

Frequent shuffling in top bureaucracy

Bodes ill for administration

IT has become a regular feature for the administration to shuffle around key civil servants through inter-ministerial and departmental transfers and postings galore. During the past 15 days changes have been effected on 16 posts of secretaries and the height of it has been the mass transfer of 87 senior assistant secretaries out of Dhaka to outlying areas of the country.

Making transfers and moving officials in the civil service ought to be routine matters, but what has been done in the latest round of reshuffle, basically adding to the sweeping changes brought earlier on, is extraordinary, needless to say, in a highly negative sense.

Bureaucracy, let's not forget, happens to be the most stable and constant factor of administration in any working democracy. Such massive transfers and postings are bound to create a "tremor" across the officialdom shaking it to its very foundation. Transferring and shuffling of officials too frequently also disrupt that process of 'settling down' which is required before the concerned individual becomes oriented to the surroundings, working environs and is able to make his or her contributions towards a collective achievement of common goals. This is most relevant, particularly in the case of secretaries and additional secretaries who are at the highest level of policy and decision-making in the administration.

The other dimension is that such sudden transfers can produce strains on the minds of concerned officials lowering their morale and interest in work. The moves can also raise question in the public mind as to the motivation behind them, more precisely, as to whether or not, these were driven by political or partisan considerations.

We strongly feel that these sudden bursts of transfers and postings of civil servants should cease forthwith, both for the sake of maintaining equilibrium in the overall administration as well as ensuring that the servants of the Republic work impartially and completely in public interest.

Taxing foreign charity initiative?

A rational approach needed

THE ordeal faced by an American charity group in the clearance and delivery of some medical equipment brought in by a team of surgeons for their use in collaboration with the Department of Reconstructive and Plastic Surgery (PPRS) of Dhaka Medical College Hospital has been unfortunate. The equipment was brought free of charges on a returnable basis. The experts had been routinely visiting the country on a bi-annual basis for the last seven years. The equipment in question and the experts were but too well known to the concerned authorities, hence we find it regrettable that delay occurred in the clearance of the equipment. Noticeably, due to this delay surgery could not be performed on some poor patients including children, few of whom came from outside the capital, since the foreign medical experts had to leave the country to meet their other commitments elsewhere.

In a similar incident reportedly a team of French doctors who came to Bangladesh to provide the treatment of eye complications had to leave the country without providing the much needed specialised treatment.

Specialised medical services of the nature in question are few and far between and whatever facilities exist within the country are expensive and beyond the reach of common man. It is thus imperative that we hold on to such quality facilities when offered free of cost by a charitable organisation. If a change in the basic rules is needed for a speedy and hassle-free clearance of equipment, let us not hesitate to bring it about here and now. Meanwhile, a probe into the incidents will be in order to find out where things went wrong and how.

'None of the above'



ZAFAR SOBHAN

BOTH the incumbent four-party alliance and the main fourteen-party opposition are now more or less in full pre-election mode. There are any number of stumbling blocks on the path to elections, the most apparent being the current impasse over the voter list and the make-up of the election commission, but it is good to see that even amidst the uncertainty and controversy, neither side has (yet) given up on the hope for fair elections.

Both are continuing with the electioneering work which indicates to me that each sees the polls as the means to ultimate vindication.

In Bangladesh, being in full pre-election mode, of course, one has more to do with identifying suitable candidates for each seat and building up one's local grassroots organisations than with either performance in office (for the incumbent) or articulating an agenda for the future (for the opposition), but it is at least a start.

Sources tell me that both sides are now very heavily into the process of figuring out who is

going to run where. The horse-trading has begun.

For the four-party alliance, the main tension is between the senior partner BNP and its junior partners in the alliance, most specifically, the Jamaat. In 2001, the alliance's electoral engineering was masterful, and the hope is that careful planning can ensure a repeat victory.

In 2001, the Jamaat was allotted thirty seats of which it managed to win seventeen, which for

(BDB) is waiting in the wings. For each BNP leader who is snubbed in favour of the Jamaat candidate, that is one potential candidate who the BDB could run in that seat.

Furthermore, as is always the case in Bangladesh, there are a good half dozen viable candidates for each seat, and once the official party decision is made, the unlucky finalists might easily be persuaded to jump ship and run either as an independent or under

candidates with a good shot of winning, is going to be a difficult process.

Without the advantage of incumbency, it is much harder for the opposition to get the local leaders who do not receive nominations to stay in line than for the government, which can offer all sorts of other inducements.

In fact, scrutinizing the disposition of the unwanted candidates will be a good indicator of which way the political wind is blowing.

order is a start.

The idea is that mandatory publication of information will persuade the parties to run candidates with good reputations and records instead of party financiers or local musclemen. People's mobilisation ensuring that the High Court order is complied with would go a long way to ensuring a better choice at the polls.

Another initiative that would help ensure good elections is the inclusion of a provision for a "no

behind this idea and I hope to hear it publicly debated more fully in the near future, with the aim of creating momentum behind what would be a truly bold initiative for positive change that would shift the balance of political power from the political parties to the people. This is not a partisan issue but is an idea that all believers in truly participatory democracy should be able to get behind.

Another good idea is for a non-partisan group to issue conditional endorsements of candidates who meet certain criteria. The idea is that there are good people in all parties and this kind of initiative would help persuade the party leaders to nominate only candidates who would garner such an endorsement or face a backlash at the polls.

Thus, even as the political parties start to get all their ducks in a row for the upcoming elections, there is much that the public can do in a non-partisan and people-focused manner to ensure that each voter gets to make a meaningful choice, the essence of democracy.

The voters need not be passive spectators, accepting everything that our political leaders choose to dish out. More than anything else, the public wants to ensure that there is a meaningful choice on the ballot, and despite the limitations of the political parties, widespread mobilisation on this issue can go a long way to securing good elections and returning the power to where it ought to reside in a democracy -- the hands of the people.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star

STRAIGHT TALK

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it was a far better showing than the 1996 election, when it ran on its own steam and ended up with only two seats.

Allotting Jamaat some thirty seats in return for Jamaat votes in the remaining 270 constituencies was a good deal for the BNP as well, since it ended up with some 190 seats, a sharp increase from its total of 113 seats in 1996.

This year the Jamaat wants more seats, hoping for a minimum of fifty, which might translate into a solid thirty seats in parliament. With ten per cent of the seats in parliament, the party would hope for even more cabinet seats and even greater influence in an ensuing government.

The trouble for the BNP is that the Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh

another party's banner. Keeping everyone happy is thus a tough balancing act.

Things are, if anything, even trickier for the opposition.

In the first place, it too will have just as many unhappy candidates who miss out on getting nominations and will be vulnerable to the temptation to jump ship and run as an independent candidate, possibly siphoning off thousands of votes and holding the balance of power in a closely contested constituency.

In addition, the AL will need to allot some seats to its coalition partners. Unfortunately, not too many of the coalition partners have too many viable candidates, and keeping everyone happy, and at the same time fielding

If there is a stampede of overlooked candidates in one direction or the other, that would be very telling.

But now that the selection process has begun, the time has come for the people to put pressure on the political parties to ensure that come election day the voters in each constituency have a good slate of candidates to choose from.

There are many methods for this. The High Court has issued an order directing that candidates for office must release certain information about themselves to the voters. This has not been complied with in recent by-elections and the EC has not taken any action against those who do not comply with the order, but the

or "none of the above" vote. Under such a provision, if more voters choose "none of the above" than vote for any one candidate, then this would trigger a fresh election in that constituency.

This provision would empower the voters to reject flawed candidates in a meaningful way and help ensure that the political parties nominate only decent candidates. This would be a more meaningful alternative than having to vote for the "lesser of two evils" or voting for one's party-line candidate, even if one has reservations about him or her, out of fear that the other party's candidate will then win by default if one does not vote.

Citizens' groups have already been mobilising for some time

The dog and pony show



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LAST week, our country was in the grip of what could be described as referred pain. The Chief Election Commissioner had backache, which smarted heartache amongst some people which shot headache throughout the country. At the centre of everything was the High Court order to stay the preparation of the voter list. The pain started to radiate from there. Close to the dinner time, we are fighting over the recipe.

So, what is cooking? A cornered Chief Election Commissioner stayed home until the government came to his rescue. The two election commissioners under him took divergent views and wanted to obey the court ruling. The lonely Chief felt like a general who was deserted by his soldiers. You could get a backache if you were under excessive pressure. It takes lots of spine to stand up and do what is right.

The government appointed two more commissioners so that the Chief Election Commissioner could find his feet on the ground. Never mind that it was downright cheating. It was like giving two easy questions to a candidate when he struggled to pass a difficult test. But what is wrong with

the first two commissioners? If the court ruling is right, then why are they wrong? If the court ruling is wrong, then why are they pressing for it?

Perhaps there are more to it than meets the eyes. The court ruling has been prompted by a writ petition filed by the opposition challenging the authenticity of the voter list. In so much as we bring politics into everything, the two commissioners might be politically motivated in their stance to

smoking guns in the newspapers or post them on the walls of the Election Commission? That being what it may, we also need to know something else. Why should the Election Commission stand divided on this issue? It must do what is legal and legitimate. To be or not to be definitely is not the choice.

The question is whether those who have hard time making that decision are the right choice for the Election Commission? Is our

last Sunday, which could lead to more complications in the coming days! International negotiators are already descending to tell us how to handle it.

This is such a pity! The situation already looks precarious because the opposition wants to boycott the election unless some modifications were made in the caretaker concept. The Election Commission fiasco has rubbed salt on that wound and we might see troubled times in the run up to the

house where the parents are fighting like alley cats.

Meanwhile the country is heading for chaos as nothing seems to work anymore. The caretaker government, the Election Commission, nationalism, patriotism, the Liberation War, the binding forces of history, anthropological homogeneity, common language, everything and anything that once gave us the burning zeal to fight and die for a nation state look irrelevant.

fires into a procession killing a number of demonstrators. The problem lies in the heart of this delusion. Yesterday's predators become today's preys, yesterday's hyenas become today's heroes. This is where we fail. Again and again, we lose sight of the circus in our excitement for the sideshows.

It reminds of the dog-and-pony show that came to be popular in the USA in the 19th century. By the late 1920s it was being used dismissively of any small-scale or mom-and-pop operation in the same way dog and pony shows were considered to be cut-down versions of "proper" circuses. Sometimes it was the name of one part of a larger circus, perhaps designed as a sideshow for the children, who were allowed to ride the ponies and pet the dogs.

What happened at the Election Commission last week was an absorbing sideshow. It was one part of the larger circus called election, which will, one by one, bring out the dogs, ponies, jugglers, tightrope walkers, acrobats and lots of clowns. But the most amusing of all acts is the illusion, which has been created to mislead the country. If the court wants the Election Commission to stop working on the voter list, why should the commissioners want to fight amongst themselves?

I bite my tongue. The Chief Election Commissioner is in hospital again. This time it's diabetes and blood pressure, and only the two newly appointed commissioners seem to know more about it than their other two colleagues. Plenty of sideshows this time, not enough circus though. Shame, shame, shame, I rest my case.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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push a particular agenda. This is where the buck stops. It has the smack of a political crisis within the Election Commission.

That crisis was obvious when the Chief Election Commissioner disappeared for eleven days until the government gave him the back rub to heal his pain. It became more obvious when the newly appointed commissioners quickly closed ranks with their boss to lend him the weight and influence he needed against their dissident colleagues. But how good is that victory? How long can it hold off or ignore the court ruling?

The crux of the matter is whether or not anybody is tampering with the voter list. If that is happening, why not collect all or some of the names, which are being excluded and publish the

election process in good hands with them? Are we sure that they will be able to enforce a fair election over and above the integrity of the voter list? Who can tell if the backache will not return when the heat turns up again?

Now it is an irony that the priests should desecrate the temple! Let us not be surprised if the government is looking for an Election Commission which will be the ventriloquist's dummy. But the events of the last week have made it worse. The Election Commission proved it was dumber than the dummy, thereby creating sufficient ground for us to raise questions about its independence, not to speak of the integrity of the voter list. And look what has happened already! There has been violence on the street and a day-long strike

election, if the election happens at all!

There must be lots of people in the government who are confident. They were confident once before, and they proved wrong in less than six weeks! Of course, I am talking about the election when the ruling party had a short-lived stint, forming the government after the elections, which was boycotted by the opposition parties. The government had to step down because it couldn't pull it through.

The beauty of democracy is that, like a baby, it needs two parents to be conceived, one parent being the ruling party, another the opposition. It has a lot in common with conjugal life, which has moments of domestic squabbles and romantic bubbles. But ours is an unhappy

This is where I disagree with most people. Creating institutions will change nothing unless people who make those institutions change as well. We hear about a scholarly man who entered politics and then suffered a stroke because a large sum of money was withdrawn from his account by someone who forged his signature. In as much as we would like to know who that swindler was, we would also like to know how so much money had gone into that account.

Last week, we saw on TV the sleeping face of a politician who was injured in the police attack during Sunday's strike. If you rewind your memory, the same face had once appeared in the newspapers, circled in black, along with gun-toting men who shot

Nepal scenario: Crises deepening



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

NEPAL, facing the twin crises of political unrest and Maoist insurgency, clearly suffers a setback. Differences between the all powerful monarchy and the politicians further widened leading to large scale arrest of political activists ahead of a planned mass demonstration demanding early restoration of democracy in the Kingdom while the government-Maoist clashes also increased as a logical corollary to the recent withdrawal of an unilateral truce by the insurgents. Consequently, the picturesque country at the foothills of the mighty Himalayas braces itself

with larger political unrest on one hand and intensified skirmishes with the ultra leftists on the other unless a progress is made in both directions.

The political instability is stalking the nation ever since King Gyanendra seized all powers by dismissing the elected prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba nearly a year ago. Nepal, an effective monarchy for many years, introduced Westminster type parliamentary democracy in 1990 when late King Birendra vowed to pro-democracy movement without much effort to cling to power. Major political forces like the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) and others swapped powers as new-found democracy was struggling to establish firm roots while some leading politicians at the helm to rule in a way weakened the process by resorting to corruption and mismanaging the affairs. This situation notwithstanding, the pattern of representative government was progressing through trials and experiments, but a palace massacre that eliminated

MATTERS AROUND US

While the resolution of the Maoist problem is evidently a difficult one, the same is not the case obviously with the political unrest since an early general election is key to the settlement. Political parties feel that the monarch is seeking to lengthen his rule as far as possible. Exacerbation of the twin crises is certain to create bigger problems for the country and this is least desired.

the king and the mainstream royal family including the queen and the crown prince drastically changed the scene. The developments brought King Birendra's younger brother Gyanendra to the throne and Nepal has since been slowly slipping back to effective monarchy.

The last nail in the coffin was hammered when prime minister Deuba was sacked with his cabinet on February 1, last year, and the King emerged as the absolute ruler. He blamed the elected government of failure to make any progress on the vexed problem of Maoist insurgency and also listed failure of the political parties to perform their task as was expected

by the people. Former prime ministers ageing Girija Prasad Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba, former deputy prime minister and Communist party leader Madhav Kumar Nepal and others did not take the development kindly. Political parties protested and had been demonstrating against the state of emergency that the King had imposed and other anti-democratic measures including steps against the free press. The state of emergency was later called off, but little progress has been made towards restoration of elected government. The King announced municipal polls for early this year, and parliamentary elections in 2007.

The politicians are hardly content with these plans of the monarch and are clamouring for early polls. So far, they have not been much able to cause major headache to the monarch and were unable to organise any massive anti-government show. However, a few days ago, more than a lakh people assembled at an opposition rally outside the capital and this seems to have come as a shot in the arms for the political parties. They planned another programme in capital Kathmandu on the last Friday and the authorities went all out against the gathering. This brings two sides on a bigger collision course and political unrest appears as

order of the day. The politicians are making unremitting efforts to bring their nation back to democratic track as early as possible. However, the King seems still firm in the saddle.

The Maoist insurgency has grown in intensity since 1996 and even the elected government could not make much headway in settling issues. The ultras control a large part of the rural areas in the far flung countryside, but could not make any big impact in the urban areas barring occasional incidents. Their main demand includes dismantling of the monarchy in every form and turn Nepal into a Republic. Many people have been attracted by

their slogans in the poverty-ridden country, but many including the political parties are also disenchanted because of their destructive activities. However, the common anti-King policies have brought ultras and politicians on a broad understanding even though their differences remain as such to a large extent. Maoists' elusive leader "Prachanda" late last year announced an unilateral truce for what he said to help the government find a solution to the insurgency but scrapped it a few weeks ago, accusing the government of taking no initiative to break the impasse.

Clashes between the two sides are now back although no major skirmishes has taken place since the withdrawal of the ceasefire. The government has blamed the ultras as destructive force and maintains that things are very much under control. But fact remains that hostilities may now once again assume bigger proportions.

The politicians are also seeking international support for restora-

tion of democracy in Nepal and they recently visited India, the big neighbour, and met both ruling and opposition leaders. But the King appears to be keen to see that his writ runs even though he says that the country will get back democracy in appropriate time. This has led the two sides move somewhat inexorably towards a confrontation that is visible now. While the resolution of the Maoist problem is evidently a difficult one, the same is not the case obviously with the political unrest since an early general election is key to the settlement. Political parties feel that the monarch is seeking to lengthen his rule as far as possible.

Exacerbation of the twin crises is certain to create bigger problems for the country and this is least desired. The bitter truth is that situation is clearly deteriorating which Nepal can really ill afford. Some positive developments bring some hope for must the lovely country in the coming days.

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