

A useful message from TIB study

JS committees could have done better

THE parliamentary standing committees on the ministries, which could at least hold meetings with participation of opposition MPs even when they were boycotting JS sessions, have not performed as effectively as they should have. While the JS remained non-functional, by and large, the standing committees were expected to play a vibrant role at least in making the ministries accountable and thus contributing towards curbing corruption, among other things.

But the committees have not had a smooth sailing, thanks to some inhibitory factors. Statistics should make the point clear: out of the 37 committees, 27 failed to hold one meeting per month as per the rules of procedures, which certainly does not point to a robust presence of the parliamentary watchdogs. Worse still, the ministers and state ministers concerned attended only 42 per cent of the meetings held, which again shows that the committees could not even strongly initiate the process of dislodging the monster of corruption, let alone other evils. The attitude of the ministers and state ministers was non-cooperative. Clearly, wherever the committees made any attempt to have a shot at corruption, it was effectively scuttled by the ministries concerned.

The result was not unexpected. The committees remained busy with less important, peripheral issues which would never ruffle the feathers of any influential minister. That, of course, defeated the main purpose of having such parliamentary bodies. After all, containing corruption at the highest level of administration was a matter of great importance that the committees should have been able to address with some degree of success.

That said, we felicitate the TIB for the substantive work that it has done on the working of our parliamentary system. It has served the nation, the JS, the MPs and the ministers well. TIB has given us a comprehensive picture of the performance of the parliament and has brought to light some of the weaknesses of the parliamentary committees which remained shut out from the public view.

The TIB study has also made it clear that the committee system can work well only when the ministries and others concerned have the compulsion, as part of democratic norms and culture, to cooperate with the committees -- a point that should be taken note of.

The bane of 'mass' recruitment

An avoidable burden on national exchequer

THIS administration's tenure is scheduled to end in about four months' time. There has been talk of curtailing the size of the government for quite sometime now. Already there are budgetary constraints. We find it rather odd that sweeping blanket recruitment is being made at a time the government apparently does not have enough budgetary provisions to meet the legitimate demands of pay hike by the striking primary teachers. Many in government circles also hold the view that the categories in which the appointments are being made will have but little impact on the overall performance of the government. On the other hand, it looks as though, the recruitment is being made hurriedly without following the established criteria applicable for the individual positions.

Allegedly, the influential quarters both within and outside the government are also interfering in the matter. There are further allegations that the advertisement for applications by some ministries does not indicate the total number to be recruited against a particular post leaving a scope for tampering with the recruitment process. We therefore fail to understand the justification behind these recruitments unless there is a hidden agenda behind it all? To us it looks like a reckless act and a wasteful exercise on the part of the government.

There is but little time left for the government while innumerable tasks of greater national importance remain unaccomplished. Administration should exclusively concentrate on them. If anything, the administration from now on should work towards fulfilling its term with grace and as little blemish as possible.

Finally, we do sincerely hope that the administration would refrain from such 'mass' recruitment during the remainder of its tenure which can only be interpreted as a ploy to gain electoral advantages over the opposition.

Caretaker government, president and the armed forces

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It is immaterial who retains the command of the armed forces. While it is not necessary for the armed forces to be deployed during the parliamentary elections at all, its use should not be seen as anything more than a part of the general deployment of the security forces to maintain law and order. However, the rationale for putting the armed forces under the president is not clear. The excuse of "unelected" character of the CTG remains unconvincing. The chief executive should have operation control of all the ministries, and that is where the control of the Ministry of Defence should also revert.



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ALONG with the demand of the opposition for electoral and caretaker government (CTG) reforms, a related issue has been the political control of the armed forces during the interregnum. The 13th Amendment accords the CTG the role of an interim government, and the status of the chief executive of the republic to its chief advisor. However, Article 61 has placed the armed forces under the president. As the election draws near, the opposition alliance has renewed the demand of reformation of the Election Commission, and of the CTG, and with it putting the ministry of defence where they feel it should belong, under the CTG.

There are two strands of opinion regarding Article 61 that has vested the president with the power to administer all laws that regulate the defence services during the tenure of the CTG. Most arguments, both for and against the proviso, has been prompted primarily, not by legal and governance compulsions but, by apprehensions of the prospect of misuse of the armed forces by whoever is allowed to retain its control during

the parliamentary elections.

It is an unfortunate commentary on our democracy and its institutions that the armed forces have been accorded unnecessarily the role of trump card in the democratic process in Bangladesh. All the political parties have displayed this particular mind-set, while the civil society's concern stem from the country's experience of the past, where reportedly influence brought upon the electorate by the armed forces have determined the results of the election.

But one is inclined to believe that our polity has more confidence in its own ability now than to depend on extraneous influence to win elections. Therefore it is not only wrong to suggest that the armed forces might be used to influence elections under a democratic dispensation, it is a poor reflection on the maturity of the political parties in Bangladesh to contemplate machinations through the use of the armed forces.

Although the CTG system has been hailed by many countries,

and some are even thinking of emulating it, the arrangement one feels is a reflection of the Bangladeshi psyche of distrust of fellow beings, which refuses to entrust the responsibility of holding parliamentary elections under the incumbent party. It's an irony that we have "unelected" persons to run the affairs of the state (those who contend that the job of the CTG is to hold elections are only partly correct. It pursues the policies of the government including conducting the foreign policy of the country). And changes of the system are felt necessary whenever one party sees it being exploited to meet the political ends of the other party or fails to win majority in the parliament.

The concept of the CTG is Awami League's brainchild that emerged after the very bad experience of Magura by-election during the fifth parliament, and an issue that the BNP unnecessarily procrastinated upon before passing the 13th Amendment. The point to note here is that the president, who is largely a ceremonial figure, has been invested with substantial

powers during the interregnum under this Act. The 13th Amendment has given the president not only control over the Ministry of Defence, and therefore the armed forces, it has also given him the authority to declare a state of emergency. A very interesting feature of the 13th Amendment is the proviso that allows the president to assume the functions of the chief advisor should the selection of a chief advisor under Article 58C of the constitution be not possible for some reason.

This is indeed an unprecedented empowerment of an office whose powers remain largely circumscribed under the "normal" system. Having said this, one must hasten to add that under a "normal" system of government, the president would still perform some of those functions described above if required, but only on the advice of the PM. It must also be said that certain provisions of the 13th Amendment give one the impression of the arrangements as being a quasi-presidential form of government, which perhaps was not contemplated actually.

The empowerment of the titular president must be seen in the context of the time and situation that the amendment was formulated and effected. It was the BNP, which had the majority in the parliament, and the president at the time was of, from, and by the BNP. As such the modification to Article 61 of the Constitution that relates to the military, to allow presidential control of the armed forces can be seen in hindsight as having been motivated by ulterior considerations, a rather disingenuous act some contend. However, it must be noted that the AL apparently found nothing wrong with the provision when it was in power.

As for whether the armed forces should be under the CTG, leaving other legal questions aside, merely from the point of view of the constitution, the rules of procedure hold strong rationale for keeping the ministry of defence under the CTG. As per the Amendment, the chief advisor is the chief executive and it thus follows that all the ministries should be under him; making exceptions can only suggest doubtful motives, that too when under the related provisions the CTG has been made collectively responsible to the president. And further more, if an "unelected" person can hold the charge of all the other ministries by virtue of his being the chief executive, no logic can be strong enough to put a particular ministry outside its operational control.

The use or the possibility of misuse, as some apprehend, of the armed forces during the period of the CTG, in particular during the

elections, is a cause for worry to many. Those in favour of keeping the armed forces under the president cite the abortive coup of May 1996 as a justification of such an arrangement propping up the argument with the reason that being not an elected entity the CTG should not retain the control of the armed forces. Others feel that had the armed forces been under the CTG, and the president remaining the supreme commander at all times, the rift between the then CAS and the president that ultimately took the profile of a military coup never have happened.

It is immaterial who retains the command of the armed forces. Its use should be a matter of objective consideration of the relevant factors and not based on subjective thoughts of those that order it about. While it is not necessary for the armed forces to be deployed during the parliamentary elections at all, its use should not be seen as anything more than a part of the general deployment of the security forces to maintain law and order.

However, the rationale for putting the armed forces under the president is not clear since no other ministries have been given the same privilege. The excuse of "unelected" character of the CTG remains unconvincing. The chief executive should have operation control of all the ministries, and that is where the control of the Ministry of Defence should also revert.

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The demise of objectivity



IKRUM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THE fag end of the 20th century saw freedom of the press run on a fail-safe line in many first world countries. One of the major casualties of the 21st century is objectivity (and of the media). Objectivity, for the most part, remains an endangered species in third world countries run by authoritarian rule, raising its head as an aberration for brief periods. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, while the rumours of its demise (in the free world) are greatly exaggerated, there are increasing signs that the media torch the Vietnam generation lit in the US in the 60s and early 70s has come full circle.

In the wake of 9/11 the conservatives who tried to muzzle the free media in the US in the 50s using the bogey of communism (McCarthyism) are now increasingly active again. In the late 20th century, Fox TV would have gone bankrupt with its hard rightist stance. Today one of Fox's leading anchors has become the US President's press secretary.

Freedom of the press came to Pakistan late in the 80s like a breath of fresh air with the advent of the first Benazir regime. While occasionally the PM did blow her top at "offending" pieces, even

though I personally suffered twice in her second tenure, it was more at the hands of and instigation of others rather than her saying: "Who will rid me of this meddling priest?" Government reaction against recalcitrants was never frequent enough to warrant censure.

More or less this was the same for Mian Nawaz Sharif, who barring excesses like the infamous "Najam Sethi" affair and that also because of a certified nut, he did not really target the media for what he considered "biased" reporting, i.e. when Mian Sahib read a newspaper or saw the TV. "More loyal than the King" henchmen like Saifur Rahman usually went overboard. In my personal case the personal vendetta was orchestrated by a known scoundrel during BB-2. Media's freedom has not only been sustained under the military regime but has flourished, to the extent of "license" sometimes in the electronic media.

"Letting a hundred flowers bloom" in granting permission for more and more TV and radio stations, Musharraf's regime has been the beneficiary of an extended honeymoon that no previous military and/or military controlled civil government has enjoyed. To the military regime's credit they have been more liberal than the democratic governments before them.

Despite losing the popular vote, the Bush "National Security Strategy" enunciated in 2001 was delivered as if the new president had a unequivocal mandate from the American people to impose "Pax Americana" a la Bush on the rest of the world. Burning with desire to impose US-style democracy in the world, the Commander-in-Chief's penchant to use force, necessary or not, is a recurring phenomenon among those who have never heard a shot being fired in anger.

One becomes more blood-thirsty once one rises to positions of safety and can send others to their deaths to achieve personal glory for one's self. International law does not allow such military adventures in the absence of "casus belli." Osama Bin Laden obliged by carrying out the dastardly act on 9/11. Pre-emptive strike, "a la Israel," came into the US lexicon, the modern calling card of a dominant power being "if you are not for us, you are against us!" All the freedoms jealously upheld by the US are treading a fail-safe line in the US, casualties likely to be freedom of the media

AS I SEE IT

The fact of the matter is that the government can't do right all the time and the opposition can't do wrong all the time. The media has to be a neutral observer as well as an independent analytical media, to praise when praise is required and criticise when criticism is necessary; that is objectivity. And if I may say so, for the sake of this country, narrow the gap between them instead of revelling in their differences.

following the loss of civil liberties like "privacy" and "freedom of expression."

Objectivity really possible in an environment where there are only stark choices before you. One person, who I took to be a friend, offered me the choice of "either you sail in our boat or the other." The modus operandi is to eulogise all their good points and gloss over and/or studiously ignore their bad ones, or simply fabricate lies. If, unfortunately true, of the government it would be bad enough, it is the same for the opposition also.

If I dare praise Pervez Musharraf, my friends in the PML (N) and PPP castigate me, even walked out of my son's wedding when the president walked in. If you make the mistake of supporting some initiative of the ruling regime, the opposition targets you for having "sold out."

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country, narrow the gap between them instead of revelling in their differences.

The concept of "clear and present danger" requires you to handle certain issues in a transparent, even-handed but careful manner. The media has also to exercise maturity, sensationalising to attract the largest audience can damage the national fabric. The electronic and print media can damage not only the social fabric but maybe also the national integrity.

During General Elections 2002 some results started being announced when it was clear even the preliminary results were still not known. When I protested that if the actual results turned out otherwise the entire elections would become controversial, that we have a greater responsibility to the country not to air anything affecting the national fabric, one of the owners scornfully told me during a break: "Which country, which nation? Our aim is to have a maximum audience!"

India is far ahead of us in the practice of what goes for democracy in the third world. Whatever the faults in their democratic process, one admires the fact that they have been able to keep the process going without outside intervention since their independence. Yet the Indian media is also far from being objective about human rights issues. One can understand that in their national interest they would want to avoid mention of abuses in Kashmir, what about Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Bodoland, etc. What about Chattisgarh and Jharkhand? And what about the "Naxalites" in revolt for nearly 40 years?

There is still almost no mention of it in the domestic press. In a military-dominated democracy we have far more freedom than that enjoyed by India's media on the domestic scene. Since internal security operations can be messy, national interests may require that the flow of information in such a situation is "controlled." Even in the "war against terrorism," the US has learnt to "control" information flow if not curtail it altogether.

Pakistan's image is far worse than the actual reality. In the absolute freedom given to our media, the tendency is to run riot with the "truth" as long as it is anti-establishment. This exposes their lack of maturity. We do have internal problems in FATA and a problem in the Bugti-Marri Districts (2 out of 26) in Balochistan; where is the extended analysis?

This is also true of sectarian trouble, from time to time even ethnic strife. Nothing we have in Pakistan compares the thousands and thousands in violent revolt in India, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Nepal in the immediate vicinity, leave aside regions further afield.

Did Arunadhari Roy go off on a bend when she recently attacked India's democratic credentials and exposed the many violent insurrections? Would our domestic media have the courage to admit that compared to others we are an "island of peace"? Yet Pakistan is assailed by the media mostly from within, and that is force-multiplied by ignorant analysis and/or vested interests outside the country.

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Why can't South Asians play football?

MATTERS AROUND US

There is not an iota of doubt that South Asia has a long way to go to reach a level of world standard, but infinite interest for football is evident during the World Cup. Hopefully, this will make the organisers and players sit up and think how to improve their performance in football, a game so very loved in Bangladesh and the region.

the country -- thousands of country flags of favourite teams can be seen even in the countryside, and fans seldom hesitate to spend their money to highlight the sides they love. Celebrations are impromptu and at times, wild, following the victories of favourite teams, and many have already made bets over the ultimate outcome of the World Cup.

These celebrations provide respite from the political tension, acrimony, and endless debates that unquestionably take away much of our normal peace and tranquility. Indeed, a large segment of the population, similar to their counterparts in many other

countries, are relishing this event to the max, which is particularly noteworthy in countries like ours which are generally mired in myriad political, economic, and social problems. No one knows when this nation will reverse the cycle, even though we desperately hope that things will change someday for the better, and we keep our fingers crossed.

While enthusiasm for football is admirable, it is a dismal fact that performance in Bangladesh, as well as South Asia, is seriously lagging behind this enthusiasm. The South Asian nations are strong in cricket and field hockey, but this is not the case when it

comes to football. Paradoxically, cricket and also hockey -- to an extent -- are known as games of the elite; however, South Asia has excelled fairly well in these two disciplines, despite poor economic conditions. Football is the oldest game in this part of the world, and it is familiar even in remote areas of most countries and certainly in Bangladesh. With this in mind, it is hard to believe the magnitude of the lack of progress in football performance here. This is very frustrating.

As far as cricket is concerned, three South Asian sides -- India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka -- have won the World Cup, thus reaching

the zenith of this game. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has not been as successful thus far, but good omens exist as cricket is progressing somewhat satisfactorily. India and Pakistan are still big names in world hockey, but they are struggling to retain their reputation from tough competition from nations like Argentina, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Bangladesh has yet to make a mark in hockey at a high level, but prospects are there.

However, the state of football in South Asia is saddening, since South Asia is nowhere near a commendable standard, let alone closer to reaching the global level. No South Asian country can even dream of playing among the 32 teams that comprise the World Cup finals. In the qualifying matches for securing eligibility, four Asian nations: Iran, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia earned berths for World Cup. Obviously, no South Asian team representing a huge population qualified, and this reflects poorly on our standard of football. Also,

the fact that these four countries failed to get past the first round is also discouraging for Asian football. Although a Herculean task, surely it is possible for South Asia to reach the World Cup finals.

The status of football in South Asia has regressed -- previously, there were good teams and several well-known players. There was the legendary Samad -- better known as "Jadukar Samad" -- who was known for playing like "magic" with the ball, and several other players also earned reputations in football at a much larger scale. India's PK Banerjee, Chuni Goswami, Naimuddin, Habib, and Saylan Manna, as well as Pakistan's Torab Ali, Jahan, and Ayub Dar are a few names to mention in this context.

Erstwhile Pakistani players such as Omar, Abbas, Murree, Sgt. Nabi Chowdhury, Gafoor -- popularly known as "Kala Gafoor," Pratap Hazra, and great keepers like Ranjit and Mintoo were famous. In Bangladesh, Salauddin, Enayet, and Zakaria Paudyal are only a few names

among many for whom we can boast about. Where has this legacy of South Asia gone? We still have good players, but South Asian football is still lacking in accomplishment.

Why is South Asia lagging behind the rest of the world when it comes to football? The low standard of physical fitness in South Asia as compared to European and South American standards is definitely a handicap, not only for South Asia, but Asia in general. Japan and South Korea reached the quarter and semi-final level in the last World Cup partly due to the weather and their supporters, who helped them in their matches. All four Asian nations in this World Cup are rich and have spent huge amounts of money in their quest for success.

In South Asia, we have neither fitness nor the money required for such a fast-playing and expensive discipline. Inadequate facilities, lack of proper planning, and excessive squabbles or narrow politics hinder whatever prospects exist in football in this

region. Coaches are appointed mostly ad hoc without any long-term strategy. Last but not the least, the eagerness and determination needed to improve the game is largely absent.

This unhappy scenario notwithstanding, we should not lose heart because a silver lining is slowly emerging. Bangladesh is not lagging behind its South Asian cricket and hockey rivals in football, as Bangladesh has won the South Asian Federation (SAF) championship. Small regional countries like the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan are also exhibiting potential.

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ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

FOOTBALL fever is currently sweeping the globe, and not surprisingly, Bangladesh too is very much engulfed in this great sports enthusiasm, which comes only once every four years. While this country is currently in the grip of political problems spawning uncertainty and mayhem, a different kind of unrest, a healthy one, is discernible all over Bangladesh centering on the World Cup.

People remain glued to television sets and spend sleepless nights in great delight. This euphoria has touched all areas of