

Encouraging, But

Once again, the government has spelled it out. It deems law and order situation of the country as its prime concern and continues to sound loud and clear about its readiness and sincerity to arrest and put in the reverse gear, the present trend of alarming deterioration of it.

The Home Minister who literally blazed the trail by presiding over the programme rightly observed that a change in the prevailing law and order situation for the better is not possible by the singular effort either of the government or any party for that matter.

The absence of any representative of BNP, the largest opposition party, in a workshop on a national issue crying for a semblance of consensus and unanimity across the whole political spectrum, was a study in deplorable failure.

Nevertheless, we have enough reasons to be hopeful. The Prime Minister has reiterated her call for a crusade against criminals irrespective of party affiliation and the minister concerned is all there in eagerness as the instantaneous announcement of a taskforce in this regard, would suggest.

We all know politics is more about strategy than sincerity and there reigns supreme the spectre of Machiavelli. But to effect any perceptible improvement in the law and order, politics of this country has to be exercised of the revered Italian's spirit, at least for the time being.

The ZIA's Image

The Zia International Airport (ZIA) suffers from multifarious problems. Many of them stem from inadequate physical and technical facilities reflecting either bad policies or lack of policies.

Now the director of ZIA appears to be concerned about the deterioration in law and order at the airport. Increasing incidence of snatching, harassment of passengers, illegal transactions in foreign currencies, etc have prompted him to seek help from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

We think the director for his serious concern about the image of our international airport. To the foreigners the ZIA simply presents the country's face. We cannot allow any smear on that face.

Point is Well Taken

To have called our parliament a "jatiya mit-thabadi sangsad" (national liars' parliament) has been very unfortunate, ill-conceived, and reckless. The impropriety is appalling when one considers the occasion and the person who delivered it.

However, the point Khaleque wanted to make is an issue of tremendous importance, and must not get lost amidst the furore. The issue concerns the submission of accounts of election expenses by the contestants in the June polls.

The contestants could have very well asked the Election Commission to raise the expenditure ceiling beyond the level of Tk 3 lakh before the polls. They did not. So, even if a single MP is now found to have spent one taka more than the ceiling, he should be answerable and accountable for the same.

Finally, Khaleque paid for his insulting comment by tendering an apology but to have forced him not to continue with his speech was also unbecoming.

Prime Minister, Parliament and Administrative Reforms

by Muhammad Anisuzzaman

It was possible even decades ago, to receive state services without bribery or influence. But why is it not possible now? For whose protection is there legal and judicial system, administrative system and to punish whom?

Administrative systems and structures at levels should be reformed with a view to developing a people-centred, accountable, non-partisan and effective civil administration.

There is widespread concern about government performance, and a perception that accountability measures and institutions are neither sufficiently transparent nor adequately strict to ensure effective, fair, and efficient policy and programme implementation.

Since Administrative Reforms encompass vast, and variegated subjects, one must be very practical or pragmatic in selecting major areas of innovation. One must not shoot at the sky — rather down-to-earth concerns and sufferings of the people must be addressed.

Differing in semantics, but not in substance, the GO, NGO, and Donor — the three prima donna on the Bangladesh theatre — have underscored the major issues of administrative reforms, viz. effective public service delivery (PM); people-centred and accountable civil administration (ADAB); transparent measures and institutions to ensure programme implementation (UNDP). One can ill afford to join issue with such identification of needs or what should be done.

The point, however, is how to do it. This paper seeks to place the enterprise of Administrative Reforms (ARs) in its proper perspective so that those who want ARs can sift the chaff from the grain, because ARs are amorphous in connotation — including a change in PM's private secretary in Union Parishad.

The time frame: ARs are undertaken within a time frame and the best time is first three months of a new regime. The time is just right when people are in a mood to see changes take place. Later innovations might be hard to implement or new and more pressing demands might past it to the background. Just recall that the last regime set up a local reform commission which took so much time that it failed to do anything at all. So strike the iron while it is red.

Every regime experimented with AR beginning with high hopes and ending with some, little or no effect. Among major ARs, Sheikh Mujib's District Governors' Scheme 1975 could not see light of day. Ziaur Rahman's District Development Coordinator scheme was put into operation (1977), but could not make much headway as the relative position of DCC and DC was not made clear. Ershad asked his Administrative Reforms Committee (1981) to report within a month and he introduced its recommendations about Upazila Parishad as an elected local government system at thana level. Khaleda Zia with unseemly haste did away with the Upazila System (1991) without replacing it with anything else. Sheikh Hasina might guard against such an attitude. An institution or measure must be considered in terms of its objectivity and not subjectivity. If the three-month rule has any merit,

Hasina has already lost the first month. She has only two more months to act on ARs.

Agenda setting: Since ARs encompass vast, and variegated subjects, one must be very practical or pragmatic in selecting major areas of innovation. One must not shoot at the sky — rather down-to-earth concerns and sufferings of the people must be addressed. Agenda need not be built anew. Agenda are already available in the PM's speech, NGO demand and donor's preference — indicated in the beginning of this paper. How about implementing these three agenda, for example? Increasing effectiveness of bureaucratic service delivery, accountability of government of officers and transparency of government measures and institutions — to take only three ARs identified by three responsible institutions.

Implementation possibilities: The PM has noted that people are afraid to visit any government office. If she now desires that something be done to deal with the problem effectively and expeditiously, what options are available to her? We must remember that by this one stroke of pen/paper/print she has indeed encroached upon the bureaucratic wonderland which has a century-old tradition of seclusion, secretiveness, and confidentiality which seal the bureaucrats off from the public or more correctly, disabling the public to enter any government officer's room to get their grievances redressed.

Members of the public require the permission of bureaucrats to enter the Secretariat — which is not an easy thing to get when one needs it. In the Divisions and Districts, Commissioners and DCs are not easily accessible either. Many Commissions and Committees cast doubt on the utility of maintaining such colonial offices for a free nation — such as Ershad's Administrative Committee recommended doing away with these officers and replacing them by elected representatives. While Ershad did away with SDO at sub-district level and accepted elected system at thana level, he kept Commissioner and DC in tact.

In Bangladesh, the most powerful officers are Secretaries at the national level, Chairmen at the autonomous bodies level, Commissioners at the Divisional level and DCs at the district level. If people have any grievances against them, what is the remedy available? The Ombudsman remains on the Constitution in letters only.

Instead of setting up an AR commission to look into and report on the state of affairs — for it is already over known, why not consider the ways of dealing with it? How about scrapping the British made laws and regulations that put a long list of powers and functions in the hands of DC and replacing these with laws and regulations enabling elected chiefs of district administration to remain "accountable" to a District Parishad? Instead of lamenting on "for whose interest the present administration is being run at the cost of public exchequer?" the PM might consider bills of District Administration along "accountable" lines and place these before Parliament. Hitherto Parliament has been by-passed in ARs and hence these could not be effective.

The district administration is in dire need of new laws to deal with the requirements of the situation "people are afraid to visit any government office" and the PM is pledge-bound "to free the nation of these vices and wrong doing." Because the district administration officers are well shielded by laws and regulations, no effective and expeditious redress was possible to the entire population of Dinajpur district, when its DC

or SP could not be brought to trial in the case of Yasmin's rape and murder reportedly committed by government officers themselves — while the victim was in their custody.

This brings up the question of public-police relations soured so much over the recent years. A parliamentary task force may be constituted to examine public-police relations and submit a bill within a month or so enabling the Parliament to do the needful with dispatch. The PM might be required by such legislation to place before the parliament annually the cases of violations and non-availability of redress against police action so that the entire nation can keep watch.

Accountability and transparency: The so-called autonomous bodies — the public undertakings and sector corporations — were intended to render government — service available with greater dispatch than is possible by government departments. The initial concern with speed was so much that we lost sight of its control, accountability and transparency. The result has been a parallel bureaucracy besides government departments each with its empire which is not answerable to any body in the effective sense of the term.

Their operations are not yet public knowledge and the public undertakings committee of the Parliament is yet to bring these "emperors" to book. The

proceeding of this committee like those of Public Accounts Committee have been noted for "backlogs" in their official reporting, and much less on actions taken.

The Seventh Parliament can take the lead in making the Public Undertakings Committee more visible in particular in view of the growing importance of those public undertakings — bringing their chairmen, members and directors to parliamentary committee hearings and making them justify the existing expenditure and publishing its report expeditiously to inform the public. Here again, the PM has the crucial role.

Lastly, the NGOs — whose size, and operation have grown so much as to form an NGO Bureau in the PM's office. Again, there is little or no parliamentary debate on them. Only recently have these come up for public scrutiny as to their sources of income, nature of expenditure and impact. The World Bank's stress on the financial transparency of the NGOs is a case in point (Editorial, The Daily Star July 12, 1996). Again, why not a Parliamentary task force on NGO and it report within two months placed before the parliament? Necessary legislations may then be initiated.

The readers may by now have noted my emphasis on Parliament, new laws made by it where needed, its committees being made at once active and responsible in controlling bureaucratic excesses and in letting the public know what goes on in the enterprise called the Government. Only four levels of analysis have been indicated here — the secretariat, the sector corporations, the district offices and the NGOs. If the PM can initiate quick action in these four levels — by placing appropriate bills in the Parliament — then Parliament will serve as the nerve-centre of government as the PM is on record to seek. Other concerns of ARs might be identified and placed before the Parliament as the needs arise. The point is that Parliament has had no role whatsoever in AR efforts in Bangladesh. Let the PM reverse the trend by putting Parliament in the scenario of ARs.

The writer is a former member of Administrative Reform Committee, 1982.

To the Editor

Thoughts on 7th JS

Sir, I avidly watched the inaugural session of the Seventh Jatiya Sangsad live on BT. However, I was shocked by the lack of eloquence shown by members of both the Treasury and Opposition benches which contrasted sharply with the forceful oratory of the Lok Sabha in India which I have seen on satellite television. What disappointed me most were the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Far from setting examples for others to follow, both seemed content in indulging in banal trivialities and digging up skeletons of the past.

The walkout staged by the BNP does not bode well for the future. I feel it would be a political mistake for the BNP to insist on paying back the Awami League in the same way in which the latter had dealt during the former's tenure in power as this would not be well received by a fast-maturing polity. Instead, the BNP would be better advised to adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude.

During the proceedings of the JS my attention was drawn to a particular incident. At one stage during her speech the Prime Minister referred to the

previous BNP government as "fertiliser-thieves." Subsequently, the Chief Whip of the Opposition raised a point of order and asked Speaker Humayun Rasheed Choudhury to expunge the comment from the record of proceedings as it was, he alleged, derogatory. However, amazingly, the Speaker chose to completely ignore the issue and instead of deliberating on it proceeded with the scheduled. Cries of protest from the Opposition were drowned in the fanfare heralding the arrival of the President. I thought that the incident was most discouraging for those hoping to see a neutral Speaker. I sincerely hope that the Speaker's oversight was due to unfamiliarity with his new position and did not stem from partisan considerations.

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Matters to consider, or not ...

Sir, Radio Bangladesh is now being announced to be called as Bangladesh Betar. I don't understand why the

Turn Grief into Strength

It was December 11, 1994, when the then opposition was up in arms against the former government. I first wrote something under the above headline and earned wrath from supporters of Bangladesh's two major political parties.

I had then written that most people do think the opposition's demand for a constitutional amendment seeking elections under a non-partisan interim government was good and would help stop vote game.

They also do not like street agitations that cause disruptions to their daily lives now being propagated by the opposition, and hope Sheikh Hasina will take "benevolent" steps to gain more support, than antagonism.

Now, as Bangladesh welcomed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government, after 21 long years in political wilderness, I decided to resume the column with the hope that the change that was brought about through the elections has also ushered in a temperament not to take everything on partisan lines.

Thus, at the very outset, I would like to say that the electorate, specially those who seek to see the glorious independence struggle upheld in its true perspective, have lots of expectations from Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in implementing her pledges rather than delivering regular sermons.

The sermons have been preached, even the one delivered to the armed forces, but those can quickly get tired if she fails to translate pledges into reality — at least one — during her first month in office instead of going for usual analysis after a government crosses its first 100 days.

Already the main discussion with everybody is that except the restoration of Bangabandhu in his rightful place, no substantial thing took place. People think that there was hardly any need for such a haste to declare August 15 a "national mourning day and a public holiday."

The prime minister in her first comments to the press after the elections said: "We will heal the nation and not create new ones, unite the nation and not divide it." A comment that immediately drew praise and international attention.

By the cabinet decision a part of that comment appeared, just a "political one, lacking human angle expressed in her tone on June 14 during a press conference at the premier's Dhanmondi residence. Bangabandhu, with both his

post-independence good deeds and mistakes, does not need a unilateral decision to restore his rightful place in history. He is a personality that does not need to be imposed on others once the true history is unfolded in steps, not in haste.

Sheikh Hasina, by leading her Awami League to power and ensuring state honours for her lamented father, has accomplished a great feat by any standard. Anything more is being looked upon as either steps taken out of emotion or on party lines.

Many feel that the issue of August 15 should have been brought to the parliament for a "consensus" decision and it was, unlikely to have been opposed by the main opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of decorated war veteran slain president Ziaur Rahman.

By not doing so, the Awami League has given some section the opportunity to dishonour one of history's greatest leaders. Let there be no more actions that will give anybody the opportunity to dishonour him. Keep him above controversy.

IN FOOL'S PARADISE? by Nadeem Qadir

The whole world knows who led Bangladesh to its independence. When I lost my father in the independence war at the age of 10, I was repeatedly told to turn your grief into strength.

Even Bangabandhu told my mother to have "courage." The fond words of a father "you are like my daughter.... Come to me whenever you want." He held me close and hugged me like a father.

For the past 25 years, Allah above and my mother have helped me survive with courage and determination, with (mis)light sound funny) a longing for a father who could stand by us to tell the harsh world "get lost!"

What is important to remember is that truth always triumphs — may sometime take a long time — and no man can change the course of any event either by distorting history or dishing out lies or "self-censoring" news reports. The last was Begum Zia's main enemy, as I have seen it with great regret in some cases.

The truths could have helped her more than the censored versions. For the new prime minister, the immediate task should be to take steps that effect the life of Bangladeshis in general — the man on the street.

Control on price of consumer goods should be a priority and those found responsible for artificial increase in prices should be severely dealt with. Mercy is humane, but in running a statecraft it can be a "bad quality." Look what hap-

pened to Sheikh Mujib by forgiving those who collaborated with the Pakistani army during the independence war hoping they would turn into "angels." Devils remain devil.

Her pledge to give autonomy to the state-run television and radio should materialize before the current parliament session ends and I would like to caution the prime minister that I can smell psychopaths hovering around her.

Please tell those managing radio and television that you will punish them if you and your ministers cutting tapes or visiting some government projects are given such useless as well as hated publicity. News means news, not publicity that invites public wrath.

I had hoped that Begum Zia would not repeat the faults or actions committed and criticised when the Awami League was in the opposition. But the July 14 parliament session saddened me and general public that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is no different as an opposition group.

As some commentators have said that the BNP was

trying that day to give back Awami League what they gave BNP when it was in power. I think Begum Zia will gain much by acting as a responsible opposition leader, without missing an opportunity to catch the government if it really makes a mistake. There has been a lot change in public sentiment between 1991 and 1996.

I can only say anger can destroy, but patience bears fruit. Just one appeal, please distance yourself from those who opposed Bangladesh's birth.

Sheikh Hasina was expected to act like a premier and reserve her accusations against Begum Zia for a later date.

One can now only pray that our leaders will not let us down once again and instead try to find more common grounds than feuds to lead Bangladesh — described by the former caretaker government chief Muhammad Habibur Rahman as a "unfortunate" country — to prosperity. Let it no more be "unfortunate."

I would again like to put up a point I made in December that the constitution should make it mandatory for politicians that, before fighting it out among themselves on any issue and keeping the general masses as "pawns" in their chess boards, they must first seek public opinion on that through an independent body so that there is no fear of tampering with the results.

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Mandela's Odyssey from Robben Island to Buckingham Palace

by Abdul Hannan

THE end of the Cold War has brought many extraordinary transformations, but none has the fairy tale quality of Nelson Mandela's progress from a prisoner to an honoured statesman in the span of a few years.

Once vilified and reviled by British leaders as a terrorist, Mandela the first South Africa black President was given a hero's welcome during his recent 4-day state visit to UK. He was received by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh at the horse guards, greeted by a 21-gun salute and treated by the traditional royal carriage drive with the Queen to the Buckingham Palace, to have the rare privilege of staying there, as her Guest of Honour. In stark contrast of Common's silence for 20 years that followed Mandela's imprisonment in 1962, he was accorded the distinct honour of an address to both houses of parliament at the 300-year-old Westminster Hall, the first visiting head of state to do so since President De Gaulle in 1960.

Another event had no precedent as Chancellors of about a dozen universities including Oxford, Cambridge, London, Nottingham, Glasgow and Lister tipped over each other to confer honorary degrees on Mandela at a unique mass graduation staged at the Buckingham Palace. People lined up the streets of London to greet and see Mandela, considered a legendary icon, whereas the average state visitor barely earns a second glance. He attended a state banquet in his honour at the Buckingham Palace with 200 guests and received the honorary freedom of the city of London at a Guild hall banquet. Prince Charles accompanied him in course of his walk about in Brixton in south London.

This unprecedented honour shown to Mandela by Britain is a reflection of Mandela's unique and inspiring story. Nelson Mandela incarcerated as a political Prisoner for more than a quarter of century at Robben Island prison, the symbol of black majority's struggle against apartheid and white domination became the first black president of this new non-racial government of national unity in South Africa in 1994. Mandela played a vital role in one of the most successful political transitions of 20th century by bringing about an end to apartheid without the backlash of any hatred or rancour. In his lack of bitterness towards former white

oppressors, he is a living witness to the value of tolerance and reconciliation and, may be, a lesson to all political leaders who preach democracy.

Mandela, however, went on a visit to Britain to attract commerce and not compliments. Between all the colourful splendour and ceremonies, the aim of his visit was a hard-sell. Although large proportions of foreign investment lost in punitive sanction years under apartheid has recovered, there is a desperate anxiety in Pretoria to attract foreign investment and promote its farm products in markets of Europe to shore up its economy. He was accompanied by a delegation of more than 100 industrialists and businessmen. He held talks at the Bank of England, had a meeting with the British Prime Minister John Major and attended a one-day conference on investment in his country sponsored by the Confederation of the British Industry. Britain is the largest investor in South Africa which is at the same time a First World and a Third World: the former in much of its capitalist structure, the latter in terms of the income of its rural poor.

The economy grew by 3 per cent in 1995, investment was up by 6.5 per cent and inflation was down by 6.6 per cent reflecting business confidence at home and expanded international involvement. The economic policy of the new democracy in South Africa is characterised by surprising pragmatism in favour of market-friendly policies. The government has begun phasing out exchange controls, has drastically reduced import tariffs and will shortly begin to privatise. Generating jobs is critical to well being country's new democracy. The strategy aims at 6 per cent growth and the creation of 400,000 jobs per annum. It is possible South Africa does not suffer from what is described as African syndrome. South Africa is far more economically developed than any other state in the continent. It has a larger middle-class, a bigger urban population, an even bigger non-African professional minority and vast natural resources. Mandela's commitment to national reconciliation, his devotion to multiracial relations and determination to come to grips with the vicious cycle of poverty and violence bodes well for stability and attraction of foreign investment.

Mandela is being compared with Gandhi and Martin Luther. His life is an incarnation of the quintessential virtues of sufferings and forgiveness, love and compassion. His is a triumph of human spirit over evil, right over wrong and truth over falsehood. By honouring Mandela the British people may have made amends for their past mistakes. Even as late as October 1987 at a press conference following the Commonwealth heads of government conference held in Vancouver, the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher said: "The ANC is a typical terrorist organisation... Anyone who thinks it is going to run the Government in South Africa is living in a cloud of cuckoo land." The unprecedented honour shown to Mandela in a larger sense, may be an act of atonement to help achieve a catharsis of the collective shame of all white colonial masters for the tyranny, oppression and injustice against the black in the past. Nevertheless, as has been aptly said by Mandela that Britain remains the bastion of democracy, by honouring him, the British people have honoured their own deep and enduring values of democracy, freedom and human dignity.

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The writer is former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh Mission to the UN in New York.