

The opposition must join parliament

There is so much at stake for the nation

SUNDAY'S opening sitting of the New Year session of parliament was the usual, unfortunate picture of boycott and blame.

The president, while calling upon the opposition to join proceedings, criticised it for failing to discharge its constitutional and democratic obligation to the people by boycotting parliament. Of course the president as head of state is the guardian of the nation and has the right to do this. But, even given the fact that the speech was vetted by the Cabinet, we expected a more even-handed approach from him, who, it seems to us, did not quite use his influence and good offices to play the role of a conscience keeper as he could have.

That being said, the practice of boycott has indeed become a serious, existential threat to our democracy. Recent reports have found that the ruling Awami League, when in opposition, was absent from parliamentary proceedings for 223 days over five years and that the current opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, were absent for 283 days over the last four years. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself attended the House for 45 days in the last parliament as head of opposition, while Begum Khaleda Zia, currently in the same capacity, was present on eight days.

The culture of boycott has become so ingrained that, instead of raising constructive discussion and debate in the House, our politicians prefer to take to the streets in protest and violence. But a few lines of protest, no matter how fiery, are barely heard when made on the streets, let alone resolved, whereas in parliament, they are presented not only to the people's representatives but to the people themselves through the media. As the situation now stands, however, burning issues such as that of the caretaker government, are not being properly addressed. This being an election year, without the exchange of political views, how can we expect a participatory election? Whatever the grievances of the opposition, they must be brought to the House of the people, which is the proper forum for voicing them and having them addressed.

The government has repeatedly called upon the opposition to join parliament. If this is to happen, however -- and we believe that it must -- the opposition must be given decent space and voice. Only through dialogue can problems be solved and progress made in a true democracy.

Journalists at risk

Government should ensure their safety

WHAT one often tends to overlook is the fact that if journalists are under threat it is journalism that is under threat too. We thank the Information Minister for at least acknowledging the fact that journalists in Bangladesh are putting their life on the line in their line of duty. We also thank him for recognizing the truth that it is for the government to ensure that all impediments, including unnecessary harassment, not to speak of the threat to their life, are removed in order that they can work freely.

In this regard the recently published report of the South Asia Media Commission is worth the note, which, with regards to Bangladesh situation, blames the "harsh reprisals by political parties" on reporters whose reports are critical of the political parties or the government. Apart from the death of three journalists in 2012, including a journalist couple, a total of 137 journalists were also injured in 69 incidents of attacks in Bangladesh, according to the report

We accept the reality that our job is inherently risky, but in Bangladesh journalists have to face threats from various directions. There is the political pressure at every level including encumbrances faced from government agencies in the performance of journalistic duties. And this phenomenon is not regime-specific. This has been the prevailing situation regardless of whether there was autocratic or democratic rule. And if one were to take a stock of the list of journalists killed, one would find that the cause of their fate has been their professional commitment to reveal the wrongdoers and their wrongdoings.

Not only should the government ensure that all impediments facing the journalists in Bangladesh were removed, the mystery of the deaths of those killed must

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

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January 29

1918

Ukrainian-Soviet War: An armed uprising organized by the Bolsheviks in anticipation of the encroaching Red Army begins at the Kiev Arsenal, which will be put down six days later.

1989

Hungary establishes diplomatic relations with South Korea, making it the first Eastern Bloc nation to do so

1991

Gulf War: The Battle of Khafji, the first major ground engagement of the war, as well as its deadliest, begins.

1996

President Jacques Chirac announces a "definitive end" to French nuclear weapons testing.

What to do with Iran?



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE US president faces a tough decision on Iran. Brinkmanship has obviously failed to put an end to the nuclear weapons programme. Embargoes imposed by the UN have achieved little in making a dent on the leadership. Where coercion has obviously failed as a foreign policy tool, where does Washington go from here? Decision time for Barack Obama has arrived.

While Israel has always opted for military action, the rationale for such a strike has been perceived to be fraught with too many unknown variables by the US. Domestic support for yet another overseas adventure is slim at best. That coupled with the possible fallout from a direct attack on Iran could very well spark a regional war embroiling other not-so-stable countries like Lebanon. Costs associated with a long-drawn conflict will run literally into hundreds of billions of dollar for the US treasury annually, money that is simply not there.

Yet, Washington cannot sit by and allow Iran time to develop a nuclear capability, a weapons programme that will almost certainly be aimed at the State of Israel. Diplomacy as a whole has taken a backseat as the Iran crisis has developed these last few years. Indeed, as Fareed Zakaria stated in his column in *TIME* magazine recently "while the sticks have been handled shrewdly, the carrots have not. The US has been unable to define for itself or for the world what would be an acceptable deal and, most important, what it is willing to do if Tehran agrees to such a deal. Would sanctions be lifted? Which ones? Would the US stop its efforts to overthrow the regime?"



Engaging Iran in an armed conflict is not the solution; rather it will set the stage for a wider conflict whose outcome cannot be predicted. Overcoming deep-rooted suspicions on both sides of the negotiating table will take a lot of work by US policymakers. But that negotiation must begin now.

Would it be willing to discuss normalisation of relations with Iran?" Valid question all.

But then, making credible diplomatic overtures have their respective problems. Backing away from a bellicose tone to one of "carrot and stick" policy could be misinterpreted by Iranians as a softening of American position. Yet, a more balanced approach is now called for given that sanctions have not worked and outright military action is an extremely high risk option. Given the current scenario, i.e. Iranian legal export of oil facing serious constriction, estimates vary precisely how long the Iranian leadership can sustain the economy on current foreign exchange reserves. Even if this is a year down the line, and with all avenues cut off for an

embattled regime, there is nothing to stop the Iranian government to allocate all available resources to develop at least one bomb. That is not a conducive scenario for either the West or Israel.

One possible solution to stop Iran from taking that drastic step has been discussed by Columbia University Scholar Robert Jervis. He states in his article (*Getting to Yes with Iran. The challenges to Coercive Diplomacy*): "In the most likely deal, Iran would agree to stop designing warheads and to refrain from enriching uranium above the 20% level. It would retain only limited stockpiles or uranium enriched to 5-20%, accept limits on the capacities of its enrichment facilities, allow robust inspections of its nuclear facilities, and agree to refrain

from building facilities that the United States could not destroy. (Such a deal would permit the heavily fortified underground Fordow enrichment plant to remain open, since it is vulnerable to a US strike -- something that would displease the Israelis, whose own capabilities to overcome Fordow's defences). In return, the United States would accept a limited Iranian enrichment programme, promise not to overthrow the regime (and maybe not to undermine it), and suspend sanctions that were imposed specifically in response to the nuclear programme." Such a deal could pave the possibility of normalisation of relations between Iran and the estranged West over the mid to long-term. But that step has to be taken, primarily by the US. For only the US can overcome Israel's obsession with an Iran having nuclear-enrichment capability.

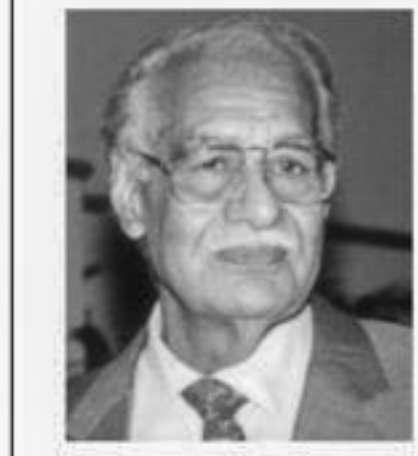
The US must bring the Europeans into the fold to convince Israel that peace, and only a peaceful solution is the way forward. Engaging Iran in an armed conflict is not the solution; rather it will set the stage for a wider conflict whose outcome cannot be predicted. Overcoming deep-rooted suspicions on both sides of the negotiating table will take a lot of work by US policymakers. But that negotiation must begin now. And we are talking about serious negotiations here. The offer for truly credible negotiations and the first tentative steps will have to come from the Americans. Taking up the offer for genuine talks with the "great Satan" carries a lot of risk for the Iranian leadership. It may spark an internal struggle between hardliners and reformists. But it is a risk worth taking. No one gains from a conflict that will upset the relative peace Mid-East has enjoyed since the end of the second Iraq invasion.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Shinde spoils Rahul's launch



KULDEEP NAYAR

JANUARY 30 is the day when Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead by a Hindu fanatic for partition of India. Nathu Ram Godse who killed him remained unrepentant and said in his defence in the Punjab High Court, where the case was heard: "Gandhi was a hypocrite. Even after the massacre of the Hindus by the Muslims, he was happy. The more the massacres of Hindus, the taller (he raised) his flag of secularism."

India paid a heavy price to uphold the values of pluralism. Yet a similar kind of incipient group has crept up, with the same ideas of eliminating those who are of different religion or who have stuck to the ideal of secularism. This group is attacking India's polity relentlessly and adding to its followers in the name of religion.

Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde has said that "reports have come during the National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe that BJP and RSS conduct terror training camps to spread terrorism." He further said: "Bombs were planted in Samjhauta Express, Mecca Masjid and also a blast was carried out in Malegaon. We will have to think about it seriously..."

The statement may be a bit sensational and I wish Shinde had not made it at this time when there is a fallout in India on what is happening at the border. And the facts he used at the Congress conclave at Jaipur raise doubts about his intent. He looked as if he was out to defame the BJP and the RSS. I have no quarrel with him because both bodies are out of step with the principles of secularism we pursue.

What Shinde should have done is to produce evidence on which he

has based his disclosures. A white paper before the next session of parliament in February is an appropriate measure. At a time when Islamist terrorism has already become a nightmare for the authorities, Hindu terrorism can be a greater threat because it will contaminate the majority community. Communalism by the minority community can be tackled. But when it embraces the majority community, it can become fascism.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has alleged again at the same conclave that Hindu nationalist terrorism is the answer to the Muslim one that comes reportedly from Pakistan. This may be correct but it does not help the situation developing in the country.

A Muslim intellectual from

Shinde's disclosures have lessened the sheen of Rahul Gandhi's anointment as number two in the Congress. But this has not mattered with the party men who have suddenly begun calling Rahul, not Mr. but Ji, the nomenclature the party uses for respect and acceptability.

Pakistan has emailed his comment: "While there is no denial that there is a Pakistani connection in some of the terrorist attacks in India, such as November 26, there should be also no doubt about the equally true fact that Indian Muslims themselves have many reasons to fight back on the Indian state that is treating them unfairly for now more than 60 years in India, just keeping in view the Babri masjid attack and murder of Muslims in Gujarat."

He further says: "In an increasingly violent world where the West is waging war for colonisation of natural resources and political influence everywhere one should not be surprised to find out that violence creates new violence. Every action has a reaction as we have seen on French misadventure in Mali and Algiers."

The response of the BJP is understandably hostile. It has demanded an apology from the prime minister and has threatened a *bandh* throughout the country. Yet after readmitting Kalyan Singh, who was chief minister when the Babri masjid was demolished to the last brick, the BJP's anger has lost sting. It should be defensive in its approach.

Nonetheless, Shinde's disclosures have lessened the sheen of Rahul Gandhi's anointment as number two in the Congress. But this has not mattered with the party men who have suddenly begun calling Rahul, not Mr. but Ji, the nomenclature the party uses for respect and acceptability.

Elevation of Rahul from the position of secretary-general to that of

vice-president of the party does not declare that he is its nominee for the prime ministership in the 2014 general elections. He says he will build up the party. It looks rather odd that his mother, Sonia Gandhi, the president, and he the vice-president should be together building the party. But then the Congress, gripped by dynastic politics, cannot help. It has to carry out Sonia Gandhi's wishes, even though Manmohan Singh has lost importance and has become a lameduck prime minister.

True, Rahul made a good, emotional speech at Jaipur. But what did it say, even if it is assumed that he wrote it himself? The observations like overhauling the system or fighting against corruption are empty words. How can he be taken seriously when he knows that his

brother-in-law Robert Vadra has dishonestly acquired lands in Haryana?

People in India and abroad want to know Rahul's views on the burning problems facing the country, not a goody-goody speech. He has never uttered a word on the international scene. Ordinarily, it may not be necessary to comment on such subjects. But since he is a candidate for prime ministership he has to allow a peep into his mind on these topics.

My hunch is that Rahul may not be the Congress candidate for the prime ministerial position in the next election. Sonia Gandhi, who reportedly wept on his elevation fearing that power was like poison, may carry on with Manmohan Singh as long as he lasts, if the Congress heads the post-election government. Rahul may step in after Manmohan Singh.

Some other person may also be a possibility. Already Finance Minister P. Chidambaram has engaged a tutor to learn Hindi. Sonia Gandhi is herself giving prominence to Parliamentary Minister Kamal Nath and has nominated him to lead the delegation at Davos. Commerce Minister Anand Sharma is only a delegate, although in the past the commerce minister has headed such delegations.

The 2014 election may turn out to be a contest between secular and non-secular forces. However, the BJP will think twice before nominating Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi. One, he will polarise the country and, two, the BJP will find it difficult to organise allies if he is projected as prime minister. The party should recall how the Vajpay's first government had to resign after 13 days in office because no other party was willing to join hands with it. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

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The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.