

Biman’s fate unlikely to change without considerable autonomy

Review draft law to put professionals in the driving seat

CAN you solve a problem using the same method and style of thinking that created the problem in the first place? The administration seems to think you can, as it approves a draft law putting bureaucrats in the driving seat of Biman Bangladesh Airlines—instead of professionals—repeating a cycle that saw systemic graft and bad management calls destroy any chances of Biman being profitable. Even after the national flag carrier was turned into a public limited company in 2007, raising hopes for a much-needed overhaul, it never enjoyed the autonomy it needed to transform itself. Biman recorded losses year after year as it failed to break free of corruption, inefficiencies and bureaucratic control. Now the government has made this state of affairs official by formalising the aviation ministry’s control over the airlines through the draft law.

According to the draft Bangladesh Biman Corporation (Repeal) Act, the government will be able to take management decisions regardless of what is said in the Companies Act, under which Biman was supposed to run independently and take its own decisions. The ministry will be able to dissolve and restructure its board of directors—the highest authority for Biman—and have the power to terminate, change and amend contracts of different management treaties of Biman.

The case for government control of a government-owned company may seem reasonable, but the fact is, absolute government control has a track record of backfiring in Bangladesh. We have seen how public money had to be injected into Biman year after year as it was unable to turn any profit on its own. The authorities may take a lesson from the fate of state-owned jute mills in the country that suffered blanket closures after years of continued loss, thanks to a lack of accountability and the inability to transform. Subsidies of the kind Biman receives may not be unprecedented, but successful government-owned airlines globally are all known for their professionalism, efficiency, state-of-the-art aircraft, airport capacity, in-flight services and customer satisfaction—Biman lags far behind its competitors in all these respects. Bangladesh may also take a lesson from the fate of Pakistan International Airlines, which was recently banned from flying in European airspace for six months for its failure to oversee its operators and aircraft in accordance with international standards.

This is what happens when bureaucrats in control of a national flag carrier are given free rein over its operations, without a strong mechanism of accountability in place. The draft law approved by the cabinet fails to address these concerns, and thus is unlikely to help make Biman profitable again. Instead of a government-fixed board of directors predominantly comprising bureaucrats, it should be led by actual professionals who will be given considerable autonomy and flexibility to offer the services that today’s jet passengers have come to expect from international airliners. Unless the government allows necessary reforms, Biman may never come out of its destructive cycle.

A well-deserved rebuke for Wasa MD

Wasa must comply with HC directive to seal off drains connecting Buriganga

A report published in this daily brings to our attention the High Court’s observation that the managing director of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) is “intentionally” refraining from implementing a 2011 directive asking the Wasa authorities to seal off drains and sewerage lines linked to the Buriganga. Wasa’s long-time MD, Taqsem A Khan, has been violating his commitment and delaying compliance with the court directives by submitting different affidavits and seeking time. So the HC issued a caution to him, asking him to properly implement its directives and submit a compliance report within a month.

Even in December last year, the HC bench noted that Dhaka Wasa was responsible for controlling the 68 underground drains and sewerage lines that were linked to the Buriganga and directed it to implement its directives in this regard and submit the progress report. On the same day, Wasa submitted an undertaking to the HC saying that it would seal off all its drains and sewerage lines and file a progress report every month. Then Wasa’s MD, who has been at its helm for 11 years, appeared before the HC bench on March 4, apologising for not implementing the 2011 directives, and said he would take steps to fully comply with them. However, he submitted three confusing reports since last month claiming that Wasa had sealed off four sewerage lines at Hazaribagh area but cannot seal off lines in Shyampur due to floods when, in fact, there is no flooding in Shyampur. This is hardly a surprise as he has a well-documented history of trying to evade responsibility. Last year, he was widely criticised for claiming that water supplied by Wasa was 100 percent safe, when it was anything but. He also told reporters on various occasions that water-related issues can be attributed to technical problems, and often denied reports of corruption and mismanagement within Wasa.

Such evasion of responsibilities can be costly when it comes to rivers. Bangladesh is heavily dependent on its rivers and if these cannot be protected from pollution and damage, they may not survive for long. The activities of Wasa in this regard leave much to be desired, and its commitment is not reassuring at all given its previous record of noncompliance, mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption in handling of the city’s water supply and sewerage facilities. As Wasa fails to take initiatives, the Buriganga is choking, as are other connected rivers. It is therefore crucial that the authorities take necessary steps to address this situation. They must ensure that Wasa complies fully with the orders of the HC this time. Continued disregard for the court orders cannot be tolerated.

International Right to Know Day must generate serious reflections by all sides

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

SEPTEMBER is an important month for Right to Information (RTI) buffs all over the world. They undertake various activities during the month to commemorate the International Right to Know Day on September 28 with two key focus points. One, to remind citizens that the RTI Act provides them with a legal basis to find out if their government is managing the affairs of the state effectively, efficiently and honestly. And two, to remind governments that they have a duty of transparency and accountability towards their citizens, who are entitled to access nearly all information available within public offices.

Such interaction between citizens and governments is the hallmark of democracy. Without a healthy balance between the two, democracy cannot flourish. It explains why so many states all over the world, around 130 by the last count, have enacted the RTI Act. By adopting the law, they have sought to enhance their democratic credentials.

Adopting the law and making it work are, however, two different things. Many governments enacted the law primarily as “democratic window-dressing” with little interest to open up their records to the people.

Citizens too are reticent to use the law, either because they do not trust government offices to honour their information requests or are afraid of retaliation from government officials. Hence the law remains only on paper in many countries. The annual Right to Know Day provides an opportunity to all sides to assess challenges and

opportunities and draw lessons from them.

Citizens have the highest stake in the success of the law. Among hundreds of laws of the land which governments use to control and regulate citizen behaviour, the RTI Act is one law which allows citizens to control and regulate government behaviour. If citizens fail to apply the law and make it work, governments have little to be blamed of.

How has Bangladesh’s RTI Act 2009 fared in the 11 years since it came into force? One easy indicator would be to

help them to have their names inserted on the list, as has happened in many places in Bangladesh. While the use of the law for personal needs can indeed be important for citizens, limiting its use to such purposes alone is a waste of a powerful tool. We must help citizens to understand that the law can contribute to systemic change in such a way that the lists are *always* prepared in a fair way.

There is still a common misunderstanding among many in the country that the RTI Act is meant to be used as a tool to expose dishonest or

complied with, would contribute to positive interaction between the two sides. It would establish trust and understanding between them. Such a situation would negate the need to expose individual corruption by digging up information with the help of the law. The purpose of RTI requests should be viewed as a means to advancing systemic change so that corruption can be nipped in the bud.

The success of citizens’ demands for information is, of course, linked with its supply by public officials who hold the information. Without a close interplay between the demand and supply sides, the system cannot work properly. For that to happen, two things are important. One, there must be a clear commitment from the highest echelons of the government to make the law work. Public authorities must not only be encouraged to comply with the requirements of the law but regularly exhorted to do so. Two, ways must be found to help public officials realise that they need not fear any penalisation from the authorities for disclosing information permitted under the law. On the contrary, they may have to face sanctions under the law for not doing so.

This leads us to the role of the Information Commission (IC). The three members of the neutral commission are supposed to be chosen for their impartiality by a committee prescribed under the RTI Act. Unfortunately, those often chosen for the jobs, particularly those with bureaucratic pasts, bring their restrictive baggage to the job.

Discussions during the Right to Know Day celebrations should lead to ideas on how to overcome such tendencies. The government may wish to consider setting up a mechanism to assess the decisions of the commission over the years. There is much to learn from them. Citizens too should come together to undertake collective efforts to seek the views of the High Court under its writ jurisdiction, particularly on decisions involving interpretation of important provisions of the RTI Act.

Notwithstanding such limitations in the implementation of the RTI Act in Bangladesh, it is no small achievement that the law has survived over the years and has maintained slow but steady progress. In recent months, the pandemic has taught citizens and their governments all over the world the immense importance of trust between the two sides to deal with national crises. We hope that the lessons learnt in this regard in Bangladesh will help us build an RTI regime in the country that lives up to its lofty ideals.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

The RTI law is a positive tool for developing close interactions between citizens and public authorities. Its use should be seen as an opportunity for citizens to ask for information from public authorities which, if properly complied with, would contribute to positive interaction between the two sides.

look at the number of RTI applications made over the years. Records show that on an average, around 8,500 RTI applications have been filed annually in the country. Compared with some six million applications annually during the same period in neighbouring India, it is not difficult to conclude that our citizens are yet to wake up to the value of the law and reap its benefits.

One obvious reason more citizens in Bangladesh do not use the RTI Act is that they do not know about it. Even those who are aware do not necessarily have a clear understanding of its goals. The majority consider that the law is meant to be used primarily for personal reasons, as and when they need specific information from government offices to get things done or redress personal grievances.

True, in a developing country like ours, individuals would use the law to seek information, for example on the process of how the list of recipients for a safety net measure, like old age or widow pension, has been drawn up. This may

corrupt public officials. True, the law specifically mentions that one of its key objectives is to see that “corruption... shall decrease and good governance... shall be established.” But that does not mean that the law should only be used to expose specific corruption. That will be a negative use of the law, which in the long run can be harmful to citizens’ interests as irate officials may develop a hostile attitude towards it and frustrate its objectives.

Citizens must learn to use the law positively. They must understand that by making proper use of the law, they can help public officials realise that the days of official secrecy are over. A smooth operation of the law would contribute to systemic change in governance, whereby corruption will automatically diminish.

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Bangladeshi youth can carve a new path for the Global Youth Adaptation Network



LAST week, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon jointly launched the new South Asian Regional office of the Global Centre on Adaptation (GCA).

This was followed by the launch of the GCA’s flagship Global Youth Adaptation Network (YAN) by Saima Wajed Hossain, who is the thematic ambassador for Vulnerability of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). This new YAN initiative will start with a series of regional consultations around the globe as well as a few national consultations in some selected countries initially.

The aim is to have the YAN up and running as a global youth movement at the Global Adaptation Summit to be held on January 25, 2021. It is aimed to be a synergistic counterpart to the global movement of school children that the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg has so successfully led where the focus, quite rightly, has been in getting the major greenhouse gas emitting countries to reduce their emissions to keep global mean atmospheric temperature below 1.5 Degrees Centigrade, which all countries have promised to do in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015.

The YAN, on the other hand, will focus on youth from the global South and promote the need to adapt to the adverse impacts of human induced climate change, which have now become quite apparent. The year 2020 will be marked as the year in which the globe has transitioned into a climate changed world with major wildfires, floods, hurricanes, heatwaves and droughts occurring in every continent. Henceforth, the enhanced intensity of all such major climatic events, as well as slower ones such as sea level rise, can be attributed to the fact that humans have already raised global mean atmospheric temperature above one Degree Centigrade.

As the YAN consultations take place



School and college children staged a demonstration at Manik Mia Avenue in Dhaka in September 2019 to urge world leaders to act against climate change.

PHOTO: STAR/ PRABIR DAS

over the coming weeks and months, there will be one in English for the South Asian region and another one in Bangla for Bangladesh and West Bengal in India, where we have an opportunity for our young people to engage proactively in setting up the Bangladesh National YAN chapter as the first national chapter of the global YAN.

Bangladesh has already many different movements and clubs of youth in schools and universities, as well as Scouts and others who can join together in this effort. An important aspect of the YAN to keep in mind is that adaptation to climate change is not simply being aware of environmental issues like pollution and engaging in activities like planting trees, although those are certainly important. It requires a slightly more

nuanced understanding of climate change impacts, which are not always the same as simple environmental considerations.

Hence, it will be important for our youth to gain an understanding of climate change impacts and how to adapt to those impacts and help the country become more resilient over time. This will require some initial learning and capacity building for all our youth. The consortium of universities and research institutions in Bangladesh under the leadership of Gobeshona has a youth leadership programme that can support the other youth initiatives with this learning and help build their capabilities to tackle adaptation to climate change.

This is a tremendous opportunity for the young people of Bangladesh to play a pioneering role, both in South Asia as

well as globally, in promoting actions to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change.

In particular, as the world prepares for the 26th annual Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to be held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021, it will also be preceded by a Youth COP to be held in Milan, Italy in September 2021.

If we are able to get the Bangladesh chapter of the YAN up and running by then, it will be a great opportunity to share our activities with youth from around the world in Italy next year.

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