

# Parliamentary norms: More honoured in the breach

INAM AHMED

IN Parliamentary democracy, it is as much about rules as it is about norms, traditions and practices. It is not enough to do the right thing but also in the right manner.

The British parliamentary system from which we derive our inspiration runs only on tradition and precedence. The British do not even have a written constitution and yet the parliament functions most vigorously and that is because norms and traditions are observed almost as laws.

This is precisely why we have decided to write about what we consider to be a serious deviation of parliamentary practice -- not holding the meetings of the parliamentary party of the ruling party in parliament, but outside its premises, the latest example being on last Tuesday.

Where the meeting is held is as important as to what it is about. Not holding such a meeting in the parliament denigrates the House.

But in our case the AL chose the prime minister's residence.

In the last four and a half years, the ruling AL held all its parliamentary party meetings at Ganobhaban. And BNP hardly held any meetings of its parliamentary wing and the few gatherings that it organised were also held at the residence of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

Interestingly, our Sangsad Bhaban has two huge meeting rooms for the two parties -- AL

and BNP -- which alternately take the positions of treasury bench and opposition. These rooms are meant for the two parties to hold meetings of their parliamentary wings.

But they remain unused.

The attitude of the two parties in holding meetings of their parliamentary wings shows their disregard for parliamentary norms and traditions -- the two vital things much of the parliamentary system rests on.

And if these norms are broken or disregarded, it only weakens parliament as an institution. If a party can disregard one norm, it can ignore other norms too. And that would leave parliament only weaker.

We have also seen Sheikh Hasina holding meetings of her party in her official residence, blurring the distinction between the party, the government and her personal activities.



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It is important to distinguish between party and state. Just because she happens to hold the party chief's post does not mean she can use her official facility to further party activities. We acknowledge that she faces great security risks following the August 21 grenade attack on her

for which she might be avoiding going to the party office for meetings. But then she could easily give up the party position to somebody capable and let the party affairs run as they should be.

And probably the greatest disrespect to parliament is perpetuated by both AL and BNP when we find them continuously boycotting parliament on trivial grounds.

When BNP was in power between 2001 and 2006, AL boycotted parliament from the very first day, never to return to the House except for the obligatory presence to retain membership.

And now when AL is in power, BNP is doing the same.

Sheikh Hasina's choice of the Speaker of the House was also a blow to parliamentary norms as she has chosen a person for the post who is not an elected lawmaker.

The prime minister boasted that by choos-

ing a woman for the seat she has further emboldened the cause for women's empowerment.

But then she had overlooked the fact that it is simply not the norm for an indirectly elected person from a fixed quota to oversee the House as its guardian and that this would only undermine the position of the House.

This behaviour reflects on the centralisation of the political parties, and the AL is just another example.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, while being the head of the government also heads her party. She is also the leader of the House.

We can draw the example of India. When Manmohan Singh was the prime minister, Pranab Mukherjee was the leader of the house and Sonia Gandhi led Congress. That is how democracy flourishes and the party becomes stronger, diversified and institutionalised. This is true for the UK, Australia, Canada and elsewhere where parliamentary democracy is practiced.

At this moment we need institutions on strong footings and, for the sake of that, we hope AL will hold its future parliamentary party meetings in parliament where the party members would be able to speak freely instead of looking up to the party leader.

And we also hope that BNP would respect the parliamentary norms.

Otherwise, parliamentary democracy would only weaken.

The writer is Deputy Editor, The Daily Star.

## BNP's smugness test

AKHTAR SHAH

AFTER the setbacks of 36-hour threat and numerous impotent hartals, the opposition leader and her compatriots are feeling extremely good about themselves. Five local government election wins with sizeable majority are bringing in tides of good fortune.

Her senior party people are claiming these wins as results of their hard work with puffed up chests. They have permanent smiles on their faces and are beginning to eye up various plum ministerial jobs in the future government. National election win is in sight.

Being carried away with writer's prerogative here, it's kind of stating the obvious that local party workers and some national BNP leaders did work hard to put forward their side of the story to the electorate. In doing so, every trick in the book and some extra ones that were invented specially for the elections were deployed; some highly exploitative of religious sentiments of ordinary folk, some telling untruths about opponents' past misdemeanours. BNP would argue and perhaps rightly so: "Only did what the AL people were doing anyway."

Since these elections were announced, BNP was asking for army deployment, and complaining about foul play by AL and misuse of government resources in assisting the AL candidate. They continued with this theme right up to publicity deadline by EC and reinforced such rhetoric from their central office in Dhaka. It is clear to ordinary citizens that BNP was putting the country on notice; were they to lose the elections (having warned of foul play on numerous occasions) they would be justified in unleashing *andolon*, which would have included hartals that inevitably escalates into violence, disruption and destruction.

It's so so patently obvious to all citizens that political parties threaten 'dire' consequences and make each other responsible for future and inevitable dire consequences. This is simply like 'buying a license' for violence without having to answer for it. Such churlish behaviour from mature politicians simply demonstrates that the only form of grip they have on party workers (other than money) is promise of future violence in the name of *andolon*.

It is astounding that after 42 years of independence and having routed all 'foreign rulers,' parties still talk about *andolon*. The words 'mutually respectful dialogue' are missing from their thought process!

BNP's analysis of the wins (as mouthed off by their leaders) in the main talk about rejection of AL

as a party by the voters, endorsement of caretaker demand by BNP and corruption by AL. They hardly talk about their misdemeanours of the past and not repeating them. This they think will be sign of weakness, not political maturity.

BNP is unlikely to admit that AL is simply losing the plot, and that AL's shambolic handling of matters of grave national interest, holding party before country and complete disconnection of the leadership from the grassroots were the main reasons for BNP's massive win.

It seems lessons are never learnt by either party. But surely it's ideal opportunity for Mrs. Zia to learn from her own errors and lack of judgment during her last premiership. She had made some feeble attempts of apology in the past. She was surrounded by people who have now gone underground and are likely to surface should she win the elections. Her 'inappropriate motherly instincts' took over and stopped her putting country first and family second. A free reign of her wayward family and their own hangers-on made her government look like a complete circus. Money making was the main preoccupation of the whole regime. This makes it incredibly hard to implement programmes that help and encourage wealth creating citizens. Hardworking, honest people become despondent and some ended up joining this rat race of low standards of moral and ethical decay.

Mrs. Zia has seen for herself that AL continued in the same vein after promising an era of "changing ways"! Alas, with such unprecedented majority coupled with absolute grip of power by one person squandered a golden opportunity of beginning the process of creating an open, exploitation free, tolerant, forward looking middle income country respected by its neighbours and the rest of the world. AL has put these election wins on a plate to BNP.

It's time for BNP to admit their mistakes of the past and come up with concrete, workable and transparent plans to show the people how they intend to run the country should they win. Promises alone won't do. AL's recent defeats categorically and firmly endorse that view. It appears that the electorate has become much savvier and are able to see through the mistakes, lies, exploitation and attempts at covering them up! The scams and tricks are now all known, in the main. Unless the parties come up with new ones or own up and behave in a fair way, trouble with a capital 'T' will never be far away.

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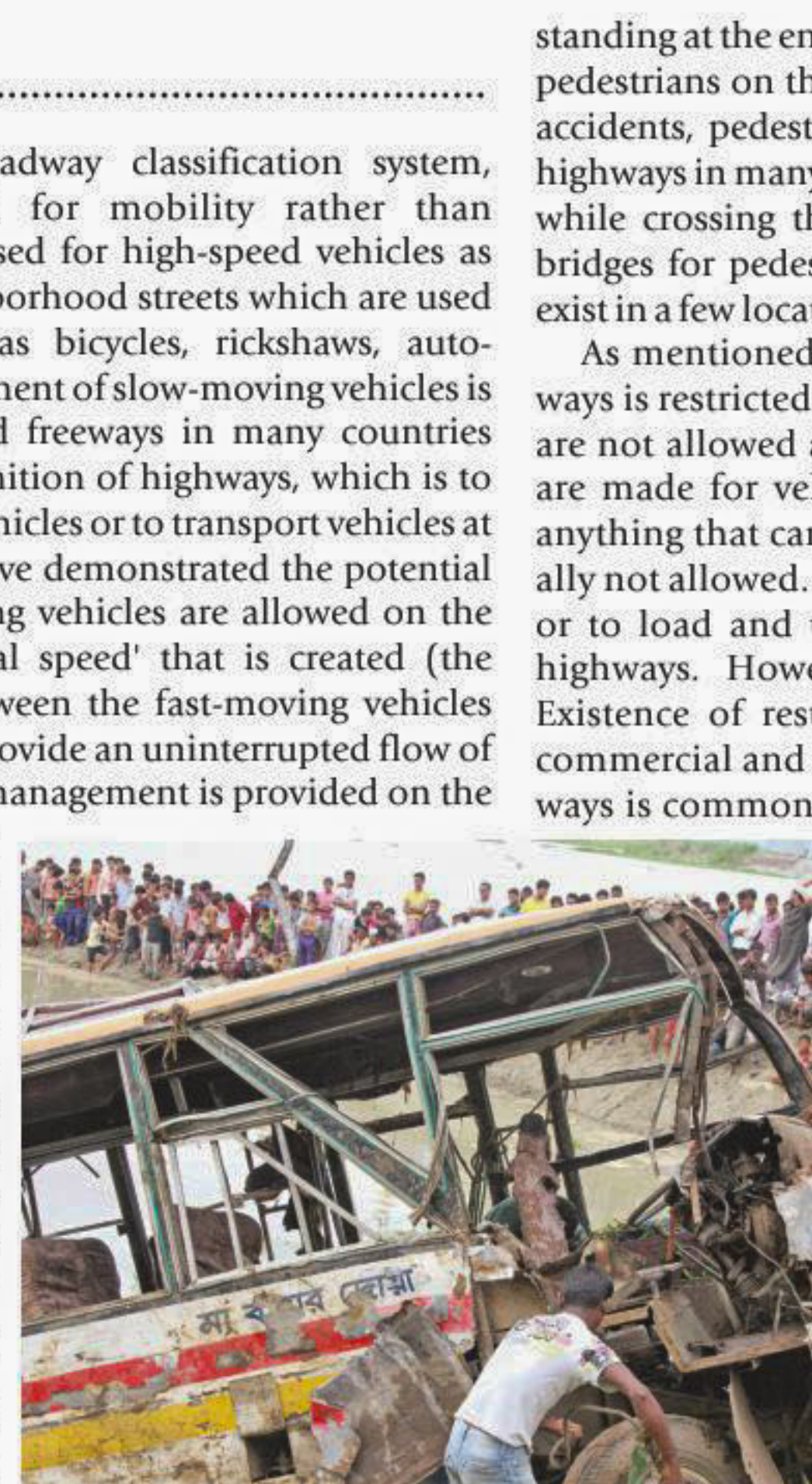
## Violation of roadway classification system: Major cause of highway accidents

RIDWAN QAIUM

ACCORDING to the roadway classification system, highways are designed for mobility rather than accessibility. These are used for high-speed vehicles as opposed to local streets or neighborhood streets which are used for slow moving traffic such as bicycles, rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and pedestrians. Movement of slow-moving vehicles is prohibited on the highways and freeways in many countries because it conflicts with the definition of highways, which is to provide mobility to high speed vehicles or to transport vehicles at high speed. In fact, researches have demonstrated the potential risk of an accident if slow-moving vehicles are allowed on the highways due to the 'differential speed' that is created (the increase in speed difference between the fast-moving vehicles and the slow-moving ones). To provide an uninterrupted flow of traffic in many countries, access management is provided on the highways, meaning that vehicles can enter and make exit only through certain locations. Exit and entrance lanes or ramps are provided so that vehicles leaving or entering the highways can do so without affecting the speed of other vehicles. For the movement of slow-moving vehicles, many countries have provided 'frontage roads' or 'service roads' parallel to the highways. This separates the high-speed and low-speed vehicles and thus the potential risk of a collision between high-speed and slow-speed vehicles is minimized.

In Bangladesh all kinds of vehicles are permitted to travel on the highways, including non-motorized vehicles such as bicycles, rickshaws and even pedestrians. This is one of the main reasons behind the high accident rates here. Since most of the highways here are two-lane, two-way, the speed of a vehicle is restricted by that of the vehicle ahead. If there is a slow-moving vehicle, then all others behind have to adjust to the former's speed until they are able to go past it. This slows down the overall traffic movement, and results in traffic congestion. To pass the slow-moving vehicles, the only option usually is traveling into the lane in the opposite direction. Sometimes, due to visibility issues, drivers are not able to judge the presence of an approaching vehicle in the opposite side until they enter the lane opposite. This often leads to head-on collisions, a common type of accident on the highways in Bangladesh.

Pedestrians including young children are often seen to be walking along the highways and also crossing the highways. While crossing the highways, sometimes it is not possible for the pedestrians to judge the speed of the oncoming vehicles, and they cannot realise the presence of a speeding vehicle if they are



Accidents on the highways have increased tremendously in the recent years. Some of these accidents happen not because of the fault of the drivers but rather because of the violation of the classification of the roadways.

standing at the end of a curve. This is why road mishaps related to pedestrians on the highways are very common. To prevent such accidents, pedestrians are prohibited from walking along the highways in many countries. To enhance safety of the pedestrians while crossing the highways, many countries have foot over-bridges for pedestrians. Foot over-bridges for pedestrians only exist in a few locations on the highways in Bangladesh.

As mentioned earlier, in most countries access to the highways is restricted. Buildings, such as residential or commercial, are not allowed along the highways. This is because highways are made for vehicles to pass without stopping. As a result, anything that can slow down the mobility of vehicles is generally not allowed. Even to access the rest areas or fueling stations or to load and unload passengers, vehicles have to exit the highways. However, this is not practiced in Bangladesh. Existence of restaurants, filling stations and other types of commercial and residential development adjacent to the highways is common. Buses stop in the middle of the highways to load and unload passengers. A most of the highways are two lane, when one vehicle stops, the vehicles behind has to stop and slow down as well. To move past a stopped bus, vehicles behind it have to get into the lane opposite, potentially increasing the chances of head-on collision.

Accidents on the highways have increased tremendously in the recent years. Some of these accidents happen not because of the fault of the drivers but rather because of the violation of the classification of the roadways. One has to realize that highways are designed to transport vehicles at a faster speed. Therefore, drivers expect to be driving at a high speed but often times they have to encounter slow moving vehicles and even pedestrians in their travel path, which forces them to slow down abruptly. In doing so, sometimes they lose control of their vehicles which results in accidents, some of which are even fatal. To ensure safety of vehicles on the highway, slow moving vehicles and pedestrians should be prohibited from traveling on the highway. Frontage or service roads can be provided for transporting slow moving vehicles and pedestrians. Pedestrian foot-over bridges can be provided for pedestrians to cross the highway. Entrance and exit ramps can be provided for vehicles on the highway to access restaurants, fueling stations, bus stops and other types of developments. In addition, except for emergency purposes, stopping on the highway should also be prohibited. These few measures have a great potential of significantly improving the safety condition of the highways in Bangladesh.

The writer is a transportation engineer working in Thailand.

**ACROSS**

1 Off  
6 Handed out hands  
11 Drunk (Sl)  
12 Wicker-work willows  
14 WWI president  
15 "The Compleat Angler" writer  
16 Further-more  
17 Farewell  
19 Coloration  
20 Requirement  
22 Right angle  
23 California wine region  
24 Contrib-ute  
26 Got rid of the bumps  
28 Tummy muscles  
30 Moisture  
31 Not as prevalent  
35 Bar legally  
39 Frilly, in a way  
40 Minor worker

**DOWN**

1 Straight-18 Well, —  
2 Gave shape to  
3 "Monty Python" opener  
4 Old prom-enade  
5 Device for testing physical conditions  
6 Fastened with pegs  
7 Birthright  
8 Have a bug  
9 Deadly  
10 Theatrical company  
11 Master  
13 Golf's "Slammin' Sammy"  
18 Well, —  
21 Blog, basically  
23 Full of info  
25 Jimmy Fallon's network  
27 Churchill's gesture  
29 Cosines' reciprocals  
31 Deceler-ates  
32 Venice's thorough-fares  
33 Vinegar radical  
34 Director Howard  
36 Stagger  
37 Baltimore athlete  
38 Hammer-head parts  
41 Stars stupidly  
44 Asking too many questions  
45 Agree-ment  
48 Red or Black  
50 "The Matrix" role

**SOLUTION TIME: 27 mins.**

**YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUIP:**  
NEW SPECIES OF RODENTS WHICH SCIENTISTS SAY ARE COMPLETELY SELFISH AND DEMANDING: GIMES PIGS.

**TODAY'S CRYPTOQUIP CLUE:** B equals W

**CRYPTOQUIP**

ENH EBO YGHEX BNG KIBKTX  
PGRYXHZ UHAXH EGSHEHHA  
PGJXMRHYZ ENBRXHIJHX  
YKAEJHAX MJ ANTRH

**BEETLE BAILY** by Mort Walker

SARGE, YOU'RE A POMPOUS JERK!  
STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES BUT NAMES WILL NEVER HURT ME  
WHY ARE YOU COLLECTING ROCKS AND STICKS?  
TO THROW AT SARGE

**HENRY** by Don Trachte

I ONCE CAUGHT A BIRD BY SPRINKLING SOME SALT ON HIS TAIL, HENRY!

**QUOTABLE Quotes**

"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

Abraham Lincoln