

Accountability by Linkages

Inadequacy in the evaluative system relating to ministerial performances has resulted in a timely call for fine-tuning it. The other day Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina while chairing a Cabinet session on the annual reports of ministries asked for changing the existing format in consultation with the PARC (Public Administrative Reforms Committee). Some of the details that cropped up in the course of discussion do suggest that there is an increasing and very welcome urgency within the government to promote transparency. What is there now in the name of a system is a mere travesty of the word. How do you evaluate, for example, the performance of the Energy Ministry if the system does not have the provision to ask how much electricity has been produced over a year? Can a mere presentation of the records of foreign tours by the officials of the relevant ministry be a substitute for that? Yardsticks like the number of pending litigations in different courts have to be there in an evaluative system. It is an effective stocktaking time bound process that cannot be allowed to lose significance in pointless exercise of trivialities.

In a democracy, the question of accountability is not merely confined to the Cabinet. To a great extent the efficacy of a democratic system depends on how well the parliamentary committees function in their observatory role while judging the performance of the ministries. That is the acid-test as far as the bureaucracy is concerned. We assume that the annual reports of the ministries are routinely scrutinised by the relevant parliamentary committees thereby ensuring the scope for debate and discussion on them but a useful approach in rethinking the evaluative process would be to incorporate the role of the Ombudsman.

After all the idea behind having an Ombudsman was to make sure that state machinery functioned along the lines of accountability and good governance. Now that the way for this long mooted post of an overseeing authority of public affairs has been paved, it would be doing service to both the functional value of the post as well as the element of governmental accountability if we forged a linkage between the Ombudsman's office and the ministries.

Lenient for the Crime

The Jahangirnagar University Syndicate's pronouncement of expulsion orders of varying terms against five among the alleged student rapists, all with a BCL label to an embarrassment of the ruling party, sounds like a whimper — lenient, inadequate and unequal to the culpability of the offence committed. This is in the likeness of a proctor's post-facto disciplinary action against some unruly behaviour observed on the campus rather than a legal course taken to bring the offenders to justice in accord with the gravity of their crime. There is no reason why proven student rapists should be treated any differently from those who commit physical violence in any form or manner on girls or women. The air has been rife with clamours from all around for the present set of laws against repression on women to be made more stringent. And a new version with some real teeth is also on the anvil, as is common knowledge now. But it seems even the existing laws have not been applied where there was a test-case justification to do it. Sanctity of a university, reputation of a ruling party and security of female students were all involved here.

For a time it appeared as though things were on course. The fact-finding committee set up by the JU authorities worked unfettered and produced a report that was at once bold and fair in naming the culprits without blinking an eye for their political label. By a hindsight, the syndicate appears to have been rather predisposed to retaining a grip over the affair till the very end which is why there wasn't a judicial probe as demanded by most people on the campus itself. A judicial probe would have set the ball rolling to a criminal court.

The offences were in the nature of the worst moral transgression one can think of in any society. They were charged with rapes committed on the campus and an assault made on a teacher of the university — a trend that if not deterred now by meting out exemplary punishment could dangerously recur.

A Happy Vijaya

Imagine a woman, not an Amazon of the Hellenic mould but a truly vivacious one, all the time warring and slaying the demons to make the heavens safe for the gods to live in and rule. In all her numerous aspects of Kali and Chandī, Devi Mahamaya is a ruthless killer of the most daunting visage. But as Durga she combines all the beauty in the world — and poise — even as she slays Mahisha while her progeny of popular gods and goddesses, Ganesh and Saraswati et al look on in dotting admiration. The whole range of the vast Devi lore speaks very eloquently of a pronounced matrarchal streak in a highly patriarchal Sanatan Dharma. In fact, as Adyashakti she is seen as the source of all creation including the deities.

She slays the demons clad in a very resplendent Bengalee sari and never looking at the hapless Mahisha pinned down both by her lion and her spear. And in search of the beauty that can adorn her form and face ideally, the sculptor community makes an exhaustive run over the popular actresses of the Bengalee screen.

Whether BNP comes to power or the Awami League continues to remain in power we wonder if woes and miseries of our people would ever come to an end? We are of the opinion that if elections are held now the Awami League would be the financial gainer and the BNP would be the financial loser. All cities, towns, village, roads, highways, streets and bazars of the country are filled with thousands of boats. The League can no more require to spend crores of taka to print millions of posters and spend

It was about 7 o'clock in the evening on Valentine Day in October 1989. The Muslim ambassadors were called by Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati in the ornate palace housing the Foreign Office in Tehran. They were called at a very short notice. Foreign ministers almost all over the world are renowned to call Heads of Missions at a short notice. Perhaps, this is a way to assert their shrinking authority on foreign envoys in these days of fast developing system of communication and direct methods of contact among world leaders. In this case, however, hardly any notice was given. The briefing, therefore, appeared to be on an issue both important and urgent.

We sat with inquisitive apprehension, Velayati appeared shortly after the scheduled time. Following the customary exchange of greetings, he informed the group of the decision of the venerable Imam, the Rahbar or the supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini, to declare Salman Rushdie a renegade who deserved death on account of writing the Satanic Verses, the blasphemous book against Islam and for disparaging remarks made against the holy Prophet. Penguin Books, the publisher, was also ostracised. We were stunned, primarily due to the unprecedented action of the leader of one country awarding fatwa of death sentence on a foreign national for a crime of this nature. None

of us had yet read this book and the degree and extent of blasphemy committed therein was left to our unbridled imagination. We promptly sent dispatches to our respective governments with details of the briefing. The reaction in the West, as apprehended was explosive. They not only severely condemned the action of Iran's supreme leader, terming it as illegal and unacceptable, but held it as a gross infringement on the freedom of expression. The wave of protest in the Muslim world, on the other hand, was so intense that, in the wake of widespread demonstrations, many lives were lost, besides commission of arson and causing heavy damages to property. Angry demonstrators burned copies of the book in several cities also in the UK. The book was prescribed in most of the Muslim countries. The militant Khomeini Foundation of Iran, put a bounty of 2 million US dollars on Rushdie's head. Rushdie started to live in

Edict of Fatwa on Salman Rushdie Lifted

Beginning of a Thaw in Iran's Relations with the West?

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hiding, being a fugitive from the society and fearing for his own life and for security of his family. Living became increasingly difficult with the passage of time and almost intolerable in long nine years. His second wife, an American writer, left him after 15 months of hiding. He could hardly have visitors.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Rushdie being an immigrant from Bombay, the British government took upon itself the responsibility of providing his security at an annual cost of 1 million pounds.

With the advent of a relatively liberal regime under the leadership of President Mohammad Khatami in the Islamic Republic hopes were aroused about the possibility of

removing the impasse. A moderate speech delivered in Washington in January last by the British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook containing some warm words for the new Iranian regime paved the way. This led to months of secret negotiations in an unspecified third country that turned out to

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi and his meeting with Robin Cook in New York on the 24th September.

Kharrazi declared that his government had no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever to threaten the life of the author of the Satanic Verses or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so. His British counterpart hailed the statement as "historic" and expressed the opinion that threat to the life of the author was considerably diminished.

Despite global acclamation of this diplomatic breakthrough, some are still uncertain about universality and efficacy of the withdrawal of the fatwa by the present government of Iran. Dr Ghyasuddin Siddiqui, leader of the so-called Muslim Parliament in Britain, made it explicitly clear. He said that Rushdie was still in danger. "I don't think the Iranian government can do anything at all. They can make promises, but that is all they can do," he said.

In a television programme in London a few days ago, he was set against Michael Foot, the veteran British politician and analyst, who regarded the outcome as a victory of people's right to freedom of expression. In any case, this ended a decade-long exile of Rushdie, who heaved a sigh of relief saying, "It means everything, it means freedom."

The stage has now been set for resumption of Britain's full diplomatic relations with Iran at ambassadorial level. US and others may follow suit. While this would mean a virtual end to the diplomatic isolation for Iran in a significant section of the international community, the West has also much to gain. Iran's strategic location in the heart of the Arab world and its vast oil and other resources have always come under deep focus of UK, USA, France and other countries, who had historic links with and drawn material gains from Iran.

This has not only gratified a host of eager traders, contractors and investors from the West awaiting the cherished breakthrough, but will be crucial to Western efforts to control international terrorism and drug trafficking. Finally, one must not be oblivious of the western anxiety of using this platform as a counterpoise against Iraq and as an observation post, if not more, over Afghanistan and the southern flank of the defunct Soviet Union.

International Day for the Elderly

Global Life Expectancy Increases by Twenty Years

The impact of the world's ageing population growth on the socio-economic policies and the culture of societies is already presenting problems to Governments. To help meet the challenge, the United Nations General Assembly decided in 1992 to observe the International Year of Older Persons in 1999.

The majority of older persons, 55 per cent, are women. Among those who are 80 years or older, 65 per cent are women. The impact of the world's ageing population growth on the socio-economic policies and the culture of societies is already presenting problems to Governments. To help meet the challenge, the United Nations General Assembly decided in 1992 to observe the International Year of Older Persons in 1999. The objective of the year is to raise awareness of the fast-changing demographic picture of older persons globally, to stimulate debate, promote action strategies, and encourage research and information exchange. The situation of older persons and its impact on a country's resources call for immediate study and solutions.

The Year's theme "towards a society for all ages" invites the participation of all generations, all sectors of society and organizations. It also promotes collaboration among the many sectors, both traditional and non-traditional. Non-traditional sectors — mainly the private sector, the media, youth organizations and academia — are beginning to include older persons in their programmes.

With fertility rates declining in some countries, other types of problems have arisen. For instance, the International Longevity Centre has found that European countries, which have the lowest birth rates, are searching for ways to keep older workers in the labour force longer because fewer young people are entering the workplace. The declining number of care-givers, especially since more women — the traditional care-givers — are now entering the workforce, has created problems worldwide. Income

security for older populations is another major concern, especially in additional societies where the family and the community once provided care and support. Such support systems are being eroded by urbanization, migration, instability, and armed conflict.

UN action for Older Persons

The international community first debated the question of ageing at the United Nations at the initiative of Argentina in 1948. The issue was again raised by Malta in 1969. In recognizing that longevity was becoming one of the major challenges of the twentieth century, the United Nations convened the World Assembly of Ageing in Vienna, Austria, in 1982. That same year, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the International Plan of Action on Ageing, that dis-

cusses the broad implications of ageing for individual life and for societies. It sets forth 62 recommendations for action dealing with the situation of older persons.

In 1990, the General Assembly designated 1 October as the International Day for the Elderly, later renamed the International Day of Older Persons, which was celebrated for the first time the following year. The Day has become an annual event in most countries, with varied activities organized in conjunction with the official commemoration.

The General Assembly adopted the United Nations Principles for Older Persons in 1991. The eighteen Principles provide a broad framework for action on ageing. They are organized into five clusters: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older persons.

In 1992, the General Assembly adopted the Proclamation on Ageing, an outline for practical action to be taken at the global level in support of regional, national and local activities. The proclamation urges partnerships among the many concerned actors in society — including Governments' non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia and the private sector — to ensure that the needs of ageing populations are adequately addressed. The Proclamation also called for the observance of the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons.

The 1992 Proclamation urges the development community, through donors and recipient countries, to include older persons in their development programmes. The press and media are urged to play central role in the creation of awareness of population ageing. The private sector is encouraged to support broad and practical partnerships with the UN system. Youth are seen as an important target group in preparing for the later stages of life and in encouraging the old and young generations to cooperate in creating balance between tradition and innovation in economic, social and cultural development. — UNIC Feature

To the Editor...

Projecting Bangla Literature

Sir, The literature page of the DS (Sep 26) broached a topical issue which needs official notice of the government; namely the introduction of standard translation service in the country (at reasonable cost), to project Bangla literature and culture to the outside world through the medium of English, which is the de facto world language now.

This new Institution needs government backing, and the service needs public support and subsidies to set the ball rolling. The NGOs and the British Council and USIS could offer technical guidance and assistance. Nobody is taking any interest in the project in fact, there is no project on the anvil. We are already late by two decades. It is not expected that the foreigners will take the initiative, although they are exposed to a very small segment of Bangladeshis who also write in English.

The official approach to foreign languages is rather puzzling. Urdu is practically banned and frowned upon as a print and art form (a language by itself is neutral, and is harmless if not imposed upon), and only recently the government has awakened to realize that the knowledge of English in our students in the educational institutions is slipping away.

Where is the long-term planning? Even the outlines are not touched upon by the intellectuals and the academicians. The taboos have to be debated and some consensus arrived at, as we can no more live in isolation. Isolation in the fields of art and literature is fatal.

A Zabr Dhaka

Flood and politics

Sir, "Boat" or "Leaf of Paddy"? When the whole country is floating on flood water and the sufferings of the people are inexplicable the opposition BNP on the one hand is demanding for mid-term general elections and on the other the ruling Awami League is insisting on by-elections.

Whether BNP comes to power or the Awami League continues to remain in power we wonder if woes and miseries of our people would ever come to an end?

We are of the opinion that if elections are held now the Awami League would be the financial gainer and the BNP would be the financial loser. All cities, towns, village, roads, highways, streets and bazars of the country are filled with thousands of boats. The League can no more require to spend crores of taka to print millions of posters and spend

money of publicity campaign on its party symbol. But the BNP is required to incur colossal amount of money on import of "rummy" leaf and printing of posters for publicity campaign as miles and miles long of paddy fields have gone under flood water.

At this time of national calamity we cannot juxtapose flood, politics and elections together. Rather we all the AL, BNP, JP, JI and others need to stand unitedly and fight against this disaster.

O. H. Kabir 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

Why there is a government?

Sir, To seek a life of security and welfare the humankind created society and state. And out of the state came the parties and governments. And the very first duty of the government is to safeguard the life and property of the people. If a government fails to fulfill its very first duty then the whole state is in danger.

I do not feel secure, my wife and daughters' honour is at stake, and my property can be looted any moment. Then where shall we go? Perhaps to a civilised society, or stay here and keep on taking all the risks.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Darul Ihsan University Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Congratulations to BRTC!

Sir, Recently the BRTC authority has introduced a separate bus service for the women. This noble initiative by the BRTC is worth appreciating in every respect.

In fact the need of separate bus service for the women had been felt for a long period and many conscious people have requested the government for this through various letters and opinions. The displeasing experience of a woman when she falls into rivalry with her male counterpart to get on a bus is beggars description. Many women, who cannot win the competition with men to get on the bus, are seen standing at the bus-stops for an infinite time. This scenario is common all over the city even at night. Sometimes the helper of the bus does not allow women when the bus is crowded.

But only one bus service is not sufficient for all the women. Others should introduce such services. And the fare should be affordable because most of the female passengers are garment workers and are very poor.

Md Mahmudul Hasan 266, Elephant Road Dhaka-1205

Aggressive nationalism

Sir, The aggressive nationalism witnessed at the dawn of 20th century gradually waned as more and more people migrated to different parts of the world thereby intermingling different civilisations and in its wake giving birth to multi-racial states both in culture and in physical dimension. Only Zionism and the Jewish entity (Israel) kept the racial content of the nationalism alive, but even in Israel people are moving towards cultural homogeneity with the Arab neighbours and the bulk of the population is for the "peace process" to succeed but the militant elements which include the present Israeli government itself is deviating from the agreed formula of "land for peace" and trying to undermine the very basis of the peace process initiated by US and to a certain extent the European community played a constructive role to bring about peace in the war-torn Middle East.

The end of this century saw the rise of bilateral trading between often hostile neighbours. The complexion of sovereign entity has very much changed with proliferation of nuclear weapons as such prospect of large scale warfare is declining because it will be suicidal for both the parties involved in the conflict.

The recent deal of Pakistan to sell electric power to India is very much in line with the present-day trend in international trade. The aggressive nationalism could be a hurdle if political parties rouse the cheap nationalist slogan with the sole motive of catching votes.

Al-Haj S M Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka

A man

Sir, A woman has destroyed the most powerful man on earth. Monica Lewinsky has finished President Bill Clinton. She has done it by loving him. Or is it really love?

Analysing the Keneth Starr's investigation, it appears clearly that Monica is an implant by Clinton's enemies to trap him. It was not her love towards Bill but an act to finish him. The whole process — enticement, tape recording of the conversations, preservation of the semen stained dress etc., all are indicative of that.

The man on whom world eyes are fixed, may think he has also a private life? He did all those silly things right in the Oval office and then denied it!

What is shame! Another woman Hillary Clinton (flats off to her) the most dignified lady of the world has stood beside her president husband rock solid despite go-

ing through a terrible mental agony. She has done everything possible to make and remake Bill Clinton. What a magnanimity! Indeed commendable. A wife in need is a wife indeed!

America is a free society and many American presidents were womanisers but perhaps Bill Clinton has been the most undignified. This is surely not expected from somebody who is in such an important position. Surely this is not normal.

Bill Clinton should have psychiatric consultation and however capable he is as President and whatever his opinion polls, in all fairness he should resign for the sake of dignity of the post and the American leadership in the world.

F Karim Khulshi Hill Chittagong

Agro-forestry

Sir, It is regrettably true that our marginal amount of forest resources are gradually dying out as we are not so interested in afforestation the way we cut down trees indiscriminately. Different studies reveal that present demand for wood is estimated at 476.75 million cubic feet per annum of which only 24 per cent are obtained from our forestry. If this process goes on, in near future almost all of our cropland would surely turn into desert.

At this disastrous situation, we all should lay extra effort on planting more trees even around our cultivable land. The Forest Department should take effective measures to popularise the afforestation in croplands at the grassroots level. The people have to be convinced about the importance of planting more trees to retain habitable environment all over the country.

Arunkumar Biswas 329, Jagannath Hall, Dhaka University

Crime and Punishment

Sir, With the passing of each day, as one would observe, there grows a rising number of young men who are adrift from the world of work, wayward and less responsible to families and society. Their teenage unsocial activities have invariably led them to an adult life of delinquency and crime. Having no job, little education or any particular skill, these young men who are causing concern to parents, neighbours and society, live from their parents or by extortion or scavenging. These young men are everywhere, even on streets near you to scare you of your decent living. Dhaka city dwellers know the

type by now, too well. If news reports are any indicators, they speak of the great trouble these young men are causing in every shiver of human activity — road blocks, wildcat strikes, and others on rampage on trivial issues and then resorting to damaging vehicles, properties, government or private; even lives of citizens are at times threatened for no fault of their own.

Not long ago, students turned terrorists descended on the Bangla Academy and did incalculable damage. Again only the other day, during the so-called trials some of these young ones took law in their hands and offended an office-goer in public. If one study the rape (even abduction) cases, it is no more the dirty old men who are committing these. In most cases the youth of our society generally organise kidnapping and rape of innocent young girls

without any rhyme or reason. The worse is that more and more teenagers are now getting brutal, remorseless and committing crimes regularly, without being caught or punished. While the law enforcement agencies blame parents, teachers and social workers and society in general, they hardly take effective measures to punish the culprits.

Either individuals or the nation as a whole suffer from each crime committed. The sufferings are in terms of: — lost values to owners, — defensive cost i.e., security devices, security guardsets, — cost of public policing and criminal courts, — cost due to death, pain and sufferings from sexual, violent and drugs related crimes.

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OPINION

Acts of Indiscretion

A Husnain

The Clinton private affair, which later turned public with the mass media blazing away, focuses attention on the importance of discreet deportment and poise by those who hold high public offices, involved, and the public esteem and expectation are quite high — a critical sacrifices at the altar of leadership.

This stringent qualification is independent of the person or personality, the time, the place, and the culture, because it is a moral issue, and the latter have no boundaries within the orbit of human civilization.

At lower levels, the issue packs less public sensitivity at lower potentials. But the gravity of the transgression has the same moral aspect and impact, because what had been done cannot be undone, as those concerned were affected positively or negatively, in the materialistic sense also, say, for example, in cases of graft, corruption, tax evasion, cheating, swindling, blackmailing, and a host of offences well known, and artfully practised through the ages.

Not that the Americans have suddenly become more prudish, but, according to some American critics, they expect political accountability in their politics and in their President. A parallel case has just emerged in Malaysia, with two persons prosecuted by the court in a case involving the private life of a sacked minister of the government. The trend in moral levitation is encouraging, — on the eve of the new millennium. At the top level, the loss of

face is intensely sensitive; changing the image of the affected leader. Efforts to restore the image is a sort of wild goose chase (a reasssembled broken glass shows the joints).

Those familiar with the history of the British Civil Service in India may have noted that once the bara white saheb lost confidence in a native official, whether due to indiscretion or otherwise, that was the end of the latter's career. That is why the recruits were sought from blue blood, on the assumption that they could resist various types of temptations, situations, and pressures better than those from families less economically solvent (keeping in view the influence of traditions and cultures).

Most societies tend to discreetly overlook the wasteful period of life when wild oats are usually sown, more due to biological urges than the lack of tutitional guidance, before locking into the stable orbit of a successful career. Thereafter, the society sets the norms, with occasional sun-spot activity, as happened in the case of poor Clinton.

Anyway, the turn of events is immensely interesting to foreign observers, as the probable wobbling of the world's most powerful nation would be watched with intense speculation, if not concentration; as those under the influence of this big planet would be exposed to the side effects. The quality of human frailty remains constant — the bashing of a big brother is enjoyed with unmixed glee!