

Accountability Initiative

If one were to pore over all shreds of banking and government department papers beans will spill about many a financial irregularity swept under the carpet for long.

Nevertheless, we are heartened by the beginning of a process of accountability marked here by a report that the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh M Hafizuddin Khan has lately submitted to President Shahabuddin Ahmed.

The Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh (CAGB) has been accorded a statutory or constitutional position for ensuring transparency and accountability in financial matters as an integral part of government by collective responsibility which is answerable to the public through the parliament.

We suggest the President have a word with the Prime Minister to ensure that the system of accountability which is now on paper really gets to work.

Making Traffic Move

Parts of Dhaka are breathing again. The city's main thoroughfares, particularly those around major shopping areas such as New Market, Nilkhet, Elephant Road etc., have long been subjected to the most horrendous kind of traffic jams.

For starters, Riflemen cannot be expected to manage traffic forever. This remains a job for the traffic department of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), despite recent induction of armed forces personnel. But this exercise has conclusively demonstrated that, when traffic laws are enforced without discrimination, then road users are more likely to abide by the rules.

This exercise has pointed to the course future events must take. The days when traffic rules were violated under the noses of the police should now be over. But the DMP also needs adequate trained manpower to ensure effective policing at all points.

Why Should Minoti Die?

Seven women workers were breaking bricks on a construction site at Munshikhola, Demra on Wednesday. Suddenly overhead electric wires snapped from a nearby pole and Minoti Rani was electrocuted instantly.

Why should Minoti Rani die? Why should her fellow workers be debilitated? Their occupational hazard, if any, did not include electrocution.

Minoti is the latest of the sacrificial animals offered to the utter lack of maintenance by electricity authorities. Will Minoti's death be compensated and somebody punished for causing it to her? Why not? Public Interest Litigation has a very apt case here.

Perhaps, this fatal case of live overhead wire snapping has something to do with PDB's systems loss. The irregular and unauthorised connections generally use non-standard poles and wires.

Death like Minoti's must be treated with seriousness by the government and the society otherwise this wouldn't be a civilised polity. Law and justice will be dangerously undermined if such deaths are not proceeded against and wholly prevented in the long run.

Village Phones and Poor Men's "Hallo"

What's the harm if taking some steps turn the table in favour of the poor we shed tears for? GB has set the tone, why should GoB not step in now? Let us think something big. Telephones are not consumer goods but produce goods — an important input to raise productivity, efficiency and equity.

THE North-South Centre for Development Research of the University of Bonn (Germany) sponsored a research topic titled: "Village Phone and the Poor: Socio-economic impact of Grameen Bank's Communication Information in Selected Villages of Bangladesh."

Two phoney ideas centre around phones, especially, in popular discussions. First, telephones are consumer goods and second, the poor segment of the society barely benefit from such services.

About one-third of the total calls outgoing from a VP are made by the poor people in sample villages (about 1500 phone calls are made through VPs per week).

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poor on this account compares with 15 per cent of the calls made by the non-poor. Another important reason for which poor callers utilise the service is health related which account for 17 per cent of their total calls compared to 10 per cent made by the non-poor.

With the access to VPs, the consumers surplus (CS) is different classes stand very high. The CS has been estimated by taking into considerations factors like (a) hours taken in alternative methods; (b) transport costs in alternative methods; and (c) opportunity costs of physical mobility.

As an add-on, a GB member sells the services of this latest technology. The average net income comes out to be around Tk 300/week. The income from phone services account for a respectable — about one-fourth — amount of the total income of the household.

Have mobile phones made them more mobile? This is an important question thrown mostly by the critics. The answer is YES. First, at village level, off and on, she has to carry the messages to the households concerned.

Let us call other options as traditional. The non-traditional mobile phone injects some non-priority social benefits which traditional activities do not let, per unit, to flow in.

Let us take some examples to justify what we have said so far. The GB member's frontier of knowledge is now wider than before because of the phone she owns. She knows the names of many foreign countries by virtue of phone calls being made by her villagers outside the country.

These are same of the virtues of VPs. A government that cares for the welfare of the poor should see that the poor have got access to information like the rich have. road, electricity and telecommunication — all infrastructure facilities — are friendly to the poor.

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Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

ternative methods and Tk 17 in VPs thus reaping home a surplus of Tk 78. The non-poor also bag home surplus but of Tk 51 which is substantially lower than the poor.

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GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENT

Change and Continuity in Italian Politics

WHEN an incoming head of government stands in the Parliament and gives a tribute to his predecessor, and also promises to continue with the policies laid out by his ousted counterpart because it is in the interest of the country, we are definitely not talking about any politician or any system of government close to home.

When one glances over the cast of hundreds, which are the myriad political parties thronging the political stage of Italy, it is mind-boggling to think how the political plot is kept from thickening to an absolute standstill! Consider the broad spectrum of political beliefs and affiliations that range from the extreme fascists to leftists, Marxists, moderate Marxists, Communists, reformers, socialists, Socialists, Democrats, Socialists, rightists, Christian Democrats by other names, centrists, right of centre, left of centre, republicans, federalists, even secessionists, and also the greens, then back to the reds!

Furthermore, while spelling out his new coalition's policies, the new Prime Minister said, "The imperative of this government will be to bring in government reforms being made to public finances and the economic and financial strategy laid out by Romano Prodi and which allowed us to join the European Monetary Union."

The civilisation of Bengal is no the civilisation of Italy. The Italians, but how civilised we continue to become, is a matter of how deeply we cultivate the elements of governance and incorporate them into every aspect of our lives.

We can learn much by observing how other democracies work. In how other governments conduct themselves without fraying the fabric of society. In Italy, last week as equally in the past, the transition from one government to another was smooth, and even during the hiatus between the lapse of one 'governo' and the formation of another, Italy operated without a government at all, with no apparent hitch.

It is also interesting to note that the coalition enjoys a parliamentary majority thanks to the inclusion of the centre-right UDR led by Cossiga, a former president who used to be in the cabinet of D'Alema's party. And this tiny group of 31 members holds four cabinet posts of which two are the key ministries of Defense and Post and Telegraph. This kind of line-up

of D'Alema's government suggests that Italian politicians are beginning to see beyond the traditional divisions of left and right in a more mature quest for stability and consensus. Ironically, these are words that are alien to Bangladeshi politicians who are not really as, or nearly as polarized in their beliefs as here in Italy.

One thing cannot be denied that leading such a heterogeneous group will not be an easy task. But this sort of coalition is a temporary system and proposed constitutional and electoral reforms are already under examination, whose aims are to change a system that has seen 50 years of across the board proportional representation, that encourages the existence of too many small parties which destabilize the Italian political scenario.

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POSTSCRIPT

Neeman A Sobhan

all, and though it creeps, one also notices that it does not actually collapse, enough to throw the entire society into convulsions! The new coalition government of D'Alema is an alliance that broadly includes his own party, the Democratic Party of the Left (DPL) which is the successor to the Communist Party of Italy; the Moderate Marxists; the centre-right Democratic Union for the Republic (UDR) which was formed out of the wreckage of the former Christian Democrats that dominated Italian politics till the '90s when it fell apart due to corruption scandals, about which more later; the Greens, and some independents.

In fact, the following would give an idea of the breadth and reach of the present political medley: when the new PM unveiled his 27-member cabinet, it included several former foes. 3 former premiers who have retained their earlier posts (Lamberto Dini, the foreign minister; Ciampi, the treasury minister, and Amato, the institutional reform minister) 6 women and the incumbent Mayor of Naples as Labour minister, all of whom comprise a broad assortment of Social Democrats, former Communists, hard-line Marxists, religious Catholics, Greens and centre-right Christian Democrats!

There is a lesson here for our Bangladeshi counterparts. Yet, like any other politically-conscious nation, the Italians are brutally self-critical, and denigrate themselves as being only a bunch of squabbling 'partycrats', politicians who are petty and corrupt! But what they perhaps modestly refuse to see is that the fact that their system survives both these politicians and the chameleon-like nature of their governments in power, underscores the strength of their social and political institutions that allow so many ups and downs without causing any major disruptions.

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Little do We Know about the Killing of Freedom Fighters

by Ehtesham Huda

TODAY is November 7th. This day is significant in the history of Bangladesh. On this day in 1975, the country lost three brave freedom fighter army officers in the hands of the anti-liberation forces.

Until the Awami League government came to power in 1996, this day was celebrated as National Solidarity day to mark the killings of these valiant sons of the soil. But fortunately, now this celebration has stopped and this national holiday has come to an end.

It was recently announced by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that the government is taking up steps for carrying out proper trial of the killings of President Major General Ziaur Rahman, Bir Uttam. With the same gesture, we as citizens of this country, want to see that similar measures are taken immediately for carrying out the trial for the cold blooded killing of Late Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf, Bir Uttam.

As the first step, the nation should give official recognition to these three officers by restoring the dignity that is rightfully due to them. They were each highly decorated Freedom Fighter Sector Commanders and Sub-Commanders in our War of Liberation in 1971.

Had Moshataque Ahmed remained in power, chances were high for all of us to witness and experience the spell of Pakistani authorities once again. Twenty three years have elapsed by now since November 7, 1975. We feel it is high time that the nation justly glorify them and their noble cause — the truth must prevail, and we, the citizens have the right to know.

The writer is son of Late Col K N Huda BB and has written this also on behalf of his sister, Naheed Huda as well as Raka Khaled, Amreen, Khaled, Tairat Khaled, daughters of Late Brig. Khaled Mosharraf BU.

To the Editor...

Noble lobbying for Nobel!

Sir, As a citizen of Bangladesh, I felt embarrassed to read reports in a section of the local press of covert attempts to get a local national leader nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for initiating the peace treaty signed on CHT.

In contrast, we read stories how difficult it is to get the Nobel Prize by deserving candidates. Prof A K Sen got it after being nominated for a number of times in the course of a decade. Dr Salam had to wait for about a decade and then share it with two scientists of the North. An American prize-emanic got the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1994 after waiting for nearly 40 years; and that too based on a thesis he had written decades ago for his PhD at the age of 21, back in the late 1950s.

The high points in one's life come rare, and come late, if ever. Some become famous after their death. What is the philosophy of achievement and reward, and how are these related? According to a wise saying, those who seek or crave for awards, do not deserve it.

A Citizen Dhaka

Better late than never

Sir, The USA is one of the richest countries in the world. The hard working people of America maintain a high standard of living and their per capita income is around \$6,000 dollar. They enjoy two-day weekend because of their wealth, economic prosperity, industrial development, efficient administration, smooth law and order situation, social security and justice.

Whereas in Bangladesh our per capita income is only \$220. We are one of the poorest countries in the order, our standard of living is most horrible and deplorable and our economy, trade and commerce, law and order and health care are in shambles but some of us foolishly want to compete and follow the footsteps of the people of America in many ways especially in enjoying two-day weekly holiday.

It is not irrelevant to state here that we are more than 200 years backward than the people of the US and it would take another 300 to 400 years for us to have a per capita income of \$25,000 from the present \$220. Over past several weeks we have been hearing various re-

ports that the government has realised its mistake in declaring two-day weekly holiday and now it is going to re-introduce one-day weekly holiday. We strongly believe and feel that sooner the government announces its revised decision of one-day weekly holiday instead of two-day weekly holiday is better for the entire nation. Better late than never.

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

Strengthening CAB

Sir, To set up the proper network for the Consumer Association of Bangladesh (as advocated in a DS editorial), allocation of only one per cent of VAT collection (STax may be included if necessary) in the capital budget might be enough for a start. UN and donor agencies may provide technical assistance input to start with. The ops and maintenance budget could be covered with a little subsidy. The staff must be professionally trained.

The political and administrative will has to be forthcoming. This is an essential public service, but the priority accorded officially is regrettable, realising that the consumers have a tight budget for consumer shopping, and the adulteration culture is well developed.

A Zabra Dhaka

...A case for a bipartisan..

Sir, With reference to the article "Bangladesh — a Case for a Bipartisan Foreign Policy" by Faruq Choudhury in the ES on the 3rd November, 1998, the suggestion of being bipartisan is one thing and taking a firm stand on international issues which affect the nation is another. I personally feel that the latter stance should be adopted for the better. It would go a long way in propagating the image of the country and also tackling problems like water sharing, flood and resources management which involves the neighbouring countries.

The vain hope of garnering increased assistance and investment by being bipartisan is not going to solve matters in the long run. As a young nation, it is time that people strove to initiate and build an identity for itself rather than adopt unfamiliar influences.

Anish V. Koshiy, 272/4, West Agargaon, Shewpara, Dhaka