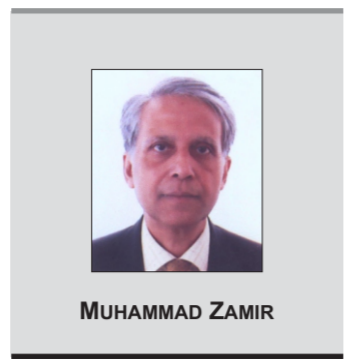


The trauma of being a Bangladeshi



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WE are almost at the end of the tenure of the current BNP government. Five years later, the nation finds itself in a complex situation where the present state of governance is under question. We also have an uncertain future with regard to the transition to a caretaker format of government. In addition, contrary to the claims made repeatedly by our Health Minister (about the success of our family planning initiatives), the nation finds itself with a massive growth in population, particularly of the voter variety. The odd thing is that despite such a suspicious increase, there is an even chance that the reader will not find his name in that controversial voters' list. According to the government, we are being swept forward by the tide of economic development. I am afraid that this statement is only partially true. We are actually being drowned in the upsurge caused by extraordinary rise in prices (for which 'syndicates' apparently deserve special mention) and breakdown in law and order. To this has also been added the high waves of corruption. Wherever you turn, you will be facing the spectre of 'bakshish.' Everything is possible at a price. The net result has been the phenomenal increase in the percentage of savings of the long term deposit and the 'Sanchaypatra' categories (according to the Bangladesh Bank) over the last financial year. This of course does not include visible and invisible investments in the real estate sector. I was mentioning the other day to an expatriate friend that it would be a misnomer to call Bangladesh a poor country. In this context I was not referring to our PPP statistics but to

our informal economy. I am confident that if this aspect was also taken into account, then we would have difficulty terming ourselves as being in the LDC category. We have also been informed quite often by the official Bangladesh Television channel that Bangladesh has improved in terms of healthcare. Yes and no. Yes, we have many private diagnostic clinics and hospitals that have mushroomed all over the country. However, more often than not, his three gold teeth, very prominent all the time. He then responded by asking me if I was aware of the government initiative about whitening 'black' (corrupt) money. He also told me that his extra income would probably delay his meeting with his Maker. He informed me that although he was not a 'VIP' or a 'senior government officer' he, and members of his family, could now afford medical treatment also in Singapore and Bangkok. I was totally taken aback. I guess the Chief of the next caretaker government. Mind you, such changes or revision upwards of the age of retirement for other professions were not undertaken. This was not seen as necessary. After this came changes in the composition of the Election Commission. Steps undertaken here only re-confirmed that this Institution was really not free or independent of the Prime Minister's Office. The new officials chosen for this sensitive Body were known for their personal views and feelings of partisanship. The net result has been a disaster. Their obstinacy, indifference and inefficiency have resulted in a voters' list that has been the subject of ridicule both at home and also from visitors abroad. Created in an opaque atmosphere, the computation and composition of this unsavoury list is shrouded in mystery. It has also resulted in loss of confidence in those associated with this important Institution. In the meantime, the Prime Minister has upped the ante. She has, a few days ago, during her address at an Army Durbar in Ghatail Cantonment, asked the armed forces to 'keep a vigil as attack on the national independence and sovereignty could come not only from outside but also from within the country.' She has, in this context, also stated that 'internal clash and anarchy could be the reason.' These comments were obviously directed at the current efforts of the Awami League led 14-Party group to effect reforms within various state institutions. Observers have identified this as 'double-speak.' On the one hand the Prime Minister has been hinting that

present government, in their own way, has taught the general public that there are two sides to the lack of governance and corruption. I will now turn to certain other factors. The government, blinded by their two-thirds majority in the Parliament after 2001, forgot that the Opposition also received more than 40 per cent of the total popular vote. Their 'winner takes all' attitude has led them, during their tenure, to undertake debatable steps not only with regard to governance but also pertaining to the political process. The government has tried to achieve this with a phrase that does not exist in any other country. Politicians and analysts from the civil society have given this surreptitious process a new name -- 'election engineering.' Initiated from within the government, it was aimed at creating a tilt within the surface of the so-called 'plain playing field' (free and fair elections). The first to be focussed upon was the judiciary. The age of retirement for Judges was changed upwards. This created a new matrix whereby someone associated actively with the BNP in the past could become

What is required is the necessary political will for this purpose. The Prime Minister and senior officials of her BNP have, on more than one occasion, reiterated that their Party is going to win the next election. This can only be proved through an acceptable election which can be described as free and fair not only by the participants but also by foreign and domestic observers and monitors. Such a prospective scenario appears to be uncertain right now. We are presently sailing through uncharted waters. Meanwhile, time is fast running out. We have a very small window ahead of us -- just a few days. The present government's tenure will be over in four weeks. The present session of the Parliament will conclude in the first week of October. It will not help if the political scenario continues to deteriorate. Further confrontation can, and will harm our nation. It will create further instability, affect economic develop-

ment and also generate greater polarisation within the political process. None of these factors will facilitate progress and poverty reduction. Inflexibility is not the need of the hour. More than seven months have passed since Sheikh Hasina; the Leader of the Opposition placed her proposals for reforms within the Jatiyo Sangshad. Since then, we have watched the present BNP-led Alliance government dribbling with the ball. The lack of progress in the dialogue for reforms and the absence of clear initiative from the government can only be interpreted as lack of confidence and a feeling of insecurity on their part. Inversely, it may also be treated as a case of over-confidence. We have seen some of the senior officials of the BNP and their partisan media being very critical of the recent efforts to find a compromise that have been undertaken by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), foreign diplomats based in Dhaka, international multilateral financial agencies and representatives of foreign civil society groups. Their action has been termed as interference and contrary to established diplomatic norm and behaviour. In the meantime, the relevant Agencies of the government appear to have forgotten that today, good governance and corruption are high on the international agenda, particularly for nations reliant on hand-outs. It is also an important element in the matrix of cooperation that exists between Bangladesh, the USA and the European Union. We need to be careful. It must be understood that the foreign community through their comments have only expressed concern, as friends should do. It should not be construed as anything else. What we have today is a problem that we have created and which we have to resolve by ourselves. Partisan politics and greed for power must not stand in the way of requisite reforms. Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

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POST BREAKFAST

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pathological diagnosis is faulty. We also have a situation where surgeons do not hesitate to undertake complex surgical interventions. Subsequently, when patients die, they do not waver in pointing fingers at the lack of proper post-operative care and absence of medicines being the cause of the patient's demise. Doctors as a breed are indeed very fortunate in this country because they are, as a rule, never taken to the court for mal-practice. Other doctors also refuse to give evidence about negligence or failure on the part of others in the medical profession. Instead, the deceased's family is urged to pray for the departed's soul, after paying the high costs of his mal-treatment in a private clinic. No wonder, that at every opportunity, our different types of VIPs leave Bangladesh and seek better treatment in Singapore and Bangkok. Such action, I am afraid, does not increase confidence within the public about available domestic facilities. The other day, I asked a notorious electricity billing official if he was aware that being corrupt was against the tenets of Islam. He did not smile. He laughed uproariously,

present government, in their own way, has taught the general public that there are two sides to the lack of governance and corruption. I will now turn to certain other factors. The government, blinded by their two-thirds majority in the Parliament after 2001, forgot that the Opposition also received more than 40 per cent of the total popular vote. Their 'winner takes all' attitude has led them, during their tenure, to undertake debatable steps not only with regard to governance but also pertaining to the political process. The government has tried to achieve this with a phrase that does not exist in any other country. Politicians and analysts from the civil society have given this surreptitious process a new name -- 'election engineering.' Initiated from within the government, it was aimed at creating a tilt within the surface of the so-called 'plain playing field' (free and fair elections). The first to be focussed upon was the judiciary. The age of retirement for Judges was changed upwards. This created a new matrix whereby someone associated actively with the BNP in the past could become

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ment and also generate greater polarisation within the political process. None of these factors will facilitate progress and poverty reduction. Inflexibility is not the need of the hour. More than seven months have passed since Sheikh Hasina; the Leader of the Opposition placed her proposals for reforms within the Jatiyo Sangshad. Since then, we have watched the present BNP-led Alliance government dribbling with the ball. The lack of progress in the dialogue for reforms and the absence of clear initiative from the government can only be interpreted as lack of confidence and a feeling of insecurity on their part. Inversely, it may also be treated as a case of over-confidence. We have seen some of the senior officials of the BNP and their partisan media being very critical of the recent efforts to find a compromise that have been undertaken by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), foreign diplomats based in Dhaka, international multilateral financial agencies and representatives of foreign civil society groups. Their action has been termed as interference and contrary to established diplomatic norm and behaviour. In the meantime, the relevant Agencies of the government appear to have forgotten that today, good governance and corruption are high on the international agenda, particularly for nations reliant on hand-outs. It is also an important element in the matrix of cooperation that exists between Bangladesh, the USA and the European Union. We need to be careful. It must be understood that the foreign community through their comments have only expressed concern, as friends should do. It should not be construed as anything else. What we have today is a problem that we have created and which we have to resolve by ourselves. Partisan politics and greed for power must not stand in the way of requisite reforms. Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

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Public commotion over power outage

Govt must act urgently, but the public must also show restraint

WITH the growing frequency of power outages people all over the country, including those living around the city are staging violent protests. While the frequency in power outages has been steadily on the rise so has the duration between each outage has terribly shortened. This being the month of Ramadan and with Eid festival approaching, people's anger over the matter has reached a new height. So intense is the anger that the agitating people are blocking roads for hours including railway tracks and damaging vehicles. We are deeply concerned about the continued growing unrest. From whichever angle one might look at it, the fact remains that much of the responsibility for the violent expression of anger by the people has to be shouldered by the government. To date the rationale and the explanations offered by the various agencies of the power sector are superficial and inadequate for the people to either appreciate or understand the actual situation. So far all that the administration has been able to come up with is the number of power generators currently out of operation and the resultant shortfall in meeting the total requirement of power. The administration ought to have come forward with an action plan that was doable within its term. For months, representatives of both business houses and industrial enterprises had been clamouring for a schedule for power outages but that too continued to be elusive. Within the capital city there appears to be a discriminatory attitude of the relevant authorities in terms of distribution and power supply which in turn has also contributed to people's anger and frustration. Meanwhile we urge the people not to damage public property and set on fire trucks, buses and other private vehicles. The agitating people must also restrain themselves from such acts like attacking power distribution centres and blocking of roads and railway tracks. After all it is doubtful as to how much of their cause would be served through such acts given the complexity of the problem and the realities that exist in the power sector today.

Project approval galore

No responsibility for implementation

USUALLY the beginning of a financial year would be marked by a slow pace of project approval. In other words, the end part of the financial year would see a flurry of project approval activity. But the final year of a government's tenure is an exception. It is at the fag-end of that year which witnesses seals of approval hurriedly stamped on the onrushing projects from the various ministries. This happened during the Awami League tenure and this is happening now breaking all previous records in the terminal year of this government's term.

With only a month to go for its exit, the government on September 27 approved 18 development projects in an hour's time worth Taka 8746 crore. Earlier, on September 14, another ECNEC meeting okayed 16 projects. Altogether 34 projects whizzed past the approval line in a matter of 13 days giving rise to a natural concern over their quality. Among the latest installment of projects passed in a lightning speed are 13 in the power sector after the damage has already been done in the area amidst raging public protests against unprecedented power outages. These include two power generation projects and one transmission line related project. Just how grossly untimely the projects are can be gauged from the fact that these are likely to go into production no sooner than 2009. Even though the projects have been sanctioned by the government, the latter wouldn't most possibly be able to release funds for them at this fag-end of its tenure. Who takes responsibility for the projects' implementation? These are going to be in 'no-man's land'. Actually, it is no rocket science to understand that the government wants to show these off to the voters as its parting blessings to the electorate. At the election time, the government would showcase these saying, "Look, what we have done for you." And if the government fails to win another term, it could at least brag about having done everything during its tenure of office. This is the way we play around with development projects!

Nepal: Democratisation of army!

NURUL HUDA

THE interim parliament of Nepal deserves kudos for the passage of a new law imposing tighter civilian control over the army. The 90,000 strong armed forces of the Himalayan kingdom had so long been extremely loyal to the country's royal family. The law, which was unanimously passed on September 22, paved the way for hearing of accusations like corruption, rape and murder against members of the army by civilian courts instead of military ones. The word "royal" was also removed from the army's name, which is seen by analysts as a major development towards democratisation of the Nepalese army. The army will now be known as "Nepal army." The people of Nepal have long been fighting for the establishment of democracy, and strengthening of the country's democratic institutions. The armed forces were used to suppress street agitations of the people struggling for the establishment of their democratic rights. During the 14-

month direct rule by the king many civilians had to embrace death at the hands of the country's law enforcing agencies. The passage of the military bill has been described by Pradeep Gyawali, a minister, as "a major breakthrough in the democratisation of the Nepal army." The army usually used to conduct its activities in a secret manner. With the passage of the new law the Nepal army would become more transparent, another parliamentarianism was quoted to have told news agencies. The parliament, earlier this year, stripped King Gyanendra of his control over the country's armed forces. The king was compelled to end his nearly yearlong direct rule of the country following violent street protests. The multi-party government and rebel Maoists have been observing a cease-fire since the restoration of the parliament. The Maoists are now in a "slow moving peace dialogue" with the government. The Maoists have said that wider consultation should have been made before the passage

STRAIGHT LINE

People around the world have been watching with interest the democratisation process of the army of Nepal. It, however, remains to be seen how democracy gains ground in the country which has seen unlimited powers of the monarchy for a very long time. How the king reacts to major changes in the constitution, which curtail his unlimited power, is also being watched with interest by the people around the world.

of the new law imposing tighter civilian control over the country's army. It needs to be recalled here that all bills in parliament needed royal assent, and it was the king's prerogative whether to give assent or not. The parliament of 1999 was hardly able to represent public opinion, or even to introduce socio-political changes. Rather, the king could seize all parliamentary powers without violating the constitution. This law, is likely to be cited as an example in other countries for strengthening civilian control over the army. Under the changed law recruit-

ment will be carried out through public examinations instead of by the army. King Gyanendra seized absolute power last year, but was compelled to hand it back to an interim government in April this year following several weeks of street protests. The dismissal of democratic governments is nothing new in Nepal. King Mahendra also dismissed the democratic government of Koirala in 1960, and put him, along with other leaders, behind bars. On the other hand, the 1962 constitution, for the first time, officially identified the country as a Hindu kingdom, meaning estab-

lishment of Hindu values in every sphere of life. Since Nepal was a multiethnic state, even though it was not called so at that time, monarchy was seen as the unifying factor of the nation. King Mahendra's brutal actions against the banned political parties, and their western democratic ideology, nipped every kind of resistance in the bud. For many years the party leaders, those who had not been imprisoned, could only be active while exiled in India, a situation well known since the time of Rana. It was in the 1970s that parties intensified under-

ground activities in Nepal as well. The constitution of 1990 laid the basis of the prevailing political system of the landlocked country. It was drafted by the representatives of the Nepali Congress and the left parties which had jointly organised the movement. They, together, tried to lay the foundation for a democratic system of Nepal. The makers of the constitution rejected the idea of describing the country as a secular state, though the left parties and non-Hindu groups had loudly raised the demand. Interestingly, during the time of the movement, and also

during the drafting of the constitution, terms like multiethnic and multilingual were emphasized together with the slogan for democracy. But equality of all citizens is a constitutional guarantee. In 1991, the election commission withheld the recognition of three parties representing ethnic, or other, social groups that were discriminated against by the Hindu state. For the mid-term elections in 1994 this number grew to six. In fact the undemocratic structure of the major parties makes the introduction of broad based, and equal, participation of all strata of society even more difficult. Only the established party elite, in all parties belonging to the Brahmins and Chetris, decide whether other groups in society are allowed to participate or not. This is to the disadvantage of those groups that already had been disadvantaged before the advent of democracy -- the ethnic groups, the so-called untouchables, the women and the Tarai population. People around the world have

been watching with interest the democratisation process of the army of Nepal. It, however, remains to be seen how democracy gains ground in the country which has seen unlimited powers of the monarchy for a very long time. How the king reacts to major changes in the constitution, which curtail his unlimited power, is also being watched with interest by the people around the world. The ongoing peace talks between the government and the Maoists is also being carefully watched, as unless there is understanding between them lasting peace cannot be expected. It needs to be mentioned that the country has witnessed, for more than ten years, a kind of revolution which has almost shaken the foundation of state and society. Maoists, who are loyal to the United People's Front which won nine seats in 1991 elections, were behind the revolution. Nurul Huda is a BSS Special Correspondent