

# A low key end to 9th JS

## Opposition boycott a dominant feature

As we look into the picture of attendance by opposition MPs in the 9th parliament on which curtain has been drawn we are struck by a sense of disquiet. A mere total of 76 sittings out of 418 were attended by them, that too riddled with walkouts, and lack of quorum for which the ruling party had to be blamed.

The opposition's obligations to the parliament were three-fold. First, they represented the constituencies that elected them MPs. Importance of this function could not be measured in terms of number of seats in the parliament but the percentage of votes polled by them, which was substantial. Secondly, they were to play a watchdog role. Thirdly, opposition is considered a government in waiting. Sorry to say, on all these three counts, BNP largely failed to meet public expectations.

Inadequate or almost no space for the opposition to speak on the floor of the House has been identified as a key reason for their being absent in the JS . Since the opposition gave the ruling party walkover, their demand for space stood a little diluted. All the same, the government had its share of responsibility in turning the 9th parliament into a one-sided affair.

Ironically though, the boycotting MPs never flinched from enjoying perks, privileges and allowances that go with their elected positions. As if to reinforce the mindset, they would end boycott only to retain membership under a provision that debarred 90 days of continuous absence in parliament.

A vibrant parliament is only achievable through regular turnouts of all its members.

# Environment under threat

## Wetlands disappear from landscape

THE real estate industry has emerged as a major challenge to the environment. At least that is the case for most marshlands around the Dhaka-Mawa highway. Without batting an eyelid on existing laws and regulations with regards to environmental protection, land developers are busy filling up the majority of wetlands and natural water bodies in the area.

As per newspaper reports, we are seeing thousands of acres of land being filled up and made ready for construction in Srinagar and Lauhagonj in Munshiganj district. With signboards advertising the future plans for one "city" or another, sticking out of many remaining water bodies and claiming ownership, one can only imagine how long before these too disappear from the landscape! It is not only water bodies and marshland that are under threat, farmers are being uprooted at will, either by force or compelled to sell their property at dictated prices. With authorities strangely silent on the issue, the practice continues unabated.

According to one study, some 10,000 acres of wetland have been transformed into housing projects over a decade (1999 – 2010). The preceding decade saw the loss of 13,000 acres. With croplands, wetlands, and rivers either disappearing or being forced to change direction to accommodate these "developments", it is hardly surprising that flood mitigation problems are facing problems. Unless the government is serious about enforcing laws it has enacted, like the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995 (as amended in 2010), neither the environment nor agriculture can be saved from disaster in

# Minimum wage of a garment worker

SYED KOLLOL

THE daily *Prothom Alo* reported recently that the minimum wage for garment workers was proposed and finalised as Tk.5,300 with yearly 5% increment. Also, an apprentice will be paid minimum Tk.4,180.

It seems a good negotiation at the moment but if we look closely we can find some flaws that will actually make the whole effort vague.

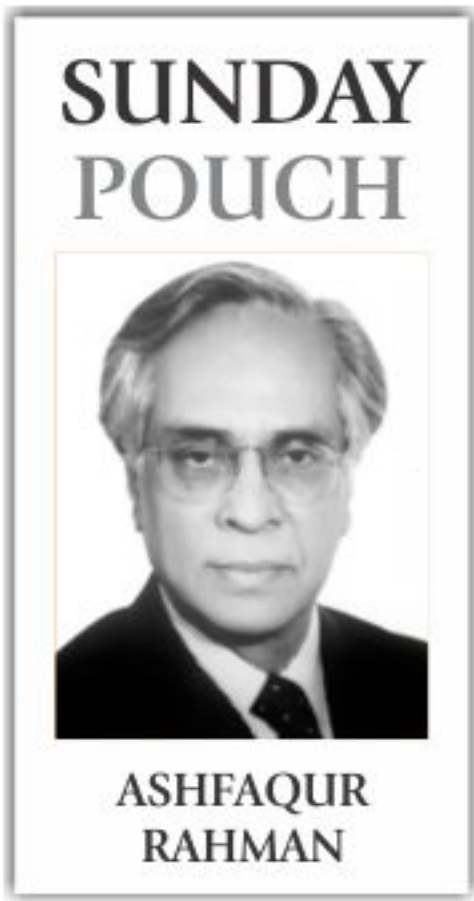
Here is why:

- 1)Minimum wage for new entrants: According to the report, a new entrant will receive minimum Tk.4,180, which is less than the wage of non-new entrants in the labour force in this particular industry. That means it will open the door for the garment owners to oppress the workers in a new way. They will not upgrade a new entrant's status and thus end up paying less in wages.
- 2)The process is very simple. First, they will terminate existing workers and then re-hire them as new entrants. In an overpopulated country, the poor labourers will fall prey to the new system of oppression. The result is inevitable, resistance and revolt again.
- 3)The 5% yearly increment will not be enough to balance the trend of 7.8%-8% yearly inflation rate. The living standard will not improve as a result of this inflation gap. The result -- we will see unrest in the sector again.
- 4)How to rectify this:
  - i)The government can introduce a new law, saying that if a person had 2,000 hours of experience in the industry, the owner could treat her as an apprentice anymore. Also, it must be mandatory for payroll departments to print and distribute a copy of Time Sheet to the worker in each pay period.
  - ii)Yearly increment should be fixed according to the inflation rate, or at least not less than 85% of the inflation rate.

We really want an end to the wage war in the garment industry once and for all.

The writer is an accountant.

# Is China reforming?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, the Third Plenary session of the 18th Central Committee was held in Beijing to discuss reform measures to be introduced in China in the coming days. There were lots of speculations as well as inputs provided by Chinese academia before the meeting. The big hope was that there would be introduction of systemic reforms that will transform China's economy and society.

President Xi Jinping is considered to be a reformer in many political and social circles. But since the plenary session, analysts now say that President Xi cannot be clearly identified as a reformer. To many the answer to this question is neither a clear 'yes' nor a 'no.' There is no doubt that the president is totally committed to convert China into a market economy. His idea is that the government should only concentrate in regulating and monitoring the economy. Further, he is strongly in favour of migrant workers and farmers enjoying all rights, as is now done by others in Chinese society. He is keen to see that they have equal rights and opportunities like others. He is also in favour of reforming the Chinese judicial system.

But one of the critical areas which should be in the reform agenda of the Chinese government is to break the monopoly of the major state owned enterprises. These firms are behemoths that dominate industrial production or extraction. Their appointed functionaries are not only politically powerful but also have high connections. Their performance is, however, much below what is desired. Not only are these units inefficient, they also lose government money as they depend on loans from government banks. So most of them are indebted to the state yet they still hold large portfolio of non-performing loans. Many enterprises have diversified their production and the managers spend much of the loans on luxury activities. It is here that massive reforms need to take place. But so far the president has not moved in this area.

President Xi Jinping is considered a leader with a liberal agenda. He was instrumental early this year in a nationwide drive to check corruption and clean up the bureaucracy as well as the Communist Party. However, the result was limited. Yet he continues his efforts. Significantly, he also called on the Communist Party, which has atheism as an article of faith and requirement for membership, to include and tolerate all religions which he terms as 'traditional cultures.' So, under President Xi there is a general drive to



reform major aspects of Chinese society.

But some recent developments inside China point to the fact that the president is more of a pragmatist and realist than a reformer. There are now greater controls over the media in China. The social media, which includes the Chinese version of Facebook and Twitter, is tightly policed. Views, especially independent views, are regularly monitored. Several activists who espoused liberal causes have been jailed too.

In many ways, President Xi is sending out mixed signals. On the one hand he has lionised the Great Leader Mao Zedong. He has advocated 'rectification' of the Communist Party as well as promoted mass campaigns as Mao did, and which history tells us had once brought woe to the Chinese people. But at the same time he is closely following what his mentor, the diminutive Deng Xiao Ping who was belittled by Mao, had achieved for China. The president took his first tour after becoming president to the southern city of Shenzhen to see for himself how Deng changed China and how he could take lessons from there for his own mission to revolutionise change in his country.

Many observers have noted that President Xi is 'goal oriented and not ideologically constrained.' In order to work assiduously in that path he believes that the Communist Party of China needs to be strengthened. This he thinks will help him to promote the wellbeing of the people. The whole Chinese nation will be revitalized, as he quietly pointed out when he laid before the world his 'Chinese dream.' To President Xi it is the Communist Party that must be in full control to achieve his aims.

So where is China headed? Is it treading the traditional path of Mao Zedong, or is President Xi emulating Deng Xiao Ping to pull China out of the past and put it on the path to modernity and prosperity? It is of course time which will tell. The president has ten years to do what he wants to do with China, but we cannot forget that China is the second largest economy of the world. Whatever reforms take place in that country will definitely impact other countries in the region as well as round the world. Bangladesh, as a close neighbour of China, has deep interest in what is happening there. Ours is a market economy and we are interested to leverage the economic growth there for our own growth. As things stand we need to observe what is taking place in China for our own good.

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# India chases false prestige in space



PRAFUL BIDWAI

NATIONALIST euphoria is invariably conjured up when India conducts a new scientific experiment or makes bombs, missiles or submarines. India's entry into a "select" high-technology "club" is celebrated -- never mind its members' readiness to rain mass death upon innocent civilians.

Take the hype over the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) Mars orbiter Mangalyaan. We are told the mission's success or failure isn't relevant. What matters is that it will stir the "national spirit" and inspire youth. No price is too high for this, certainly not the mission's Rs.460-crore cost.

This column argues that the Mars mission is basically irrelevant to space science. It will divert attention from the real challenges facing the space programme, and further distort India's science priorities. Worse, the mission will draw India into dangerous space rivalry with China.

The media declared the mission successful even before Mangalyaan left the earth's gravity-field. But it failed to reach the planned maximum height of 100,000 km after three orbits around earth. ISRO didn't anticipate the glitch, but says it has fixed the problem.

However, the real problems lie ahead: in raising the orbit to 200,000 km, flinging Mangalyaan into inter-planetary space, and placing it in a Martian orbit next September.

As the partially-failed Chandraayan moon mission showed, ISRO hasn't mastered the technologies involved in such manoeuvres. So the possibility of major snags in the Mangalyaan mission is real.

Mars missions worldwide have a 50 percent-plus failure rate. Even Japan and China failed to place orbiters around Mars. ISRO hurriedly developed Mangalyaan in 15 months, whereas development time in the US or Europe is 36-48 months.

However, even if all goes according to plan, Mangalyaan will be in an orbit that's so distant (up to 80,000 km) from Mars that it can observe very little, not even a fraction of what US and European rovers/orbiters have done. The 1,350-kg Mangalyaan carries a tiny 13-kg scientific payload, compared to the latter's 100 kg-plus.

Therefore, Mangalyaan cannot add significantly to what's known about Martian topography or atmosphere. The US's Curiosity -- which roved on Mars's surface -- couldn't find methane even in the parts-per-million range. It would be a miracle if Mangalyaan, a distant orbiter, finds methane.

Mangalyaan's basic limitations arise from ISRO's 15-years-long failure to develop a Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV), which can place heavy (2,000 kg-plus) satellites into high orbits.

Instead of operationalising the GSLV and launching a bigger spacecraft with a higher scientific payload, ISRO hurriedly used the much less powerful Polar SLV to launch Mangalyaan in a low-earth orbit. This greatly limited the speed Mangalyaan could acquire -- and its abilities.

Former ISRO chairman G. Madhavan Nair, no less, has criticised the Mars mission as a "useless," "showpiece event" with no "new technology," which is meant to cover up the GSLV programme's failures.

Mangalyaan isn't about science, but about creating a spectacle. ISRO could at best gain from it some familiarity

with deep space communication technology -- necessary because it would take 6 to 42 minutes for radio signals to travel between Mangalyaan and earth.

Even here, ISRO will depend on Nasa -- as it did for Chandrayaan-I. It's not clear if ISRO can develop such capability.

In contrast, GSLV development is a higher priority. It will allow ISRO to tap the global \$2 billion commercial-satellite launch market.

Another priority is to solve the problems that plagued Chandrayaan-I. Contrary to hype, the mission didn't fulfil its stated goals. It was abandoned in 10 months, instead of the planned two years.

There were early snags with Chandrayaan-I's thermal systems, which caused overheating. More serious problems developed in its navigation system, which crippled its capacity to determine its orientation.

Then, its main sensor and computer packed up, and ground control lost contact with Chandrayaan-I, for reasons which ISRO has failed to investigate or explain. Surely, ISRO should have resolved these issues before launching Mangalyaan.

Spectacular missions like Mangalyaan and recent launches of military and surveillance satellites have raised concerns in China about India's space "ambitions." It would be unwise for India to get into a space and anti-satellite (ASAT) missile race with China.

The danger is real. In 2007, China destroyed an old satellite with ASAT. India has since worked on ASAT, and conducted several test-flights of a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) interceptor to destroy an "attacker" missile. It's now trying to develop space-based BMD capacity with the Agni-V missile.

India-China rivalry will further militarise space, a process recklessly begun by the US, which unilaterally abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 to develop space-based BMDs.

India opposed the militarisation of space for decades. It's now silent on it. It's also trying to get BMD technology from the US and Israel.

No less important than telecom satellites is the military angle of ISRO's work. India's space and missile programmes are Siamese twins. ISRO's SLV rockets form the first stage of the Agni missile series. ISRO has also launched many communications and spy satellites for the armed services.

Further expansion in ISRO's clout thus has military implications. With the Department of Atomic Energy and DRDO, ISRO already soaks up an unconscionable two-thirds of India's science and technology spending.

Diverting yet more funds to ISRO's fanciful projects means starving Indian science of resources and speeding up its decline in global terms.

That decline is stark. For decades, India was the Third World's unquestioned "science superpower." In 1980, it globally held the 8th position in the number of papers (about 15,000) published in peer-reviewed journals, while China with under 1,000 papers was a distant No 15. By 2000, China moved to No 9, with almost twice as many papers as India, now down at No 15.

Since then, China's scientific output has risen 600%, but India's only 30%. India now faces tough competition even from Brazil and Taiwan, not to mention South Korea, Australia and the Netherlands. This demands a massive shift in India's S&T priorities. The Mars mission will impede that shift.

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## President should step in to resolve crisis

The president being the head of the state enjoys the prerogative to summon both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to his office for an urgent meeting and chair that meeting to resolve the single issue: formation of a very short-lived polls-time government. General perception is that Abdul Hamid as a person is pleasantly acceptable to both the warring political camps and also a wider segment of the population regardless of their various political beliefs. I think this is because of his simple lifestyle and inherent human quality which nowadays most of our political leaders sadly lack. Why are UN, USA, and EU meddling in our domestic affairs hurting our national pride? Our leadership is immensely capable of meeting this challenge. So, it is time President showed it to the world once again that Bangladesh can do it. Have we not read the clarion call of our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam: "Oshohay jati morichhe dubiya janena shontoron / Kandari aaji dekhibo tomar matri mukti pon."?

S. A. Samad  
Boro Moghbazar, Dhaka

## Pray for Philippines' typhoon victims

Recently the people of Philippines had to face a natural calamity of a great magnitude. Typhoon Haiyan swept over the country leaving a trail of devastation. It was a category 5 typhoon with maximum sustained winds estimated at 315 kilometers an hour and gusts reaching 380 kilometers an hour; it is believed to be the strongest wind recorded.

At least 10,000 people lost their lives and the scene of destruction is so tragic that one has to gasp with pain and disbelief. Thousands of people were injured. Without food, water, and shelter they are passing their days in great misery. The United States, Australia and the United Nations have mobilised emergency aid to the Philippines. We hope other countries will also come forward to help the victims of the typhoon. We are praying so that they can overcome this misfortune.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

## Education on morality at school

Schools should teach their students morality. Moral education has a lasting effect on youngsters and not all of it will disappear with time.

In my early schooling I had a subject called moral ethics and I still hold some of the values. It appears to me that now in this commercialised world the bottom line is how to be successful. Teaching ethics might help the students to commit less evil acts in the future.

Mahbubur Rashid  
Bashundhara, Dhaka

## Comments on news report, "No policy decision, only routine work," published on November 21, 2013

Shahin Huq

What Sheikh Hasina says is law in Bangladesh. We don't need any constitution or law books.

Abul Kashem

What a unique arrangement! What an exciting and enjoyable game! If an election is held, they will be in power; if for any reason the election is not held, they will also stay in power.

Zman7

Is there any Nobel Prize in logic? Fakhrul should get one... he urged the government to accept their demand of CTG or else he said "the government would have to take the responsibility for any violence that might occur." Isn't it a good logic that he or his party will announce hartal and his party men will attack all kind of vehicles, burn and kill people, destroy public and private properties, and then he and his party will hold the government responsible for all such brutal criminal acts!

Time to Rise

No one can stay in power for ever. You may have a very bad time soon...

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"Ministries in a mess" (November 21, 2013)

Salim Ullah

This is the real picture of our ministers who have been engaged in making money through unscrupulous ways over the last 5 years.

Abul Kashem

No language can appropriately define the unpredictable characteristic of former General Ershad for his continuous 'hither and thither' policy. But one thing is clear beyond doubt that he himself made a suicidal decision by joining the so-called all-party government headed by the 'dictatorial' prime minister. It is yet to be known what reason behind the screen has prompted him to take this desperate decision.

Apel Ahmed

Amazing example of inefficiency. A small store owner of the West shows much more sense of strategy and back-up plan in his/her day-to-day operation than this country's administrator.