

District ministership

A milestone verdict

THE government has reportedly decided to appeal against the High Court ruling that declared the post of district minister null and void, as it has no constitutional sanction. Earlier, the government's prayer for a stay order on the HC ruling was dismissed by the Appellate Division on April 30. We welcome the HC verdict, which has done away with a position which did not serve any purpose other than giving the ruling party exclusive control over developmental and administrative matters of any particular district.

The ruling party's eagerness to retain *status quo* till the elections may indicate that these critical areas could have a great bearing on the forthcoming polls. The point seems reinforced by the report that ruling coalition high command might be thinking in terms of incorporating the provision of a district minister in the constitution through an amendment.

The whole issue has to be viewed in the light of the on-going political turmoil revolving around the question of making the next general elections free and fair. Obviously, the prime concern here is prevention of abuse of authority in any form by any party denying other political parties a level playing field.

We have to consider the fact that elections are only months away and also that the idea behind installing a neutral caretaker government is to eliminate the possibility of any party enjoying undue benefits. Against this backdrop, it is far from desirable that a government minister, that too without any constitutional sanction, would be in charge of disbursing development funds and deciding on positioning of government officials just when everybody would expect a much curtailed role of the government. It does not certainly tally with the plan of having a neutral administration before and during the elections.

The nation is looking forward to an election not smeared by party influence or any kind of interference by the administration. We believe the HC ruling is a step forward in that direction. Now it is for the government to realise that having district ministers, with such sensitive jobs assigned to them, won't serve the cause of fair elections.

Eminent citizens speak out

Democratise the nomination process

WE wholeheartedly support the several recommendations made in a joint statement by thirty-six eminent citizens. Of their numerous suggestions, the one that appears to us to be of critical nature deals with reform within the political parties through in-house practice of democratic culture. To our mind, while the pressure for all-round reform of the political system must be exerted relentlessly on the key players in politics before the elections, realistically, not all of the suggestions made can be implemented given the state of confrontational politics and the limited time at our disposal before the next general elections.

What seems eminently doable however is democratisation of the nomination process at the constituency-level in contrast to the highly centralised system of nomination feeding on inherent absence of intra-party democracy and the attendant tendencies to impose candidates from the top. The local-level leaders and party workers hardly have any say in the matter of choosing their candidates at the crucial selection level, all the rest naturally coming to them as *fait accompli*.

In such a system, needless to say, candidates with black money and muscular prowess have a greater chance to sway party choices than others, let alone horse trading as a potential influencing factor. In other words, the top-inflicted nomination needs to be replaced by a bottom-up process in which within a political party consultations will ensue with a view to choosing candidates tested on the criteria of honesty, both financial and moral, dedication and eligibility. This should be replicated by all political parties within a constituency so that the best aspirant from each political party has the greatest chance of getting nomination.

Given the will on the part of the leaderships of the political parties, this objective of democratising the nomination process is quite achievable and worth pursuing from this moment onwards.

Who wants to become the next *crorepati*?

So the call is who wants to become the next *crorepati*, please come forward and show your loyalty. In a poor country like Bangladesh with limited resources and restricted opportunity this is a very strong motivation. The ruling party expects this call would definitely be answered by a good number of youths who otherwise do not see a bright future. These youths could take the opportunity to prove their worth in the next general election by becoming the muscleman and creating havoc in favour of the ruling party by intimidating voters and influencing poll results.

GM QUADER

THE state must be governed in a way to ensure reward for the good and punishment for the bad. When a society fails to do that, people get confused and start to drift away from the usual value system in conformity with ethical or religious principal. Irregularities and crime are considered to be acceptable and start increasing at an increasing pace. That leads any nation towards its doom.

In our society today, who is going up the ladder of prosperity, fame, and respect, and who is suffering the most financially or in respect of prestige and position? If we look at the rich and successful people of the society around us, do we find honesty, good education and efficiency in them? Some of them may have but most of them do not. If you know a person whom you identify as honest, efficient, and educated, do you see him as successful? If it is so, that is an exception.

Most of the people would agree that such people are in a miserable condition financially and also in respect of social status. Obviously, this has a tremendous negative impact on our value system and the same has distorted to a deformed shape where most of universally accepted "good" is being conceived as "bad," and vice versa. When bad is being encouraged and good sup-

pressed, crime and social injustice would thrive and the very foundation of our country would be vulnerable and unstable. Surely if the situation is allowed to continue this would lead us to turmoil and ultimate devastation.

The state is responsible for providing governance in a way to ensure good flourishes and bad perishes. Lack of proper governing or absence of good governance is the cause for distortion of understanding of good and bad in our society. Government is given the job of governing the state, so government cannot escape its responsibility for attaining this harmful and destructive condition.

Interestingly, it is not that our present government brought the country to this stage due to negligence or inefficiency to govern. They created this situation intentionally to fulfill their greed through corruption and to meet their ambition to continue in power perpetually by hook or by crook.

Under this government, people are not judged on the basis of merit, capability, or honesty. People are evaluated on the basis of who would serve short-term or long-term interest of the ruling party best, even if it means working against the interest of the people. When a society gets the impression that whoever can prove their allegiance to the ruling party is being evaluated as per the degree of

their loyalty and are receiving return accordingly, what else but blind devotion to ruling party could be considered as good?

It is obvious that people who lack conscience and are corrupt and otherwise incapable or inefficient would do better in this race of faithfulness to vested interests. It is no wonder the best of the corrupt and opportunist are the people going up the steps of prosperity and fame at the cost of good and honest people and ultimately the entire society.

In case of appointment in government offices, even if there is a show of test, the selection is mostly done on the basis of list received from government party people. There are incidents that the candidates coming for test find the result sheet being typed before even the test starts. Public Service Commission, the prestigious organization for filling up higher positions of government bureaucracy, could not retain its credibility due to allegation of partisan favouritism and corruption widely accepted by majority as true.

As reported by a student of a public university, the ex-student leaders of the ruling party who are now MPs or ministers, when paying visits to their student wing in the universities say in their deliberations that the students who belong to their party would not need to take study seriously or do

anything else but serve the party to succeed in life. They would get jobs even if they do not qualify in selection test. They could become MPs or ministers like them only if they can ensure by any means that the party remains in power.

Posting, transfers and promotions in government offices are a matter decided on party line in order to serve the ruling party interest best. Not only the usual guidelines are ignored, the existing rules are bent or even changed to suit the above goal. Forced retirement or making of OSD or officer on special duty (meaning keeping the person without any responsibility) is the result of showing less interest or non-fulfillment of irregular dictates of ruling party irrespective of other positive qualities of that person.

Almost all government business including selection of parties for execution of development works like construction of government buildings, roads, bridges, etc., installation of power plants, purchase of defense and other equipments and other government purchases are decided to benefit ruling party leadership or people connected with them.

Most cases, tenders, and other forms of competitive biddings are shown to have been done purely with a view to make documents conform with the rules to avoid any future adverse legal action. In reality, biddings are restricted to only selected parties. Other interested parties are stopped by use of force or intimidation or any other possible means. Even the party who would be selected and the rate at which the bid would be accepted are determined in advance.

It is widely believed that most organizations and individuals connected with extortion or any anti-

social or illegal activities are operated either by people connected with ruling party or with the patronage of ruling party activists. It is said they are to be paid protection money for providing patronage. There are allegations that toll for providing protection to illegal activities are also collected by members of law enforcing and other regulating agencies sometimes in connivance with the ruling party people.

In the process, a section of the ruling party people are being benefited directly through irregular and corrupt practices. Corrupt government officials are also being benefited by getting a share by providing all sorts of assistance and cooperation for siphoning out people's money. This is how people following irregular practice are going up in respect of accumulation of wealth through corruption along with power and position. This is also the reason the honest and capable person with conscience and self respect fail to sustain existence with some degree of respect and decency.

When bad works yield apparently good or beneficial results it becomes difficult to stop that practice, as the motivation in real life is very difficult to ignore. It seems the ruling party has taken up this as the theme of their political strategy, especially for the coming general election.

At every constituency the ruling party has made a small number of people from amongst them as owners of at least ten million taka or *crorepattis* by providing them all sorts of irregular benefits and scope for corruption. Many of them were nothing but paupers and were basically extortionist and village touts.

Of course, this money belongs to the people and was collected by

government in different form of taxes and revenues for the benefit of the people and also in the name of development of the country. It is being propagated in different ways that the recipients could attain this benefit as they showed their loyalty towards the ruling party leadership and its interest, even by violating laws of the land if necessary (such as intimidating voters or any other person who tries to resist the desire of the ruling party leadership).

So the call is who wants to become the next *crorepati*, please come forward and show your loyalty. In a poor country like Bangladesh with limited resources and restricted opportunity this is a very strong motivation.

The ruling party probably feels this may act like addiction of drug for the young generation to lead them to the unholy path of crime and other vices in the name of politics. The ruling party expects this call would definitely be answered by a good number of youths who otherwise do not see a bright future. These youths could take the opportunity to prove their worth in the next general election by becoming the muscleman and creating havoc in favour of the ruling party in intimidating voters and influencing poll results.

Our generation is made to worship criminals. Youth, our future generation, is thus being led to a competition of becoming a bigger criminal instead of competing for real excellence to lead the society to peace and prosperity.

GM Quader is a Member of Parliament.

Trade and transit with India

India's persistent demand for transit by road is well understood. The seven states in north and NE India receive general cargo from the rest of India. Majority of the goods are trucked from Kolkata to Agartala in Tripura. The distance is 1,615 km, which can be reduced by more than 1,000 km if transit is provided through Bangladesh (Benapole-Akhaura). It will save 75% transport costs. But for Bangladesh, the estimation of costs and benefits of providing road transit to India is not so simple.

M. IQBAL KARIM

WHEN it comes to trade and transit arrangements with India, the government should learn lessons from the existing treaty of transit between India and Nepal. It is a simple agreement which provides "traffic in transit" facility to Nepal. The treaty is governed by a protocol, which is again reinforced by a memorandum to the protocol. It does not address the technical standards, but administrative and procedural issues, giving rise to the scope for non-tariff barriers.

For example, Nepalese trucks are allowed to remain in India for 72 hours. This is a reciprocal arrangement, but inconvenient for Nepal. Nepalese trucks traveling between Kakarvitta and nearest port Haldia (Kolkata) in India take more than 72 hours, due to delays in obtaining customs clearance; police escort, for which a payment has to be made but which is not readily available; high-way checking; and long queuing, un/loading and inadequate berthing facilities at the port. Nepalese truckers cannot make it in 72 hours. As a result, Nepal has lost all in and out bound trucking business to India. Nepal and Bangladesh wanted

transit through India. The Phulbari corridor agreement was signed accordingly between India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. However, the 619 km long corridor, transiting only 43 km between Panitanki and Phulbari in India did not materialize.

India did not develop infrastructure at Banglabandha. It did not allow traffic through the bypass which could reduce the transit distance to half. Also, India did not field the customs and immigration staff, who had to be called in from Siliguri or elsewhere. The land port has remained virtually closed to trade and transit between Bangladesh and Nepal.

The government should learn a second set of lessons concerning non-tariff barriers practiced by India in its trade with Bangladesh. The government, as well as the private sector representatives discussed this issue with India in all bilateral and regional forums. Agreements including Safta were reached, but never fully adhered to by India.

For instance, Indian customs authorities routinely impose spot customs duties that are considerably in excess of the agreed upon tariffs. Example: on April 1, six hundred tons of processed betel nuts were found

lying at Petrapole for days awaiting customs clearance, because India suddenly imposed a 100% duty on import of this item, and on April 16, truckloads of raw jute and jute bags were found awaiting customs clearance for days at Petrapole, because India increased duty to 15% and required additional 4% on raw jute.

In addition, Indian Customs change HS codes to push goods to higher tax category, re-fix the prices to over valuation, require chemical tests (performed in Delhi), etc. Such non-tariff barriers impacted negatively on all exports by Bangladesh.

None of the banks in the seven states in the north and NE India is allowed to open Letter of Credit (LC) for import of any commodity from Bangladesh. An importer is required to travel to a designated bank in Kolkata and perform a number of formalities to open LC.

Finally, the process for obtaining product clearances by Indian national and various local chambers and associations is discouraging. Application form is hardly available and product registration cost is exorbitantly high compared to the low cost of registration of Indian products in Bangladesh.

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But for Bangladesh, the estimation of costs and benefits of providing road transit to India is not so simple. It involves a number of technical, economic, social and environmental issues and concerns. The road network in Bangladesh is not designed to meet the needs of modern freight transport systems. The roads are unsuitable for movement of heavy goods vehicles with containers due to flow capacity, road width, and axle load constraints.

On the other hand, customs clearance, port demurrage charges, vehicle specifications inclusive of emission standard, road safety, insurance, road maintenance, tolls, code of conduct for drivers, etc need to be addressed. India is not prepared to comply with the established international norms and practices for trade and transit.

Bangladesh and India should jointly consider trade and transit opportunities which are technically sound, economically efficient, and socially and environmentally acceptable to both the countries:

Transit by inland water transport (IWT): The Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade provides eight in-transit and inter-country water routes, of which five are used. However, due to accumulation of silt

over the past years, the waterways largely lost navigability and also, the existing navigational aids and port facilities are inadequate and inefficient.

Bangladesh and India together should consider restoring the navigability of the most direct Rajshahi-Dhulian route. They should find it worth investing in IWT for transporting low-value non-perishable commodities for environmental, social, and economic reasons, e.g.: (a) low draft water is particularly suitable for barge traffic; (b) one 10,000 horsepower tow-boat can push 40 barges (1,500 tons each) that have the carrying capacity of 600 railcars (100 tons each) or more than 2,200 trucks (25 tons each); and (c) number of kms one ton can be carried by barge per (diesel) litre is 183 km compared to 72 km by rail and 21 km by road.

Transit by rail transport: It is currently performed through four designated land ports; however, constrained by different gauge lines and lack of integration which require transshipment. Low value commodities are transported from eastern India to NE India, mostly by rail from Kolkata to Agartala via Gauhati and Lumding. The distance is 1,635 km. The alternative route, i.e. transit through Bangladesh (Akhaura-Benapole) will reduce the distance to only 625 km.

This would require one shift from broad gauge to meter gauge at Tongi and then back to broad gauge at Akhaura, assuming that the other broad gauge links will be completed as planned. However, the key issue concerning rail transit is the Jamuna Bridge, which was not originally

designed for train. India should be willing to invest in rail, since it is more efficient than road. For example, a double-tracked rail line can carry more passengers or freight in a given amount of time than a four-lane road.

Designated trade and transit facility at Chittagong port: For example, tea produced in Assam is largely exported through Kolkata port to Europe. The road distance between Gauhati (Assam) and Kolkata is 1,380 km. If allowed through Chittagong port via Akhaura, the distance will be reduced by 60% to only 530 km.

However, it will still require nine days on average to clear customs, loading into a container and subsequently into the vessel compared to six days at Haldia, Kolkata, and one and a half days at Nhava Sheva, Mumbai (JNPT).

In addition to delays, inefficiency (and corruption) has already made the Chittagong port the most expensive in Asia. The government should address the physical inadequacies, strengthen the customs and port authorities, and promote transparent and accountable inter/national private sector participation.

Implementation of the above three actions concerning transit to India should be adequate, efficient, and equitable. The government should make its position clear to India and get out of the "transit-to-India" quagmire.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Report on REB poles

I have seen your report in the October 5, 2005 edition entitled "Poles of Fortune" and in April 21, 06 entitled "REB subscribers victims of 'unusual' expansion". I am very interested in learning if there are similar reports dealing with the replacement of the 1977 vintage of wood southern yellow pine poles with spun concrete poles.

In 1977 I drafted the specification for these southern yellow pine wood poles from the U.S. for the first Chairman of REB. He wanted at least 20 years of service life. To date I have not heard a report of the first failure. I have made two trips to Bangladesh to inspect the U.S. southern pine poles in service with some of the REB staff. We did not find the first sign of any decay in any of the poles.

One of the manufacturers who supplied these southern yellow pine poles to REB has sold some poles manufactured to the same specification to Africa with a written 40-year bank guarantee. Several major U.S.

utilities have adopted the features from the REB specification that have given this performance.

Keep me informed. I have more than 50 years' experience with utility wood poles in 36 countries. I have worked in every continent except Antarctica on pole problems. Let me contribute to your campaign. James A. Taylor One-mail

Air force plane crash

On 24 April a young trainee air force pilot died in a plane crash due to technical faults. He had a family just like anyone of us, his parents sent him to the air force, to bear the responsibility of safeguarding this nation. Lives of such people are precious not only to their families but also to us; the general people are safe for the sacrifices made by such people of the armed forces. It is however the responsibility of the higher authorities to ensure the safety of such pilots and take all measures to minimise the risks that they are exposed to.

Technical faults cannot just be a good enough explanation for their deaths.

The plane that pilot Taniul was flying was a PT 6, can anyone answer how old these planes are? I am more than certain they were bought long before I was born, that is more than two decades back. Then comes the question of whether a poor country like Bangladesh can afford new planes or not, well of course it can, recently I learnt that the air force bought some VIP helicopters. I would surely like to know how the VIP helicopters are different from the regular ones, do they have thrones installed in them without which the VIPs cannot travel? What is more important, the luxury of the VIPs or the safety of pilots?

It is even more disappointing that the incident of pilot Taniul's crash happened on the same day that the country got to read in the papers about how the air force has claimed the discrepancies of the prices paid for the newly purchased aircrafts to be mere errors. Errors?!! In the largest

purchase of the air force in recent times? How credible is it? There can be one and only one price for something we buy, and not many different ones that can be used at convenience of the authorities.

Acitizen One-mail

Irregularities in power plant purchase

The recent newspaper advertisement by a company; be it a public or private sector entity is extremely unrealistic.

The very idea to have at site one, two, three or four units of dual fuel, GTGs for 30MW power plant in 75 days and commissioned within 120 days of contract signing is an absurdity. Even if the whole set up weighing over fifty tons is air freighted!

This indicates the possibility of only persons having inside information with financial liquidity to boot will participate in such a tender.

Further, the preamble of the tender states "only eligible manufac-

tures and suppliers" with no indication of the eligibility criteria! A lot of people may be unnecessarily purchasing the tender forms at Tk. 14, 000 to find out they are not eligible!

What a waste of time and effort! It is a repetition of the fallacies in the earlier proposed 10 MW private sector power plants for which tenders were floated nearly a year back! It seems we are really not interested to go for open tenders with such unworkable criteria. So much for transparency! Engr. S.A. Mansoor Gulshan, Dhaka

JMB story

Shamim Ashraf's report "All 7 JMB Shura men had links to Jamaat, Shibir" published on 28/04/2006 tells us a very important family and political history of Abdur Rahman. I wonder how the Awami League leader (and his family members or friends or political associates) whose sister married Abdur Rahman could possibly not know all this before they decided to go into a relationship with

him. How much reference and background checking Bangladeshi families go through before offering a girl's hand to a man in matrimony? Masrur Khan Sydney, Australia

Weightless weights!

I refer to the above report published in your daily. I fully agree with it.

Every time I visit Karwan Bazar, Dhaka to buy fish, vegetables, fruits, onions, sugar, rice etc. I feel that we are being cheated by the sellers of these products. The sellers always mention that their "weights" are all right, but consumers have no way to "check" the weights of the items purchased.

Prices of all items have gone up in recent times causing great hardship to the consumers. On top of it, the consumers are being cheated by the sellers. Therefore the government should take some drastic steps to protect the consumers.

I understand in Kolkata, West

Bengal, the authorities have set up some system to protect the interests of the consumers. Possibly our government can look into this and initiate protective measures for the consumers.

IHaq One-mail

Crime and politics

I was shocked to read that in the Tongi election, the candidate with the second highest number of votes is one suspected of involvement in a murder case, and one who is currently behind bars.

Why do we allow actual or suspected criminals to contest in elections? If they are in prison, they are there for a reason. We all know that elections can be manipulated, and that if one wins, one has ability to influence the course of justice. We should inject a clause into the election reform proposal that no-one currently in prison or under trial should be allowed to contest elections.

Of course, we need to make sure

that the ruling party does not imprison candidates that they do not wish to see elected! Sanjoy Kumar Nath Chittagong

TV channels

In the recent years the number of private TV channels has grown significantly. At present there are more than five private channels operating in the country. They have some new features definitely but educational programmes are still not adequate. Commercial ads dominate the shows. So, as a result, we are losing our interest in the local channels.

In view of that we would request these channel owners/directors to look into this matter and try to make their programmes more attractive. Zahir U. Hyder One-Mail