

Right to information

Deny it, deny good governance

INTERNATIONAL Right to Information Day passed off yesterday. It is a day of great significance and relevance to Bangladesh, especially in the prevailing status of various basic rights. It hardly needs emphasising that most of our socio-political and economic ills stem from the absence of this important right.

One of the prerequisites of good governance is giving full cognisance to citizens' right to information. It is all the more crucial in a democratic system of governance where the law-makers are elected through a direct and universal franchise. In fact, right to information is central to all other rights. Unless the right to access to information is guaranteed, other rights like freedom of speech and expression will be rendered infructuous.

This right is non-existent in its holistic sense of the term in Bangladesh, and there is hardly any effort in sight on the part of those who govern the country to recognise and implement it in society. It is only natural that there would be plentiful misgivings all around because of the denial of access to vital information.

In Bangladesh, the government is the largest repository of information since public sector development projects and programmes remain under its direct control. Huge sums of money are being allocated to often least important projects, which are spent by the public representatives who head various ministries. But common people are denied access to information concerning the method of tendering for procurement, evaluation of price quotations, terms and conditions of local/foreign loans or credits and overall expenditure. Such close door handling of matters involving millions of dollars breed suspicion in the minds of the citizens leading to deeper resentment against the people in power.

We are aware of a draft bill titled 'Right to Information Act 2002' prepared by the Law Commission of Bangladesh that awaits enactment. Once passed with adequate features, the law would help the people of Bangladesh in exercising their right to remove various impediments to development and service delivery. In fact, grievances would be more easily redressed.

We strongly urge the relevant authorities to enact the right to information law thereby making governance a transparent, easy and less hazardous task. It would be like letting in sunshine into the dark cells where vital information is being stored.

KEPZ receives the nod

A welcome development

AFTER five years in hibernation, the Korean Export Processing Zone (KEPZ) is warming up with the government having taken a decision to provide it with the licence to operate. This potentially biggest export processing zone project for the country was thrown out of gear when the BNP government regarded it as 'a political beneficiary' of the preceding AL government and refused it permission to operate.

Meanwhile, the Korean company Youngone had acquired 2,500 acres of land at a cost of Taka 100 crore and developed it. Then the waiting began and with it uncertainties grew about the fate of the project. Rather put off by the procrastination, the Youngone group diverted more than \$40 million it had earmarked for investment in the KEPZ to Vietnam, China and India. But even under those circumstances, foreign investors kept visiting the KEPZ site evincing an interest to invest.

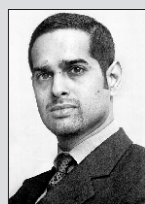
The initial response from a KEPZ source to the government's green signal is positive: "When formally informed of the decision, we expect to bring in investors immediately and start export from the zone." The plans are to install 500 industrial units with an investment of \$1 billion employing one lakh people directly and two lakh more indirectly.

The government needs now to extend all kinds of facilities to the KEPZ authority to help build its infrastructure so as to prepare the ground for the foreign investors to come in.

Withholding permission to the Youngone group for such a long time may have sent a negative signal to foreign investors willing to invest in Bangladesh. Better late than never; now that the operating licence is being given it should remove the clouds of misgiving, if any. Actually, we wonder why in 2003 when a committee headed by the principal secretary to the prime minister recommended that the KEPZ should be allowed to function 'in the interest of national image and foreign investment,' it was not given permission to do so. Let's not forget, we are in a race with time in garnering foreign investment for national development. Surely, we don't want to be thrown by the wayside.

More democracy, not less

STRAIGHT TALK



ZAFAR SOBHAN

How about working towards creating a system that allows the common man and woman to participate in their own governance and taps into the collective wisdom and ability of the Bangladeshi people. I assure you that it far exceeds the collective wisdom and ability of our ruling elite. If we can give voice to the people, we might just find that the solution to all our problems has been in our hands all along, if only we had had the courage to try.

ILL let you into a little secret that I have learned traveling the world. Wherever you go, people are all the same. They all want more or less the same thing. They want good schools and opportunities for their kids. They want to be able to live in safety and security. They want a decent job that pays the bills and allows them to put food on the table.

Most people's desires are very modest. It doesn't take a great deal to make them happy. And in Bangladesh, even less so. It wouldn't take a great deal for most Bangladeshis to feel that things are generally moving in the right direction and that they are content with their lot.

Safe drinking water, not coke. Electricity for light and maybe a fan, not air conditioners. The means and ability to move around cheaply and without undue hassle, not their own personal chauffeur-driven car (I know that many readers must be shifting in their chairs, wondering who on earth I am talking about, but believe me, for

most Bangladeshis, this is indeed the case).

Look at the negotiations with respect to a minimum wage in the garment industry. Without proffering an opinion on what an appropriate or workable wage should be, I think we can all agree that the Tk 3,000 the workers have been demanding is, in absolute terms, a pretty paltry sum. But for most Bangladeshis, Tk 3,000 a month is a generous salary, something they can only aspire to.

Today, most garment workers earn barely a thousand taka a month. Rickshaw pullers the same, if they are lucky. Security guards earn Tk 2,500. Farmers struggle mightily to make ends meet. I met today with an old driver, retired to his village in Lokkipur, who I help out with a thousand taka a month. One thousand taka. It makes all the difference to him.

These are the Bangladeshi people. And there are tens of millions of them. The tragedy of this nation is that it doesn't take

much to give the Bangladeshi people what they need and what they deserve. But even that little they have been denied.

The failures of the current government have been abject. First, it has failed to provide even the most basic of services. Then it has arrogantly denied that there is a problem, as though the people are fools and blind to the evidence in front of their eyes. Then, finally, it has shot dead in the streets those who have had the temerity to demonstrate for their rights.

Nor is it the working classes alone who suffer. The middle classes, too, have trouble making ends meet and live a life of ceaseless insecurity and anxiety.

So what is the country to do? We have been patient. We put our faith in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We put our faith in Ziaur Rahman. I don't know how many people put their faith in Hossain Mohammad Ershad, but all the same, the bulk of the people did wait patiently for a time to see whether he could deliver, before rising up against

him and then waiting patiently again for better days to arrive.

First, we were disappointed by the BNP. Then the AL government failed to live up to the people's hopes and expectations. Now, the BNP-led government has again failed the people.

Where do we go from here? Is there any reason at all to give the BNP another shot? Third time lucky? Will the AL be able to do anything for the people or will it be the same old story?

Some look nostalgically to the days of Ershad and imagine that life under military rule might be better. But once again this is nothing more than a hope, a dream, the same dream that some deus ex machina figure will come from above and lift us out of our misery.

But this is a pipe-dream, far removed from the reality.

The real problem we have faced since the start is that we have never given any power or voice to the people, so it is no wonder that their needs have

never been met.

Democracy as a basis for good governance isn't based solely on the noble notion of everyone having an inalienable right to order his or her own affairs. This is certainly one strong argument in favour of democracy, but the other, more persuasive argument is that democracy creates accountability, which leads to good governance.

But in Bangladesh we do not have, have never had accountability.

In the first place, elections are never fully free of intimidation, coercion, and "election engineering," which limits the ability of the people to call their elected representatives fully to account.

In the second place, so much of the workings of government have remained hidden from public view, that we do not even have access to the information to let us fully know how bad a job the government has been doing, to even begin to take the steps to redress things.

In the third place, we have no mechanism in place to create accountability within the system. Every five years we can (if we are lucky) throw the incumbent government out and bring in a new bunch, but that's about it.

The solution to Bangladesh's ills is not less democracy, it is more. This is something that we have never tried before, and be assured that there is a direct correlation between the dysfunctions in our democracy and the dysfunctions in our nation.

Instead of looking to strong leaders in khaki or clerical robes to lead us to the promised land, we need to look into ourselves.

How about working towards creating a system that allows the common man and woman to participate in their own governance and taps into the collective wisdom and ability of the Bangladeshi people. I assure you that it far exceeds the collective wisdom and ability of our ruling elite.

If we can give voice to the people, we might just find that the solution to all our problems has been in our hands all along, if only we had had the courage to try.

These are the people who have given their lives to demand that the government provide them with water and electricity and fertilizer at affordable prices. These are the people who would be content if only the government could keep the price of essential commodities within a reasonable limit. These are people who would be happy if only the government, for once, was responsive to their needs and interests.

Perhaps, for the first time in our history, we should consider listening to them, and try to give them what they need. What a wonderful world that would be.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

They drowned, we sank

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Then we need to deal with the shame as a government, as an opposition, and as a nation. It was people who gave their lives to create this nation, and the nation did nothing, when it could, to save these people. Not only that, this nation even did nothing to show that it was shocked and saddened by their death. If the sea has taken them, it is their good riddance. Better dead than living in this mess. In many ways, what has happened to them has also happened to us. They drowned and we sank. The difference is a sea of shame!

WHEN a cow rolls its tail in its own dung, we call it a mess. When someone wallows in the mud of his own mistake we call it shame. But politics is the name of the game with a different twist. It is all about dabbling your tail in my mess, or dragging me down in your mud. My mess is your shame. Your mess is my shame. Flip the flop. In politics, it remains the same.

So whose mistake was it when thousands are said to have drowned in the Bay of Bengal during last week's storm? Whose shame was it that countless bodies floated in the water before they turned into delectable dishes for the crows, vultures, and dogs? The government blamed it on the opposition. The opposition blamed it on the government. Nobody wants to accept the blame, and everybody wants to pass the shame. The fact remains that it was one

big mess.

The first point of order is that nobody bothered to mourn these deaths. People die around us all the time, but should that take away our capacity to feel the loss? Did the parliament show respect to the dead by observing silence for even one minute? Did we do anything as a nation to mourn the loss of so many lives? It is perhaps the grotesque law of calculus, but the grief of one or few deaths often paralyzes the country. Even the flag is kept at half mast at times when an eminent national or international person dies. But, so many of our own countrymen perished without a trace, as if they had never lived amongst us.

Do we know how many people have died so far? Have we tried to count the numbers? Often trying to assess the loss is a way to show the moral compunctions for failing to prevent it.

For god's sake, we are not talking about a flight of birds or pack of animals here, not even a school of fish or swarm of locusts. They were human beings like us, in limbs and lumps, in hopes and dreams, those who went to the sea to earn their livelihoods like we go to work, ministers go to the parliament and the opposition goes to the streets.

It is said that Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea" presents all five forms of conflict: man vs. man, man vs. society, man vs. other man, man vs. nature, and man vs. fate. If we ignore the conflicts between man and nature and between man and fate, the other three conflicts become quite obvious if we look at the way we have treated these deaths. It is an irony that we are so engrossed in our all too human activities that we even forget we are human

beings.

How else could we not act when human bodies were drifting in the water, when those decomposing bodies were being devoured by birds and animals? How could we not feel the pain every time the claws, beaks, and fangs sank in the flesh, every time the vultures went for the eyes, the crows drilled into the entrails, and dogs tore away the limbs? We can argue forever as to who created this mess, whose mistake it was and who ought to take the blame and shame. We can point fingers at each other but nothing will change the fact that what we have done is less than decent.

It is hard to tell whether men and women transform into higher or lower beings once they enter politics. It is hard to tell whether their hearts and minds harden after or before they get into the game. But it lowers my

head in shame that they should have behaved the way they did, that they started accusing each other instead of doing something to recover the dead bodies. These politicians who go overseas even if they sneeze, those who appreciate good health and long life, didn't even bother that those who died might have loved life with equal intensity.

It was a big mess indeed when bloated bodies washed ashore, looking stiff and enigmatic like sculptures of death, their raised hands and frozen claws portraying how they must have wanted to clutch at anything to cling to life, until the pressure of water took them to their watery graves. But we need to find out whose mistake it was not to tell those poor fishermen that the sea was going to be hungry and disturbed, that they needed to stay out of harm's way.

Then we need to deal with the shame as a government, as an opposition, and as a nation. It was people who gave their lives to create this nation, and the nation did nothing, when it could, to save these people. Not only that, this nation even did nothing to show that it was shocked and saddened by their death.

I don't know what happens on the other side of the grave. Will these fishermen ever wake up to remember what happened to

them, one minute riding on the waves and next minute going under as water rushed into their nostrils, ears, and mouths to suffocate them? Will they then realize that we didn't do what we could have done, probably to save some of them, perhaps all of them?

Even if they do, good news is that they would never come back. We don't have to look them in the eye and tell why we have been so obscenely insensitive to them. They went to the sea and then they went beyond. What about us, those who have been left behind stewing in our own unfeeling juice?

We shall live to die in our allotted times, some normally, others abnormally, since death pervades both sea and land. But mourning is a way to draw the line. It is the rite of passage that gives mere mortals a chance to transcend their state. When you weep for the dead, it is actually an appreciation of your life. Perhaps we don't care who lives and who dies because we are a bunch of living deads.

If the sea has taken them, it is their good riddance. Better dead than living in this mess. In many ways, what has happened to them has also happened to us. They drowned and we sank. The difference is a sea of shame!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Abe takes the helm

CLOSEUP JAPAN

Compared to Koizumi, Abe lacks both experience and the first-hand knowledge of backdoor maneuvering to fight effectively against such practices. But the support of rank and file party members that he enjoys can serve as a crucial factor in overcoming that drawback. At the same time, to ensure that his support base remains intact, the new Japanese prime minister needs to prove to voters that he is capable of delivering the promises that he made.

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

THE Japanese Diet in an extraordinary session has voted Shinzo Abe, the newly elected leader of the country's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), to the post of prime minister to succeed Junichiro Koizumi who retired after serving the top post for five long years.

At the age of 52, Abe has become the youngest post-war prime minister of Japan and the first to have been born after World War II. These mere facts should have been enough to get a clear signal of the winds of change that have been blowing in Japanese politics for quite some time now.

But one should be careful enough not to count the generational differences alone to come to a definite conclusion of any real change in Japanese politics.

Abe has already nominated key party leaders and filled his cabinet mainly with his supporters and people close to him. Both party and ministerial nominations give clear indication of continuity of the reform policy pursued by the outgoing administration, though there are only a handful of those like Foreign Minister Taro Aso who have been able to retain their cabinet posts. The thirteen-member cabinet consists more or less of senior LDP figures and most of them appear willing to continue the reform initiatives of

the Koizumi administration.

In addition to the cabinet posts, Abe also has appointed a number of junior ministers and, for the first time, nominated five relatively high-ranking LDP politicians as assistants to the prime minister. As a result, his new administration is now set to start functioning amid expectations that a relatively younger head of the Japanese government would not only initiate new ideas in helping the country to come out of economic stagnation, but also help Japan to find her rightful place in international politics.

This second task might turn out to be a tricky one as Abe, despite his youthful vigour and age, has always been regarded

as a politician whose policy line is not far from the old guard, willing to ensure Japanese domination in Asia. This is probably the most striking feature of Japan's new prime minister that runs contrary to the deceptive view that some people might have looking just at his age.

For Abe, though he rightfully represents the younger generation of the ruling LDP politicians in terms of age, the legacy of the older generation is not something quite easy to discard. It is not only because he is surrounded mostly by those who do not fall into the really fall into the category of younger politicians, but also because he carries with him the strong legacy of a political inheritance that has its root firmly placed in conservative ideas on crucial social and political issues.

Being the grandson of the former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, Abe has long been seen as a champion of constitutional revision and an enthusiastic patron of initiating a bill that would change the Fundamental Law of Education aiming at creating an environment to make

Japanese feel more proud of their motherland. These are the ideas that young Abe inherited from his grandfather, who is seen by many as the leading figure of conservative thought in post-war Japan.

As Abe starts his tenure with a chosen team of politicians he feels would be able to help him strengthen his hand, his popularity remains his greatest strength as well as the main cause of concern. His firm stand against North Korea, particularly on the issue of abduction of Japanese nationals, and the strong position that he always held on China over the controversy of Yasukuni Shrine visit made him popular, as many started to consider him a politician with a firm commitment.

The more he expressed his strong commitment to such controversial matters, the more he was seen sailing in the tides of spreading nationalism touching other highly debated issues ranging from the revision of constitution to the controversy over history textbooks. Now as the head of the government he probably needs to slow down a

bit, at least to show Japan's extremely suspicious neighbors that he would move away from his predecessor to mend ties with Japan's Asian partners.

Initial signs are not bad at all, as instead of showing signs of antagonizing further Japan's Asian neighbours by making hasty commitment concerning his plan to visit Yasukuni Shrine, Abe so far remained cautious by not declaring what he intends to do. Although some find this standing of the new Japanese prime minister ambiguous, both China and South Korea seem to be convinced that they would be able to get along with the new Japanese administration much better than with that of the outgoing one.

Japan and her two most important neighbours failed to arrange any summit meeting for more than one and a half years because of Koizumi's repeated visit to Yasukuni. Abe has declared that mending relationship with China and South Korea would be among his priority issues.

As a result, some in Japan have also started to see him as a

politician capable of drifting away from the pre-set political mould to a new platform in line with the demand of the time. According to those subscribing to this idea, if the new prime minister continues to show such pragmatism in connection with other crucial issues too, this would eventually put a firm end to the age-old practice of behind-the-scenes maneuverings in politics for which LDP is notorious.

But will he be able to uphold this expectation? Initial signals clearly show that no drastic policy changes are on the cards and he most likely, at least for the time being, would not diverge much from the policy lines of his predecessor, who during his five-year tenure has changed drastically the way of choosing the party leader. In choosing the leader of the LDP, importance is no longer attached to policy or experience, but to the capability of acting as a drawing card to win the elections. Koizumi was master of that capability and it is this single most important factor that helped him to sustain

for so long.

Compared to Koizumi, Abe lacks both experience and the first-hand knowledge of backdoor maneuvering to fight effectively against such practices. But the support of rank and file party members that he enjoys can serve as a crucial factor in overcoming that drawback.

At the same time, to ensure that his support base remains intact, the new Japanese prime minister needs to prove to voters that he is capable of delivering the promises that he made. A crucial test for Abe will come next summer during the upper house election. If by then Abe fails to show voters anything substantial, he could find himself leading the party in an uphill battle to ensure the majority in the upper house that the ruling coalition now enjoys. As a result, he doesn't have much time to spare and ponder upon his tremendous success in becoming the youngest prime minister in post-war Japan.

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