

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 worst.

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 unparadigmatic 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 gingerly 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 Augean stables 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 Houari 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 'ageen' (acceptance to marriage) my father gave it on my behalf" — Begum narrated 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. Poor advised her to contain 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 Gramen Bank's door. Only recently she opted for Pallimongal.

Have your economic conditions improved over the years? "Yes, substantially," she replied to add, "over the last five years, I have built two tin-shed houses, bought two bullocks worth Tk 17,000 and accumulated small savings too." It was told that Pallimongal targets those households for credit delivery which (a) send school-age children to schools; (b) adopt family planning practices for eligible couples and (c) immunize children. Such preconditions only imply that economic imperatives are closely linked to social indicators. Houa Begum also performs the "missionary" task of educating poor women in and around her village about small family size, immunization and adult literacy.

I asked her as to why she had become so much interested in canvassing about what our rural women should do or not do? "It is simply because I want that no woman should pass through the turmoils that I personally had to go. I yearn that children should not be married at childhood, should not stay away from schools and women should not yell under the yoke of traditional social norms."

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

to 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 litigation 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

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 Bhorer 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 'Sunderban', 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 politician and a minister like 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.

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Jungle of jargon?

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

policies and practices of many economic experts and financial wizards both in the government and in the opposition.

The common people feel the pains and pangs, ache and throes on account of increase in the price of rice, lentil, soybean oil, milk, onion, fish, meat, and other essential goods and commodities, bus, railway and steamer fares and electricity charges. They are also hard hit when there is no water supply, no electricity and communication is disrupted due to observance of hartal, road blockade and traffic jams created at ferry ghats.

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.

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

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 millions people in a small patch of land (144,500 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 disaster in every sphere of life.

Every morning opening the newspaper we come across gruesome news of murder, rape, abduction, hijacking, dacoity, beating, looting, terrorism, vandalism, toll extortionists, street fighting, campus violence, land eviction, damaging of vehicles, road accidents etc.

In the govt. offices and state-owned enterprises strike, demonstration, gherao, work stoppage, go-slow process and corruptions are daily affairs. The resultant impact of these disorders is a shaky and depressed economy of the country where growth is always in downward trend, despite arduous efforts by all concerns. The year increased population grab the economic growth making it -- zero.

Our statesmen, economists, planners, policy makers, social leaders, entire government, administration and NGOs have been working for poverty alleviation and economic emancipation at the grassroots level. But unless population could be checked at zero per cent and social order is established by curbing corruption and improving law and order situation, all efforts for economic growth and poverty alleviation will go in vain.

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OPINION

Poor Telephone Service is Not Good Governance

A Husnain

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

The greatest hurdle is still persisting: the installation charge is reported to be the highest in the world; and that too in an under-developed country with a GNP of less than \$280 per person. There are no indications that the authority is interested in reducing the high installation tariff (the same in the mobile sector is coming down progressively due to competition). This is all the more irritating to the harassed subscribers when the day-to-day

service standard is poor, with high tariffs, poor availability, spotty reliability, and high ghost billing.

The old-fashioned public operators are out of tune with the changing market conditions, for two reasons: either they don't know, or they don't care. Where is the competitiveness, when all the time we are talking tall on attracting FDI, expanding export, introducing QPC, decreasing systems loss, and lowering the cost of products and services? The integrated approach to multi-planning exercises appear, to be missing (it means one-stop planning). The users of the communi-

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 Junjo 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 purely 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 has 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 not really have no illusions about the job that lies ahead of him although, in the power game in Pakistan, support lamb have on occasions displayed tigers 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 Choudhri Fazle Elahi who served the powerful Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, while he was Prime Minister. In the latter's failed experiment with the parliamentary system of governance in the seventies.

Since the fall of President Ziaul Huq in the late '80s it has been, by and large, the general desire of Pakistani politicians to turn to a full blooded parliamentary system. However, as opposed to a presidential form or governance so entrenched has traditionally been the post of the President in the power game that it has taken about a decade of gradual moves for that to happen. In that process Nawaz Sharif has emerged as the most powerful Prime Minister in Pakistan's history.

Mr Nawaz Sharif 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 Quixote 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 Chief of 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 forwarded 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 a huff, 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 President'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 some of his parliamentary colleagues, in their exasperation, 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 citing 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 thirds 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 pre-emptive actions were taken by the Prime Minister's men. First, as the police watched unconcerned, they stormed the Supreme Court and, by creating a pandemonium, prevented the court from functioning. Second, it was charged that Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, a Sindh, had superseded three judges senior to him in 1994 to assume the mantle of Chief Justice. The Baluchistan branch of the Supreme Court was encouraged to 'dismiss' the Chief Justice thereby showing a rift among the judges and thus weakening the Chief Justice's position. The Prime Minister was using the technique of setting a 'thief to catch a thief.' At that stage a somewhat harassed President Leghari who actually had to approve the appointment and dismissal of the judges on the advice of the Prime Minister decided to throw in his towel and Wasim Sajjad, the Senate Chairman, took over as acting President. He as the acting President 'restrained' Sajjad Ali Shah from performing his functions and Justice Ajmal Mian was appointed as the Acting Chief Justice. Later a 10-member bench of the Supreme Court unanimously cancelled the 1994 appointment of Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah. Thus for the Chief Justice the die was cast, and Justice Ajmal Mian permanently replaced him as the Chief Justice.

Mr Wasim Sajjad now goes back to his old post of the Senate President, thus making room for the President-elect Rafiq Tarar.

With both the President and Chief Justice replaced, the Prime Minister is now firmly on the saddle. What started off with a whimper of a proposal of

elevation of five judges has ended with a bang in a political battleground where casualties abound and new people are in charge. The battle now seems to be over, if not the war, and it is time now to ponder and reflect.

The stand off between the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice has led to quite unexpected results and has accelerated the process of establishing, in full measure, the Prime Minister's administrative authority vis-a-vis that of the President. In fact, it has taken Pakistan nearly a decade to reach this point and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif can draw some comfort in having been the main contributor. After all both he and his predecessor Benazir Bhutto, both elected Prime Ministers, had experienced the discomfort of being dismissed earlier by the President of the country.

It is worth noting that the crisis was not triggered off by any fault of Pakistan's constitutional provisions, but by the failures of the leaders of various state institutions to approach the limits of their respective power and authority. Constitutional habits acquired under decades of dictatorial regimes die hard but the principal actors may have learnt the hard way that a system of checks and balances must be allowed to operate in a set up, which now is by and large democratic. It is heartening, however, that the tussle saw its end without anyone directly tinkering with the constitution and without a shot being fired.

While a stunned population watched the antics of some of the principal actors on the national stage, the press in Pakistan by and large behaved responsibly and the standard of their presentation of news and views, has been high. A great deal indeed can be said in favour of Pakistan's free and remarkably bold and courageous press.

The Armed Forces have emerged well out of the crisis. In a situation where the choice lay among the 'evils', the Army decided to back up the Prime Minister. By doing so, it may have chosen the least of the 'evils', appearing to be supportive of the democratic process.

The judiciary has had a bad mauling and as the leader of the country, it is now for the Prime Minister and his obliging parliament to restore unto judiciary the respect and dignity it deserves. A strong judiciary, it must be recognised by the Prime Minister and his men, strengthens democracy and in no way weakens it.

Indeed a couple of what may seem like favourable factors may ironically militate against the Prime Minister. His overwhelming majority may render into his political behaviour a dictatorial touch that he must make efforts to shun. And then there is the almost total Punjab domination in all the branches of the government, something that the smaller provinces will find irksome, unless proper care is taken by the Prime Minister. Here there is a case for putting stitches in time.

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 Junjo (the latter made a last minute effort as the Election Commissioner to put a spoke in the fast moving Presidential wheel of Rafiq Tarar by disqualifying his candidature, happen to belong to Sindh. It also should be noted that perhaps for the first time in four decades a Bhutto or anyone of the Sindh 'beradati' was not among the cast of characters in the political high drama. The months long political drama has done a great deal of damage to Pakistan's economy and an all-Punjab show has disturbing implications. Cries of disparity and neglect are already quite audible in some corners of the Federation and the Punjab will have to demonstrate a degree of accommodation, understanding and fairplay, that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif may not quite find easy to implement.

to forget the logistics; or it comes as an after-thought.

The conclusion is clear: poor governance and inefficient planning and operation (the funds and investment will come in if the returns are favourable). The solution is also clear: the slow civil service has to change over from doing business inefficiently to becoming a facilitator to the modern business-units.

This change-over is taking too long, due to political instability and lack of consensus, and the inability of the successive regimes to bring about quick administrative reforms in the civil service leading to updated governance practices based on service rather than control. It all boils down one basic issue: the order of priorities of the political agenda of the regime.