

Utilities nightmare nerve-racking

Tokenism can't solve the problems

THE public indictment on the government's unmitigated failure in delivering basic amenities like electricity and water to the people taking a severe form, the ministries involved, in a sudden break of sleep, are displaying signs of desperation to assuage aggrieved public sentiments. At the end of the day it looks like a strange volt-face.

At first, there would be an outright denial of any serious utility problem existing, it would then be underplayed in the face of persistent public clamour, its origins traced to the previous government; and when the public outcry and agitation will hit the streets it would be blamed on opposition incitement with the police brutalising it and local ruling party youth elements taking to the field to crush it all. And as the situation goes out of hand the government eventually concedes the agitators' demands.

The case in point is the government's forming a four-member committee headed by a joint secretary with representatives from Dhaka Wasa, Desa and Desco to devise a 'permanent' solution to water and power crises in Demra area. After a huge lot of public commotion, brutal police action on the agitating crowds, the diabolic ruthlessness of the local MP, wounds inflicted on more than hundred persons, the dialogue option was finally taken resulting in the constitution of a committee. It has a seven-day deadline for a report which hopefully will not be dumped after all this. Similar embarrassing climb-down was performed by the government in Kansat at a grievous cost to the nation which one shudders to recall even in passing.

It is an well-formed impression in the public mind today that unless they wage an agitation and movement, have some blood spilled, court arrest and beating and get the highways blockaded to disrupt traffic, no serious grievance will ever be addressed. That's why even after Kansat and Demra, 400 industry owners and local people of three sub-districts of Narayanganj like Sonargaon, Arahazar and Ruggan are bracing for a movement to demand and obtain regular supply of electricity. As part of the movement they have plans to barricade Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

This is what unfortunately the government can go on expecting so long as it takes a piecemeal, localised and ad-hoc approach to problems that are nationwide calling for holistic and sustainable solutions.

Dismal state of road safety

Would the authority sit up and act?

THE ongoing serialised reports in The Daily Star on road accidents in Bangladesh make a very depressing reading. Just ponder -- we lose more people in road accidents every year than from any other causes including natural disasters. And the casualty figure is actually much less than the actual, because many of the accidents don't get reported at all. And while natural calamities are not preventable, road accidents can be prevented if the administration and the related agencies under it displayed more application and concern for travelers' safety. What riles us most is the game of shifting responsibility between the road transport authority and the police, each trying to suggest that the job of preventing road accidents is not its domain of responsibility. We beg to differ, and let us tell why.

If one were to look at the road accidents one would find that incompetence of drivers, unfit vehicles, condition of roads, and over speeding are the major causes. While these are the causal factors for the accidents, the aggravating factor is that the erring drivers, seldom if ever, are punished for their offences, escaping the arm of the law by greasing the palm of the law enforcers.

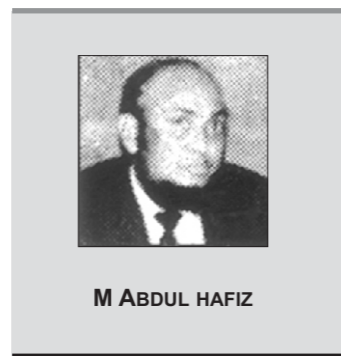
All related government agencies must bear the responsibility for the accidents that occur, and must act to ensure, in their own ways, to prevent them.

The BRTA must ensure that no one not meriting a driver's licence gets one, and no vehicle that does not deserve to be on the road is permitted to get on it. Lack of manpower is a poor excuse and very little comfort to those that have lost their kindred ones in road mishaps.

As for the role of the police, the account of the nexus between them and vehicle owners is shameful and make a mockery of justice in our country. No punishment means no deterrence, an absurdity to say the least. And as for the road condition, the R&H department must ensure that repair and maintenance of the highways are carried out on regular basis to reduce risk of mishaps.

Ten deaths a day on the road is far too many. No administration worth its salt can sit by and watch this repeated day after day.

In search of an alternative world



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE World Social Forum (WSF) 2006 is just over. It was for the first time that the WSF international council comprising more than 400 civil society organisations decided to hold a polycentric forum. In its sixth year it was scheduled to be held simultaneously in January this year at Caracas (Venezuela), Bamako (Mali) and Karachi (Pakistan). With that the WSF's arrival in our part of the world is significant in more than one way, not withstanding all the concerns, reservations and even apprehensions about its impact on local/regional political and economic scene.

The Karachi chapter of WSF, delayed due to earthquake in Pakistan, could not coincide with parallel events elsewhere and was rescheduled for the last week of March. The city of Karachi can be truly proud for hosting the mega event witnessing the attendance of some 15 to 20 thousand people including a few thousand foreigners. The local activists arranged their boarding, lodging and logistics as well as 400 events in a span of five days. By

PERSPECTIVES

More than anything else the WSF is a movement of ideas that prompts reflection to resist and overcome the domination and on the alternative that can be proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and inequality that the process of capitalist globalisation currently prevalent is creating or aggravating globally and within countries. The leaders of the WSF are aware that riding the WSF is like riding a bicycle -- keep going forward or fall off. For the moment, the WSF seems to be riding well.

any standard it was no mean achievement.

The forum brought together ordinary citizens to listen to the speakers and issues that had hitherto been the traditional domain of five star hotels in elite cities. Yet only a few were aware of what was it all about and the rest were haunted by the question till the end: What exactly was World Social Forum? Since its first congregation in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001 it appeared as an antidote to global elite's annual Davos (Switzerland) World Economic Forum (WEF) where business tycoons and political celebrities gather to evolve strategy for the further pillage of the world. Obviously then the genesis of the WSF had to be quite radical and true to the expectation it quickly earned the reputation as the cleaning house for all anti-imperialist political currents.

In a world that was swayed after the end of the cold war with Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the 'end of history' and 'the triumph of capitalist democracy' the ideas represented by WSF have the elements of burgeoning

wave of anti-imperialist sentiments around the world. Since the nineties of the last century when much of the world rode the neo-liberal bandwagon only to be caught in its stranglehold we seem to have come a full circle. The world is now visibly impatient to come out of the West's neo-liberal economic grip with its accompanying skull duggery and social injustices.

Therefore, broadly the WSF aims at providing a space for public deliberation and a platform for groups and organisations opposed to uncritical acceptance of neo-liberal and military-industrial agenda posited by such agencies as World Bank, politically powerful multinational corporations and trade governing body such as WTO, all of which undermine, in one way or other, the environment, the rights of labour and local citizenry as well as political and economic power of third world countries.

Hence there has been a search for an alternative consequent upon which there is now a brave and optimistic slogan: Another world is possible -- only if sensitivity

and awareness are increased. Then many more people may end up believing another way is indeed possible. High hopes stem from the fact that the political landscape of Latin America changed ever since 2001 when the first WSF was held in Brazil. After a tremendous socio-political mobilisation was effected by WSF in Porto Alegre the people voted to presidency the Labour leader Luiz Inacio 'Lula' de Silva and a more radical Hugo Chavez was voted to power in Venezuela. The WSF could have contributed to the change indirectly, but the presence of a host of factors such as the level of maturity of the progressive movement and its subjective situation must also have been the major determinants of those positive developments in the region. In India the right wing BJP was ousted and Congress came to power with the support of the leftists after WSF, Mumbai in 2005. One wonders if these changes are linked to the WSF! But it is home truth that after 2001 all across Latin America the right wingers were effectively squeezed.

In Latin America today the radical pole is taking shape around presidents Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Marles of Bolivia. The new formulations have led to a popular demand for a decisive political break with the neo-liberal economic model. The experiments are already underway with many innovative ideas for the region like evaluating the possibilities of common gas pipeline, a common regional energy policy, a regional bank and so on.

These alternative ideas are exciting. And who can deny the power of ideas? They form the frame of our understanding of the world, inform our beliefs and drive our behaviour. Great ideas are so profound and frame-shaking that they can instantly topple many of the things we believe and transform our worldviews, our values and hence our actions. May be it is the power of emerging ideas that are leading to the shifts also on ground.

Then again the WSF and its programmes are not without snags and pitfalls. Among the litany of complaints against the forum the most serious one is about its legitimacy and therefore the future of the process. In the first instance, the WSF insists that it is only a 'space' in which radical political movements and ideas can be shared and refuses to take on the burden of articulating a coherent and viable challenge to global capitalism. Secondly, in Arundhati Roy's words, the forum specifically and movements of resistance to neo-liberal capitalism more generally are rapidly being NGO-ised. According to Tariq Ali, a

Pakistani-born British activist, they are W(Western) GO-ised.

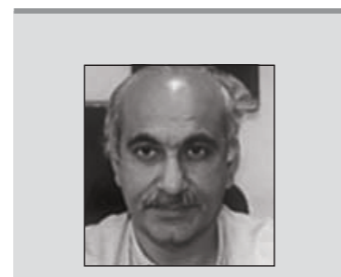
In other words, they are losing their organic and inherently democratic impulse to the discourse of professional developmentalism. However this professionalisation of the resistance movements has its roots in the politics of aid as multilateral and bilateral donors around the world jump on the peace and social justice bandwagon. But when a substantive progressive political movement that is anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and on the frontline of the struggle for democratisation builds up the exploitation by donors is likely to stop. However, the danger of donor agencies taking over the progressive movements through their own agendas through their promises of aid and funding remains ever present.

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Look before you don't leap



M.J. AKBAR

THE strife-ridden battleground of Indian politics has entered a phase of curious and paradoxical stalemated: the government is ceding space but there is no one to occupy it. In a sense, the government is losing the battle with itself. There is no one else to lose it against.

This fits in with a standard operating law of Indian politics: no one wins an election but someone loses it. But sequence must not overlap with consequence. We are still in the sequence stage. A wit might add that power is such a con that it takes no time at all to attach itself to sequence.

It is an old joke that the only success ever achieved by a government-appointed committee was the King James I Bible. The new, wry and sardonic joke in Delhi is that there is no one left to appoint to any more committees. Everyone is a member of some committee or the other.

The ruling class of Delhi has three components: the has-beens, the wannabes, and those stuck in the middle. The has-beens are politicians and bureau-

BYLINE

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crats who have retired from government. But despite being closer to seventy than sixty, they have not yet tired of power and continue to exhibit an athletic hunger for minor perks and privileges. Even the has-beens, in other words, are wannabes.

Dr Manmohan Singh, the most successful bureaucrat in history, has found the perfect solution to this problem. He has converted governance into hundreds of committees. Tell him about any problem, from Kashmir to a shortage of knitting needles, and a committee is born out of the conversation. It is axiomatic that nothing gets done. But that, presumably, is the point. The point of existence is survival, not service.

It is entirely in character that the most successful bureaucrat in history has become Prime Minister of Delhi after being appointed Prime Minister of India. Dr Manmohan Singh understands Delhi. He is comfortable in Delhi. He knows the dance of the faithful in Delhi: two steps back and one step sideways keep you at a safe distance from trouble. The absence of trouble is the first principle of survival.

The governance of India is a

different story and requires a different mindset. India needs a leap of imagination. Dr Manmohan Singh's motto is simple: look before you don't leap.

Delhi is not a single fact. There are at least two Delhis, and I am not talking of the old city built by Shahjehan and the new one crafted by Lutyns.

There is one Delhi in which Indians live, and another Delhi where the men and women who rule India live. Sheila Dikshit is the guardian of the first Delhi, of real people, and a pretty capable one too. Dr Manmohan Singh is the presiding spirit of the other Delhi: of ministers, bureaucrats, and their service providers, from the humble dholi to the obsequious magnate.

The Prime Minister of Delhi has extraordinary, even great, virtues. He is, to begin with, ruthlessly honest. Wisely, he never lets his personal morals extend to his ministers, who can be as corrupt as they want to be, as long as they don't get caught. Dr Manmohan Singh is even more ruthlessly diligent.

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Manmohan Singh's ratio is the opposite. He gives his personal attention to virtually every file. But that is not the virtue needed of a Prime Minister of India, because all problems are not equal. When everything is sought to be done, there is the great danger that nothing might be done.

The government of India is structured to look after all problems, which is why it has so many departments. The Prime Minister of India must concentrate his vision on the vital organs that keep a nation in the best of health during his temporary possession of office. At this point of time, the three great priorities should be, at least in my view, security, Naxalites, and power.

Each one of these issues could demand twenty hours of work each day. Security means not only the elimination of terrorism and communal riots, but also a mature peace with Pakistan, negotiated with persistence. Instead we have a fits and starts policy. Every so often, without any particular reason or explanation, Kashmir jumps up on the calendar, shapes headlines for a day or two, and then melts away into indifference. There is no engagement.

The Naxalites get perfunctory lip service, but in fact are treated like someone else's headache: as a law and order problem to be dealt with by chief ministers. Power needs massive, concentrated, one-horizon, national and nationwide investment. Instead, the problem has been outsourced to the general managers of power plants. If they can raise output, very nice. If not, tough luck: the golden age of Indian civilisation did occur long before air-conditioning, isn't it? If Chandragupta Maurya could do without electricity, who are you to complain about power cuts?

If this drift to nowhere has not induced any sense of panic (the panic of the lost) then it is largely because there is no Opposition. Indeed, if any political party displays the panic of the lost then it is the BJP. Those who have become used to positions, take time to adjust to opposition. That much is understandable. But two years? Getting on top of a chariot is not the best method to find your mind. You have to be on top of issues. The other political formations are like the Indians looking at Rumi's elephant: you can never be quite sure whether it is a water pipe, a fan, a pillar or a throne. "Had each of them held a lighted candle," writes Rumi, "there would have been no contradiction in their words." But illumination commands too high a premium in our befuddled times.

Voters, generally, though not always, are kinder to the Opposition than to the government. If the Opposition is lost, it only hurts itself. If the government is lost, it hurts the people. It is really as simple as that.

Voters have faith and respect for the office of Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is the voice of Parliament, and often the voice of India. A Prime Minister who devalues his office betrays this great trust. The King James Bible does tell us that the meek shall inherit the earth. Indeed they might, and probably should, but it were best if they were kept out of the office of Prime Minister of India. Meek so often blurs into weak.

The temptations of Delhi are magnetic. Let me leave those who prefer Delhi to India with a sobering thought. The Mughal empire never really survived the shift from Agra to Delhi. Shahjehan moved halfway through his reign; and his heir, Aurangzeb could barely hold what he had inherited, as he himself realised on his deathbed.

Does the Mughal empire seem too remote? The British announced the change of their capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911, but effectively moved in 1931. For more than two hundred years the British had continuously expanded their possessions and their influence, from Burma to Persia, from their base in Calcutta. Sixteen years after the Viceroy of India became the Viceroy of Delhi, the British packed their bags.

The attractions of Delhi can be fatal.

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Parliament first, judiciary third

We believe, the profile of corruption recently released by Transparency International has impaired the moral fibre of parliament, police and judiciary of the world. The perception of corruption of parliament and judiciary marked as No. 1 and No. 3 in world perspective may not create any special sense of shame in Bangladesh which has already been declared first among nations for five years consecutively.

ABDUL KHALEQUE

HISTORICALLY, king became the supreme functionary of executive, legislative and judicial organs of the state. Behind subsequent facades of titular and dictatorial monarchy, and evolution of responsible parliamentary cabinet system and powerful presidential and socialist forms of government, an oligarchy lurked with a gravitational message of public welfare. After the collapse of the ancient empires, and the emergence of nation states, colonial empires grew with exploitative practices, and built their socio-political and economic power at the expense of colonies. These empires fought among themselves.

The World War II (1939-1945) ended with uncontrollable demand for political independence of colonies. Ruthless colonial suppression failed to frustrate the demand. Independent nation-states with poverty and illiteracy and all manners of backwardness appeared on the international scene without experience of self-governance, planned economy and political virtues. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, vast illiteracy and poverty drove the newly

emergent sovereign states mostly toward chaotic political administrative regimes under freedom-fighting political leaders and ambitious military bureaucrats. Some such countries adopted democratic responsible cabinet or parliamentary presidential system with separate judiciary. The rest were dictatorial with no parliament or judiciary worth the name. Long subservience to colonial rule sapped the vitality of the value system of colonies and created strong political impulse for power and affluence. This became noticeable in Africa and Latin America.

With the commencement of the international aid system after World War II, lack of accountability, proper supervision and audit of accounts encouraged political misuse of aid for private ends. Official Development Investment in the less developed countries (LDCs) gradually dwindled into a negligible state, and in its stead the strategy of multinational corporation (MNC) was considered by donors as the harbinger of transfer of technology to LDCs for their rapid growth. Corporate corruption soon became spectacular. Latin American agonies brought to the forefront the corrupt practices of MNCs which

maintained close link with their native politics and economic interest.

We noticed Tanaka indictment in Japan and very recently the expulsion of corrupt members of parliament in India without surprise. There was a long-standing general allegation in Bangladesh against parliamentary corruption in public contracts, state purchases, distributions, allocation of funds in projects, secret shares of politicians in business etc but no action therefore. Financial tycoons grabbed money-hungry political parties and parliamentary candidates for policy dividends. Elections became a game of political-muscular-criminal combine for political power. The Transparency International and the native Transparency Trustee Boards in various countries seem to have now brought the cat out of the bag in their reports. Although corruption has co-existed with human society as a phenomenon of ordinary behaviour, its spectacular development in government and politics in recent decades is startling.

Transparency International may have had in its record the interesting legends of corruption in ancient Greece, Rome, India etc and its

march through medieval and subsequent ages of history in Britain, France, Germany, Russia, USA, China and many other dictatorial countries and in the Indian sub-continent. We believe, the profile of corruption recently released by Transparency International has impaired the moral fibre of parliament, police and judiciary of the world. The perception of corruption of parliament and judiciary marked as No. 1 and No. 3 in world perspective may not create any special sense of shame in Bangladesh which has already been declared first among nations for five years consecutively, commencing on January 1, 2000.

It is our belief that the element of error in the perception of corruption reported by the Transparency Trustee Board would not exceed 10 percent if corruption means decomposition and debasement of moral values, perversion from right principles, and is characterized by bribe-taking and bribing, misuse of public power for private ends, nepotism, favouritism, embezzlement of funds, and includes scam in elections, tax evasion, business, trade, commerce, industry, allocation of funds, purchases, contract, development projects, appointment and promotion of public servants and teachers in all levels of education etc.

Transparency International has certainly its own device of collection of data from newspapers, citizens and foreigners, victims who bear the brunt of corruption and other sources in order to reach its perception of corruption located in the parliamentary and the judicial organs of the state. The low level of the moral fibre of parliament and judiciary as distinct

from the executive was not brought into public light so spectacularly in the past, in fear of the red-eyes of members of parliament and the contempt procedure of courts. We usually concerned ourselves with the petty and crude corruption of the little men and kept out of focus the big and sophisticated corruption of the big and the powerful like parliament and judiciary, the police apart.

We do not know of any agitation of parliament and judiciary anywhere against the evaluated perception of corruption released by Transparency International. In Bangladesh, we create usually row against proverbial tyrants in and around lower courts, government offices including the police organisation and civil services and some departments where recruitment, promotion etc are hinged on corruption. Lack of effective inspection and supervision of the functions of lower courts has perhaps created corrupt elements in matters related to warrant, summons, bails, auction sale, hearing of cases, distortion in judgement under political interference. Independence of conscience of fundamental state functionaries is perhaps a thing of the past, otherwise Transparency International could not have formed its perception of judicial corruption. Lamentable is the unconstitutional role of Bangladesh executive in lower judiciary. Citizens' demand to separate judiciary from executive since the days of Warren Hastings has remained unfulfilled. We noticed since 1954 the separation issues as election highlight just to keep the illiterate voters in good humour without any political will to effect the separation.

The transparency report will, we believe, inspire research into corruption in its historical perspectives. We know that in 430 BC, Romans had law prohibiting political badge. A Roman governor used to fleece the province to compete for consulship, used magistrates to act as collaborators. Any one found corrupt was disqualified for future elections also. Julius Caesar introduced nomination of consuls to reduce corruption. In Greece, high administrative posts were assigned by lottery. In Carthage, the throne and military commands were saleable. In Britain, in the 15th century, jurors tampered with evidence. George III created peers for political jobbery. Justice Bacon was impeached for corruption. In the 19th century, parliamentary seat could be procured with money. In USA, lots of Senators have been guilty of corruption; missions, consulates, contracts are viewed as President Jackson's doctrine of spoils of victors. Corporate presidents can fill up a house with gifts. Since the time of Gerald Ford corporate corruption has startled the world. Tanaka indictment hit Japan. Lockheed scandals involved Netherlands.

In ancient India, corruption was punished with banishment. The Mughal rulers gave East India Company trade facility through corruption. Company corruption accelerated the pace of industrialism in Britain when the East India Company's purse-proud barbarians and Knights of the Golden Fleece provided the cash capital at home.

Police job is visible, hazardous, public-predicament oriented and a historical subject of unpleasantness; police has to deal with human frailties

and bring delinquents to court, in the process depriving delinquents of liberty. Police has to deal with all kinds of liars and hardened criminals to extract truth, use force to keep peace, and control order as well as disorderly crowd and pursue preventive steps. Hardly anybody appreciates the predicaments of police in the discharge of duties for which he is duty-bound for 24 hours.

In the year 1829, British Prime Minister brought wide scale reforms in police and today London police is treated as the world's best. Before the reforms, none could dare to come out in broad daylight in the city of London for fear of armed robbers and dacoits. The Tames was the haven of pirates. Women moved in cities openly for unsocial contacts. Britain had one single characteristic which was absent elsewhere. There was rule of law. None was above law. There were no red-eyed politicians and powerful citizens who could interfere in professional police job. Laws are mostly judge-made and respected equally by the high and the low. All the cruel laws known in history were legal in Britain but they were all abolished with the growth of enlightenment. Even death sentence was abolished in mid 1960s whereas by the early nineteenth century there were 250 offences for which the punishment was death. Theft of handkerchief from shop was punished with death.

In Britain, police is a self-governing institution under the statutory control of the Home Ministry, consisting of about 90 independent units functioning under local governments, under the national police policy figured out by the government in the Home Ministry. Recruitment is made at one level only (constable) by each unit, from such

recruits emerge police chiefs of the 90 units in due course.

Police corruption in Bangladesh has extended up to collusion with criminals and easy indulgence in crimes which police has to prevent and detect. He does not have professional freedom and has to work under the red-eyes of politicians. Allegations against police are too many. Police has also too many tales to tell: He overworks but gets no overtime. His pay does not cover hazards of his job. He cannot enjoy even weekly holidays. His pay and emoluments are far below his minimum requirements in family life etc.

It is unfortunate, we do not have honest, tough-principled persons in politics, capable of taking sincere and bold-stroke action to jettison the corrupt elements from parliament, police and judiciary.

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