

Cabinet Changes

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's cabinet needed expansion. This it got to some extent on the last day of '97. It also needed serious restructuring which it did not get. Several of her ministers needed to be pulled up, and some should have been given the boot. That also did not happen, except in one well deserved case. So how are we to interpret the latest cabinet reshuffle? Timid, half-hearted and without any overall plan at best, and just to placate a few disgruntled souls at worse.

Cabinet reshuffle as an instrument of better governance is hardly understood by our governments. Khaleda Zia considered a reshuffle almost as an insult to her original judgement and so hardly ever indulged in it. Sheikh Hasina has so far appeared more forthcoming but mostly without any overall vision. Reshuffle can give a new direction to the government, create greater enthusiasm about its future line of action or streamline the rest of the cabinet. None of this was attempted in this case.

We call it timid and half-hearted because after more than 16 months at the helm of affairs the PM knows the ministers who are delivering and who are not. Just look at the ADP implementation rate and the picture becomes clear. Efficiency does not seem to rate very high in this government. Clearly sycophancy, which is often misunderstood as loyalty and commitment, gets much higher premium than efficiency, professionalism, knowledge about the subject that is being dealt with, or even vision. And this is on the rise, as the government suffers the natural erosion of popularity that follows the coming to power of an elected government.

Our view is that Sheikh Hasina needed and, therefore, got herself some additional help. But she did not address the fundamental problem that some ministers, including herself, are holding too many portfolios which are not being looked after properly due to lack of full time ministers. After a year and half, there is now a great deal of disappointment. Important decisions have not been taken, vital projects remain unattended to, and even routine work incur unthinkable and unparable delays. The government needs to gather speed, determination and direction. The cabinet changes did not address them at all.

The ADP Mess

The government's development programme for fiscal 1997-98 is moving at a snail's pace so much so that it can have a negative impact on the annual growth rate. In the first quarters, between July and September, 1997, only 11 per cent of the allocation could be utilised leaving the rest of the year to cope with such carryovers in terms of financial and physical targets that the ADP looks set to remain unfulfilled.

The factors responsible for the gingly pace of project implementation are not difficult to identify, only that these will have to be staved off in a systematic manner. First of all, the release of local currency and its utilisation need to be quickened. Secondly, aid-givers must be persuaded to accelerate the pace of fund disbursement which is sometimes clogged by stringent procedural or technical requirements. Thirdly, it seems that we have everything in us to predispose a vitally important national undertaking such as the ADP, to remain a non-starter even in the middle of a year. It is beyond our comprehension why 31 per cent of the ADP projects are yet to be approved by the ECNEC when they otherwise form part of our development agenda. ECNEC is where the highest political will is reflected; if that apex body drags its feet over the essential criteria of selectivity then what trust can we have in the system? It seems we are not only without an effective project implementation apparatus, we are devoid of a clear-sighted, committed and professionally sound approval machinery as well.

The Prime Minister is urged to look into this selection-cum-approval aspects of ADP projects. If project preparations were shoddy then the ministries concerned should be faulted for it in the first place, with Planning Commission coming next in the line of fire.

Interministerial coordination being key to ultimate project selection and implementation, we would like the PM to ensure it with all the power she commands.

Computerising Judiciary

The legislative makes the rules. The executive governs by those rules. The judiciary ensures the rightness of the rules and also of governance and fills in the gaps left by the other two to build and sustain the rule of law en route to the fashioning of a just society. This is the ideal basal arrangement of a modern tripod state. For the functions it must discharge under this arrangement, the judiciary must have the right capacity, in terms of manpower, infrastructure organisation and overall power. The history of our judiciary is one distinguished by both incapacity in many areas to carry out its charge and under-capacity in all. This has resulted in a general fall in the quality of its functioning. Quality apart, this has led to the creation of a veritable Aegean stable of hundreds of thousands of undecided cases in backlog. To clean this stable the judiciary will be needing some extra and more than Herculean capacity.

It was very imaginative and enlightened of the World Bank to give this prime need of ours a serious thought and come offering a bale-out. A five-member all-star advisory body headed by Justice Habibur Rahman is soon to report to government their assessment of the needful. We like to put in a piece of counsel both for the advisers and the government. We have no doubt the recommendations will take care of the many inadequacies in the current capacity of our judiciary — mostly related to manning and infrastructural support, warranted all the way by a population that has about doubled in six decades. No doubt putting in more of both men and material will be the main thrust of the proposed capacity building. What we propose is something that, on the contrary, will economise rather than expand the inputs of the system.

We suggest wholesale computerisation of the establishments as also the processes of the judiciary. This will save time and space and add immeasurably to the efficiency of the system. True, an initial mighty push will be necessary to enter the contents of hundreds of tons of important documents into the floppy discs. But once done this will be a awfully nice little cozy corner of the system.

With the Candle They are to Kindle

They are moving with candles to kindle awareness among rural women population who are forced to be outcast on all fronts... the recently concluded UP election where women directly participated both as candidates and as voters, signals the dawn of a new era for them.

THE other day, I came across a village woman at Kapasia — 62 km north of Dhaka city. Her name is Houa Begum (called Houa Begum) and she is aged nearly 40. She happened to be a beneficiary of the credit programmes enunciated by a local NGO, Pallimongal. For the fourth time, she took loans from Pallimongal to carry out income generating activities.

As I was told, Houa Begum was married when she was just seven — an age level when children mostly adore dolls and balls to play with. "I was not matured enough to understand what went on in the name of 'marriage' and 'husband'... in fact I did not give 'green' (acceptance to marriage) my father gave it on my behalf". Begum married to me in an emotionally choked voice. However, after few years, she was forced to go to her husband's house at the age of 10. Now she is mother of four sons and five daughters and Houa Begum was 12 when she had her first baby.

Darkness shrouded her immediately after marriage. Her husband was a poor man with one acre of land and a hut to live in. None advised her to control family size in the face of very limited resources. "We were producing many children but not enough food to feed them... my children neither

got education nor anything to live humanly". As days rolled by and frustration gripped her, Begum came to know that NGOs provide credit to carry on with income generating activities. Desperate as she was, she came out of her house and knocked at Grameen Bank's door. Only recently she opted for

Kapasia to attend one of their group meetings. Discussions with some of them tend to show that they were not the bunch of rural women that we are generally told about. They have already mastered ideas about the virtues of family planning for eligible couples, immunization, literacy, breast feeding etc. All of them, like Houa Begum mentioned earlier, portrayed a gloomy past that they had to grapple with. Their involvement with NGOs, as they reported, gave them golden opportunity to empower themselves both economically and socially. What more struck me is their vow to see that their children are not as neglected as they themselves were in childhood.

The aim of this note is not to propagate the positive roles of NGOs in Bangladesh. Admittedly, there are pros and cons of what is going on in the name of NGOs in some places. Rather, the idea is to argue that the present level of awareness among rural women regarding health, family planning and literacy probably owe much to the activities of NGOs in rural areas. And on that score alone, government activities should supplement NGO activities. For example, some women told me that they are now convinced that for effective check on population growth, long-term measures like ligation is relatively

healthier and cost-effective than short run measures like use of pills, condoms etc. But they alleged, local level hospitals and clinics do not have sufficient capacity in terms of resource endowments to deal with the

number of clients. That leads to long que, large transaction costs and other problems to discourage a long-run solution. Likewise, primary health care services are also not available at door steps in due time. The government should by now realize that there is no other cost effective way of reaching the poor at grassroots levels than NGOs. And so its primary task is to help NGOs reach the grassroots, supply them with necessary social inputs.

We left Kapasia with the impression that women are gradually growing with drive to emancipate themselves not only from economic hardships but also simultaneously to redress their social backwardness. But they all are poised to do it not only for themselves but also for others. They are moving with candles to kindle awareness among rural women population who are forced to be outcast on all fronts.

To Houa Begum of our story, the recently concluded UP election where women directly participated both as candidates and as voters, signals the dawn of a new era for them who are painfully married at child age, are forced to give birth to a large number of children and are ignorant about basic health care services. Houa Begum informed me that she had already conveyed the lessons to her sons and daughters and they promised to abide by their mother's advice.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



There were about 100 women — mostly poor and Pallimongal clients — who came from far flung areas

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To the Editor...

Is it true

Sir, My attention has been drawn to an interview of Forest and Environment Minister Sayeda Sajeda Chowdhury published in the November 21 issue of the Borer Kagoj. At the beginning of interview, she claimed that there had not been any democratic government in Bangladesh in the last 21 years. Is it true? We all know that two highly acclaimed neutral elections were held in our country in 1991 and in 1996. Probably Sajeda Chowdhury would like to say that election of '91 was not fair because BNP was voted to power. It was the other way round five years later because AL came to power through that.

Elsewhere she observed that authority concerned in the past didn't pay any attention to the Sunderbans, even to the Buriganga river for last 21 years. The question that comes to the mind is that a lot of money is sanctioned each year to these departments (especially for forest department). If her statements are true then she should be praised but if these are false then she should withdraw the statements.

Previous regimes who were in the opposition now should talk over these statements. I know that several steps were taken over the Sunderban in the past.

Such one-sided approach is not expected from a prominent Sayeda Sajeda Chowdhury. In fact, a minister is above all parties and politics. She is a minister not only for AL, but also for the country. I think such biased speech only help to stoke the political hostility and instability that are there.

When we compare the life and standard of living of some of our political leaders, ministers, MPs, bureaucrats, engineers, doctors, exporters and importers, industrialists and businessmen with those of the vast majority of our cultivators, workers, fishermen, daily wage labourers, poorly paid government servant and so on, we see the gulf of differences between what is said and what is done by the people at the top.

The hypocrisy makes the very concept of micro or macro economics sound absurd would some of our political leaders, economists and intellectuals tell us as to how micro economics or macro economics can bring prosperity and happiness to our twelve crore people without further wastage of time, energy and public money? We are tired of the vanity and absurdity of our political leaders, intellectuals and bureaucrats on micro and macro economics.

A Citizen Dhaka

M A Jalil 372/B-Khilgaon, Dhaka.

Jungle of jargon?

Sir, Most of our people neither understand the ABC of either micro or macro economics. They fail to grasp the theories,

Demographical disaster

Sir, As of today Bangladesh is the most thickly populated and poorest country (939 heads/sq km and per capita income \$224 per year) in the world having more than 120 million people in a small patch of land (144500 sq km) with population growth rate 1.8 per cent. For feeding, housing, education, health, sanitation, drinking water, communication and to provide daily necessities for this vast population overall environment and ecological system have been completely disrupted resulting in a disorder in every sphere of life.

Our political leaders, thinkers and scientists, economic experts and financial wizards always go on haranguing, defending and criticising each other but the sufferings of our people, the problems of our people are never addressed or mitigated.

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The general standard of the basic telephone service provided in Bangladesh is below the average expected even in a developing country poised to take off any time. The change-over to digital technology by the BTB is changing the picture much more slowly than expected.

Besides the teething trouble of analogue-digital interface, the expansion of new digital networks suffer from two handicaps: small islands of isolated projects taking too much time to plan, install, commission and operate (in the public sector). At this pace, when the waiting period for a new connection will come down to, say, less than four weeks?

In Pakistan, for example, the waiting period came down from three years to three weeks, once the sectors were opened to private operators. The author

projects are uneconomic. By the way, at the present state of technology, the traditional wired telephone system may also be uneconomic.

Only the fringe areas of the telecom/telephone service, namely, expensive mobile cellular has been opened to the private sector operators (for rich users who are less than 10 per cent of the total telephone users, including the potential users). Here also the enough interfacing facilities are not available with the public telecom agency to cope with the mobile rush. Such bottlenecks are usually foreseen during the planning and expansion stages.

Repeated ad hoc expansion

Politics in Pakistan

A Tale of the Unexpected

In the regional polarization of society that has taken place in Pakistan in the recent years, it may not be wise to ignore the fact that both Justice Sajjad Ali Shah and Justice Junejo happen to belong to Sindh.

ACCORDING to the country's Constitution the election of the President of Pakistan should be a relatively simple affair. The President is elected by an electoral college comprising the two Houses of the National Parliament and the four Provincial Assemblies. This is how, Mr Rafiq Tarar was elected to, what should now be, a purer ceremonial post of the President of Pakistan.

In a situation where the ruling Muslim League enjoys an overwhelming majority, the election of its nominee, Rafiq Tarar, was not expected to be a nail biting affair. Nevertheless dullness had hardly been an attribute of Pakistani politics, and the process leading up to Mr Rafiq Tarar's election, with all the twists and turns of events, has had a great deal of the excitement of the unexpected. The first unexpected element of the election has been the timing of the election itself, as the presidential election had not indeed been due. Farooq Leghari's unexpected exit, making him the first President of Pakistan to have resigned of his own volition, brought forward the date of the elections ahead of time. The second element was that Mr Rafiq Tarar was hardly known outside his immediate circle of friends and well-wishers though happily for the President-elect Mr Nawaz Sharif was one of them.

Not even in his wildest political dreams could Mr Rafiq Tarar see himself occupying the presidential chair. Yet events developed in such a manner that, for the first time in its history, Pakistan saw a properly elected President resign and also saw loyalty to the Prime Minister become the primary requirement of the new incumbent. Mr Rafiq Tarar was found eminently suited to fill the bill.

Mr Rafiq Tarar should normally have no illusions about the job that lies ahead of him although, in the power game in Pakistan, supposed lambs have on occasions displayed tigress teeth. Mr Tarar is not likely to be counted amongst his high and mighty predecessors like Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Ziaul-Huq and Ghulam Ishaq Khan. He will not even be in the same league as Farooq Leghari who occupied the 'Awan-i-sadr', the imposing presidential palace in Islamabad, during what may be termed as the twilight period of the decline of presidential power in Pakistan. In that respect President Tarar would be more of the ilk of President Choudhury Fazle Elahi who served the powerful Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, while he was Prime Minister.

Mr Rafiq Tarar can be said to be even more powerful now than Mr Bhutto in his heydays, for a number of reasons. First, unlike Mr Bhutto, who came from the smaller province of Sindh, Mr Nawaz Sharif belongs to the Punjab which is glaringly becoming the central springboard of political power in Pakistan. Mr Sharif enjoys a comfortable two-thirds majority in a pliable parliament — something that Mr Bhutto never had. More importantly perhaps, Mr Nawaz Sharif has achieved complete mastery of Pakistan's political skies by completing the process of taming the President, by succeeding in installing judges who appear amenable and kind and by having an Army ever so understanding and helpful. In all this he must now also thank Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah's Don Quixotic extra judicial behaviour for accelerating a process that would have otherwise taken much longer in coming. Thus one may say that it is to Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah's action that Rafiq Tarar owes his job and Nawaz Sharif, his power. This tale of the unexpected has to be the 'Chef d' Oeuvre' in the latest anthology of Pakistan's political tales and it is not likely to lose any of its lustre by a brief recounting of facts.

The story unfolded last October, when Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah quietly forwar a list of five names to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for elevation as Supreme Court Judges. Nawaz Sharif smelt a rat in this, as he did not like its composition. There were certain corruption cases against Nawaz Sharif, pending in the Supreme Court, a remnant of his previous prime ministerial incarnation and the judges in the list did not seem like an amenable lot to the Prime Minister.

A split decision by the Pakistan Supreme Court had after all sealed Mr Bhutto's fate only years earlier and it was therefore not unexpected of Mr Nawaz Sharif to keep a wary eye on the composition of the Court. He therefore put the proposal regarding the elevation of five judges in the cold storage. This angered the Chief Justice, in whose view it was not for the Prime Minister to 'say why' but to simply accord his agreement to any Court proposal in such matters. The Chief Justice, acting in his usual style, instructed the revival of the corruption cases against the Prime Minister. Not only that. He issued Court Orders suspending two constitutional amendments passed by the Parliament at the instance of Nawaz Sharif: one discouraging floor crossing by its members and the other withdrawing the power of the President to dissolve the Parliament. From the Prime Minister's point of view, the pressure tactics appeared to be working as the Prime Minister now seemed willing to endorse the appointment of the five judges.

However, in the meantime the Prime Minister and his parliamentary colleagues, in their desperation, had made some critical remarks in the parliament about the judicial process in the country. Instead of letting sleeping dogs lie, Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah decided to bring contempt charges against the Prime Minister and some of his parliamentary colleagues for cing the Prime Minister to appear in the court in person. A conviction by the court could have meant the end of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister, and this is something a Prime Minister, with an overwhelming electoral mandate,

was not expected to take lying down. He requested President Leghari to get rid of the Chief Justice, but the President from his pedestal, as it were, refused to oblige. Therefore, with his two thirs ds majority in the Parliament Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif started drawing up plans to impeach the President. The crisis thus got elevated to the level of the President and the Prime Minister.

This is a situation where the Head of the Armed Forces cannot sit idle. After all the state machinery seemed like being on the verge of a collapse and no Army, least of all that of Pakistan, with all their exposure to statecraft could wait and watch the happenings from the sidelines. In the event the Army saw it prudent to stand by the elected representative of the people, viz. the Prime Minister.

Simultaneously two extra-legislative actions were taken by the Prime Minister's men.

First, as the police watched unconcerned,