

# Parliamentary Democracy in Bangladesh: An Evaluation of the Parliament during 1991–2006

M. MONIRUZZAMAN

*Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia*

**ABSTRACT** *This study of three parliaments in Bangladesh during 1991–2006 argues that parliament has failed to become the centre of political and legislative activities. This is mainly because the ruling parties deliberately bypass parliament, while the opposition deserts it. The parliament has been dysfunctional for more than half of its tenure. For the short periods it has been active, its business sessions were devoted more to party political bickering than legislative activity. Due to the opposition boycott, the ruling party's negligence and the absenteeism of ordinary members, the standing committees of the parliaments were less effective, and parliamentary accountability of government was lacking.*

On gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh adopted the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. The system, however, was replaced in quick succession by authoritarianism (Islam, 1986), single party system (Ahmed, 1991) and personal rule (Moten, 1990). The mass upsurge against the personal rule of General Hussein Muhammad Ershad in 1990 led to elections in 1991 which once again installed the parliamentary system that lasted until 2006. During this period, three elected parliaments completed the five-year constitutional term.

This study attempts a comparative analysis of the performance of the Bangladesh parliament during the era of parliamentary democracy (1991–2006). It analyses three parliaments, i.e. the Fifth (1991–95), Seventh

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*Correspondence Address:* M. Moniruzzaman, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, Kuala Lumpur 53100, Malaysia.  
Email: mmzaman@iiu.edu.my

(1996–2000) and the Eighth (2001–06). The Sixth Parliament, which lasted for only 12 days (19–30 March 1996) and passed only one law is inconsequential to the analysis attempted here. The three parliaments are assessed using the following criteria: attitude of the ruling party towards parliament; attitude of the opposition parties towards parliament; nature of parliamentary sessions; administration of business sessions; and finally, the public accountability of the parliament. The study argues that despite the adoption of a parliamentary system, the parliament largely remained ineffective and dysfunctional.

### **Basic Features of the Three Parliaments**

The fifth parliamentary elections were held on 27 February 1991 under the caretaker government. A total of 2,063 candidates belonging to 75 political parties and 424 independent candidates contested the elections for 300 seats. In the elections, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) emerged as the single largest party obtaining 140 seats followed by Awami League (AL) 88, Jatiya Party (JP) 35 and Jamat-i-Islami (JI) 18, respectively (see Table 1). The BNP formed the government with JI support while AL was declared the parliamentary opposition (Baxter & Rahman, 1991).

The seventh parliamentary elections were held on 12 June 1996 which registered an unprecedented 74.15 per cent voter turnout. A total of 81 parties contested the elections. Contesting all 300 seats, AL secured 146, 58 seats up from 1991; BNP bagged 116, down 24 from 1991; JP won 32, down 3 from 1991. Compared to AL's increase in seats, BNP's loss was minimal despite its suffering from an anti-government movement during the last two years of its rule. While JP maintained almost same number of seats, JI performed badly gaining only 3, down 15 from 1991. In the Seventh Parliament, the former opposition AL formed the cabinet with the support of JP, while the former ruling party BNP went into opposition. The BNP became the largest opposition party in the parliamentary history of Bangladesh.

The eighth parliamentary elections were held on 1 October 2001 and were contested in a different manner. A strong coalition of four parties namely the BNP, JI, JP and Islami Okkyo Jote (IOJ) confronted the AL and won 264 seats. AL performed poorly securing only 62 seats, compared to 146 in the previous election, giving the coalition an easy and comfortable majority. The four-party alliance formed the government under the leadership of BNP. The AL denounced the result outright and resorted to 'street politics' accusing the BNP of election fraud.<sup>1</sup>

The three parliaments completed the five-year terms as stipulated in the Constitution. As shown in Table 1, in the three parliaments none of the parties had an absolute majority of seats; consequently, the larger parties depended upon the JP or JI to form the government.

**Table 1.** Elections and composition of the three parliaments, 1991–2006

Major parties	Fifth Parliament (1991–95) seats		Seventh Parliament (1996–2000) seats		Eighth Parliament (2001–06) seats	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
BNP	300	140	300	116	300	264 (4-party alliance)
AL	264	88	300	146	300	56
JP	272	35	293	32	300	17(JP Ershad)
JI	222	18	300	3		
BAKSAL	68	5				
CPB	49	5				
IOJ			165	1		
JSD and Other	1188	6	935	1		
Independents	424	3	281	1		
Government formed by	BNP		AL	BNP-led coalition		

BNP = Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

AL = Awami League.

JP = Jatiya Party.

JI = Jamat-i-Islami.

BAKSAL = Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League.

CPB = Communist Party of Bangladesh.

IOJ = Islami Oikkyo Jot.

JSD = Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal.

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Bangladesh Elections Commission, 1991, 1996, 2001.

### **Ruling Party Attitude towards Parliament: Deliberate Bypassing**

It is standard parliamentary procedure that the government initially presents a white paper on an important issue before introducing legislation. The issue is then publicly debated by various concerned and interest groups throughout the country. Taking various opinions and concerns into consideration, the government presents the bill to the parliament. The bill in turn goes to the concerned parliamentary committee for scrutiny and at the same time is discussed in the House. Finally, the House decides on the bill. However, it is observed that due to their comfortable majority in parliament ruling parties in Bangladesh chose to bypass the parliament in making major laws.

The dominance of the Treasury Bench was quite apparent during the Fifth Parliament (1991–95). According to the pre-election agreement among the political parties, the primary duty of the Fifth Parliament was to agree a

constitutional amendment to switch to the parliamentary system. However, some sources indicate that the ruling BNP was not much inclined to immediately change the constitution as it wanted to enjoy some prerogatives of the presidential system introduced earlier by President Ziaur Rahman (Hakim, 1992). Thus the Treasury Bench, in the beginning of the Fifth Parliament, promulgated three ordinances relating to restrictions on floor crossing in the House, the Presidential Election Act and Presidential Election Amendment Act which proposed presidential election through open ballot. Apparently, through these ordinances the government wanted to ensure election of its presidential candidate in the House.

Laws relating to these issues were inseparably related to the proposed constitutional amendment. The ruling party wanted to strengthen the power of the president before it opted for constitutional amendment favouring parliamentary democracy. However, the ruling party had to back down because of opposition pressure and because the High Court declared the promulgations illegal. Finally, the BNP moved the Constitution (Twelfth Amendment) Bill 1991 in the House on 2 July, which was referred to a 15 member Select Committee consisting of the ruling and opposition parties for review. The committee came up with a unanimous report and placed it before the House on 6 August for approval. After two rounds of voting, the Bill was passed by 307 votes to none. The proposed change in the constitution was subsequently ratified in a nationwide referendum held in September making parliamentary democracy constitutional (Hakim & Haque, 1994).

Despite constitutional change, the attitude of the ruling party towards parliament remained unchanged. In this, it was assisted by the opposition boycott of the parliament. The Fifth Parliament under BNP had very little opportunity to engage in legislative activities, and arguably the boycott led the government to promulgate laws easily. The BNP government during 1991–95 passed most of its 172 laws enacted by promulgation. Only 4.0 per cent of the total bills were scrutinised by the relevant committees, and an impressive 34.7 per cent of the bills were originally ordinances (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Nature of bills passed by the parliaments

Parliaments	Nature of bills (% of total)		
	Ordinance-turned bills	New bills	Bills scrutinised by committees
Fifth	21.0	34.7	4.0
Seventh	28.4	8.4	92.06
Eighth	185	4.0	29.0

Source: Ahmed (2003); 'Parliament Watch: 2001–2006 (February, 2007)'. Available at [http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page\\_id=401](http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page_id=401) (accessed 17 April 2007).

A prominent ordinance-turned bill was the Anti-Terrorist Bill (1994) aimed at controlling the deteriorating law and order in the country. This bill was reportedly promulgated when it was under review by the parliamentary committee. It was presented later to the parliament for approval. The BNP coalition government during the Eighth Parliament (2001–06) also maintained the same attitude of executive domination of the legislature. The most important of the 185 bills that the BNP government passed, such as the Speedy Trial Tribulation Act 2002, during the Eighth Parliament were by promulgation. During the Fifth and Eighth Parliaments, bills scrutinised by concerned committees were negligible (see Table 2).

The ruling party AL during the Seventh Parliament (1996–2001) also maintained the heavy hand of the executive branch in making laws. The AL government deliberately bypassed the parliament on many occasions and promulgated a substantial number of ordinances that were later ratified by the parliament. Among the three most important ordinance-turned bills passed in the Seventh Parliament were: Ganges Water Sharing Treaty with India (1996), Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Treaty (1997), and Anti-Terrorist Bill (2000). In making these laws the parliament played only a secondary role of mere ratification. These three bills followed none of the prescribed procedures. However, during the Seventh Parliament 92 per cent of the bills were scrutinised by the relevant committees before being presented to the parliament for approval.

The AL generally tended to sideline the parliament during the Seventh Parliament despite the fact that the BNP as opposition party remained relatively more parliament-oriented, at least initially. Sharing of Ganges water with India has been a persistent national problem dating back to the Pakistani period. After independence, the problem remained unsolved as India disregarded Bangladeshi requests. The AL, which had traditionally maintained cordial relations with India, seized the opportunity to deal with the problem. Within six months of its coming to power it signed a 30-year water sharing treaty with India in December 1996.

The Ganges Water Treaty came as a complete surprise. The government maintained tight secrecy about the negotiations leading to the treaty, keeping the parliament and the nation in the dark. The government disclosed the upcoming treaty little more than a week earlier. Experts believed that the secrecy maintained was motivated by a desire to present the nation with a pleasant surprise and to claim exclusive credit. But the government failed to recognise that it was following a strategy subversive to the parliamentary system. It also believed that the secrecy was maintained under strong Indian pressure due to its fear that such a long-term treaty would face tremendous opposition in Bangladesh. The treaty was subsequently ratified in the parliament by virtue of a sheer majority with no discussion. Such practices

were tantamount to following the practice of the authoritarian regime. The AL was severely criticised for its deliberate bypassing of parliament on this important issue.

About a year later in 1997 the AL signed the historic Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty. The tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region had been struggling for independence since 1971. Until 1997, the governments resisted the demand of independence or autonomy for the region. The AL government decided to grant autonomy to the region through an executive order. The government turned down numerous requests to have a parliamentary debate on the issue, and went ahead with signing the treaty and submitting it to the parliament for ratification. During discussion in the parliament, there were as many as 1,455 amendments made on each of the four bills relating to the CHT treaty, and considering the unmanageability of responding to all these amendments only 11 opposition members were given the floor to speak on the bills.

The People Security Act 2000 was enacted by promulgation as well. In a similar way, many of the 190 laws enacted during the AL government had been ordinance-turned bills. Examples of such promulgations are national holidays on Sheikh Mujib's birthday and demise, Sheikh Mujib's Return Day,<sup>2</sup> National Mourning Day,<sup>3</sup> two days of weekly holiday, and the mandatory display of Sheikh Mujib's portrait in every public office and subsidised educational institutions. Among the bills that were passed by the House without following proper procedures were the Indemnity Ordinance (Repeal) Bill and conferring on Sheikh Mujib the titles of *Bangabandhu* and *Father of the Nation*. In early September 2000, the government also approved a proposal to repeal the Enemy Property Law, a legacy of the Pakistani past.<sup>4</sup>

The most controversial bill that the government had passed by the Seventh Parliament in the absence of the opposition was the Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act. The law provided for lifelong security by the Special Security Force (SSF), along with other large benefits, to the sisters Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Sheikh Rehana Siddique, as daughters of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These included houses for the sisters, a grant of one million Taka to the children of Sheikh Rehana, as well as a monthly allowance of Taka 1,500 until they attained the age of 25 years. Sheikh Hasina was allocated the prime minister's official residence, while Sheikh Rehana was given a state-owned house worth \$US10 million at a token price of Taka 1,001. Sheikh Hasina was also entitled to a six-member personal catering staff, free medical treatment in the country and abroad, a fleet of cars, free telephone, and SSF military protection when abroad.

One obvious sign of the ruling party's attitude was the poor attendance by the prime minister of parliamentary sessions in all the three parliaments. During the Seventh and Eighth Parliament, the PM attended the House for only a few out of the total working days.

### Opposition Attitude towards Parliament: Deliberate Desertion

If the ruling parties generally tended to undermine the parliament, the opposition parties used the strategy of ‘boycotting the sessions’ to put the sitting government under pressure. Desertion of parliament on the part of opposition parties has been observed as a dominant phenomenon in Bangladesh politics during the last three parliaments. The opposition deserted the Fifth Parliament 300 (75 per cent) out of a total of 400 days at work; it deserted the Seventh Parliament 156 (40.83 per cent) out of a total of 382 days, and it deserted the Eighth Parliament 223 (59.78 per cent) out of 373 days at work (see Table 3). During the three parliaments the opposition remained absent for 58.78 per cent of the sessions.

The tendency to boycott or desert the parliament is probably due to the experience of non-cooperation, mass agitation, street demonstrations and violent politics during the Ershad regime (1980s). Street politics overthrew the Ershad regime and was successfully utilised to make the BNP government very unpopular during the Fifth Parliament. Secondly, the ruling AL and BNP during the 1991–2006 parliamentary era had very little experience of parliamentary etiquette compared to anti-government opposition and street politics. Until 1991, the BNP ruled for about three years (1979–82) and were in opposition for about ten years (1982–91). In the case of AL, it was in opposition, until assuming power in mid-1996, for over 20 years compared to ruling for about three and a half years (1972–75). Therefore, the extra-parliamentary behaviour of the opposition in the form of boycotts and street politics continued to dominate opposition behaviour.

**Table 3.** Opposition presence and boycott of parliament

Parliament				Opposition		
Under study	Tenure	Sessions	At work (days)	Boycott (days)	Presence (days)	Absenteeism (%)
Fifth (1991–95)	4y 8m	22	400	300	100	75.00
Seventh (1996–2000)	5y	18	382	156	126	40.83
Eighth (2001–06)	5y	23	373	223	150	59.78
Total			1159	679	376	58.78

Sources: Compiled and calculated by the author based on various sources such as the *New Age* (Dhaka), 28 Oct. 2006; *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 28 Oct. 2005; *Daily Naya Diganta* (Dhaka), 28 Oct. 2006.

During 1991–2006, AL and its allies twice went to the opposition benches, while BNP and its allies went once. But while on the opposition benches AL and BNP demonstrated a similar attitude towards the parliament. Immediately after elections the would-be opposition party rejected the election results outright, alleging electoral corruption, threatened to boycott the oath-taking session but attended eventually and walked out immediately. During the subsequent sessions, the opposition boycotted the parliament on various grounds and sometimes for a number of sessions continuously, but attended the parliament for a brief period prior to 90 consecutive days of absence.<sup>5</sup>

After the 1991 general elections, the AL rejected the results and immediately started an anti-government movement through agitation, demonstrations and violence (Baxter, 1992). The AL leader allegedly vowed to the ruling BNP ‘you have won the power, but we will not let you be in peace for even a day’ (*Daily Inqilab*, 26 March 1991). As such, immediately after the opposition took the oath, it resorted to street politics, deserting the parliament. A number of issues during the first three years of the Fifth Parliament favoured AL’s anti-government politics which ultimately developed a tradition of boycotting parliament.

### **Opposition during the Fifth Parliament**

During the Fifth Parliament the opposition boycott of the parliament centred on three major issues, namely the Ghulam Azam and Magura-2 by-elections, and the caretaker government. On these issues, the opposition completely and consistently boycotted nine of the total 22 sessions (see Table 3). Firstly, Ghulam Azam was officially declared the leader of the JI in 1991, which the opposition AL and its allies did not accept on the ground of his alleged foreign citizenship.<sup>6</sup> The following year a civilian committee named *Ghadanik* held a mock trial of Ghulam Azam in an open court for war crimes in 1971 and sentenced him to death. The AL actively sided with and supported the *Ghadanik* move and demanded that Ghulam Azam be tried for war crimes. The opposition boycotted the parliament several times over this demand and staged general strikes nationwide. In response to the opposition pressure and public disorder created, the government arrested Ghulam Azam and referred his case to the court.<sup>7</sup>

The second major issue concerned the Magura-2 parliamentary seat which fell vacant in 1993 due to the death of its AL representative. This seat was an AL stronghold, but in the by-election the AL lost to a BNP candidate. The AL accused the government of election fraud, rejected the election result and bolstered the anti-government movement through further alienating the parliament. The opposition boycott of parliament now centred on the fourth major issue – a demand for total reform of the Elections Commission (EC) and



introduction of a caretaker government that would conduct all general elections. The ruling party did not yield to any of these demands and the opposition maintained a continuous boycott of parliament.

Consequently, the parliament was rendered virtually irrelevant for about two years, which worried the ruling party. The political instability in Bangladesh even attracted foreign attention. To appease the opposition, the government proposed an interim government and attempted to amend the People's Representative Order 1972 aiming at strengthening the electoral process and the EC, but the opposition rejected such initiatives. Several efforts by the Speaker of the House failed to produce any result. The good offices extended by the Commonwealth Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku and former Governor General of Australia Sir Ninian Stephen to mediate the crisis failed due to opposition stubbornness.<sup>8</sup> The US ambassador and the British and Canadian High Commissioners' efforts to mediate also failed to make any breakthrough.

Opposition politics achieved high momentum when a section of civil service professionals joined hands with the opposition. The opposition took for granted the downfall of the BNP government, so it pushed the parliament towards further irrelevance. It announced an ultimatum to the government to either accept the demand for a caretaker government by 27 December 1994, or face an *en masse* resignation from the parliament on the following day. The Speaker's final attempt was also unsuccessful resulting in an *en masse* resignation by the opposition on 28 December after fulfilling a parliamentary boycott for 300 days. During these 300 days of boycott, the opposition maintained street politics through mass agitation, demonstrations and frequent *hartals*.<sup>9</sup> In 1994 alone, the opposition observed 14 nationwide *hartals*, four blockades, and three *gheraos* (siege).<sup>10</sup> The democratically elected opposition was active in the streets while the parliament remained neglected. As Rasheduzzaman (1997: 258) observes:

For two years, Bangladesh democracy was caught between a government whose credibility was questioned and an irresponsible opposition that stimulated the destabilising street politics instead of working through the constitutional process. As a result public esteem for both the government and the opposition dwindled and politicians were viewed with cynicism. Intellectual permissiveness toward unfettered *hartal*, boycott, and protests was a dangerous signal for democracy and institution-building.

### **Opposition during the Seventh Parliament**

BNP in its turn in opposition during the Seventh Parliament (1996-2000) continued the inherited method of deliberate desertion of parliament, following

**Table 4.** Sample attendance of members in the Eighth Parliament (% of the total 373 working days)

Presence	Number of MPs	Absence	Number of MPs and their affiliation
50%	113 (out of 330)	75% or more	48 (17 ruling, 31 opposition)
76%	74 (out of 330)	75%	61 (30 ruling, 31 opposition)
50% or more	104 (47 ruling, 61 opposition)	60%	opposition boycott

Source: prepared by the author based on 'Parliament Watch: 2001–2006 (February, 2007)'. Available at [http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page\\_id=401](http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page_id=401) (accessed 17 April 2007).

in the footsteps of the AL. Compared to BNP, the AL government (as mentioned earlier) passed a number of important bills in the parliament and the opposition had proper opportunity to challenge those bills in the parliament. Instead, the opposition continued the anti-government drive through boycotting the parliament and numerous *hartals*, sit-in protests, demonstrations and non-cooperation until June 2000. After keeping the parliament paralysed for about 11 months (Table 4) the opposition returned to the House on 20 June 2000 for a while. The opposition reasoned that its return to parliament was in order to prevent constitutional change, while political observers explained that the move was meant to save its membership which would expire in about 23 days due to continuous absence.<sup>11</sup>

True to extra-parliamentary activities, the opposition BNP and its allies observed 276 days of nationwide *hartals* and strikes in relation to particularly the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty. During the Seventh Parliament, the BNP and other opposition parties boycotted for 156 days, and, either partially or completely, ten out of a total of 18 sessions. Even if the opposition attended the parliament sometimes, it made repeated walkouts on mostly trivial issues. During the Seventh Parliament the opposition recorded 100 walkouts.

### Opposition during the Eighth Parliament

During the Eighth Parliament, the opposition AL behaved in the traditional pattern. It stayed away from the first two sessions and first attended the parliament in its third session (24 June 2002), eight months after its beginning; but then boycotted the parliament from 25 June 2003, rejoining it on 12 May 2004 to retain membership. Again the opposition started a prolonged boycott from 31 January 2005, and returned to parliament on 12 February 2006 to save its

membership. The opposition AL boycotted the parliament for 223 out of a total of 373 working days. Therefore, the major characteristic of the three parliaments is that they were boycotted by the opposition most of the time. Out of a total 1,155 working days, the three parliaments were boycotted for 679 days, and worked for only 476 days. This means the parliaments worked for only 41.12 per cent of total days and remained boycotted for 58.78 per cent (Table 3).

Apart from party decisions, individual members of both the treasury and opposition benches generally showed a relaxed attitude to attending parliamentary sessions. Besides declared boycotts and routine walkouts, the members generally avoided attendance. A survey of attendance in the Eighth Parliament shows this general pattern (see Table 4).

Many believe that the opposition during the three parliaments could have played a more constructive role by attending the parliament instead of deserting it.<sup>12</sup> Common people have been developing an increasingly negative attitude towards such irresponsible behaviour by the opposition. A survey conducted in 2000 suggested that 69.94 per cent of the public believed that both parties were responsible for the parliamentary impasse, while 16.46 per cent held the ruling party and 13.60 per cent held the opposition responsible for deserting the parliament.<sup>13</sup> A particular claim of the opposition has been that they were given disproportionately less time to speak in the House compared to the treasury bench members. A survey of time utilisation in the three parliaments substantiates the claim. However, the claimed level of disproportion is apparently not substantial. A sample survey of the Seventh Parliament shows that the treasury bench enjoyed 140.87 hours, while the opposition was given 113.02 hours for deliberations. However, the opposition enjoyed more time for deliberations on a number of issues such as Thanks Motion on Presidential Speech and General Law and Order situation (see Table 5).

An analysis of the three parliaments under study shows that the opposition usually attended three types of sessions – budget, vote of thanks on the Presidential speech, and the session that supposedly annuls membership due to continuous absence. However, as Table 4 shows, there was a general tendency of absenteeism from the parliament in the members of both the ruling and the opposition parties. The opposition leader, for instance, during the Eighth Parliament attended only 45 out of a total of 373 sittings.

### **Nature of Parliamentary Sessions**

This section analyses the nature of deliberations in parliamentary sessions. It underscores three basic characteristics: abusive deliberations, personality cult and the accusation/counter-accusation game.

Table 5. Time utilisation in the Seventh Parliament, 1996–2000

Session	Important topic	Hours allocated	Time utilised (hr/min)		Total hours utilised	Remarks
			Opposition	Treasury		
First	Budget 1996–97	40	23.43	21.52	45.35	Opposition walkout 6
Second	General	–				
Third	Thanks motion on President's speech	20	12.22	10.06	22.28	
	Share market	–	01.02	01.00	02.02	
	Water treaty	–	01.10	01.12	02.22	
Fourth	Transit & regional issues	–	01.08	01.08	02.16	Opposition walkout 1
Fifth	Budget 1997–98	40	22.46	24.53	47.39	Opposition walkout 6
Sixth	General					
Seventh	Law & order (CHT incident)	–	00.11	02.03	02.14	BNP, JI absent
Eighth	Thanks motion on President's speech	20	07.25	13.37	21.02	JI absent, opposition walkout 15
	CHT peace treaty	–	00.39	01.29	02.08	BNP, JI absent
	Shahid Miner incident	–	01.14	01.12	02.26	JI absent
Ninth	Budget 1998–99	40	09.46	11.16	21.02	BNP absent for 11 days, opposition walkout 6

(Table continued)

Table 5. Continued

Session	Important topic	Hours allocated	Time utilised (hr/min)		Total hours utilised	Remarks
			Opposition	Treasury		
Tenth	Opening of Jamuna bridge	—	00.26	00.39	01.05	BNP, JI absent.
11th	Flood situation	—	02.14	01.48	04.02	
12th	General	—				
	Thanks motion on President's speech	20	04.53	05.58	10.51	Opposition walkout 15
13th	Prices of essential goods	—	01.00	00.58	01.53	Opposition walkout 17
	Electricity & Gas crisis	—	01.03	00.40	01.43	Opposition walkout 17
	Budget 1999–2000	40	20.44	19.37	40.21	Opposition walkout 17
	Law & Order	—	00.59	01.04	02.03	JI absent
	Foreign policy	—	01.17	01.32	02.49	JI absent
14th	AAPP	—	00.07	01.08	01.15	BNP, JI absent
15th	General	—				
16th	Thanks motion on President's speech	10+10	02.13	21.35	23.48	BNP, JI absent
17th	General	—				BNP, JI absent
18th	Budget	—				Opposition attended for a little while
Total		240	113.02	140.87	257.84	

Source: Bangladesh *Jatiya Sangshad* (National Parliament) Homepage, [www.parliament.gov.bd](http://www.parliament.gov.bd). Slightly adjusted by the author.

### *Abusive Deliberations*

Parliamentarians and legislators are judged by their eloquent deliberations, sound and rational reasoning in debate, and critical analysis and alternative suggestions for contentious issues. However, the most disappointing aspect of the parliamentary business sessions has been the absence of these essential qualities in the legislators. Discussions and deliberations were generally confined to eulogising respective party leaders and abusing opponents. All the major political parties were branded with specific derogatory labels by each other. Following are some of the abusive terms used in the parliament:

*Dalal*: Collaborator, a very insulting remark against JI for its 1971 pro-Pakistani role.

*Shwadinatar shatru*: Enemy of national independence, used by all parties against each other.

*Janagoner shatru*: Enemy of the people, used by all parties against each other.

*Panchattarer ghatok*: Killer of 1975, referring to the BNP for its alleged involvement in killing Mujib, his family and associates by military coup.

*Ekattarer ghatok o dalal*: Collaborator and killer of 1971, referring to JI and other Islamic parties that opposed the war of independence and collaborated with the Pakistani regime.

*Shairachari*: Autocrat, referring especially to Ershad.

*Bishwabeheya*: Great adulterer, referring to Ershad.

*Chor*: Thief, referring to the BNP in relation to its alleged election fraud and fertiliser scandal.

Discussions and deliberations were mostly found to be irrelevant and off the topic. For instance, a partial survey (2003–06) of the Eighth Parliament suggests that the MPs resorted to irrelevant discussion 962 times, of which the ruling party MPs shared 70.79 per cent and the opposition accounted for 29.21 per cent. There were some 547 occasions when the Speaker had to issue warnings over irrelevant discussion, and he switched off the microphones of the MPs 66 times for the same reason, for which both the ruling and opposition were equally responsible (see Table 6). In some extreme situations the Speaker had to suspend the sessions several times to control abusive, noisy and derogatory deliberations.

### *Personality Cult*

Personality cult was a dominant characteristic of business sessions in all three parliaments (Table 6). The AL had been obsessed with the cult of the person of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the celebrated party leader and the leader of

**Table 6.** Nature of parliamentary sessions (partially from 2003 to 2006)

Issues	Total number of incidents	Ruling party MPs (%)	Opposition MPs (%)
Personality cult	1,058	74	26
Discussion switching to irrelevant issues	962	70.79	29.21
Warning given to MPs for irrelevant discussion	547	67	33
Switching off microphone	66	50	50
Accusation/counter-accusation	990	71.01	29.09

Source: prepared by the author based on 'Parliament Watch: 2001–2006 (February, 2007)'. Available at [http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page\\_id=401](http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page_id=401) (accessed 17 April 2007).

independence movement and the first president of the nation. Similarly, Ziaur Rahman, founder of the BNP, was idolised by the BNP as the true architect of the nation. During the parliamentary sessions, members of each party delivered emotional addresses glorifying their respective leaders, and exchanged abusive, pejorative and humiliating remarks about opponents. During 2003–06, there were some 1,058 times when the ruling party (74 per cent) and the opposition (26 per cent) made contributions focusing on a personality cult (see Table 6). The AL was found to be more excessive in building up a personality cult and institutionalised the practice. It passed a bill conferring on Sheikh Mujib the title of Father of the Nation and named many streets, buildings, academic and cultural institutions, and bridges after him. Numerous cultural and social organisations were also named after him. A number of national holidays were declared commemorating various occasions in his political life. Textbooks and state controlled media put special emphasis on his personality. He was termed 'the greatest Bangalee of a thousand years'. In addition to building up the personality cults of their great leaders, both the AL and BNP also developed the personality cults of their current leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda respectively.

#### *Accusation and Counter-accusation Game*

All the three parliaments were full of accusations and counter-accusations during business sessions. The AL, when in opposition, accused the BNP government of inefficiency, autocracy and corruption, while the BNP in its turn accused the AL government of the same. During the 2003–06 parliamentary sessions alone there were some 990 instances of accusation and counter-accusation recorded, of which the ruling and the opposition parties' shares

were 71.01 per cent and 29.09 per cent respectively. Interestingly, most of their respective accusations were strikingly similar (see Table 7). Some of the major accusations are mentioned below, a few of which are merely situational.

Despite these accusations, governments of both parties, however, failed to accomplish four basic aims highlighted in election campaigns. These were: 1) repeal of Special Power Act (SPA); 2) independence of judiciary; 3) press and media freedom; and 4) turning parliament into the centre of all legislative and political activities. None of the political parties have kept their promise but

**Table 7.** List of accusations against each other

AL's accusations against BNP rule	BNP's accusations against AL rule
1 Incapable of guaranteeing law and order, defending properties and lives, mitigating terrorism on the University campuses, unravelling the crisis of CHT	Deteriorating law and order situation, increase of terrorism and violence against women, continuous CHT problem
2 Police brutality towards journalists	Incapable of handling share market
3 Politicisation of administration	Politicisation of civil administration
4 Total control of TV, radio and news media.	Monopolising TV, radio and electronic media
5 Resorting to black laws and retaining of special power act	Increased repression against opposition activists; retention and abuse of special power act
6 Passing of Anti-terrorist bill	Passing of People's Security Act
7 Harassment of political opponents	Anti-BNP propaganda on state controlled media
8 Unilateral decisions on important national issues	Unilateral formation of parliamentary standing committees
9 Intolerant attitude towards opposition	Blames opposition for failure and all terrorist activities; intolerant attitude in parliament
10 Dictatorship of Prime Minister	Absence of constitutional rule and unilateral decision-making
11 Fraud and rigging in election	Rigging in elections
12 Incapable of ruling the country	Cannot solve the crisis in power sector
13 Sovereignty and independence under threat	Selling the country to India through making unfair treaties, offering a corridor, buying electricity and selling gas
14 Rehabilitation of anti-liberation forces	Controlling campuses under police protection
15 Corruption and mismanagement	Nepotism and corruption
16	Resorting to conspiracy theory and shifting responsibility of inefficiency

Source: Compiled by the author based on various sources.



they accused each other of failure and intentional use of power contained in some of these institutions.

During parliamentary deliberations, the ruling party always claimed to be right in all its decisions and viewed its legislation as devoid of any shortcomings, mistakes and criticism. At the same time it considered opposition demands and criticism unconstitutional, false, conspiratorial and as agitation. The sitting government claimed its legitimate right to stay in power, while it considered the opposition's anti-government movement unconstitutional, vindictive and vengeful. Deliberations and debates mostly revolved around past misdeeds, failure and corruption of the earlier regime, each accused by the other. The ruling party blamed the previous government for destruction and exploitation, while the opposition blamed the sitting government for every problem the country faced. Even the opposition AL went so far to label Prime Minister Khaleda Zia as *dainy* (witch), responsible for natural disasters in the country.

### **Administration of Parliamentary Sessions**

The parliament was not only neglected by the ruling and opposition parties but it also suffered from its own administrative inefficiencies. All the three parliaments demonstrated inefficiencies in the Speaker of the House, Business of the House, and the secretariat.

#### *Speaker*

In all the three parliaments, a common accusation against Speakers was their alleged partisan behaviour in conducting the parliamentary sessions. The Speakers were accused of not giving equal or even adequate opportunity to opposition members vis-à-vis the ruling party members during deliberations. Such behaviour by the Speakers had caused the opposition to walk out on many occasions and sometimes embark on a prolonged boycott in protest. Consequently, the Speakers in the past had to make a formal promise to behave impartially. In the Seventh Parliament, the Speaker introduced an arbitrary rule of a compulsory signing system for the MPs which invited vehement criticism from the opposition, and was eventually abandoned.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Business of the House*

It is difficult to compare the three parliaments in relation to the Business of the House because of the various periods that the parliament was boycotted by the opposition. Yet four particular aspects can be looked at to evaluate the Business of the House. These aspects are: total number of starred and

non-starred questions answered by the treasury bench, number of adjournment motions received and entertained, number of notices received and accepted for discussion on matters of urgent public importance for general as well as for short duration, and, finally, no confidence motions.

Firstly, question and answer sessions are an important part of the Business of the House. Members of parliament usually get an opportunity to interrogate ministers in these sessions. However, in this regard, all three parliaments showed a particular pattern from the treasury bench that the ministers concerned often replied sarcastically to opposition questions, bypassing the real issue. In terms of answering questions from the floor, the three parliaments answered 25.2, 32.8 and 41.1 per cent, respectively (see Table 8). The Eighth Parliament saw a total of 15,277 starred and non-starred questions answered.

Secondly, in terms of adjournment motions, the Fifth Parliament received 1,790 notices of which only 64 were accepted for discussion. Of the 64 notices, 38 were from the opposition. On matters of urgent public importance in general, the House received 5,156 notices, of which 377, including 251 from the opposition, were accepted for discussion. On the other hand, the House received 774 notices on the same issue for short duration, of which

**Table 8.** Status of motions: comparative performance

Issues	Notices	Fifth Parliament	Seventh Parliament	Eighth Parliament
Adjournment motions	Notices received	1790	4450	2530
	Notices accepted	64 (3.57%)	0.00%	0.00%
	Opposition notices accepted	38 (59.37%)	NA	152
Discussion on matters of urgent public interest	Notices received	5156	1528	10407
	Notices accepted	377 (4.00%)	456 (3.00%)	416 (4.00%)
	Opposition notices accepted	251 (66.57%)	NA	NA
Discussion on matters of urgent public interest for short duration	Notices received	774	561	226
	Notices accepted	68 (3.4%)	NA	8 (2.00%)
	Opposition notices accepted	62 (91.47%)	NA	NA
Half-an-hour discussion	Notices received	133	21	8
	Notices accepted	(0.80%)	None (0.00%)	None (0.00%)
No confidence motion	Motion tabled	1 (unsuccessful)	None	None

Source: Partially based on Ahmed (2003), and author's compilation from various sources.

only 68 including 62 from the opposition were entertained. The performance of both the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments in these regards was extremely poor. The Seventh Parliament received 4,450 notices of adjournment, 1,528 notices for matters of urgent public interest, of which 456 were accepted, but none of the 561 notices for short duration and 21 notices for half-an-hour discussion was accepted by the House. The Eighth Parliament received a total of 2,530 notices of adjournment motion of which 152 were from the opposition, but none of the notices were accepted. The House discussed only three matters of general importance. The House accepted 416 (4.00 per cent) out of 10,407 notices on matters of urgent public interest, eight (2.00 per cent) out of 226 notices for short duration discussion, and accepted none of eight notices for half-an-hour discussion.

Finally, the most remarkable Business of the House during the Fifth Parliament was the no-confidence motion which was unsuccessful. This is the only instance in the history of Bangladesh. There was no such motion placed in the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments.

In addition to the parsimonious Business of the House, the members' participation in various matters had not been encouraging as well. A sample scanning of the Eighth Parliament suggests that most of the members were generally found not to be interested in taking part in discussions (see Table 9).

### *Secretariat*

The secretariat of the three parliaments was frequently found to be inefficient in administering the issues in accordance with parliamentary rules of procedure. The Fifth Parliament performed relatively better, but the Seventh Parliament in comparison performed worst of the three. Two particular

**Table 9.** Activism of the MPs in discussion on various issues in the Eighth Parliament

Issues	MPs participated	Total	MPs did not participate	
			Ruling party MPs	Opposition MPs
1. Matters of urgent public importance	NA	110	66%	68%
2. Presidential speech	118	182	151	31
3. PM's question hour	47	203	203	
4. Budget	201	99	80	19

Source: prepared by the author based on 'Parliament Watch: 2001–2006 (February 2007)', [http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page\\_id=401](http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/index.php?page_id=401) (accessed 17 April 2007).

instances of the Seventh Parliament demonstrate the inefficiency of the secretariat.<sup>15</sup>

First, following the defection of two MPs from the BNP to the AL, the parliament secretariat declared that their seats would not be vacated, though the secretariat has no jurisdiction to make such a decision. This decision was later challenged in the High Court which asked the parliament secretariat to refer the matter to the Elections Commission, the only body that could decide in such matters. According to Article 66 (2.4) of the constitution, such matters should be referred to the EC and its decision would be final. But the way secretariat acted showed that it had overridden the EC and interpreted the law in the ruling party's favour.

The second example of its inefficiency was the repetition of the same mistake of overriding the Election Commission in declaring a seat vacant. According to the constitution, if an MP is convicted by a court, then his or her parliamentary seat would be declared cancelled. Immediately following the High Court indictment of H.M. Ershad in the Janata Tower case,<sup>16</sup> the parliament secretariat declared his parliamentary seat vacant. This declaration by the secretariat was made at a time when all the high officials including the Speaker, parliament secretary, and additional secretary were abroad, and the deputy speaker was outside Dhaka. In the absence of these principal officers, another additional secretary ordered the gazette notification from the secretariat. The secretariat clarified this, saying that the notification was made with the consent of the Speaker who was visiting the United States at the time. Ershad responded to the notification by declaring it 'total madness'.<sup>17</sup>

It was 'madness' not only because the case was still undecided due to appeal, but also because of the overriding of the EC by the secretariat. As in the first instance, the High Court invalidated the secretariat gazette for two months, ordered the secretariat to refer the matter to the EC, and issued a show-cause notice asking for an explanation of why the notification should not be considered invalid. Hasty decisions by the parliamentary secretariat demonstrated poor performance in following the rules of procedure, which tarnished the image of parliament.

### **Parliamentary Accountability of Government**

Parliamentary accountability is the bedrock of good governance in a democratic system. Both the treasury bench and opposition scrutinise each other's activities, and they remain responsible and answerable to the parliament. In practice, however, there was a serious lack of parliamentary accountability.

In a parliamentary democracy, many of the important parliamentary oversights and legislative functions should be performed by parliamentary standing committees. But due to the dysfunctional nature of the parliament,

standing committees had a number of serious limitations. Firstly, the committee formation took an unexpectedly long time. For instance, the most important Public Account Committees (PACs) in the Fifth Parliament were formed more than seven months after the dissolution of the previous PACs, while the Seventh Parliament took about a year after the dissolution of the earlier PACs (Bhuiyan, 1998), and the Eighth Parliament took two years to form 50 PACs.

Secondly, under the existing Rules of Procedure, the standing committees have very limited functions. The dominance of the executive branch over the legislature did not require bills to be necessarily scrutinised by the committees. Though the AL government amended some laws, it failed to improve the system. For instance, according to the amendment, the minister concerned remained a member of the committee provided that he was an MP. It is assumed that such an amendment was intended to maintain executive dominance over the legislature. Lastly, opposition MPs or ruling party backbenchers had very little opportunity to act as watchdogs due to restrictions on floor crossing.

A rule regarding the standing committee states that, 'all government Bills introduced in Parliament would be referred to a Standing Committee for examination and report to Parliament before the Bill was taken up by the House for immediate consideration'. However, another clause in the law adds that 'certain kinds of Bills cannot be referred to any committee'. This makes the earlier rule weak as the government can easily apply its discretionary power based on this later clause to prevent any bill it wants from going to the standing committee.

The parliamentary standing committees maintain public accountability through controlling public expenditure, maintaining government's transparency, accelerating administrative dynamics and holding the executive answerable to the parliament. But the problems discussed above indicate that the committee system failed to provide the intended services. Yet despite limitations some committees were found to be more active and performed well. Table 10 shows that the total number of committees formed during the three parliaments was almost the same. The committees under the Seventh Parliament held the highest number of meetings, but compared to the other two parliaments, they produced fewer reports. On the other hand, two-thirds of the committees during Fifth and Seventh Parliaments failed to produce any report compared to the committees of the Eighth Parliament where only ten committees failed to do so. Therefore, in terms of committee activities, the Eighth Parliament performed much better despite having the highest number of committees and least number of meetings among the three.

Interpolation (question/answer) is a standard parliamentary method to ensure accountability of the government to parliament. However, during all the three parliaments it was common for ministers to follow three patterns

**Table 10.** Comparative performance of the standing committees in the three parliaments

Types	Fifth	Seventh	Eighth
Total committees	46	46	48
Total committee meetings	1388	1485	1242
Average meetings (per committee, per year)	6.03	6.46	8.63
Total reports submitted	49	28	47
Average reports submitted (per committee)	1.07	0.61	0.98
Committees did not produce any reports	30	29	10

Source: Rahman (2007).

while responding to questions. The first was avoidance of responsibility and failure by simply refusing to accept the facts presented by the opposition. For instance, the AL government failed to acknowledge its major failure in handling the share market collapse in 1996. Second, ministers repeatedly shifted responsibility for failure to the opposition. For instance, the JI was held responsible immediately after a massive bomb attack on a cultural programme in Jessore in 1999. The government also blamed the JI for a terrorist attack in Chittagong on 12 July 2000. The statements made by ministers the following day were regarded by many as highly irresponsible.<sup>18</sup> And, third, the government often resorted to ‘conspiracy theory’ to avoid its responsibilities. For instance, in 1997 an electricity tower collapsed due to theft of screws but this was held up by the AL government as an act of sabotage by the opposition.

To improve the parliamentary accountability of government, the Seventh Parliament introduced Prime Minister’s Question Time. However, despite its novelty, its use in the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments remained extremely low. This was because of a number of factors such as the fact that the time allocated was only 30 minutes once a week; questions were not asked directly; answers were given to selected questions in a set format; and, especially, the poor quality of questions asked.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it was noted during the PM’s question and answer sessions in the Seventh Parliament that even when a question was directed at the prime minister, another cabinet minister would routinely stand up to respond on the PM’s behalf. But, above all, the device proved to be useless due to frequent absence of the PM from the House. The Eighth Parliament hardly held any such session.

### **Factors Responsible for the Dysfunctional Parliamentary System**

Why did political parties maintain such an attitude towards the parliament in Bangladesh? What were the factors that contributed to the existing nature of

parliamentary politics in Bangladesh? An extensive analysis of these questions would require a greater space than available in the present article. However, a modest attempt is necessary to shed some light on these questions. The following factors could be held largely responsible for the dysfunctional nature of parliament in Bangladesh: violence and agitation as political culture, personal hegemony of party leadership, and an undemocratic party system.

### *Violence and Agitation as Political Culture*

Although the political culture of any nation originates from its ethno-cultural and national characteristics, there are some forms of political behaviour that become part of political culture over time due to their persistent pattern and overt presence. In Bangladesh, the origin of violence in politics could be traced in the British colonial era, but it became a popular political means from the beginning of the Pakistan period. The opposition during the 1950s and 1960s remained violent and agitational on issues like language movement, Six Points Demand and Agartala Trial.<sup>20</sup> During the 1980s political violence became commonplace in the move to unseat the Ershad regime. From the beginning of the 1990s, political violence became further institutionalised through inter-party conflict. Eventually, violence became a legitimate means of securing political demands. Violence, disturbances and interruption of normalcy in public life become part of the political landscape overshadowing the role and importance of parliament. The number of major *hartals* and political strikes the parties observed, as discussed earlier, substantiate the point.

### *Personal Hegemony of Party Leadership*

In Bangladesh politics, parties have always been associated with personalities instead of principles. Since independence in 1971, political parties have remained highly personalised around a few leaders such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his daughter Sheikh Hasina for the AL, Ziaur Rahman and his widow Khaleda for the BNP, Ershad and his wife Rawshan for the JP, and Ghulam Azam for the JI. The communist and socialist parties have maintained their leadership unchanged since the 1970s. These political leaders were institutions in themselves in the sense that their hegemonic leadership inside the party remained unchallenged, unchanged, unopposed and unquestioned. Due to this privileged leadership, the personal preferences, interests and decisions of the leaders were considered to be party decisions as well.

The personal hegemony of party leadership can probably be explained by two factors. Firstly, the reverence and sympathy for their assassinated predecessors exalted the image of the current leaders of the AL and BNP. And secondly, as a consequence, the very survival and integrity of the AL,

BNP and JP was regarded as depending on the continuity and hegemonic leadership of the current leaders. Experience shows that breakaway leaderships and parties such as Gana Forum of Kamal Hossain, BNP-Obaed of Obaidur Rahman and JP-Manju of Naziur Rahman Manju have proved unpopular. These factors in party leadership make their leaders autocratic in running parties.

### *Undemocratic Party System*

In a multiparty democracy, democracy within political parties is essential. Democracy within political parties makes them inculcate democratic values and principles of collective and consultative decision-making, representation through elections, tolerance of criticism and differences of opinions, and accommodativeness. However, political parties in Bangladesh are not run according to democratic principles. Due to the absence of internal party democracy, the parties suffer from a number of problems such as dominance of personality rather than rules; the maintenance of leadership so that it tends to be a lifetime position; and finally, the dynastic nature of party leadership. The last two problems appear to be more serious. There has been no leadership change in the AL, BNP and JP during the last three decades. Furthermore, the current leaders have inherited their positions (Hasina of AL being the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, Khaleda being the widow of General Ziaur Rahman). Leadership in the JP and communist parties are also person-oriented. And finally, the AL, BNP and JP are in the process of handing down party leadership to family members (Hasina and Khaleda to their sons and Ershad to his wives).

So, the undemocratic nature of running the parties has made the party leadership stagnant, dynastic, authoritarian and autocratic (Hossain & Lowey, 1994). Party decisions regarding roles in the parliament or outside the parliament are largely shaped by the style of party leadership. Such a nature of parties helps leaders easily avoid public responsibility.

Recently, civil society and interest groups have become critical of the behaviour of political parties and their leaders. Specifically, demands for political reforms in relation to leadership, party political culture and *hartals* are strong. Public resentment is also on the rise against violence and street politics. Since the beginning of the 2006 caretaker government (October) demands for political reforms including internal party reforms have become even stronger. Officially, the interim government has introduced a number of electoral reforms which require parties to bring fundamental changes in the party system. The clearest attempt the interim government made was to remove the leaders of the AL and BNP from politics, unofficially known as the 'politics minus two' formula, in the face of strong resistance from, the parties. However, irrespective of the party stand, it is understood by many that the



future of parliamentary democracy in the country depends mainly on reform in the political practices, party leadership and introduction of the rule of law.

## **Conclusion**

Parliamentary democracy existed in Bangladesh during 1991–2006. The three parliaments during this period achieved a number of successes such as making the parliamentary system constitutional, signing the Ganges Water Sharing and the CHT Peace treaties, and above all maintaining the parliamentary system for such a long period (Mannan, 1996).

However, these achievements were overshadowed by the ineffective and dysfunctional state of the parliament caused by deliberate bypassing by the ruling party and desertion by the opposition. The three parliaments remained virtually dysfunctional for a large part of their tenure. Parliamentary politics suffered from excessive use of extra-parliamentary means. Institutionally, the parliament remained practically paralysed due to prolonged and frequent boycotts, and it failed to become the centre of legislation. In addition to political disregard, the internal administrative inefficiency of the parliament also greatly tarnished its institutional image.

Therefore, evaluated from the viewpoint of liberal democracy and its essential characteristics such as responsibility, transparency, tolerance, accountability, trust, respect, recognition and cooperation, it can be said that these have not developed in the political parties and the politicians during the parliamentary era. Although political parties agitated on the streets in the name of parliamentary democracy, these parties themselves kept the parliament dysfunctional. Political parties and politicians were good at anti-democratic movements, but did not become competent for living in and with democracy. Unless politicians and political parties inculcate these characteristics of parliamentary norms and rules of engagement, one may reasonably become sceptical about the future of a healthy parliamentary system in Bangladesh. It was indeed due to the unparliamentary behaviour of the parties that the continuity of the parliamentary system was interrupted by emergency rule from January 2007 to December 2008.

## **Notes**

1. It became a common behaviour of the opposition parties in Bangladesh since the mid 1980s to denounce elections results; boycott parliamentary sessions, and resort to frequent mass demonstration, protests, transport and industrial strikes to unseat the government. The opposition politics remained more active in the streets than in the parliament.
2. Sheikh Mujib was released from prison in Pakistan and returned to independent Bangladesh on 10 January 1972.

3. Sheikh Mujib was assassinated on 15 August 1975. The AL observes the anniversary as a day of mourning.
4. This law in 1965 confiscated the properties of the Hindus who left for India during the Indo-Pakistani war.
5. The Bangladesh constitution allows a member of parliament to remain absent from the House consecutively for 90 days, after which s/he is stripped of membership.
6. Ghulam Azam, a Bangladeshi by birth and leader of JI, was outside Bangladesh when it became independent in 1971. He opposed the war of independence and sided with the Pakistani regime. He came back to Bangladesh in 1979 with a Pakistani passport. He then stayed in the country and acted as a *de facto* leader of JI, and in 1989 publicly declared himself as a Bangladeshi by birth. Interestingly, the AL leader personally met Ghulam Azam soon after the 1991 elections to seek his party support to form the cabinet. The JI did not extend its support to AL.
7. Ghulam Azam challenged the government in the court and his citizenship was restored by the Supreme Court in 1994.
8. Ninian Stephen proposed forming an interim government composed of five AL, five BNP and one technocrat members to conduct the general elections. But the AL rejected the deal.
9. Hartal refers to total stoppage of activities in all sectors of life called by political parties.
10. *Weekly Bichitra*, 30 Dec. 1994.
11. *Weekly 2000*, No. 7, 23 June 2000, p. 8.
12. *Weekly Jaijaidin*, No. 36, 20 June 2000, p. 29.
13. 'Four years of AL rule', *Weekly 2000*, 23 June 2000, No. 7, pp. 35–43.
14. *Weekly Jaijaidin*, 13 June 2000, No. 35, p. 4.
15. *Weekly Jaijaidin*, 12 Sept. 2000, No. 48, p. 5.
16. The popularly known Janata Tower case refers to a corruption case involving Ershad and his wife, Ms Raushan Ershad, regarding purchase of a plot of land of the Dhaka Improvement Trust for construction of a building named Janata Tower for his daily newspaper Janata. The Anti-Corruption Department brought charges against Ershad of misusing power in purchase of the and while he was President of the country. Both Ershad and his wife and others were convicted in the case.
17. A detailed account is available in *Weekly Jaijaidin*, 5 Sept. 2000, No. 47, pp. 5–8.
18. *Weekly Robbar*, Vol. XXII, No. 33, 23 July 2000, pp. 13–19.
19. For example, one ruling party MP's question was 'is it true Honourable Prime Minister that you have been selected for FAO prize? If it is then what is your feeling as Prime Minister. Furthermore, to what extent the prize would increase the honour of Bangladesh in the world?' Parliamentary Session, 7 Sept. 1999.
20. The language movement during 1948–52 created the first massive anti-government movement in the demand for Bangla to be made the state language against the government decision to replace it with Urdu, a foreign language for the people. The Six Points Movement in the 1960s generated massive opposition demanding greater political and economic autonomy for the then East Pakistan; and the violent anti-government movement dominated 1960s politics following Agartala Trial of the AL leader Sheikh Mujib.

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