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### Five years of BNP rule

Little to write home about

S one reflects on the past five-years of performance of the Four-Party Alliance government there are three 'qualities' under which its accomplishments and failures can be assessed - quality of governance, quality of politics and quality of life.

What is the 'quality' of governance that the country was presented with? Three things have militated against good governance - a politicised bureaucracy, an oversized cabinet and pervasive corruption. There would be little to contradict the fact that the country endured a government that was beset with incompetence, if not verging on failure, as a consequence of having a highly politicised civil service and police. Under such conditions these could hardly be expected to perform at the highest level of competence. The swiftness with which some ex-bureaucrats joined the ruling party after retirement and the savagery that the police perpetrated on the opposition activists, provide testimony to the bane of politicisation. The burden of an oversized cabinet and the record of dismal performance of certain ministries have ratcheted up the failure index of the government. And the less one speaks of corruption the less will we embarrass ourselves. We have witnessed it being almost institutionalised, with centers of corruption dictating policies of the government. The way the ACC has been treated since the very first day raises a question mark on the government's intention to root out corruption.

There has been an exponential deterioration of quality of our politics and the opposition stands guilty of contributing to it. However, the majoritarian arrogance of the ruling coalition, because of its two-thirds majority, had divested the opposition of adequate political space. Discussion on significant issues like the attempt on the life of the leader of the opposition on 21 Aug 2004 and the killing of SAMS Kibria were mindlessly disallowed in the parliament. The attitude of the government has fuelled the confrontational politics, the consequence of which we see in the current political impasse

The short answer to the question whether the quality of life of a Bangladeshi has improved in the last five years will have to be an emphatic no. Unchecked rise of prices, and the unbearable shortage of electricity and water have caused the common man to writhe in agony. While the policy on polythene and two-stroke engine was noteworthy for its impact on the environment, its benefits have been diluted because of unplanned urbanisation and severe traffic congestion.

Thus, to an objective observer, there is little to write home about the last five years.

#### North Korea's nuclear test

Tension in the region

ORTH Korea with its first ever-successful test of a nuclear weapon has become yet another country to join the powerful group of countries who have the nuclear arms capability. Analysts say that North Korea has probably enough material to make six to eight nuclear bombs. Quoting a source of Russia's Ministry of Defense the media said that the devise tested by North Korea was between 5 and 15 kilotons.

This is indeed an alarming development for the region since considerable distrust and hostilities are in existence between countries of East Asia.

On a different note, it is also reflective of the failure of diplomacy and diplomatic maneuverings of that select group of powerful nations of the world who were unable to dissuade North Korea from taking the nuclear course. Surely, one cannot go on threatening countries with sanctions whenever confronted with states that are either planning to go or have gone nuclear. It should be remembered that sanctions basically affect the innocent citizens of the country in general and often end in gaining additional public support for the regime in

It appears that time has come for a change in the strategy for dealing with such emerging issues with countries engaged in empowering themselves by developing nuclear warheads. The key factor of that strategy should be based, amongst others, on equality, honesty, fair play and justice. What is needed is an in-depth understanding of the psyche of the people before embarking on any strategic or tactical

We, in Bangladesh, are concerned about the developments in North Korea and its ramifications for the region and possible long-term consequences in the race for military supremacy globally. We strongly recommend that the sixnation negotiating team be activated once again to engage North Korea in deescalating its nuclear propensities.

## The necessary question: Will you resign?



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

UR very own, very embattled chief election commissioner has just given our bemused journalists an earful. Justice MA Aziz, rather in a tight spot these days for reasons that are only too obvious, has asked newsmen who keep asking him the same question that they ought to learn journalism first and then frame their auestions.

That would be sound advice were it not for the fact that the judge is hardly in a position to sermonise today. If he is upset at the same question being thrown at him day after day, if he is looking for a different question, or a different kind of questioning, he ought to know that it can come only after he has provided a good, satisfactory and convincing answer to the first.

And that of course relates to the nationally significant matter of whether he plans to resign any time soon as a way of making it easier for the country to go seriously into the business of arranging a free and fair election early next year.

The reality, though, is that Aziz has shown precious little inclination towards resignation. The more the campaign against him has gathered speed, to say nothing of the fury accompanying it, the bigger his stubbornness has grown about "staying the course," a phrase a particular American in distant Washington is so fond of munching on these days.

The chief election commissioner has, so far, stayed the course. That is a creditable thing GROUND REALITIES

Journalism must pulsate with life, with intellectual ardour. It should be raw and yet be a hard-boiled affair. Now and in the days ahead, here in Bangladesh, media-persons must catch men and women in high places doing all the wrong things and then ask them, persistently: "Will you resign?" One day, tired and bored and finally embarrassed, those mighty ones will resign.

to do. But when you begin to weigh that pattern of behaviour in terms of loss and gain, you will stumble on the painful realisation that every single day the CEC and his three commissioners stay in their jobs is a day that could have been spent in a better and moral way. But, to be sure. Justice Aziz will not agree with us. He has every right not to. The problem crops up, though, when he comes forth with gratuitous advice on what newsmen must do before hurling that old question at him. His job is not to proselytise or to be didactic. It is simply to answer the question.

It is the professional responsi-

bility of a newsperson to frame and ask questions on matters that affect the future of a country, of a society and even of an individual. If there are men like Dan Rather poking, figuratively, powerful people like George Herbert Walker Bush at their underbellies and eliciting from them angry responses that demonstrate their vulnerability, it is a hint of good journalism at work. In the Watergate days, Bob Woodward and company kept asking the question: "What did the President know and when did he know it?" It transpired that President Nixon had known about things pretty early on. He therefore had to go in order to preserve the sanctity of the office he held. The recently dead Oriana Fallaci ruffled a lot of powerful feathers the world over and yet kept on asking the same question over and over again. The Shah glared at her, Ayatollah Khomeini was positively scandalized, but they answered her questions all the same.

When you deliberate on journalism in terms of the Bangladesh reality, you cannot pretend that the nature and quality of the profession have not changed since the early 1990s. The change is out there for all of us to see, though we do realise that the level of boldness a journalist needs in order to put some more meat on his professionalism remains to be attained to its fullest extent. When Justice Aziz brazenly

told those journalists, most of whom are young and naturally irreverential of authority, that they should be learning journalism first and then proceed with their questions, he ought to have been given, in turn, some more questions to handle. It is never a journalist's job to be intimidated or shamed by one holding a position of public trust. If politicians in Britain are terrified of the possibility of being grilled by Jeremy Paxman, there is hardly any reason why the powerful men and women in our own Bengali society should not be subjected to a similar situation.

The task here, for anyone who calls himself/herself a journalist, is to leave sentiment and social mores aside and simply wade into the cesspool with his/her questions. Which is what the iournalists who asked the CEC whether or not he would quit office should have gone on doing. When Aziz asked them: "Why are you throwing wild questions at me regularly?" they should have gone "wild" all over

again.

A good journalist is one who turns out to be a purposeful questioner. He is one who is not willing to allow powerful men and women get away with their obfuscations and evasions and their arrogance. He looks them in the eve. and will not blink until he has the answer. There is something called constructive meanness; and it is geared to the public good. A journalist who cannot buttonhole a powerful individual and then slowly push him or her up against a wall is not being nice to their job.

At this point in time, the question for Justice Aziz and his commissioners will remain one, and only one: "When will you go?" That guestion has nothing of the personal about it, but everything of the public good ingrained in it. In the months before he died of a cardiac arrest, Colonel Akbar Hossain was asked by the media if he planned to quit the government over the many charges of corruption leveled at him and his minis-

He heard the question loud and clear, did not pretend it was not there, and then said in distinct manner that he intended to stay on. So what is the difference between the deceased minister and our CEC? It is simply in the fact that where the minister answered the question, the judge not only refuses to come forth with a response but also comes up with the attitude that he can teach the media all they need to know about journalism. A few months ago, he astonished the



country with his offer to teach the law to our men and women of law. A good thing it was that no one took him up on the offer.

Be that as it may, the chief election commissioner has done us all in the journalistic profession a favour. He has simply rekindled in us the thought of the many gaps that yet need to be bridged in our pursuit of right journalism in this country. You can spot these gaps as you surf across the many Bengali television channels and zero in on some of the ubiquitous talk shows that never seem to fizzle out. It is the same participants, along with the same comperes. And it is the same old line of questioning -- too polite and even ingratiating, too friendly, too incomplete and too lacking in aggressiveness to be of any value

The image should have been the reverse. It should have been the participants quaking in their boots in apprehension of the questions coming their way. And it ought to have been for the comperes to exercise control over their programs, a performance they have not quite mastered. The tendency remains one of trying not to wound the feelings of the powerful men or women seated by them with their "disrespectful" questioning. That mars the show and you then tell yourself that if you have watched

one you have watched them all

The idea that a public forum such as television is out there for certain truths to be exposed goes missing, and it does not matter whether or not you think you are emulating some of the determined journalistic minds in the West by copying their titles and mannerisms. If on your local version of Hard Talk you spot the presenter (who incidentally has never been part of the media world) failing to grill General Ershad over his political legacy and so failing to satisfy our collective curiosity, you know how journalism shoots itself in the

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Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka

### **Europe's identity**



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

N a brilliant critique of Pope Benedict's recent address on faith and reason at the University of Regensburg, Germany, Tariq Ramadan, a professor of Islamic studies at St. Anthony's College, Oxford has made some very pertinent obser-

In one of them, he has asked the Muslims to calm down and adopt a more reasoned approach to the Pope's unfortunate use of an offensive quotation: "Show me iust what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman. such as his command to spread

## LETTER FROM EUROPE

It is a pity that, in his religious zeal to define an exclusively Greco-Christian character of Europe's identity, a scholar of the stature of Pope Benedict should try to ignore not only the contribution made by the Muslims in transmitting Greek rationalism to Europe but also original contributions made to European rationalistic thought by the great European Muslim philosophers of the 10th to the 14th centuries, al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, al-Ghazali, Ash Shatabi, and Ibn Khaldun, whose works are available in all European university libraries.

by the sword the faith he preached" -- from an obscure medieval text.

Prof Ramadan thinks that verbal excesses, and physical violence against civilians in predominantly Muslim countries, usually end up being counter productive and lend credibility to the accusations themselves. Instead, he feels, the Muslims should pay more attention to the Pope's attempts to define Europe's identity as exclusively Christian, because it is an issue with far-reaching consequences, particularly for the European

Muslims and for Turkey's entry to

Europe, at present, has a Muslim population of approximately ten million people and, according to reliable sources, it is likely to grow at a steady rate in future. In view of this phenomenon, i.e. the growing Muslim population in Europe, it is imperative to address this issue urgently and in as dispassionate a manner as possible

Pope Benedict seems to think that there is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam. According to him. God and reason (Logos) go together in Christianity, while in Islam, God is totally transcendent -- God's will is not bound by rationality.

In other words, Christianity represents rationality and is, therefore, non-violent, while Islam is not rational and, therefore, tends to be violent. The Pope also thinks that Europe's identity is defined by Christian faith and Greek rationalism. Therefore, the inevitable conclusion that one is forced to draw from this line of argument is that the Muslims can never fully reconcile themselves with the European identity.

violence was exercised by the followers of which religion to spread their faith, the crucial questions in the context of the Pope's definition of the European identity are: Have faith and reason always walked hand in hand in Christianity? Is Islamic thought completely foreign to European culture and identity? Has Islamic thought not contributed anything to the European rationalism? According to historical

Leaving aside the thorny issue

of trying to measure how much

records, St Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) was the first Christian theologian who studied Arabian-Aristotelian philosophy at the University of Paris, and starting from Aristotelian premises tried to reconcile faith with scientific rationalism. Yet, in spite of St Thomas's respect for reason, he felt that real truth was still obtainable through faith.

In the context of this letter it is relevant to mention here that this trend of thought was against the basic tenets of Latin Averroists like John of Jandun, Taddeo of Parma and Angelo of Arezzo

(Christian disciples of Averroes or Ibn Rushd, the Muslim European rationalist philosopher, who was born in 1126 and died in 1198), who had developed the theory that "reason and philosophy are superior to faith, and knowledge founded on

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The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

### **Full Moon rising**



N Monday, October 9, the UN General Assembly confirmed South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon, 61, as the next secretary general of the UN. Ban will take over on January 1 2007 for five years.

Ban has been the South Korean trade minister since 2004. He is a career foreign service officer since 1970. He obtained MPA from Harvard University. He has acted as "chief-de-cabinet" to the 56th president of the General Assembly (a South Korean) and as a senior aide to South Korea's President Roh Mu-hyun

#### Politics plays a part

It is noted that the selection of the secretary general of the UN is a political decision entirely, and not

# BOTTOM LINE

Ban faces an enormous task in maintaining peace and security in an increasingly divisive world. The parochial attitude of the permanent members needs to be abandoned. Preventive diplomacy and strengthening of the institutions of failed or weak states appear to be the future activities of the UN. There is no magic for resolving issues that have been prolonged over decades, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Kashmir issue. Ban reportedly sees his role as one to reconcile harmoniously the different opinions of member states. We wish him all the success in his tenure.

on merits of the candidates. A lot of regional and international politics are involved in his selection. One cannot get away from the fact that the UN is a political organisation and, therefore, the interests of the big five play a major role in the selection.

Sometimes they compromise on the merits of the candidates for consensus, such as when Javier Perez de Cuellar of Peru (1982-91) was selected when the two original candidates failed to get affirmative votes of the big five.

Egypt's Boutros-Boutros Ghali could not get secure re-election in 1996 because it is believed that he had annoyed the US for his independent mind, and did not toe

the line of the US

Kofi Annan, an official of the UN, was lucky because the US backed him strongly, although his record as the head of the UN peacekeeping operations was dismal. It was during his tenure that the Rwandan massacre occurred in 1994 when he had decided to reduce the number of the UN troops. Furthermore, an insider of the UN is normally not selected for the position.

Why did South Korea succeed?

Political observers believe that South Korea has an edge over others because it has been a close ally of the US and the West for decades, and it is the third

largest coalition partner in Iraq. The US has a military base in that

Furthermore, it is reported in the publication Journal that the Jewish lobby in the US supported South Korea's candidate. David Harris, the executive director of the American Jewish Committee, reportedly confirmed that he had "several meetings" with prospective candidates and acknowledged: "There is a feeling that American Jewry would have some impact on the thinking of the United States.'

France always approves a candidate who is fluent in the French language. Ban speaks both English and French fluently.

China has developed good relations, partly because of its policy of peaceful engagement with the communist North Korea, (called "sunshine policy"). It is believed that Ban would be able to constructively engage North Korea because of his deep understanding of the issues involved in the

Furthermore, Russian relations with South Korea have been friendly, partly because of South Korea's somewhat strained relations with former ruler Japan and partly because it does not take a hard line view towards North Korea. South Korea is a rich country, and for the last 10 years it has seriously participated in the affairs of the UN and its agencies. Some of its candidates have been successful in gaining top positions in the UN affiliated agencies.

South Korea has been the 11th largest contributor to the UN budget, and had voted with the rich-world financiers led by the US, Japan, and the EU, that blocked, or delayed, some of the proposed management reforms put up by Kofi Annan in May.

Observers believe that al these above factors, among others, have helped South Korea's candidate to gain the support of the five members of the Security Council

The other candidates from Asia, India's Shashi Kapoor, Sri Lanka's Jayantha Danapala, and Thailand's Surukiart Sathirathai failed to get the backing of the crucial veto-wielding five permanent members of the Security

It is speculated in the media that China has reservation about India's nominee because China did not want any candidate from a "large country," coupled with the fact that he has been a high official of the UN closely aligned with Kofi Annan. That possibly went against him. The UN needs a new broom, not an old one, to sweep the debris of the UN clean. Thailand's candidate had no chance after the coup in his country, although he resigned from Thaksin's political party. Sri Lanka's candidate fell behind in the straw polls taken to gauge the acceptance by the 15-member Security Council of the UN. Moreover the image of Sri Lanka has been severely damaged by the on-going sectarian civil war.

Ban's plate will be full. Eradication of poverty, terrorism by non-state actors, limiting nuclear proliferation or weapons of mass destruction, global climate change, resolution of inter-state conflicts. issues of failed states, and reforms within the UN are likely to engage his attention.

Observers suggest that it is desirable for Ban, as the head of the administration of the UN. to first undertake drastic reforms of the existing secretive and unaccountable culture of the UN Secretariat to become transparent, accountable, and responsible for all its actions to the memberstates. Kofi Annan missed his chance to reform the UN bureau-

It appears that nuclear proliferation is likely to be at the top of the agenda. While he has to deal with North Korea and Iran on nuclear proliferation, he has to satisfy the US which does not believe in bilateral dialogue either with North Korea or Iran. In one of his speeches he reportedly mentioned the differences between the motivations of Iranian and North Korean nuclear development. In this regard, he stated the

obvious that dialogue was the pasis to remove distrust and suspicion among the parties

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Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva