

# Is a discussion in parliament possible?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina and her colleagues in the cabinet and ruling Awami League have been urging the main opposition BNP to place, in parliament, the proposals over the mode of next election time interim government for discussions to resolve the political crisis. Do the premier and ruling AL really mean what they are saying?

The prospect looks bleak. BNP-led opposition MPs have submitted in the parliament 835 proposals in over the past four years for holding discussion on many nationally important issues. But none of their proposals were accepted and no discussions were held.

The prevailing situation also runs counter to the ruling AL's party manifesto and electoral pledges. In its electoral pledges made before the December 29, 2008, parliamentary elections, the AL promised to make the parliament centre for all political activities. Its party manifesto amended in July 2009 stated that discussion on nationally important issues in parliament will be made mandatory.

But the ruling AL has taken the opposite steps over the past four years.

The current parliament discussed only 13 motions so far. Of them, three motions were for congratulating Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for "her success [in] obtain[ing] two awards and an honorary doctorate degree" and the remaining one was to thank her for delivering a speech in the UN General Assembly in Bengali.

The House spent over six hours in total in discussion and accepted the four motions, as per the records available in the parliament secretariat.

In addition to congratulating PM Hasina, the Parliament also spent over two and half hours discussing one of the 13 motions to condemn Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia for her remarks on the trial of war criminals.

Among the remaining motions -- two were for reinstatement of Bangladesh Parliament's membership of Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), one was for requesting UN to recognise Bangla as its official language, and one was for giving thanks for all concerned for execution of the

Bangabandhu murder case verdict.

The House discussed and accepted two motions one for immediately setting up nuclear power plants in Bangladesh to meet the growing demands of power and the other for supporting the UN's nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

It discussed and accepted a motion on education policy and another one for observing the International Day of Democracy through holding a discussion in the parliament every year.

The House however discussed no motions on important issues like stock market crash, price hike of essentials, law and order situation, move to allow transit to India, unrest in educational institutions, proposed Tipaimukh dam, extra-judicial killing, shortage of power and gas, tender manipulation and other important issues of public interest.

Opposition MPs in their proposals submitted to the parliament secretariat demanding for holding discussions on different important issues in the House.

The speaker accepted none of their notices for discussion in the House as the treasury bench did not agree to do so.

Unfortunately the current Jatiya Sangsad performed poorly in comparison to the previous parliaments -- fifth, seventh and 8th regarding to the holding of discussion on important issues in the House.

And the way the House was run mocked at the concept of modern democracy where various grievances, aspirations and needs of the people are discussed in the House and necessary legislations are enacted in this regard.

Then why is the premier and why are her party men urging BNP to place proposals in the parliament?

Let's revisit the past records for the answer.

When the AL under Sheikh Hasina was agitating on the streets demanding an introduction of the caretaker government system in

between 1994-1995, then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on several times had urged Hasina-led opposition MPs to return to the parliament to discuss and resolve the political crisis.

And again when AL-led opposition parties were agitating for reforms in the caretaker system and electoral laws between 2005 and 2006, the then PM Khaleda and her other colleagues had again urged the opposition to return to parliament and place the reform proposals.

AL did not return to parliament in 1994. But it responded to the government's call and joined the parliament session on February 12, 2006 after remaining absent for 17 months in a row and placed a set of proposals for electoral reform.

But the political crisis over electoral reforms was not resolved as the government did not show sincerity. Rather, it became more volatile towards the end of 2006.

Finally, amid a grave political situation, the president declared the state of emergency on January 11, 2007.

Now, PM Hasina seems to have opted for the political weapons earlier used by Khaleda against her and urging the BNP to return to the House and place proposal on the mode of an election time government for discussion.

The BNP knows it very well this strategy the AL is applying. So it will not place any such proposal. And it is almost certain that the growing political crisis will not be resolved through discussion in parliament.

In fact all the successive Parliaments have been unable to resolve the political stand-off over the last two decades due to the negative mindset of the party in power to reject discussion on any matter in the House. This had always led the opposition parties to take to the streets.

And the culture is that the opposition parties feel comfort in the streets, instead of staying in the parliament.

Therefore it can certainly be concluded that the parliamentary democracy only exists in paper, not in practice in Bangladesh.

# The curious case of Bangladesh button

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

I promise myself that I will never complain about traffic. Driving in broad daylight with no traffic is much scarier. It's a nationwide *hartal*.

I manage to carpool to Dhaka Airport in an ambulance. You know it's a *hartal* when you see a harem of ambulances parked in front of the airport.

As I board the Dash-8 turbo prop bound for Sylhet, I notice dents underneath the fuselage. Don't tell me this aircraft flies so low that stones thrown by *hartal* picketers actually hit the bottom of the plane?

We take off. Bangladesh looks pretty from the air. For 45 minutes, we are oblivious of a non-functioning opposition voicing its non-coherent opinions against a non-functioning government at the cost of a non-political mass.

As I come out of Sylhet Airport, an ambulance waits to take me and a few other fellow passengers to our destinations. It's a quick drive through the empty streets. We are cheerfully chatting away when the driver asks us to look dead serious and orders one of us to lie down pretending to be a critical patient with the rest of us acting as concerned family members.

It's peaceful in Sylhet. Maybe that's how it is here. Tomorrow, there will be two types of people going vocal -- those claiming that the *hartal* was successful and those claiming it to be a failure. In the serene Sylhet, there is perhaps a third group: "What? There was a *hartal*?"

Meanwhile back in Dhaka, the *hartal* is going on in full swing. There's plenty of shooting -- the shooting of guns, the shooting of news cameras and us shooting ourselves in the foot.

Amidst all of this, President Pranab Mukherjee lands in Dhaka. He is given a 121 gun salute -- 21 from the Guard of Honour and 100 from the nearby cocktail explosions.

A cocktail explodes very close to his hotel. His Press Secretary says, "Bursting of such cocktails is common in Bangladesh during *hartals* and those cannot be described as bombs." Great! Now that's a blow (no pun intended) to the ego of the perpetrators, who are now back at the drawing boards to make more powerful detonation devices. This also gives the BSF a new line for their upcoming press release: "Killing of cow smugglers during trafficking is common in India and cannot be described as murder."

But Pranab Mukherjee braves it all to visit Narail. If I were him, I'd head back straight from there to India by surface. Oh wait, there's the BSF.

*Hartal* comes at a cost. The GDP is inching downwards, thanks to the ADP (Annual Destruction Plan) fueling *hartals*. A US production team goes to the Sunderbans to film the Royal Bengal tigers, but returns home without sighting a single cat. Even the tigers are observing *hartal*. My daughter is missing school and is forgetting her spellings. She spells 'hartal' as 'hurt-all'. She then asks me, "Why do they damage public properties during *hartal*?" "Well, it's like when your mom and I have an argument, we yell at you for no reason. But there's a difference. At the end of the day your mom and I go to bed in the same room, under the same roof, smile at each other the next day and buy you candy."

*Hartal* isn't all bad. Cases of hijacking have gone down drastically as everyone on the streets is carrying sticks, guns and machetes. Newspaper is projecting higher revenues as they can soon do away with the business sections. People are having frugal weddings with a fraction of the guests showing up. Agitators are going green -- breaking vehicle windshields with coconuts.

Surprisingly, pollution has gotten worse, thanks to the emissions from polluted minds.

So, what does the future hold? Will the country head towards a state of detergency -- to clean up the filth? Will Bangladesh fall behind other nations? *Hartal* proponents argue that the country will at least stay ahead of India, even if it's by a day. After all, India celebrates Pohela Boishakh on April 15. Will the HSC exams get delayed to the point that the collective national IQ will get lowered to match those calling *hartals*?

How do we stop this vice? How about a *hartal* to protest *hartals*? How about Captain Planet coming to the rescue? Not a good choice. He's been Captain Planet for the last twenty years while his course mates are now full colonels.

But life goes on. O'Level exams have been held at night. Perhaps *hartal* is the reason behind the invention of day/night cricket.

The country is doing its best to move as fast as possible -- backwards. It is indeed the Curious Case of Bangladesh Button. At least the country can brand itself like the other members of the former Indian Sub-Continent -- *Incredible India! Striking Bangladesh!! Pakistan -- Have a Blast (While You Last)!!*

The writer is an engineer & CEO turned comedian (by choice) and the host of NTV's Grameenphone Presents The Naveed Mahbub Show.



In addition to congratulating PM Hasina, the Parliament also spent over two and half hours discussing one of the 13 motions to condemn Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia for her remarks on the trial of war criminals.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I am a more current immigrant whereas my friend, Greg (not his real name), white, a devout church-going Christian, and socially conservative, is a third or fourth generation immigrant; since his forefathers emigrated from Eastern Europe.

Consistent with his conservative views, Greg is for strict immigration rules, tighter border controls, and against the "amnesty for illegal immigrants" policy, which most Republicans also oppose.

Recently, activities of immigrants have come under the spotlight thanks to some mindless acts of criminal and other misdeeds that have been in the news in the US, particularly in Boston. A few months ago, a chemist of Indian origin working for the Massachusetts State Crime Lab was charged with manipulating evidence (drugs, and others); causing innocent people to go to jail, and costing the state millions of dollars in retrials.

In April, during the Boston Marathon, two brothers, both immigrants from one of the Chechen regions in Russia, were accused of setting off two bombs causing deaths and serious injury to dozens others.

The point is that immigrants as a community, while comfortable in their lifestyle and settled in, until recently, have come under renewed scrutiny. While there is nothing in the American mood that is terribly menacing or overly strident, the hullabaloo about immigrants is also happening at a bad time for the zillions of "illegal immigrants" who have been patiently waiting for the Obama administration, with a little help from the Congress, to change the immigra-

tion rules to enable these immigrants who are in a limbo to get legitimised, and get on the pathway eventually having their citizenship.

Many are now openly asking that if the legal immigrants are causing so much trouble, would the 'illegals' be just as much of a nuisance? While studies have shown that illegals are not any more prone to criminal activities than the native-born Americans, one cannot blame the media or the average citizens, should they display xenophobia from time to time when US is engaged in protracted conflicts overseas and is trying to prevent the bad guys from sneaking in through the vast open borders, with Mexico and Canada, and the currently very loose visa requirements for foreign visitors.

Therefore this is not a bad time for us at all, and the spotlight on the role of immigrants, both legal and illegal, provides a good opportunity for this land of settlers to get its act together on this issue. And in the midst of the uproar on immigrants and their role in this society, we, with some help from our friends and neighbours, are going about our day-to-day business with the casualness that is such a big part of

the American life.

My son who was born in Boston, teamed up with a friend, whose parents immigrated to the US from the former Soviet Union, and formed a hip-hop band named "Immigrants." Their choice of the moniker caught my attention but did not surprise me. While a small minority use the term immigrants to denote clumsy social skills, or odd mannerisms, for others it is a claim to one's cultural roots.

Likewise, others who might find strength in work and simultaneously keep their hopes of returning to their home burning amidst the search for a new identity and acclimatisation to a diverse set of social, linguistic and economic environments.

My neighbour, Jon, is a Brazilian who works very hard, as a welder, fabricating iron railings, stairs, and fancy metal-work in million dollar homes. He is saving money and has bought a 70-acre farm, growing eucalyptus, and raising cattle in Minas state in Brazil where he wants to go back in the future.

However, he sometimes feels that he might never be able to go back to his dreamland that he left behind ten years

ago. Jon's situation is akin to those of my two brothers who passed away, while working overseas and gave their lives trying to enrich their adopted homeland. My eldest brother died in Zimbabwe while visiting a work site outside Harare, while the youngest, who worked in Saudi Arabia, got sick there, but did not want to spend his last days in that god-forsaken land, even though the health care system in Saudi Arabia is modern and probably one of the best in the world.

Considering the future of immigration in the US one can take comfort from the fact that Americans are sensible people who like foreign oil, foreign cars, and cheaper imported goods, and deeply appreciate the skills born and engendered in the lush greens of Asia and the cultural aspects of Asia, Africa and Latin America. There is a proposal floated in some circles to give a Green Card attached to the diploma received by any foreign student who graduates with a degree in science, technology, or mathematics. Even Greg is not opposed to this "Green Card with Diploma" proposal.

But since he has never been outside the US, not even to Europe, he has very little idea of the social structure in a developing country, and does not realise that unlike in the 18th and 19th century, the immigrants most of the time belong to families that do not suffer when certain bad events occur around the world.

While he may not have travelled outside of the US, it is not because of xenophobia or a lack of interest in "alien" cultures. He is most likely waiting for airport security in the US to ease and the exchange value of the dollar to go up!

The writer lives and works in Boston, US.



HENRY



CRYPTOQUIP

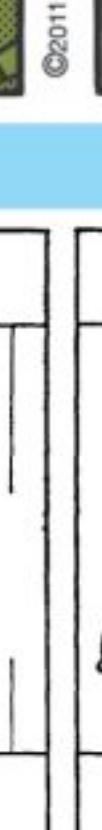


11

BEETLE BAILY



10-8



10-8

by Mort Walker



10-8

by Don Trachte



10-8

QUOTABLE Quotes

"You begin saving the world by saving one man at a time; all else is grandiose romanticism or politics."

Charles  
Bukowski