

Given Political Will, an Accountable Administration is within Our Reach

by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

Sino-HK Stalemate

With just four years to go for the transfer of Hong Kong to China, there are only a few visible signs of the easing of the crisis between the colonial administration of the British colony and Beijing. On the face of it, the recent trip to the Chinese capital by the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd had gone well — the visitor from London was all smiles for the TV camera — and there were at least no signs that it had worsened the situation. Now comes the news that the eighth round of Sino-British official talks on constitutional democratic reforms proposed for the colony by Governor Chris Patten had made "no progress." So, in one form or another, the stalemate continues, causing concern among a cross-section of people in the colony, especially the business community.

There is room for pessimism. On the other hand, one may also assume that officials on both sides have already identified the common ground that already exists in their approach to the whole range of issues affecting the two sides, ranging from the construction of a new airport for the colony, said to be the largest of its kind in the world, and democratic reforms for Hong Kong. We are sure, both London and Beijing know full well that the colony cannot be handed over to China in the midst of confusion and chaos.

In the situation marked by mixed signals and some ambiguity, there may be other possibilities. The fact that Hurd and his counterpart Qian Qichen are to meet again in September is a hopeful sign. It is obvious that the September talk must show some result before Governor Patten delivers his annual address to the colony's Legislative Council by October 6. One hopes that instead of taking an unilateral position on any of the divisive issues, the Governor will offer some kind of a consensus reached in September between the two foreign secretaries of China and Britain.

It would certainly help the process if while talks go on in Beijing, various groups in the colony, holding different views on the future of the territory, reach a broad understanding. Divided as they may be on a number of fundamental issues, some affecting their attitude towards China, they are all committed to the welfare of the colony, not just in commercial sense but also in socio-political terms. A common plan of action that is worked out among these groups would be of tremendous value for the future of the colony.

Although the transfer of Hong Kong to the control of Beijing is only four years away, much can still happen within China that can directly affect the colony's future. In the first place, the uncertainties surrounding the health of Prime Minister Li Peng raise questions about the succession issue, not to mention about the possible exit of Deng Xiaoping. The country also faces problems with its economy which, now over-heated with an extraordinary high growth rate, must now start slowing down. Meanwhile, it has run into several perennial problems of rising capitalism, from black marketing to smuggling, even of luxury cars from Hong Kong; from all kinds of economic crimes, some even involving the army to unchecked private spending on consumer goods. In the midst of these challenges, Beijing should set its priorities right. It may do well to take a flexible position on the Hong Kong question and have more time in tackling its internal problems. In the long run, a problem-free stronger China can only be a boon for Hong Kong.

Bravo Monowara

It was a singular case of courage. All cases of such grit do not have a happy ending. Luckily for Monowara Begum and for us all her piece of rare heroism came off triumphantly. Two muggers — or hijackers in popular parlance — were not only thwarted by her on Sunday evening at Shahjahanpur, she was instrumental in catching both of them and handing them over to police.

This young woman did against inconceivable odds. She held one of the attackers so tightly to her person as made the criminal completely unable to manoeuvre the lethal weapon he held. His comrade fired at her from a revolver — but she did not loosen her grip. The shot missing her, the goon hit her head hard with something. Yet she held fast while keeping in shouting for help. People came rushing followed soon by police.

Hers could be dubbed a foolish act if only she were shot. But while we rejoice at the happy outcome, it is not this that is important. We congratulate her on the spirit of resistance, of defiance to armed bullying — at the risk of her life. Mastani, with concomitant waylaying and otherwise has been of late lording over the society. It cannot be curbed by police alone. Social resistance is necessary to rid the society of this evil. Far more precious is the individual's grit not to cower down before such attacks. It will of course take a lot of daring and death before mastani would prove to be unpaying.

Street murders in the city and other towns are done by gangs bent on killing particular people for whatever reason. But hijacking does not aim at evidence, it's mounted to snatch and grab. Resistance is attempted to be overcome through violence not leading to murder. And victims of most such cases are women rickshaw passengers travelling alone after dusk.

Rather than asking women to keep indoors to avoid such risk, we counsel that they resist keeping their wits about them. In order that they succeed it is necessary that they take some training in the defensive arts of Jujitsu, Kounfu and Karate. But the main thing is courage and intelligence.

Women are going to offices and factories and business establishments in ever greater number. Before long the city streets would be half full of women pedestrians as would be buses and other transports with many women. Finding an easy quarry in a woman passenger or pedestrian will be a thing of the past then. Till then, courage, ye road users, specially if you are women.

I was with interest and appreciation that I read M. Ali's 'At Home and Abroad' pieces entitled 'On Good Government' (May 13) and 'More on Good Government' (June 8). I was, however, rather disappointed not to see much in the subsequent issues of 'The Daily Star' in the shape of reaction or response to these timely and thoughtful essays. Meanwhile, the UNDP team mentioned by Mr Ali is reported to be working in Dhaka to prepare its report on the administrative reforms in Bangladesh.

The following observations are made in the hope that these may help generate a richly deserved interest among all concerned in Mr Ali's articles on a topic of such high national priority.

First, 'mea culpa'. I am a retired civil servant, and hence cannot lay claim to an academic detachment. However, I did spend a fair number of my active years in various other professions at home and abroad, working in academe, international organisations and the private sector. I had the opportunity of acquiring first hand knowledge of the government systems and interacting with the members of the civil services of quite a few other countries including the ones lauded by Mr Ali for their dynamic economy and good government.

I share fully with Mr Ali's 'mixed reactions', towards the interest of some UN agencies and other donors in 'helping' the government of Bangladesh to bring about administrative reforms. Renewal of such interest occurs virtually with a periodic regularity. Over the years, many learned reports, initiated and generously funded by the donors, have been produced on administrative reforms in Bangladesh. Some of these targeted specific sectors, others grappled with the system as a whole. Some carried multi-million dollar price-tags, — mostly spent on expatriate 'experts' recruited and deployed by them. These are in addition to 'reforms' prescribed as 'conditionalities' under various structural adjustment loans, sector loans, programme loans, project loans and grants made by the donor agencies.

These teams produced reports, often in elegantly bounded volumes. These would be ceremoniously presented to a high dignitary, — providing an excellent photo opportunity. For a few weeks, even months, these would adorn the shelves of the ministers and secretaries, and then disappear duly to be dug out of the archives by the next mission fielded for the same purpose. The contents will be suitably repackaged, interspersed with the latest academic jargons. And to and behold, another report would appear.

In my days with the government, I had to meet many such missions and teams. Many of the member would be academics. Their practical experience would usually consist of

short visits to other aid-dependent poor third world countries like Bangladesh on similar missions. Rarely one would come across anyone who ever worked in any senior administrative position in any government.

The composition of currently visiting UNDP team appears to be somewhat different. It is reported to include a retired permanent secretary of the UK government. A Bangladeshi team consisting of academics and former civil servants are reported to be advising this UNDP mission. Hopefully, they will produce a more pragmatic and usable report than their many predecessors.

Yet, I believe that Mr Ali is right in wondering if there is any 'magic formula' for administrative reforms that we must learn from outside. There is none. Any expert team to produce such a 'magic formula' may well be sadly disappointed.

No such document, however competent, can deal with the basic issue, aptly termed by Mr Ali as 'the hard decisions'. Surely, the existing rules, regulations, manuals, codes etc. can be improved upon. Organograms can be redrawn. However, the best of these will not bring about much significant change unless and until there is a firm political will to take and enforce 'hard decisions'. It has to be realised that the malaise is more a product of the prevailing political-administrative ethos and attitude than of rules and procedures.

First and foremost, we have to forego the habit of rhetorically blaming 'colonial administrations' for all our administrative ills. After all, nearly a half-century and a quarter-century respectively have elapsed since the British and the Pakistani rules have ended. This excuse is indeed wearing thin. We should be honest enough to admit that the current state of affairs is by and large the product of our own acts of commission and omission during the post-independence period.

Fewer 'control points' as recommended by Mr Ali calls for effective delegation of authority and decentralisation. However, the trend since independence has been in the other direction. The extent of delegation which still exists in paper has suffered relentless erosion in practice. I am sure that any senior official whether in the secretariat, a directorate or in a so-called 'autonomous' body will bear testimony to this phenomenon. Decisions which should be and once used to be taken by a deputy secretary now routinely goes up to the level of secretary or minister or even higher-up.

The same holds true in respect of field level agencies. The result is a massive and permanent backlog of decisions and loss of accountability. If the ministry gets involved in, say the transfer, posting and promotion of individual primary school teachers, obviously that would not leave such time for policy issues.

The lead and initiative in correcting this situation has to come from the political levels of the government. The reality is that the more vocally political commitments to decentralisation is declared, the more centralisation takes place in practice.

Closely linked with the issue of decentralised decision-making are the role, responsibility and status of local government bodies. For all practical purposes, such bodies now only exist name and functions, if at all, under remote control of the central government. These bodies have been systematically deprived of even the authority

even needed decisions. The contrary is the reality. If this initiative or decisions are taken somebody can always find fault with at least one of them and use it against the official if he incurs displeasure, even if for completely unrelated reasons of influential persons. 'Wise' is the civil servant who does not rock the boat.

Mr Ali highlighted the colossal wastage of time by making the senior civil servants present themselves in various seminars, rallies etc. Some year ago, an order was issued requiring all secretaries to attend all seminars, meetings, rallies, opening ceremonies etc. held within thirty miles of the capital and to be graced by the presence of the then President. Attending one such functions almost invariably resulted in the loss of a working day. Hardly a week passed without more than one of such occasions.

Similar practices had spread even to districts. There was an occasion when it became neces-

ary for me to talk to a Deputy Commissioner on an urgent official matter. For two days, I kept on trying to contact him over phone. All calls made, in the morning, noon and evening met with the same response from his office or residence. — 'DC is with the Minister'.

Finally, when I managed to talk to him (after the Minister's departure from the district), I asked him why did he have to be with the Minister all the time, and who attends to his normal duties? He told me that he just did not have any choice in this matter. When the Minister visits the district (at least twice every month), DC is required to be in full time attendance during all the working hours of the Minister. Even when he would be having confidential meetings with his local party workers DC would have to hang on outside in the circuit house verandah! Perhaps this was the Minister's way of demonstrating supremacy of the political masters over the bureaucracy, regardless of the fact that the business of the government and the public had to remain unattended.

Good government practices should require that ministers and other persons in positions of high authority would not put civil servants in situations in which they are compelled to take recourse to actions which are irregular or unethical, if not downright illegal. Some years back, in my first official trip to a district headquarters after a long time, I spent two days in the circuit house. Prior to my departure, I asked the 'chowkidar' for the bill for the meals I had taken. He and in turn, his superior officials, told me that there was no bill as it was under strict instructions from the DC not to accept any payment from me for the food. Finally, the DC himself met me. He told me that he had provided my breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and snacks in between, all without any payment, not only to visiting ministers and most other dignitaries and their personal staff but also to all their local hangers on who sometime may number in dozens. Under the circumstances, he would consider it a privilege to be able to extend the same 'hospitality' to senior colleague. All such expenses, he explained, are met from the L.R Fund.

I was both shocked and mystified. Many years ago, I also served as a DC and in the very same district. Yet, I never heard of this cornucopia bearing the name of L.R Fund. DC explained to me that L.R stands for 'Local Requirement' and it is raised by 'contributions' from local business, industry, and individuals seeking to obtain various licenses and permits. He had no choice but to raise the money in this manner. How else could he pay for hundred of meals and other sundry expenses incurred during the frequent visits of the dignitaries? I came to know from him that L.R Fund was a regular fixture in every district.

It does not require much imagination to picture how deleterious such a practice can be to both moral and morals to the officials at that level, and what kind of 'multiplier effect' this can produce. It should also be mentioned that in my days as DC (nearly three decades ago), regardless of the status of the personage, all such bills were presented and duly paid by the visitors.

I understand that late President Ziaur Rahman issued instructions on the menu of food (a very simple one) to be served while on tour and also that bills for the food must be presented to his personal staff for settlement.

All the incidents mentioned above occurred before the present government came in power. I hope and believe that such practices have ceased under the democratically elected government.

No administrative reform will yield the desired benefits unless a firm trust can be created among all citizens of the coun-

try as well as the members of the civil services at all levels that all laws, rules and regulations are applied objectively, impartially and consistently. Those holding the highest offices of the land while taking the oath of office solemnly affirm, — I will do right to all manner of people according to law, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will. Similarly, every member of Parliament binds himself or herself by the oath of office which says, — I will not allow my personal interest to influence the discharge of my duties as a member of Parliament.

If all such dignitaries remain steadfast in their oath and demonstrate the same in words and actions, the same spirit is sure to percolate down to all levels of the services of the Republic. That will bring about the best of all administrative reforms. Of course, there will have to be necessary improvements in systems and procedures to ensure its effective implementation.

I believe that despite all the current failings and shortcomings both of the system and persons manning it, potential still exists for 'good government' in Bangladesh. I would conclude with an anecdote in support of my optimism.

March 1991. It was the last week of the tenure of the Interim Government. Like my other colleagues in the council of Advisers to the Acting President, I was in the process of clearing my desk. The local head of a donor agency made a courtesy call on me during one of those days.

There were the usual pleasantries. Then he said, "This election has convinced me that government machinery in Bangladesh is still capable of working successfully for national development." I was somewhat taken aback as I knew him to be a severe critic of Bangladesh government functionaries.

He went on to explain what changed his earlier views. It was the discipline, efficiency, integrity and fairness with which the general election was managed all over the country. This proved that — I quote him, — "The system still can deliver, given the right signals from the top. The officials who managed such an election process have the undoubted potential for successfully managing national development efforts."

Kazi Fazlur Rahman was an Adviser to the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in the Interim Government. Earlier, he served as Secretary of a number of Ministries and as Member of the Planning Commission. He was also a Member of the Board of Directors of the Asian Development Bank, Manila. Mr Rahman was educated in Dhaka University, London School of Economics and Oxford University. He also obtained a Masters degree in Public Administration from Harvard University.

THE Cold War's last battlefield is trying to turn itself into a modern tourist attraction.

Shut out of most international activities largely because of a continuing snub by the United States, a defiantly still socialist Cuba is fighting to survive in the post-Cold War world with capitalist savvy.

Indeed, its economic recovery plans include reviving the country's long-ignored tourist industry.

During the 14th Tourism Convention held in the island nation in early June, Cuban leader Fidel Castro announced that Havana has already made a US\$20-billion tourist investment.

He said by 1995, Cuba would have 30,000 hotel rooms built according to international standards. Last year, some 488,000 tourists came to Cuba (33 per cent more than in 1991) and the government hopes to welcome about one million by 1995.

"We will probably reach this goal faster than expected. My firm alone plans to bring in 500,000 tourists this year," said

Jose Padilla Capetillo, who heads Cubatur tourist agency.

Most of the tourists who come to Cuba are Canadian, German, Italian, Mexican and Spanish.

Abraham Maciques, President of the competitor Cubanacan SA, says Cuba spends about 37 cents of every tourist dollar. He said more than 50 per cent of the industry's net earnings stay in the island, unlike other Caribbean countries where more than 60 per cent leaves the country.

Maciques added that this was possible because not all tourist firms were partly owned by foreign investors — some were 100 per cent Cuban.

Cubatur and Cubanacan are two of three state-owned tourist agencies. Together with the Gaviota SA, they operate hotels and restaurants in collaboration with foreign firms all over Cuba.

But tourism is only one of the cards being played by the government in a bid to haul the nation's economy out of the

Last 'Cold Warrior' Fights Back

Still left out of most international activities in the post-Cold War world, Cubatour to fight back with tourism and other industries. Gonzalo Ortiz Crespo of IPS reports from Havana.

doldrums. Also lined up are plans to further develop its petroleum, nickel, bio-technology and re-activating industry and shake up its traditional sugar money-maker.

Havana is betting hard that all six will generate big revenues to replace the income it lost when the Soviet Union and the rest of the socialist bloc — its main trading partners for about 30 years — collapsed three years ago. Cuban exports, which amounted to US\$8.5 billion in 1989, were slashed by 75 per cent, with the country generating no more than US\$2.2 billion in 1992.

The situation deteriorated this year with one of the

worst sugar harvests of the century. Only 4.2 million metric tonnes of sugar were harvested, compared to the seven million metric tonnes in 1992 due to natural calamities that struck early this year.

The Cuban government announced in early June that only two million tonnes of sugar will be sold abroad, strict priority would be given to a contract trading sugar with Russian oil, and to agreements that will allow the purchase of food.

Officials are optimistic that economic recovery will come by the second half of 1994. But more realistic analysts foresee an improvement only in 1995. The country's installed in-

dustrial capacity for textile, metal-mechanic and food production, for instance, has been paralysed for sometime now due to insufficient funds to buy raw materials.

"But the industry is here and it can be good business for foreign investors," said Octavio Castilla, Vice-President of the State Committee on Economic Collaboration (CECE).

"Foreigners no longer have to invest in equipment since the industries already have them," he added. "They can have access to excellent ports, five international airports, and a complete network of roads and railway systems across the island."

Meanwhile, the government also hopes to offset the oil shortage — the main culprit behind most of the country's problems — by producing one million tonnes this year, compared to 400,000 in 1992.

The increase can be traced mainly to the re-conditioning of

existing oil wells, and not the discovery of new oil deposits. The French oil firm 'Total' and Canada's 'Petrocanada' have begun drilling based on data supplied by the Cuban government. Another round of bidding, which will last until August, has begun for foreign firms interested in off-shore oil drilling.

The Cuban government is also increasing operations in nickel mines, aiming to produce more than 40,000 metric tonnes of the metal this year. Officials are already discussing the need for mining laws so fields can be opened to foreign investors.

Still, Havana is placing most of its bets on bio-technology. Cuba is already known for its advanced technology, extremely modern laboratories and highly-qualified scientists who have already invented a vaccine for type B meningitis.

Said Castilla: "We also have skilled labourers, all of them ready to work. The only missing link is working capital. Investors in Cuba can recover their capital in a short time, and seldom will they have to put in additional capital."

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Information media

Sir, The Daily Star is to be warmly thanked for its leader "Distortion and the Overkill" (June 9). The paper rightly said, "Instead of being information vehicles, they (radio and television) have been turned into propaganda instruments". It also observed with force and accuracy that "the view expressed by the Information Minister that 'the electronic media is government property and it will be run the way government wants it' is perhaps the most absurd of the many controversial statements the Minister has so far made".

The Information Minister's assertion is contrary to the common knowledge in a democratic set-up that all information media should be run in the neutral and objective way and even the government is a public property which is to be run the way the people want it to.

How and why should the electronic media be government property in an avowedly democratic country? The people want them (the media) to be autonomous. The three alliances demanded that they must be decontrolled. The party in power also made public pledges that they would be turned into autonomous bodies. A Special Committee set up by the Interim Government with a High Court Judge as its convenor also strongly recom-

mended that they should be free of official control so that they might function as neutral information vehicles rather than as propaganda robots.

No Information Ministry of a democratic government can so obstinately use the media for propaganda without reducing itself to a lesser status. The government cannot go on insulting the intelligence of democratic Bangladesh by keeping the media under its heels defying the clearly expressed will of the people. It is difficult to believe that there is none in the government who is capable of seeing the obvious facts and refusing to be amused by the antics of some persons in high positions.

But when in the same write-up the Star says, "If our parliament has to go through such stormy sessions on trivial issues like a distortion in a TV programme", I must disagree. Distortion of parliamentary proceedings can be treated as a trivial issue only if it is implied that members talk trivialities in the parliament and that the

parliament itself is a trivial body. On the contrary, it provides an unmistakable sign that a strong campaign for rescuing democracy, brooks no delay. The Information Minister said the other day that the government was fulfilling its promises. But they are actually widening the gap between the promises and their fulfillment. Let them fulfil the promise of releasing their grip on the electronic media.

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Hajj mismanagement

Sir, Allegations and complaints against this year's Hajj management continue to pour in. It was more a mismanagement. The grievances and sufferings of the Hajjis included their stay in a bamboo made tinshed Hajj camp at Banani Dhaka temporarily built at a cost over one crore Taka wherein they soaked in rain water; they paid exorbitant residential accommodation charges

at Makkah but because of long distance they could not say their prayers regularly at Harem Sharif; the members of our Government Hajj delegation and the Muallims in Saudi Arabia did not, reportedly, take proper care of them. Moreover, the Hajj deposit at the rate of Taka 84,750 per person was too much on the high side.

We would request our Ministry of Religious Affairs to kindly give the breakup for expenditure of Taka 84,750 and refund the excess, if any charge, and also clarify the whole matter.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203.

Containing corruption

Sir, The formation of the 'Parliamentary Committee on Corruption' is a good step in the right direction. Not only that corruption has engulfed the full spectrum of the national life but moral inhibition or abhorrence

to corruption has disappeared.

I suggest that the parliament should constitute a permanent committee to oversee all reports on corruption which have prima facie credibility or widespread public interest. This appears to be an overlap with the responsibility of the relevant government department. But a department with career personnel at the helm of affair is not always in a position to tackle reports which appear in the paper or floats in the nebular sphere called 'gossip'. This will also save many honest people from malicious campaign for character assassination.

The committee which has been formed recently with the respected Speaker as the head seems to be proper and can become the proposed permanent one.

The scope of the committee will include ministers, parliamentarians, businessmen and high ranking officials.

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