

CJ's important observations

High time we acted against corruption

THE Chief Justice must be complimented for his bold and forthright articulation on the plague that is eating into the very core of our nation- corruption. Although he has restated what we have been saying all this while, he has nonetheless reinforced popular feelings on the matter, and coming as it does from the highest seat of justice, those to whom he has pointed the finger, must take note of his remarks.

The CJ's remarks stand out for two reasons. Apart from echoing the sentiments of the people he has done us the favour of pointing out the very repository of corruption in Bangladesh - the politicians and those residing in the highest social hierarchy, both surviving on a very intimate nexus in the crime. He has also suggested several means and ways to combat the disease, which deserves dilution.

One cannot agree more that it is political will and political will only that can stem this debilitating social cancer, which unfortunately has come to be accepted as the norm rather than the exception. However, the political will must come from the political leaders, but the entire political system regrettably, starting with the electoral process, is so besmirched with corruption that a systemic cleansing is called for. Those who should lead the way in our fight against corruption, the people's representatives, resort to corruption in various ways to get elected, and have to continue in the corrupt ways for getting elected.

Not only that, the bastion of political power in the country is so inexorably immersed in corruption that the idea has taken an institutional form in our country. Nothing gets done, and no business deal gets through unless routed through a certain channel, so it is said. The CJ's call for social resistance against corruption strikes a responsive chord. This can be achieved only when the public is aware enough to elect only those that are without blemish and can lead the nation through personal examples. That is a tall order indeed but nonetheless achievable if government transparency and right of the public to information can be ensured.

Purging corruption may not be possible without weeding out the corrupt. It is perhaps time to adopt concrete actions to root out the evils of corruption from the society, once and for all.

Police firing one too many

We demand an end to it

TO say that one million garment factory workers by the sweat of their brow are contributing 75 percent of forex earning through export of apparels is no overstatement. Yet, most of them are overworked and their working conditions far from ideal sans adequate amenities. Above all, the mandatory safety devices, especially the fire escapes, are conspicuously absent. In the event of accidental deaths or injury, they would be paid pittance of a compensation. The salaries they are paid are a shameful peanut to the huge profits made out of their labour.

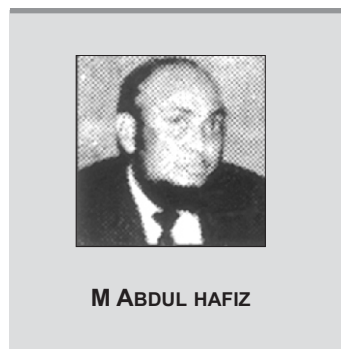
That said, we now turn to the eruption of labour grievances at a Gazipur sweater factory which led to one worker felled by police bullet fired from inside the gate without provocation. No one in authority could say on whose orders the police opened fire! Even the police superintendent couldn't say at whose instance the trigger was pulled, even though two senior police officials -- an addl SP and officer in-charge -- were present on the scene. There needs to be thorough investigation with the probe report made public.

It appears that the authorities summoned the police. And, when the latter locked the gate that the workers scaled the walls to move on to the other side where they began rampaging bringing road traffic to a standstill which too was wrong. But, what had started out as a demand for payment of salary and an end to 'oppression' of workers took a complicated turn with simmering demands for release of arrested workers and withdrawal of cases against 80 workers. Now the volatility is even more pronounced after the death and injuries inflicted in the police firing.

It seems the police have got into the habit of pulling the trigger without trying other means of resolving a crisis situation. Failing persuasion which is the best course to take, they could at the most apply other soft options to weather stone or brick pelting.

Most important of all, has the labour directorate and the industry ministry abdicated their oversight responsibility of ensuring that the workers of garment factories are paid their salaries regularly and that they do their job in reasonably good and secure working conditions? Equally relevantly, the BGMEA must have a role in securing redress of the workers' legitimate demands by engaging the factory owners in the alleviation process. Finally, there should be conflict resolution cells within the factories to swing into trouble-shooting between the employee and the employer on a short notice.

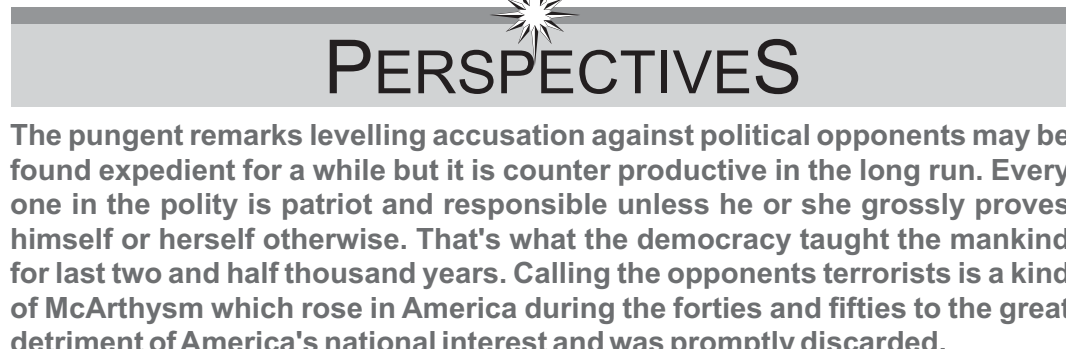
Of anarchy and terrorism



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE establishment's refrain that the opposition is culprit for anything going wrong in the country gets louder as the government's term comes to an end. It is obviously an exercise to find a scapegoat for its enormous failures. And the refrain reaches its crescendo when it is about facing an electoral verdict. Doom says then conjure up a scenario as if the volcano is simmering and a storm brewing up and unless the incumbent dispensation is returned to power the impending crisis will be difficult to tide over.

It's an usual pattern we have been familiar with in this country. But the four party alliance govern-



PERSPECTIVES

The pungent remarks levelling accusation against political opponents may be found expedient for a while but it is counter productive in the long run. Every one in the polity is patriot and responsible unless he or she grossly proves himself or herself otherwise. That's what the democracy taught the mankind for last two and half thousand years. Calling the opponents terrorists is a kind of McArthysm which rose in America during the forties and fifties to the great detriment of America's national interest and was promptly discarded.

ment has gone steps further. Calling the opposition, particularly the AL, a terrorists' party out to create anarchy in the country the government leaders asserted their responsibility to ensure public safety. None could agree more to the alliance's assertion about public safety but the ominous labelling of the opposition terrorists comes as a rude shock to the public's civic sense.

As regards the creation of the anarchy by the opposition -- well, the government is entitled to say anything it pleases in our clime. Yet a humble question may be put before it: Is there anything

more left for the country to be in anarchy? Isn't it already in the throes of worst kind of anarchy for years? Eversince the alliance came to power in 2001 or even before that the anarchy has been the order of the day with lawlessness and terrorism gripping all sectors of life. Thanks to the alliance government's bunglings, poor governance, financial sleaze and a hyper-competitive consumer oriented economy, it has only exacerbated over the

Indeed, every problem the alliance government created or allowed to be -- that of poverty, inequality, unemployment, corrup-

tion, price hike, water, power and so on are ticking time bombs by themselves and are capable of violent explosion when the time matures. We saw those explosion in Kansat, Shonir Akhra, Shokhipur and numerous other flash points across the country. Everywhere the people battled with 'law enforcing agencies' to have their rights realised even without the intervention of political opposition which is rather fearfully on its backfoot in front of fearsome storm troopers of the alliance.

Therefore, the alliance government needn't fear AL or any other opposition party for creating anar-

chy to scuttle the alliance's so-called development process. The AL -- whether terrorist or not -- is already cut to size through relentless perpetuation of terrorism against it right from 15 August 1975 and now left only to be ostracised which the government is capable of doing at any opportune time. We are surrounded by the bushfire of anarchy already raging in the country. The government better douse it by addressing the problems that gave rise to anarchy -- themselves.

Look at the prairie fire -- the anarchy in the market, campuses and in the communication sector. They are exploding one after another. It would be prudent for the government to leash the cruel market forces, to bring back the campus purity through collective catharsis and to put an end to the scourge of extortion in our vast communication network, instead of taking pique against political parties and persons.

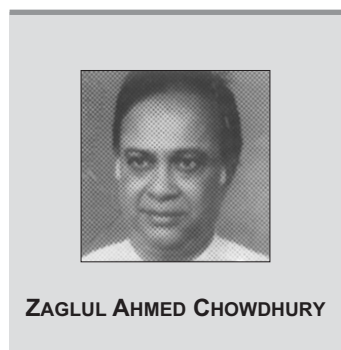
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Bangladesh today is on the brink. The next election of the country will be seminal and should thus be carefully conducted. Unfortunately up till now there are few signs that it will be. That is however no reason for giving up hopes. Any impending metamorphosis does create uncertainties and imponderables. But in Bangladesh neither a volcano is simmering nor a storm brewing up.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

How much impact can Benazir and Sharif have on Pakistan politics?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

CLEARLY, Pakistan's politics is heating up slowly centering next year's general elections and the recent understanding between two former exiled prime ministers on country's democracy has introduced a new element of interest in the entire scenario. Benazir Butto and Nawaz Sharif after their long discussions in London have decided to work together on what they said restoration of democratic rule in their country and are seeking to chalk up a plan in that direction. Both, twice prime minister of Pakistan and each time sacked from power before the expiry of terms, have also vowed to return home and join opposition politics against the present government. The otherwise not much existing political scene in the country has been enlivened by the joint statement of the former political foes-turned-allies now who have forged broader unity even though skeptics feel their chances of return to Pakistan remains difficult because of a variety of factors.

Nonetheless, the very fact that leaders of two major political parties -- the Pakistan Peoples party (PPP) and Muslim League (Nawaz) have finally come together on anti-Musharraf platform will have manifold implications. Not unexpectedly, president General Pervez Musharraf has brushed aside any possibility of their impact against the govern-



MATTERS AROUND US

People of Pakistan appear to be not much euphoric about the rue of both Benazir and Nawaz Sharif because of their performance even though they were democratically elected. Pakistan certainly needs unalloyed democracy, but this is yet to fully come despite many progress in that direction. The Benazir-Nawaz understanding has resulted in some enthusiasm because of the sympathy they gained being banished abroad for long and restrictions on their return.

ment as he says "corrupt" politicians have no scope for winning public support. Evidently, he refers to the charges of various corruptions by the two former premiers, their close relations and associates when they were in power. But his comments about the opposition leaders are unlikely to deter Benazir and Sharif from embarking upon a new course of intensified agitation while their own role in the movement they spoke about remains unclear because of limitations of being abroad under severe compulsions.

Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif had parleys for the second time, having met in Jeddah before, where the latter has been living in exile for the last few years. He was finally given a visa by the British government that enabled him to travel to London while Benazir is having a self-exiled life for several years living mostly in US, UK and UAE. Many eyes were cast on the nine-hour long meeting between the two one time top leaders of Pakistan. Their understanding on nation's political milieu has generated enormous interest at home and abroad mainly for the reason that Pakistan is approaching to election late next year and about the role of two key political figures.

The political landscape of Pakistan has gone through drastic changes since the two leaders left

the country and both PPP and the PML (Nawaz) are now in the opposition while the supporters of the military president seem to be firmly in control of the affairs. The national elections that followed after the death of former military ruler Gen. Ziaul Haq in a mysterious plane crash in 1988 brought Benazir to power, but her term was abruptly cut short when her government was sacked by the largely ceremonial president on charge of mismanagement and corruption. Midterm polls saw Nawaz Sharif coming to the helm, but he too faced the same fate and power had once again gone back to Benazir through balloting. This time too, she was dismissed midway through the term and elections brought her bitter political rival Nawaz Sharif to power with a big majority.

Aware of the constitutional provision of ceremonial president's authority to sack elected governments, Nawaz this time amended the constitution taking the advantage of two-third majority in parliament and scrapped that power of the presidency. But little he knew that he would not be able to complete his term despite this change in the constitution as the problem came from another direction. He was toppled in a bloodless military coup in October, 1998 bringing army chief Gen. Musharraf to power, whose most part of existence is characterised by undemocratic rule. Sharif was

found guilty of many charges, but sent to exile in Jeddah from prison as mediated by Saudi Arabia and the United States. On the other hand, Benazir faced several corruption charges and she chose to remain abroad evidently fearing arrest on return home. Her husband Asif Zardari served long jail terms on corruption.

The PML suffered major split with most deserting Nawaz. The PPP too was also divided on a small scale. Gen. Musharraf organised national elections before the expiry of three-year time under a supreme court verdict that had validated his coup but ordered fresh polls within three years. The polls were won by pro-government politicians with the focus on former premier Zafarullah Khan Jamali and present Shaukat Aziz from PML (Quaid-e-Azam), PPP (Aftab Sherpao) and MQM of the "Mohajirs". They have majority in the national parliament while the provincial assemblies have mostly Musharraf supporters. The opposition consisting mainly PPP and PML (Nawaz) sought to keep the pot boiling without much success. Musharraf and his supporters faced little challenge. As the polls are due in late 2007, political realignments are discernible and it is in this context two former prime ministers have resolved to bring back democracy in the country as they believe

Pakistan is still devoid of representative government.

Meanwhile, Gen. Musharraf held a referendum, which he got endorsed by the federal parliament consisting the national assembly and the senate and the provincial assemblies, where his supporters are in majority. However, during this time the opposition has also increased as Islamic MMA deserted him accusing that the president turned back from a promise to shed uniform by 2004.

Musharraf says that he has brought about enormous changes since taking power and the cup of democracy in Pakistan is now 99 percent full. This is well contested by the opposition and many others because the key person, who is the president himself, remains unelected and still in uniform as army chief. The Commonwealth, which had suspended Pakistan, restored its membership following elections, but hopes that democracy will be complete after the most powerful person sheds uniform and representative character is further enlarged. Many are in dispute with the contention of Gen. Musharraf about restoration of democracy and feel it largely sounds hollow.

About the state of democracy notwithstanding, the president is credited with success in foreign policy, particularly steering the country clear at a difficult time in the wake of the Afghan crisis. The economy mainly led by former finance minister and present premier Shaukat Aziz improved remarkably and the corruption is also much less compared to the regimes of democratic governments. All these go in favour of Gen. Musharraf. But the ambiguity about not giving up the uniform is hardly acceptable. Whether the president will go for another term at the helm following the expiry of present tenure late next year

remains unclear. Should he decide to run for another term voted by the members of parliament and provincial assemblies, it is also unclear if the present legislatures or the new ones after the coming polls will elect a new president. One line of interpretation of the constitution is that it is possible that he may be elected by the existing ones just before their life is over. But this is being contested although Musharraf is unclear whether he will seek another term.

People of Pakistan appear to be not much euphoric about the rue of both Benazir and Nawaz Sharif because of their performance even though they were democratically elected. Pakistan certainly needs unalloyed democracy, but this is yet to fully come despite many progress in that direction. The Benazir-Nawaz understanding has resulted in some enthusiasm because of the sympathy they gained being banished abroad for long and restrictions on their return. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to come back Pakistan before the next polls, but politics without the two former heavyweights in the active picture is unlikely to be much credible. How much dent they will be able to make in the strong government base is doubtful at this stage, but many feel that they all should be allowed to play their role in country's politics centering the coming national elections.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Foreign Editor of BSS.

WB's assistance strategy for Bangladesh



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE World Bank (WB) has launched its new Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Bangladesh on May 15, showing that the government in 2004 severely underperformed in six areas of governance compared to the government in 1998. The flagging governance and dysfunctional political institutions are cutting a deep swathe over the country's development, it observed.

The CAS covering the period 2006-2009, is a support package of nearly \$ 3 billion over four years and was endorsed by the WB Board of Directors on March 29. The WB will provide assistance to Bangladesh under the CAS from July for funding development in priority areas. The three corner-

BY THE NUMBERS

Over the last two decades the people of this country have witnessed a large and increasing divergence in governance, which has doubled corruption and collapsed rule of law in most of the public institutions. Not only the foreign forums, but also the common people of the country have a similar view on ensuring the accountability of the key public institutions for improving governance and reducing corruption.

stones of the CAS are improving the investment climate, empowering the poor and strengthening core governance. In addition, it will support governance reforms and investment in the power sector, water, health and education.

The WB will also support the strengthening accountability of the key public institutions like the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, Public Accounts Committee, Bangladesh Bank, the Public Service Commission, Securities Exchange Commission, as well as the core governance process of public financial and budgetary management, public procurement, the National Board of Revenue, and legal and judicial reform, in collaboration with other development partners.

The WB, the Asian Development

Bank (ADB), Japan and UK Department for International Development (DFID) jointly prepared the CAS. Under the CAS programme the four major development partners of the country will provide \$ 3 billion, provided the government continued its policy and implementation performance.

Serious weaknesses in different sectors of governance in Bangladesh will be challenges for more growth and prosperity in the coming decade, said vice-president of the WB for South Asia region Pratul C Patel at a press conference in Dhaka on May-15, while launching the new CAS. He also said that the WB has cancelled a number of projects for procurement related corruption.

The WB, which has taken a tough stance on governance and

corruption, has already warned the government, saying that future access to their development credits will be conditioned on governance related benchmarks. It will be more aggressive in its tough stance against corruption during the CAS period and the bank has already informed the government about it, said Patel.

Bangladesh scored the lowest marks among 209 low income countries in 2004 in the WB's governance situation survey. The survey titled 'Bangladesh PRSP forum economic update: recent developments and future perspectives' was conducted on the basis of six indicators of the governance issue which were voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control

of corruption.

Corruption is perceived to be most acute in Bangladesh and it has again been crowned as the top corrupt state in the world for the fifth consecutive year. The problem of corruption and poor governance lied largely in the fact that certain strategic public institutions, particularly the police, judiciary, taxation and transport remain largely unreformed. The whole mechanism of governance in the country has been vitiated owing to lack of accountability and transparency in the key public institutions.

The government was compelled to form the independent Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) under pressure from the donors. But it did not make the ACC effectively functional, why? Any motive of advancing with some partisan agenda? The foreign donors unanimously deplored the ineffectiveness of the ACC in nabbing the corrupt, as they viewed that corruption impeded prospective economic growth and investment in Bangladesh. The visiting WB vice president also expressed his deep concern over the ineffectiveness of the ACC terming it as joke.

The WB country director Christine I Wallich asked the government to prepare performance

indicators of the Public Finance Management (PFM) and to separate office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh (CAG) from the executive to ensure financial accountability of the public institutions. But the government has so far not taken any steps to separate CAG office from the executive.

The performance of the key public institutions which mainly moulds up the quality of governance, wretchedly is worst in Bangladesh. Lack of accountability in the public institutions has been nakedly exposed in all aspects of governance. The Asian Development Bank in its Quarterly Economic Update released on February 20, cautioned that poor governance and the knock-on effects of high global oil prices may create a negative impact on economy.

The WB has come up with a comparative study of governance between the year 1998 and 2004 in its new CAS. Regrettably, the four-party alliance government has severely suffered in all the key areas of governance. The police have been made a partisan force and the Public Service Commission has been turned into a rubber stamp. The separation of the judiciary has been dragged to the fag-end of its tenure to do it never. Not

only the ACC but the Election Commission has also been turned out to be a big joke. Clearly, these testify to serious weakness in governance and the government now needs to do some soul-searching and be determined in emancipating itself from the indignity of being the worst performer.

Strengthening accountability and ensuring transparency in the key public institutions, are two major components for improving governance. Appointment of a sector-wise ombudsman, cancellation of the Official Secrecy Act for ensuring free flow of information, and creation of massive awareness among the people against corruption are very crucial for improving governance. The public institutions must be made accountable to the public as well as their institutional stakeholder to ensure good governance.

Over the last two decades the people of this country have witnessed a large and increasing divergence in governance, which has doubled corruption and collapsed rule of law in most of the public institutions. Not only the foreign forums, but also the common people of the country have a similar view on ensuring the accountability of the key public institutions for improving gover-

nance and reducing corruption.

The WB is apparently committed to working with the government and people of Bangladesh to unlock the country's potential through the new CAS. While lending full support to the CAS, we cannot but emphasise the concern expressed by the WB vice president for improvement of governance and reduction of rampant corruption, whose development costs are huge. It is really disgraceful for the government as well as the nation when a foreign dignitary publicly criticises the government for its poor performance and utters words of warning for the consequence. The government will continue to be treated with such insolence unless it develops the sense of self-respect through improving governance.

ANM Nurul Haque is a banker.