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Don't shoot the messenger

Resolve the issue amicably

THE proposal by a parliamentary committee to scrap the registration of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) for a "derogatory" remark on parliament is rather surprising. The TIB, in a study last month, pointed to a "low-level participation" of MPs in lawmaking, question-answer sessions and discussions on important notices in the parliament. The lawmakers had spent a meagre 6 percent of the 388 working days in the process of lawmaking from June 2014 to July this year, the study showed.

Apparently, the parliament has taken umbrage to a comment which was not a part of the report. Surprisingly, instead of taking cognizance of the substance of the report, the parliament is harping on a phraseological inappropriateness of a miniscule part of the statement. Should that be grounds for suggesting the closing down of an international anti-graft watchdog in Bangladesh?

Since its inception, TIB has been reporting objectively on issues of governance, accountability etc, and since 2001 on the performance of the parliament, which, if taken in the right spirit, would have helped the government of the day in providing good governance.

We wonder what is more unpleasant to the parliament, an off the cuff remark or the fact that during the period in review, quorum crisis has cost the public more than Tk 30 crores. Apparently, any assessment or evaluation of the work of the parliament appears to be anathema to its members.

The parliament is the house of the people and the repository of their hopes and aspirations. And it devolves on all the citizens to uphold its dignity. However, a large responsibility in this regard falls on the shoulder of the MPs on how they run the house. And that was what the TIB was trying to point out.

Observers to sick banks

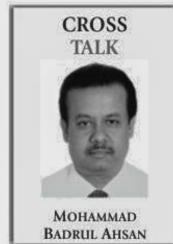
They should be more than that

IN a bid to halt the increase in non-performing loans (NPL) in four state-owned banks (SoBs) -- Sonali, Janata, Rupali and Agrani -- Bangladesh Bank (BB) has decided to appoint advisors to the ailing financial institutions. A look at the financial statements of these banks is enough to catch everyone's attention. As of June 30, NPL stood slightly over 26 percent. In laymen's terms more than Tk 1 out of Tk 4 given out in loans goes bad or is not repaid. Every year for the last few years, the ministry of finance has had to bail out these SoBs.

Weak internal controls in terms of audits and archaic operating methods where automation has not seen the light of day and lack of professionalism have contributed to the ever rising bad debt. We understand that things have gotten to the point where new branches of these banks are on hold until they do some serious revamping and come out of the "red" in terms of performance on loan recovery. The series of high profile loan scams that rocked the financial sector a few years ago came from SoBs.

The decision to appoint advisors is a welcome move, but they should be more than mere observers. We do not know what exactly their terms of reference would be, but it is a good move and they should be empowered to act in all manners to protect the interest of all stakeholders, depositors in particular. Otherwise, the initiative, no matter how well intentioned, will merely be another round of window dressing.

Terrorist attacks ring out crisis of conscience



CROSS TALK

THE series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris last Friday killed 129 people, and some of those wounded remain in critical conditions. While terrorist attacks are now a regular

phenomenon around the world, it still raises indignation every time another bomb goes off killing more people. Alarmingly, those who get killed are mostly civilians including women and children at times. They are guilty of the politics of their politicians no more than a butterfly flapping its wings two continents away is responsible for a tornado outbreak.

Let's for argument's sake accept that these terrorists have got genuine grievances to lash out at the world. They are oppressed and they are deprived. Let's also accept millions of refugees fleeing their homes often find it insensitive when the countries, which have caused their dislocations and sufferings, hesitate to give them shelter. If poverty leads to perfidy, deprivation and cruelty spawn depravity.

But that doesn't explain why modern-day terrorists don't have a conscience. One could understand if they targeted military installations, facilities and personnel. One could understand if they hit out at governments and their organs. Oppression of the oppressor restores a sense of natural balance.

Once upon a time there was something called "the terrorist conscience". The first assassination attempt on Grand Duke Sergei, Governor General of Moscow, in 1905 had failed because Russian revolutionary Ivan Kalyayev refused to kill the children, who were riding in the Grand Duke's carriage. It was in the name of that same conscience that another revolutionary Boris Savinkov was opposed to an attempt on Sergei's successor Admiral Dubassov in the Petersburg-Moscow express because the explosion could kill "strangers". His comrade Voinarovsky made it clear he wasn't going to throw the bomb if Dubassov were accompanied by his wife.

Thus terrorism was once a precision

art. The revolutionaries targeted their enemies and eliminated them without having the innocent people suffer death and devastation. In their bid to change the world, they refused to kill more people than needed. They killed not to terrorise, but for the same reason surgeons operate patients to remove malignant tumours. The targets of those attacks were kings, ministers, police chiefs and other persons of political or military importance.

Thus the terrorist attack on ordinary

uprising against the Roman Republic. But the masters had exacted their revenge on the slaves at a usurious price. Six thousand survivors of the revolt captured by the legions of Crassus were crucified, lining the Appian Way from Rome to Capua. Wholesale killing has always been the preserve of the ruling class.

The suicide bombers have turned that game on its head as those who are ruled discovered that their anguished souls could unleash the energy of deadly

produced the innumerable serpents that infest Africa.

The terrorists are also failing to see their mistakes. Not all people in a country have voted for their government in power and neither are they to blame for its hideous policies. Yet some of these people get killed or maimed when suicide bombs indiscriminately explode in public places. Miscarriage of justice doesn't rectify injustice. The blood of subjects doesn't wash the guilt of their rulers.



PHOTO: AFP

people is a recent phenomenon, perhaps the attack on the Twin Towers being its first and single biggest manifestation. Earlier, rulers carried out mass executions to put down mutinies or conquer another kingdom. Religious wars and inquisitions also victimised common people. A large number of civilians died in the two World Wars including six million Jews sent to the gas chambers and over 300,000 Japanese killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the American bombs.

Revolutionaries have carried out retail executions of their enemies since the days of Spartacus, who had led a slave

bombs. Explosives tied to the body, an individual could kill hundreds so long as he was ready to get himself blown up. It has also created this new crisis of conscience when people are getting punished for the sins of their politicians.

When the Taliban started it in Afghanistan, it was still a national crisis that Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have made global. Hardly a corner of the world is left that doesn't live in the fear of terrorist reprisals. Yet the world doesn't realise that the war against terror is only repeating the Greek myth of Medusa, which has it that the blood dropping from her severed head has

It takes conscience to make that distinction. The western powers are supposedly killing for a cause; and the terrorists are allegedly looking for a cause to kill. But how does anybody distinguish the regular victims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan from the sporadic victims elsewhere both in savagery and statistics? Innocent people are getting killed on both sides of this dangerous divide. Explosions merely ring out that inane crisis of conscience afflicting everyone.

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Is the parliament above question?



THE SOUND & THE FURY

SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

THE constitutional guarantee that the parliament, as a representative of the people, must provide a platform on which public concerns can be addressed, legislation passed, and executive action monitored may seem self-evident. It

may also seem equally apparent that we, as the people, can and ought to hold the parliament accountable, if and when it deters from its track. Yet, in Bangladesh, the obvious is the anomaly. The role of the parliament, in the current political context, remains dubious, with 153 in a House of 300 elected without a single vote being cast, and amid accusations that the opposition – an essential component of a well-functioning democracy – is a "puppet" of the ruling party, forming a part of the cabinet. But questioning its efficacy is, apparently, reason enough to be accused of treason.

The extent of the parliament's existential angst – and that of democracy itself – can perhaps be gauged from a recent report published by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) titled *Parliament Watch* and the subsequent reaction from prominent MPs of the ruling and opposition parties. In the report, the anti-graft watchdog scrutinises the performance of the lawmakers during the 10th Jatiya Sangshad and reveals that only 6 percent of 388 working hours were spent in formulating and passage of 30 laws; only 29 of 350 lawmakers (including 50 women MPs) of the current parliament participated in the process of enactment of these laws and an average of 30 minutes were spent in total in passing a bill, including discussion of the bill and the Minister's speech. Let's take a moment to ponder this. It takes us considerably longer than 30 minutes to even discuss and agree on which articles should go in a four-page supplement, but are we to assume that it is ample time for the parliament to place, discuss and pass a law – a law which, to state the obvious, has colossal, and even irreversible, implications for the country and the people?

Which brings us to the next obvious question: if the MPs are not debating and passing laws in the parliament, what exactly are they doing in all that time spent in the sessions at a per minute cost of Tk. 111,000? Analysing the second to sixth session from June 2014 to July this year, the TIB concludes that the MPs lauded their parties and

government 7,500 times and criticised the BNP-led alliance – which has no presence in the parliament – 7,268 times. The numbers, staggering as they are, can hardly come as a surprise to those who listen to the parliamentary sessions on radio from time to time and are left wondering: titillating as the gossip is, what exactly does a certain person's relationship with Khaleda have anything to do with allocations in the national budget?

Interestingly still, much of the praise of the government and criticism of the BNP came from none other than the Jatiya party-led opposition itself. A rare and laudable case of solidarity, you say? But when we consider that they did not take a strong position even on their own proposals, voting instead in support of the government decision, we are left wondering whether the TIB was accurate or seditious, as some MPs are suggesting, in terming the opposition as the "government's B-team."

Even if we were to ignore the context in which our current opposition came to take their place within the House, we surely cannot dispense with the crucial role that an opposition, as a shadow government, has to play in a Westminster-style parliament. The fact that our current opposition forms a part of the cabinet itself – an unprecedented occurrence in the history of this country and in the countries that practice this system – highlights an obvious conflict of interest. No one's saying that an opposition must by definition be uncivil towards the government, but it must keep the latter on its toes, scrutinising and debating the policies and bills proposed, recommending amendments when necessary and putting the spotlight on serious issues that affect the public but which may otherwise be ignored by the government.

Seen in that light, however, one might well ask: since when has Bangladesh had a functioning opposition in the parliament who actually cared about scrutinising legislation and holding the government accountable anyway? During the 9th Parliament (2009-13), for instance, the BNP-led opposition MPs joined a meagre 76 of 418 times, opting rather to wage street agitations that turned alarmingly violent towards the end; prior to that, the AL MPs skipped 223 of 373 sittings. How ironic that our parties should go to any length to be represented in the parliament but have so little interest in actual parliamentary proceedings! The sad truth is that we have long made a mockery of the parliament and democratic participation, the price of which has been paid by the people.

The parliament must, by its very definition, remain accountable to the people, allowing

albeit fostering constructive criticism on its activities. It is thus shocking that the TIB report was not only gunned down on and off the floors of the parliament as being "seditious," and "motivated," but a parliamentary committee has recommended that the NGO affairs bureau cancels the registration of TIB for not apologising for their "derogatory comments" on the parliament. Earlier, Suranjit Sengupta, chief of the standing committee on the law ministry, had threatened to do so if the TIB didn't apologise within three days, adding that the "the organisation will also have to vow that it will never ever make any comment on parliament and the country's constitution." In response, the TIB, which has published *Parliament Watch* every year since 2001, had said they would apologise if the committee can identify where in the report they made a mistake.

The committee or the outraged MPs are yet to specify what, if anything, is incorrect in the TIB's research findings or methodology. Apparently, the MPs are furious over a particular phrase used by the TIB chief, but is the use of an expression, however injudiciously made, enough, we ask, to justify the cancellation of registration of an organisation of such importance as the TIB? The committee is recommending that a new provision be introduced in the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation to revoke the registration of any NGO for "indecent comment" on the country, parliament or the constitution. What exactly, however, counts as indecent comment? Wouldn't any criticism against the government or any form of dissent then be reason enough to have an NGO's registration cancelled? In addition, going by Sengupta's comments, are we to accept that the TIB – and by corollary, any other NGO – can never make a comment on the parliament? We can only shudder at what the repercussions of this would be for freedom of expression and an already shrinking space for civil society in the country.

Sengupta declared that anyone who violates the constitution or speaks against it should be charged with sedition. With all due respect to the MP and in fear of being reprimanded, I ask, what happens when MPs themselves violate constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and the right to dissent? What happens when they cannot fulfil their constitutional mandate as parliamentarians? Who holds them to account, if those who dare raise a voice are castigated?

The writer is an activist and journalist.

COMMENTS

"France strikes ISIS targets"
(November 17, 2015)

Ahmed Farhad Salim

IS should be destroyed; no doubt about it. But wars will not solve this. IS or Al-Qaeda are not just terrorist groups. These are ideologies. The ideologies need to be fought.

Shakib Ahmed

Now innocent Syrians will be the scapegoat.

"Will our workers get a better deal this time?"
(November 17, 2015)

Marium

It depends on the negotiating skills of our government.

Toyiaba Ahmed

Our workers always get deprived in other countries. They are the least paid.

"Eiffel Tower goes dark as France mourns deaths"
(November 16, 2015)

Mohammad Shoeb Hassan Siddique

I understand, but what about Palestine, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq? Do all such innocent people live outside the Middle East only?

Farhana Ali

In times like these what we need more than ever is global unity.

Wouldn't any criticism against the government or any form of dissent then be reason enough to have an NGO's registration cancelled? In addition, going by Sengupta's comments, are we to accept that the TIB – and by corollary, any other NGO – can never make a comment on the parliament?