

Take recourse to this JS session

Good intent of parties crucial

THE speaker at the inauguration of the 19th session of the ninth Jatiya Sangsad hoped that the Treasury and the Opposition benches would be able to resolve their differences through debates and discussions. Since this may also be the final session of the present parliament, it presents a significant opportunity before the ruling and opposition parties to forge an understanding on the election-time government. From that perspective, the speaker's optimism is well merited.

However, the opposition BNP, which has been agitating for a neutral, non-party election-time government, has so far desisted from broaching the issue for discussion on floor of parliament. They insist that even the dialogues they have been clamouring for to settle the issue should be held outside parliament. Similar is their approach even towards the formulae they have recently floated on the election-time government.

It is hardly surprising that the stalemate continues as the ruling party cannot see eye to eye with opposition's point of view. It is time the opposition started to think outside the box and join parliament to resolve the crisis.

The floor of the House apart, the precincts of parliament can as well be used for holding constructive dialogues between the opposition BNP and the ruling Awami League. The ruling Awami League will have to play a proactive role and send positive signals to assure the opposition BNP of meaningful engagements.

But it all depends on the good intent of either party to see an end to the deadlock created over the poll-time interim government.

HC directive against adulteration

Take quick, strict measures

DESPITE countless cases of food adulteration being detected by the mobile courts, the crime continues unabated. From fruits and vegetables to meat and fish, nothing is spared by the nefarious contaminators of food out to make a profit at the cost of human health and life. Using formalin and various other harmful chemicals in uncontrolled proportions, they ripen unripe foods such as fruit and preserve stale ones such as dead fish.

In this situation, the High Court's directive to the government to explain why it should not be asked to take necessary steps to formulate a Formalin Control Act is perhaps a long overdue but most welcome move. The directive came after a Supreme Court lawyer's writ petition seeking to have the issue placed as a bill in the current session of parliament.

Food adulteration can damage vital organs such as the liver, kidneys, colon, heart, and blood and can lead to serious types of diseases like asthma, skin disease and even cancer.

We hope that this crucial issue of health and moral business ethics will be raised in parliament and prompt action taken towards formulating the abovementioned law against adulteration of food. This inhuman crime must be curbed and it seems that the formulation and implementation of strict laws is the only way to do this. We urge the authorities to take up the issue with due seriousness and without delay.



Is this democratic?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

BY asking her party's grassroots leaders to work for the AL and vote for "Boat" even if they do not like candidates picked for the parliamentary election, Sheikh Hasina reminded us of the political culture suffering from lack of democratic norms in nominating party contenders.

If democracy is practiced properly in a political party when picking candidates for elections, its leaders will accept the nominations. Once the nominations are given they will work together to win the electoral battle. This is a simple norm of democracy and a prerequisite for practicing democracy at national level, the lack of which makes democracy fragile; Bangladesh is a glaring example of that.

In the past, the party chief and a few top leaders picked candidates of their choice without considering the opinions of grassroots leaders. This gave birth to nomination trading. Businessmen, industrialists and godfathers bought election tickets from major political parties. Grassroots leaders were forced to work for them so that their parties could win.

PM Hasina's directives to her party's grassroots leaders triggered fear of return of the pervasive culture of nomination trading in the next polls. Initially, her effort to listen to the opinions of grassroots leaders when picking candidates for elections was praiseworthy. At the meetings with her, grassroots leaders were asked to propose three names separately for each constituency, considering the prospective candidates' image, education, financial situation and connection with party grassroots and people. This gave an impression that grassroots leaders, who have felt neglected since the party assumed the power in 2009, would play an important role in picking party nominees for the polls.

But the AL is no more bound to honour their opinions. To stop nomination trading, the electoral laws were changed before the 2008 polls, introducing a new provision that the registered political parties' parliamentary board will finalise nominations from the panels prepared by their grassroots leaders. This was mandatory initially. But the AL relaxed it after assuming office. Now the parties can finalise candidates only by considering the panels. This means the parties may pick candidates beyond the panels.

Hasina's directives indicate that the opinion of grassroots leaders might not be honoured while picking candidates for the polls. But they will have to work for those candidates for the sake of party's interests. Is this democratic?

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Constitutionally speaking, after the declaration of election schedule the Election Commission (EC) is in charge of all affairs for conducting the general election. The administration, including the law enforcement organs and the armed forces, are under the command of the EC and all concerned are constitutionally bound to render all assistance to it. Unless the EC does something patently illegal its actions cannot be challenged by any entity or authority.

Why can't a government and the regulatory institutions of the state be relied upon to honestly and impartially conduct a general election? Have our institutions lost the reliability to faithfully perform their constitutionally charted duties? If so, how and why, and what are the remedies to tide over the recurring uncertainty pertaining to election-time governance?

In most democracies the incumbent government over-see the election after reducing its size to the bare minimum necessary for carrying out routine work. Constitutional bodies, the services and the regulatory institutions do their mandated job for the smooth conduct of the election. Everything runs as usual.

In Bangladesh, however, we cannot put our faith in the normal arrangement. Have those institutions that ensure fair election been adversely incapacitated? If so, how did it happen? Additionally pertinent is the query as to whether the proposed strengthening of the EC would guarantee fair election.

The civil service of the republic owes its loyalty to the government of the day, irrespective of political party, and it is imperative that the service avoids creating the impression of political bias. Civil servants are expected to conduct themselves in such a manner that they deserve and retain the confidence of ministers and be able to establish the same relationship with those whom they may be required to serve in some future administration.

The above is the desirable course but the ground reality is the steady erosion of bureaucratic ethos and politicisation of the service. Professionalism, competence and honesty, the hallmarks of a hallowed system, are allegedly giving way to cronyism and pliability. Favours are allegedly being given to loyal and partisan officials who unlawfully please their superiors. In such a situation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep faith in the impartiality and integrity of public servants who are crucial in ensuring fair election.

Insofar as the regulatory agencies are concerned, the allegation is that the interests of the state have often been mixed up with the interests of the party in power. Consequently, all concerned are losing faith in the propriety of the actions of such bodies that play a vital role in the fair and orderly conduction of election.

The need is to ensure that public servants are not preoccupied with inconsequential matters to the detriment of national interests. This is paramount because public leaders are publicly expressing doubts about the neutrality and integrity of vital organs of the state whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatised. Therefore, the fears about fair election need to be allayed.

If one goes by the history of political transactions in Bangladesh, one would be pragmatic in saying that the incumbent government will not reinstate a system that has

The trust deficit

ROSS DOUTHAT

THREE observations about President Obama's prime-time remarks explaining his Syria strategy.

1) This speech should not have been given. The diplomatic situation is completely fluid, and the administration has had only had 24 hours to process the possibility that Russia might -- might -- be offering them a way out of their current political and strategic box. The speech reflected that fluidity, starting with a case for action but then petering out in a description of diplomatic initiatives and a general appeal for votes on a resolution that won't be coming before Congress this week, if ever. A prime time presidential address should either announce a policy course or make a specific appeal to Congress; it should not be wasted on a situation where the course is so unclear and the appeal so vague and undirected. Yes, it's been on the schedule since last week, but there is no rule saying that a president must speak when he's announced that he will speak if significant events intervene. And after the Russian gambit and the Congressional vote's postponement, it would have been the better part of valour to simply postpone this speech as well.

2) I am nearly alone among pundits, so far as I can tell, in finding what I take to be the administration's core strategic theory -- that a limited strike could forestall further chemical attacks, policing a worthwhile international norm at a low cost to the United States -- reasonably convincing, and more so in light of Syria's apparent willingness to at least pretend to self-disarm. So naturally I thought the strongest part of the speech came when the president made exactly that argument, telling viewers that "even a limited strike will send a message to Assad that no other nation can deliver," and promising that in the event of such a strike, "neither Assad nor his allies have any interest in escalation that would lead to his demise."

But as I've tried to argue over the last two weeks, even though the ban on chemical weapons is a humanitarian idea, the argument that we should punish dictators who use chemical weapons is not really a humanitarian case for war, because it stops well short of protecting the innocent

only recently been undone and on which the dominant political players of the ruling party hold strong views. One feels that there is an over-arching imperative for breaking the rigidities with a view to achieving socio-political peace and stability, which would demand dexterity and skill on the part of the negotiators.

It is relevant to recollect that any attempt to have political negotiations is constrained by deep suspicions about the good faith of either side, which divides both parties. These suspicions are further compounded by the mutual antipathy of the two principal protagonists who command enormous authority as the leaders of their parties.

The distrust in our polarised society is not limited to the political parties but also extends to even non-party persons who are suspected of partisan leaning. Political utterances of the not-too-distant past reflect the depth of the climate of suspicion.

If we look back, we see that the ground reality compelled the then government in March 1996 to amend the constitution, as the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, to incorporate the provision of a non-party caretaker government. The irony is that the government which seriously questioned the representative status of the caretaker arrangement ultimately agreed to a system of government that was to be made up entirely of members without any representative status. In fact, the 13th Amendment was the recognition of the validity of the demand for elections under a caretaker government.

The ongoing boycott of parliament, compounded by the inability to negotiate a settlement of the caretaker issue, gives rise to apprehension about the sustainability of parliamentary democracy. It is interesting to note here that in mid-1994 the well-intentioned external intervention in Bangladesh's politics by the Commonwealth Secretariat was felt to have reflected poorly on the state of democratic politics where our parties could not even agree on a non-partisan Bangladeshi personality to mediate a solution to our domestic problems.

A caretaker government is principally a mechanism for extrication from the political quagmire characterised by boycotting of the legislature, proclivity to reckless and vituperative attacks and retorts, and suspected efforts for election engineering by the establishment.

It would appear that the sad and painful episodes of the not-too-distant past are about to revisit us. Coercive show of strength will beget the same in future. In the opposition's movement to dislodge an elected government, the people will suffer. Industry, trade - national and international -- development, banking and finance, and the ordinary people may have to pay a costly price at the altar of power game.

Cynics say that the politicians' motto appears to be in 'power at any cost.' The people do not matter eventually. In such a scenario, the people are the last consideration and hardly ever the first.

While the caretaker arrangement might be construed as a scathing indictment on the unreliability of the political class to fairly conduct national elections, it is also a fact that the determined movement for its restoration is displaying signs of desperation, leading to an ominous future. In a situation where neither the people nor the country might figure as the first priority, our altruistic virtues would be open to question.

The constitution of the republic enshrines fundamental principles of equity and fair play, but in the absence of proactive actions by the principal actors they will remain merely as counsels of moderation. If our society proves to be so perilously polarised that the spirit of moderation is marginally present then nobody can help us. The evasion of responsibility would actually mean the demise of the spirit of moderation. Surely, we do not intend to perish.

The nation urgently requires the exercise of negotiating skill with dexterity and caution. This is not an insurmountable task for our politicians. They may or may not seek the services of persons who are not politically affiliated, but the responsibility of seeking resolution through dialogue and compromise cannot be shrugged off. The imperative is to engage in the arduous process. The demand is for credible elections leading to good government.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

The president speaks on Syria

ROSS DOUTHAT

THREE observations about President Obama's prime-time remarks explaining his Syria strategy.

1) This speech should not have been given. The diplomatic situation is completely fluid, and the administration has had only had 24 hours to process the possibility that Russia might -- might -- be offering them a way out of their current political and strategic box. The speech reflected that fluidity, starting with a case for action but then petering out in a description of diplomatic initiatives and a general appeal for votes on a resolution that won't be coming before Congress this week, if ever. A prime time presidential address should either announce a policy course or make a specific appeal to Congress; it should not be wasted on a situation where the course is so unclear and the appeal so vague and undirected. Yes, it's been on the schedule since last week, but there is no rule saying that a president must speak when he's announced that he will speak if significant events intervene. And after the Russian gambit and the Congressional vote's postponement, it would have been the better part of valour to simply postpone this speech as well.

2) I am nearly alone among pundits, so far as I can tell, in finding what I take to be the administration's core strategic theory -- that a limited strike could forestall further chemical attacks, policing a worthwhile international norm at a low cost to the United States -- reasonably convincing, and more so in light of Syria's apparent willingness to at least pretend to self-disarm. So naturally I thought the strongest part of the speech came when the president made exactly that argument, telling viewers that "even a limited strike will send a message to Assad that no other nation can deliver," and promising that in the event of such a strike, "neither Assad nor his allies have any interest in escalation that would lead to his demise."

But as I've tried to argue over the last two weeks, even though the ban on chemical weapons is a humanitarian idea, the argument that we should punish dictators who use chemical weapons is not really a humanitarian case for war, because it stops well short of protecting the innocent

from all the varied ways that civilians can be killed without recourse to sarin. Nor is it an argument about America's immediate security, which is not plausibly endangered by Assad's arsenal or any other dictator's stockpile. At heart, it's an argument about the stability of the world order, the importance of imposing constraints on rogue regimes, and the unique role that America plays as the enforcer of those constraints. But that argument, to the extent that it convinces at all, is probably too coolly Metemichian to play in a time-time address by an American president -- which is why the president had to reach, as his surrogates have down for days, for humanitarian appeals and national-security claims that if they were actually credible would require precisely the kind of expansive involvement that he's intent on ruling off the table. Which meant, in turn, the essential contradiction of this administration's sales pitch endured: The justification for war being invoked is simply too broad to fit the means and ends being contemplated.

3) The passage that rang the falsest, though, was not substantive; it was this rhetorical flourish near the end:

And so to my friends on the right, I ask you to reconcile your commitment to America's military might with a failure to act when a cause is so plainly just.

To my friends on the left, I ask you to reconcile your belief in freedom and dignity for all people with those images of children writhing in pain and going still on a cold hospital floor, for sometimes resolutions and statements of condemnation are simply not enough.

As various people pointed out on Twitter, this felt less like a credible bipartisan appeal than a weird sort of back-handed insult to both sides of the aisle, invoking caricatures of left and right in the guise of appealing to their better angels. Hey rabid militarists! Here's a chance to use the military you love so much! Hey hippie peaceniks! Think of the children and stop being so wimpy!

Yes, no doubt it wasn't intended that way. But it's a strange, tin-eared, "didn't anyone edit this" passage no matter how you read it. Which made it well-suited, I suppose, to one of the strangest speeches a president has given in my lifetime.

© The New York Times 2013. Distributed by The New York Times Syndicate.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Success indeed!

The government has undertaken massive campaigns to highlight its successes to convince the people to vote the party again to power so it may complete the remaining tasks and carry out more development works. It cannot be denied that there are some successes but unfortunately the failures outweigh those. The recent massive defeat of the ruling party in several pourashavas and city corporation elections is a clear indication. But I see clear successes of the government in selecting the heads and the teammates of the so-called independent bodies such as the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Public Service Commission, the Human Rights Commission, etc. All the heads of these independent bodies are very obedient to the government. The CEC with his recent activities has proved beyond doubt that impartial election cannot be arranged by the present election commission headed by him. Similar success of the government is evident from the appointment of judges in lower and higher courts, higher officials in police force, bureaucrats in civil services and other organs of the government. So far, nobody has betrayed the government. Really wonderful successes!

Engr. Md. Aminul Hoque
East Rampur, Dhaka

Terror behind innocent face

On April 15, 2013 the Boston Marathon bombings took place. The culprits were found to be two brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. After a brutal fight with an officer, the elder brother Tamerlan was killed and the younger one was arrested.

So now the question arises why a magazine like Rolling Stones has posted a picture of the younger brother on its cover. Many people have become outraged. But most people failed to realise that Rolling Stones issued the photo to show that behind the youthful nature and boyish face lies a monstrosity that shouldn't ever be forgotten.

The two brothers claimed that the reason behind their attack was the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, in what way have they ever hoped to fight for justice by killing innocents is something that only the younger brother can now explain.

With a promising academic performance, he enrolled in Dartmouth University and was described by several classmates as 'kind and nice.' You can't help but wonder what caused him to choose this unforgivable path.

Samiha Matin
Uttara, Dhaka

VIPs' treatment abroad

The daily Kaler Kantho has run a story on this issue on September 8. The main issue here should be who will bear the cost of such treatment. It would be unfair to put a total embargo on VIPs' treatment abroad. The best measure would be to make the treatment self-financed with complete transparency of the fund transferred and used for the treatment.

An observer
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "No consensus, no observers," published on September 11, 2013

Shahin Huq

We want very basic things: our right to vote for candidates of our choice and a fair counting of the votes. If the international community helps us to achieve that, we will remain grateful. We do not want to see too much closed-door politics. Our demand is as simple as this: Sheikh Hasina should stop being arrogant and she should handover power to a neutral government for a fair general election.

Ezajur Rahman

The international community is not obliged to help us to choose between two groups of crooks.

Iftekhar Hassan

Nice talk, when they said: "We'll definitely take a tough position for the sake of a free, fair, credible and participatory election." How will they monitor when both parties' hoodlums will try to buy a family vote for 1 saree, 1 lungi and tk. 1000?

MH Khan

We have parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. Why doesn't BNP go to parliament and initiate a talk if they have something to talk about? Why is BNP trying to hold a talk on the street?

Abul Kashem

The same way the present ruling party did not go to parliament to initiate talk, remained on the street, called hartals, burned vehicles and everything, when they were in opposition.

Mahboob Hossain

I thank the international community for taking the side of the people's demand when the government along with its paid sycophants are waging a war against its own people.

K Ashfaq

What and who is encouraging AL to force their plans on the people of Bangladesh is very intriguing.

truthprevails53

This article is full of anonymous diplomats. Who is international community here? Who are the major countries?