, customer mood was getting ugly by the minute, some were already angry, fidgety and churlish, some were seen openly jockeying for places inside a queue and jumping the lines, some milled around the lines but did not join the queues and, instead, vented frustration and hurled invectives at painfully slow, time-wasting and energy-sapping service windows behind which I could see some harassed-looking faces. Somebody at this time told my contact that it was the wrong place for us this happened for the second time and again there was no directional sign and no supervisor/employee was seen monitoring or helping waiting customers. We walked briskly, and somewhat anxiously, to the designated section, paid the required fee, got a receipt, moved to another section and got some checking and paperwork done, and returned to the somber-looking official, hopefully, for the final okay.

My contact, somewhat routinely, walked in, while I kind of lost nerve and waited with bated breath outside on the corridor as though I had just become an orphan. When, however, my contact came out a few seconds later with a smiling face, I felt somewhat relieved with my pent-up tension leaving me steadily.

We left the labyrinthine office-block where workplace layout was confining as well as inadequate, workflow was repeatedly interfered with, work processes were not put in place sequentially. Interpersonal relations were frayed, customer service and concern was rudely absent, higher-level personnel were remote, unsmiling and reticent, front-line employees looked harassed, preoccupied and bored.

Waiting lines were confusing and chaotic, service facilities were woefully few and insufficient, queue discipline was poor. Waiting time and waiting rate were long and low, waiting lines were unduly lengthy and wasteful in terms of time, cost and performance. Process simplification was not initiated, work design was not in evidence, operating procedures were not standardised, and in-situ results-oriented supervisory management was not instituted.

I looked back with a long and deep sigh at the workplace while my contact nonchalantly moved into the waiting car and felt sorry for myself and the people reduced to hustling and jostling there for one reason or the other, where, apparently, nobody heard of or bothered about customer/taxpayer right, customer service, organisation/management development, management services improvement, and supervisory management. We live, indeed, in an interesting time.

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Political will for strong democracy

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THE people of Bangladesh aspired for true democracy. They were against dictatorship and were always ready to fight for freedom of thought and secularism. After the assassination of Bangabandhu the military rulers knocked out the words "secularism and freedom of religion" from the constitution to accommodate anti-democratic principles and to please the fundamentalists.

Against various odds and obstacles, the AL has been able to win absolute victory in the last national election. It has come up with ambitious dreams to change the face of Bangladesh. Progress toward attaining the goals could, perhaps, have been smoother had there been cooperation from the opposition parties.

As in the past, the BNP started boycotting the parliamentary sessions on flimsy issues like allotment of greater number of front seats for them in the parliament. Such a demand from a major political party appears to be undesirable. In fact, such behaviour unnecessarily generates suspicion among the parties in power that the opposition is determined to bring down the incumbent government.

BNP always preaches about love for democracy, upholding of democratic principles and promotion of multi-party system. One fails to understand as to why such a party should encourage actions detrimental to establishing democracy.

In a parliamentary system of democracy it is the parliament where we expect to see the battle of wits and gift of the gab between the parties in position and in the opposition. We fail to understand as to why there should be hartal on issues like vacating the residence of chairperson of BNP. Is it good for the nation or the concerned party to make such matters national issues? Can we not abjure such practice for the sake of strengthening democracy in Bangladesh?

In the last parliamentary session BNP highlighted the following issues: price hike of essentials, deterioration of law and order, unsatisfactory energy supply situation share market crash, polarisation of administration, control over the media, killing of Bangladeshis by BSE, removal of Professor Yunus and mid-term election.

The government appears to be fully aware of the issues cited by the BNP. If the opposition chooses to go for rallies and hartals it will provoke confrontational politics. It may be pointed out in this regard that BNP extended open support to the hostile actions during the recent hartal of JMB against the National

Development of Women Policy. How could a moderate democratic party like BNP do it?

In criticising the government we have to take into account the following global events:

- Continuation of global economic melt-down;
- Middle East crisis;
- Tsunami, earthquakes, and their aftermath in Japan.

One good thing in our political scenario

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is that major parties want to establish democracy on firm footing. They have not forgotten their stunning success in forcing the military dictators to step down.

The media have a role in bringing major political parties closer. Democracy without free media cannot survive. If there is any clash between the government and the media the government wins. In the end, however, it is the government which is the loser.

Frankly speaking, polarisation in the administration started after independence through division among government servants into various groups. Such division might have caused serious damage to bureaucratic efficiency. In fact, the capability of administration can never improve without adequate reform. Without a capable administration good governance is not possible.

In conclusion we may say that democracy has a future in Bangladesh though we may have to pass through a long way. What is important is faith and confidence in our people. We need not hide our shortcomings, errors and omissions from the public. With public cooperation we may certainly achieve our ultimate goal -- establishing democratic order and governance.

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MAX DERETA

what was going on in the several office-blocks in front of us and seeing a whole lot of people in all kinds of behavioural modes all around us, my friend and I decided to take an elevator to the third level of a building. Customers, clients, men and women were moving around frantically, going up and coming down the elevators, and the hallways were quickly being packed with employees, visitors and contacts. Totally absent were the directional signs along the hallways and in the elevator points, failing to tell customers and visitors where to go and which personnel to seek and transact business with.

Unfazed and undeterred, we walked down a hallway and my contact gently knocked on an official's office-door, somehow presuming that the official would or might approve of the pending paperwork. On making a quick entry and witnessing some ten or twelve nervous-looking people with high expectations, we made a hasty retreat only after

in a few dazzling seconds the forbidding door magically opened, leading to an inner office in yet another inner sanctum in which a somber-looking official was looking up and down while going through some paperwork. Fortunately, this time around, we were given a clear and specific directive and right away headed for a section of the workplace where we were handed some forms.

Significantly enough for our purpose, an employee in one of the inner offices took pity on us and told us to make several copies of the documents we were carrying. That did not pose any problem although when we called the agency earlier for necessary information, we were not told about having or making multiple copies as part of the documentation and approval process until we found that there were no photocopiers inside the workplace and had to go to an outside outfit for photocopying. That unexpected irritant out of the way,