

# My Critic, My Friend — a Road to Better Governance

by Rehman Sobhan

*It is time for our leaders to break out of this protective encirclement and throw open their windows to the world by exposing themselves to independent opinion, including encounters with their harshest critics. Our leaders should publicly face such critics and challenge them either by a superior-truth or assimilate their criticisms by putting it to positive use in improving the quality of governance. Acknowledging error is no sign of weakness but a measure of political strength and maturity.*

IN contemporary Bangladesh anyone who criticises the government, or indeed the opposition is branded as a political and even personal enemy. I would like to argue here that on the contrary, your critic is ultimately your best friend.

In Bangladesh, and indeed before that in Pakistan, the systems of governance were built around the concealment of truth and facts both from the people and, as is increasingly evident, from the government. Long periods of autocratic rule have discouraged transparency in public life and open debate on issues of national concern. Governments of the day tend to project expression from those willing to sign their praises and to stamp on those who see them in a less flattering light. In the era of autocratic rule such critics were silenced by intimidating the newspaper owners who could give such people a forum or even by directly suppressing the critics. In more democratic times such critics are exposed to denunciation by the ministers, character assassination by the hatchment of the incumbent regime and occasional denial of favours or facilities, if solicited, from some agency of the government. This latter arrangement is much better than the days of autocracy particularly under Pakistani military regimes, where particular critics were kept under surveillance by the intelligence agencies, occasionally detained and even exposed to life threatening situations. But even in a democratic order, hostility to criticism contributes to perpetuate a climate of illiberal democracy.

This uninterrupted tradition of official hostility to criticism has, however, been of little service to the government since it has proved to be seriously detrimental to good governance in Bangladesh. Successive governments have convinced

themselves that those who criticise any failings of policy or aspect of governance are hostile, even enemies and probably in collusion with the political opponents. The concept of objective criticism thus appears to have become unacceptable within the prevailing culture and those criticised are always inclined to pose the question, *Oddesho ta ki?* (what is the intent). This question implies that the critic is either motivated by some private agenda — searching for career advancement, patronage or publicity, or is in league with the political opponents or is trying to undermine some particular person for personal and/or political reasons.

Attributing malafide motive to your critic creates a psychosis where those criticised can shut their eyes and ears to such criticism. This disinclination to recognise the legitimacy of the critic has, to a large extent, cut off successive governments from taking account of the shortcomings of their own governance. This proposition may be extended to opposition leaders as well as people in authority in private institutions. Not many people in Bangladesh take kindly to adverse comment on their deeds of omission or commission so it would be unfair to just attribute this to a failing of governments. However since it is the state which exercises a significant role in the direction of public life most of my subsequent remarks apply to the government. However my argument can as legitimately be extended to the opposition, private sector, NGOs and other civil society elements.

It is argued here that this inability to look at one's shortcomings is an enemy to good governance because the very system of governance, particularly in Bangladesh, is designed

to conceal information rather than share it. This lack of transparency in governance does not limit itself to official dealings with the public but is even more prevalent within the government. Within our system of administration subordinates only receive information with their administrative superiors on a need to know basis. In this chain of command the most ignorant person in the administration, about what is going on in their kingdom tends to be the Minister. All information eventually reaching the Minister is filtered through successive layers of bureaucracy each exposed to a minimum of information. In such a milieu any Minister or Secretary who is actually committed to improving governance, and some are, have to hunt out information from within the administration. In order to uncover the true situation within their domain a Minister needs the skills of a detective, has to have enormous patience and a nose for distinguishing fact from artifact.

Years of concealing information has meant that mechanisms of information gathering, storage and retrieval have fallen into disuse so that any effort to access information involves into a major administrative exercise. In the absence of any system of bottom-up reporting from the field and top-down supervision, systems of accountability within a Ministry remain virtually non-existent. As a result there is no basis on which to hold anyone accountable if anything goes

wrong within any part of the government. Our crisis of governance is thus inherent in the system of non-accountable administration.

Such a milieu of information blackout and lack of accountability is aggravated by the fact that Ministers and also Secretaries, rarely visit the field to elicit first hand information. Rare field visits tend to degenerate into ceremonial exercises carefully managed to conceal damaging information which reflects poorly on the local or project officials. Such management of information is, in many cases, designed to conceal serious inefficiencies as well as corrupt practices of people a long the administrative chain.

A Minister or Secretary, thus, has to be particularly diligent and skilled to keep track of all that is going on within their domain. Over the years some have taken such pains, often at considerable cost to themselves, to dig into the darker recesses of their respective ministries, but in most cases, they either do not make the effort or give up after exposure to the rigours and hazards of such investigations.

In such circumstances most policy decisions tend to be made on the basis of information of flimsy information and often reflect this in the quality of the policy. A more serious problem lies in implementing such policies or projects and ensuring their effective outcomes. If the upper tiers of decision-making are kept in the dark about how a particular project

is being implemented how can they expect to exercise their custodial responsibilities so as to ensure effective programme implementation?

Within such an administrative culture of concealment, if a government is genuinely committed to good governance, any person who brings to light particular wrong doings within the government is doing them an enormous favour. Such critics may help to reveal information which has been kept concealed from the policymakers either by motivated intent or, more often, because the system is, itself, designed to conceal such information. It is however possible that some Ministers may collude in this process of non-transparency because their own motives are not above board. In such a situation the culture of concealment is particularly serviceable to the practice of malfeasance at the higher levels of decision making.

If, however, Ministers really want to improve the quality of governance within their domain they should move to view their critics as their allies in the pursuit of good governance. To this end every Minister should employ a full time special assistant whose job would be to go through the newspapers, including those in conspicuous opposition to the government, and to keep track of seminars where papers are presented, with a view to take note of comments of the limitation of governance in particular areas. Obviously some of these criticisms will be uninformed,

misinformed, weakly argued and even downright tendentious, often with political motive. But even such criticisms may carry a kernel of truth worth retrieving. Even patently motivated and malicious criticism, originating from known political enemies, should not be dismissed since such criticisms need not always be incorrect. More to the point, even malafide criticism can serve to alert a government to issues which are agitating the minds of their opponents since such issues could escalate into a political mobilisation against the government. Such issues need to be confronted at an early stage where it is presented as an argument on paper, either through remedial governance or by political debate.

In most cases, people who criticise a government are neither friend nor foe but professionals or people from the field whose personal expertise or experience is being deployed, often with the best of intentions, to bringing to light relevant information about misgovernance. Such exercises may occasionally be motivated by the urge for self-promotion but most professionals want the best for their country and would be of some public service if anyone in authority would merely take notice of them. The best of such critiques of governance constitute a rare treasure for a government because such information would, in the normal course of events, never come to the light of Ministers or senior officials. At the very

least, such information should be investigated and if found valid, remedial action initiated.

Such efforts, including criticism of official actions, should be encouraged and even rewarded. In would, for example suggest that every month a prize be given — perhaps a mobile telephone — to the person writing the best investigative report in any newspaper during that period. This could be judged by an independent panel to ensure objectivity. Ministers should invite their information analysts with them so as to test the validity of their facts and the logic of their criticism. In such an environment a government widens its knowledge base, often beneficially, because it obtains information not at its disposal and may even derive useful ideas about corrective action. Even where no such positive outcome emerges from such exchanges, a government which exposes itself to public debate, generates confidence in its openness, and builds an image of being receptive to outside ideas. Each Minister should thus hold periodic exchanges with a cross section of their critics rather than to limit themselves to token exchanges with their political friends and personal admirers.

All these observations apply particularly to the highest office of the Prime Minister and also the Leader of the Opposition. Each inhabits a rarefied stratosphere where they remain sheltered from unpleasant information. Such concealment is often motivated by those who aspire to retain the favours of their leader by persuading them that all is for the best in the best of all worlds and any criticism of their actions can only originate from malevolent motive. Such people are no friends of a leader but courtiers whose

main goal remains self-advancement. There is no shortage of evidence from our history of leaders who have been pushed into a political crisis because no one around them had the courage to bring unpleasant facts to their notice.

Indeed, such timeservers manage to ensure that those who could render honest advice to our leaders are kept at a safe distance by poisoning the ear of the leader against such people. This tendency to keep leaders insulated from objective evidence is particularly encouraged when leaders demonstrate their displeasure to the bearer of bad news. In ancient times some monarchs had the bearer of bad news executed. Today such messengers may only be consigned to political disfavour but this is enough to ensure that leaders tend to be exposed to just the news they want to hear.

It is time for our leaders to break out of this protective encirclement and throw open their windows to the world by exposing themselves to independent opinion, including encounters with their harshest critics. Our leaders should publicly face such critics and challenge them either by a superior-truth or assimilate their criticisms by putting it to positive use in improving the quality of governance. Acknowledging error is no sign of weakness but a measure of political strength and maturity. Such a self-exposure to criticism by our leaders, thus, presumes that their critics could also be their friends and play a politically beneficial role in our system of governance. It is only in such an open environment of receptivity to criticism that good governance and political statesmanship in Bangladesh may be expected to flourish.

## Elections in Taipei: China-Taiwan Relations

by A S M Nurunnabi

*Taipei's voters seemed to have evaluated the candidates not merely on competence and cleanness, but how they might deal with the mainland.*

TAIWAN'S Ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party celebrated a major victory in crucial elections that marked a setback for the pro-independence opposition, which is likely to be welcomed by China.

The KMT, which has ruled Taiwan for five decades and seeks eventual reunification with China, retook the powerful post of Taipei Mayor from the opposition in a hard-won race and won a comfortable majority in parliament.

It may be worthwhile to recall in part the past relations between China and Taiwan. Efforts to forge relations between Taiwan and People's China began with talks in Singapore in 1993. Follow-up high level meetings planned in 1995 were broken off by Beijing accusing Taiwan government of drifting away from the common goal of reunification. Informal relations between the two countries, however, continued through contacts between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations Across the Straits.

Beijing has insisted that formal talks begin with reunification. On the other hand, Taiwan wants "more co-operation" first starting with practical issues like fishing disputes. However, on a previous occasion, during his visit to China, US President Bill Clinton had pleased the Chinese by publicly endorsing

the "Three Nos" in US relations with Taiwan: no recognition of "Two Chinas", nor of "One China, one Taiwan," and no support for Taiwan's membership in the United Nations or other organisations of sovereign states. That policy statement of the US President was a matter of great encouragement to China in pursuing the ultimate goal of reunification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. In this context, it may be kept in mind that China has always regarded Taiwan as a renegade province.

As observers predicted, the KMT candidate, Chen Shui-bian had no trouble getting re-elected as mayor of Taipei. Since Chen has won re-election, there is speculation in many quarters that he may emerge as the strongest contender for the republic's top job when the incumbent President Lee Teng-hui completes his second and final term two years from now. The significance of that eventuality is regarded as global, keeping in mind the ultimate goal of the Kuomintang (KMT), 53 years in power in Taiwan, favours ultimate unification with China, agreed upon between equals, once the mainland adopts democracy.

The neck-and-neck race between Chen and the opposition leader Ma Ying-jeou, 48, a charismatic former justice Minister in the KMT government, was just one of many key

battles in the Taiwan's voting. The results of the election show that the KMT won a comfortable majority, thus ending the fear of propelling Taiwan into an era of fractious politics and coalition governments. "These election results will impact Taiwan's direction in the 21st century," predicts an analyst. "In relations with China, they will influence the next step as in a game of chess."

Many people in Taiwan are already viewing the Taipei race as a "dress rehearsal" for the presidential election. Chen may seem ready, having earned a reputation as one of the island's foremost heroes in the struggle for democracy. If Chen has been re-elected, there are enough indications that he won't abandon the majority of his party for a presidential bid. But two years' presidential election may look somewhat distant and it is a long time in politics. Taipei's voters seemed to have evaluated the candidates not merely on competence and cleanness, but how they might deal with the mainland.

China's reaction is fluid. The KMT has abandoned its demand that China be reunified under its control. Now, there is a trend of thought that China is a divided country made up of two equally legitimate political entities. Reunification would be a long-term process of trust-building contacts, commerce

and negotiations. Chen, for his part, insists the people of Taiwan, unlike those of Hong Kong, should "have the final right to decide their own destiny." But he also accepts the need to negotiate with Beijing. The distinction may be subtle to an outsider. But since Chen has won, observers feel that there would definitely be a major difference of views for cross-country relations.

There is, however, a school of thought which believes that rapprochement, if not reunification, between China and Taiwan has enormous significance for Asian peace and prosperity. Southeast Asian and East Asian economies in the current economic crisis, it is believed, have obtained significant support from the non-devaluation of the Chinese yuan. Economic and political stability of the region underpinned by former China-Taiwan relations may greatly boost the recovery of Asia-Pacific economies and lay the foundations of Asian resurgence in the coming millennium.

However, strained, it is generally felt by observers that the patient methodology of China-Taiwan repair of relations towards peaceful resolution of disunity and conflicts may be treated as an example that countries in this region may also emulate for their benefit and progress.

## UK Arms Laws Shot Full of Holes

Britain's arms exporters have historically been successive governments' best friends, until the new Labour administration promised, after gaining power in May 1997, to stem the flow of weapons to repressive regimes. Gemini News Service reports that despite assurances, many British firms are getting around the rules thanks to loopholes in the legislation.

Mike Crawley writes from London

AFTER just a few phone calls, a researcher for Oxfam had in his hands a piece of paper that should be incredibly difficult to obtain: an "end-user certificate", bearing all the appropriate government and ministry stamps, a document that would allow him to complete an arms deal.

Britain's Labour government trumpets its policy of refusing to permit any weapons exports without such an end-user certificate, which declares that the weapons are for the sole use of the issuing government and won't be redirected or resold.

At least, that's how it's supposed to work.

But the researcher's phone calls prove that if you know how to ask, an end-user certificate is easy to obtain. And that throws into question whether British law's reliance on such certificates is stopping the flow of weapons to inappropriate destinations.

Similar questions are raised in other parts of a new report from Oxfam, called *Out of Control*. It shows that two major loopholes allow British companies to get around the legislation banning weapons exports to a list of countries deemed to have repressive regimes or "sensitive" civil status, such as Indonesia, Sudan and Algeria. Keynote legislation passed as one of the first acts of the Tony Blair government in July 1997.

A growing number of British companies are acting as arms brokers, buying arms in one country and selling them in another without the weapons passing through Britain. Current legislation means they're doing nothing illegal, yet it al-

lows British companies to get arms into places where direct exports are forbidden by British law.

The British arms broker that's been in the news of late is Sandline International, the private security firm that arranged a shipment of 35 tonnes of weapons and ammunition to Sierra Leone's ousted president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, to help him regain the power he lost in a military coup.

Oxfam says the Labour government should make it illegal for British companies to broker arms to countries covered by a national or international embargo, and should require licences for brokering to other countries.

"It won't mean you're going to completely close the loopholes and control all the brokers, but there would be more control than at present," says Oxfam spokeswoman Patricia O'Rourke.

The second major loophole allows UK arms manufacturers to set up branch plants in foreign countries where export controls are looser and licence them to produce their weapons. The licensed company is then not covered by British law and can export to countries that otherwise would be prohibited destinations. For instance, the British-owned firm Heckler & Koch has a licensed production outfit in Turkey that recently signed a deal to supply 500 sub-machine guns to Indonesia.

Oxfam recommends that Britain look to an unusual source for inspiration for controlling such licensed production: the United States. If an American company would need an export licence to ship a par-

ticular type of weapon from the US, it needs such a licence to produce the weapon overseas.

"It's interesting that despite the image the US has for having control over the availability of arms, this is one aspect in which the US is way ahead of the UK," says O'Rourke.

In addition, US legislation requires arms brokers to register their activities, something that Oxfam thinks Britain should emulate. So now the question remains: will the Labour government do anything about closing these loopholes?

In a policy proposal published in July, the government said controlling the activities of British arms brokers "would be right in principle" but went on to add that in practice the scope of such controls would be rather more restricted. Nor were brokers included in a European Union code of conduct for arms deals passed earlier this year.

The report comes at a time where questions are being asked about Labour's commitment to arms control, and not just by Oxfam. A Commons committee recently criticised the government for failing to tighten controls on the end use of exported weapons and demanded new rules for licensed production.

Also this month, statistics published by the Department of Trade and Industry show that exports of arms and related equipment have fallen less than one per cent of the more than 11,000 applications to export arms in the year leading up to August, a refusal rate that was in fact slightly lower than the rate under the last 10 months of the previous Conservative regime.

Nor do the numbers suggest a

significant reduction in the amount of arms being shipped from Britain: an average of 977 applications were made each month after Labour took power, versus 984 per month under the Tories.

Since there was no mention of pending legislation on controlling arms exports in last month's Queen's Speech, which set out the government's agenda for the coming year, it'll be 2000 at the earliest before anything gets on to paper.

Still, O'Rourke says there's an acknowledgment in government of the problems.

A rising and developing society cannot expect to be governed by a group of super men/women emerging out of the same society. In other words, people get the government they deserve (the well documented 'stable instability' condition). This age-old aphorism is still true, objectively and philosophically speaking. This situation has been recurring in history.

Here is an aside (or, may be it is a case study). Why are we not a more philosophically minded? We are ruled more by the heart than by the head. We have a good head, but we can hardly use it efficiently. There are no seminars on this dull and dry topic, which generate more heat than light.

Our historical cyclones did not allow us to cultivate the admiration of genuine political statesmanship. There is a reason for this attitude — lack of experience, and therefore, maturity, since the '50s, when autocracy surfaced, and ended in 1991 (there were gaps).

Where are the grassroots, and the parliamentary experience? Therefore the politicians cannot be wholly blamed — they were also the victims of circumstances, in that they would not flower in an atmosphere of political freedom (who brings about this freedom is a separate question). There was no adequate time nor the playing field for practising the profession of politics in a nation born only after nine months of active service. In any profession, lapses of loyalty by some of its members is a curse for the society, and the price is extracted in the following years. The professionals need mental freedom to operate in an environment of physical oppression, where security of life is involved. The deterrents were one-sided.

This professionalism is conveniently forgotten, when the majority of our leadership act in an ad hoc manner, obscurely callous to the protection of the silent and helpless masses. We are specialists in starting from zero — 1947, 1971, 1991, 1996. How many times a poor and young nation can start from zero and make the majority happy, and ward off criticism?

This understanding and/or tolerance is missing. The impatience bred from stagnation (mental and physical non-de-

velopment) has resulted in intolerance, and we see angry reactions at all levels of the society, whether it is the labour front, the service associations, the students, the civil service, the businessmen, or the politicians. Indiscipline has become an accepted culture, loudly and openly displayed in full defiance of the authority. And the helplessness of the state machinery feels is apparent. In the political realm, the sense of direction is lost frequently.

Due to 75 per cent illiteracy, the use of the students as political workers has ruined their lives through campus violence and street agitation. The cult of violence is now well-established. What is not happening in the Jatiya Sangsad? How effectively can a team can rule if it cannot resist temptation, and whose tolerance factor is very low?

Such sensitive questions have to be faced by those who deign to govern, simply because the destiny of the masses are in their hands. Parties rise and fall, but the society becomes the dumping ground of political garbage. If the party precedes the country, the rise will take infinite time, regardless of the number of street agitations.

A free oscillating pendulum can only come to rest (zero point) after a long period of damped oscillations, swinging between plus and minus, alternately, till the nation is fit to govern itself in a stable manner. This is the 'zero-point' which should be our goal, and not some street inter-section known popularly as the Zero Point in Dhaka city.

Current comment (1998): Our 'bottomless basket' image has changed baskets, from economic to moral. Morality is an internal problem, where no foreigner can help (no new technology or foreign investment involved). The politicians (on one side) show us one side of the coin, either the better side or the worse side, but not both simultaneously. Hence opposition is necessary to reveal the other side (two hands needed for clapping).

The academics and intellectuals are supposed to be neutral in the treatment of their subject. How far this is generally true in the present state of the society is a matter of opinion, because there are unseen deterrents, and no gentleman would

like to be hassled. The party icons have eclipsed the country's image. The country's leadership could not as yet tap the God-given homogeneity of the Bengalee society (overwhelmingly one culture, one language, in a compact land, with dense population). The law and order situation has deteriorated; corruption and politicisation have been institutionally allied, and ideologies prevail over pragmatism and practice.

The hidden moral degradation at the upper levels of the society are not being honestly exposed, as birds of feather keep together, and it is difficult to break the Gordian knot without self-exposure (what is happening in Indonesia in the effort to trap and trip Suharto).

Toll collection has become a parallel source of private revenue collection through vested groups headed by known godfathers, who are playing the Jekyll and Hyde roles. Graff has been grafted into the skin of people without conscience who have now become powerful, and dominate the society. Like a coin, good and evil cannot be seen at the same time.

The media is basking with loopholes in the state contracts, and the JS is ignored as a forum of public information. The JS, like any piece of machinery (structure) has two sides, one exposed, and the other hidden. While operation is visible, maintenance is invisible (behind the scenes). Similar is motive and action (the two go together, like man and his shadow). The motive behind any action must be transparent (read the latest scandal on the disclosure on betting by two famous Aussie cricketers).

The current forces of governance (includes the official opposition) are at loggerhead as seen at the recent by-election in Pabna. The polarisation of the NGOs is an ominous trend, as perceived through the melee in Brahmanbaria.

The state of governance is typical of the traffic jams seen on the metropolitan streets. Chaos is the order of the day, whether at the 'Eden Building' or at the New Eskaton and Shantinagar.

A small candle can remove all the darkness around it, but all the darkness cannot remove the light from a tiny candle. There is a message therein.

thing equivalent".

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Shelton said there were "two main objectives", one to degrade the weapons of mass destruction programme, and two "to reduce (Saddam's) ability to threaten his neighbours. From the objectives that we laid out, from the targets that we had, it has been very successful".

But, according to UN Weapons Inspectors and other experts, Iraqis are masters of hiding their assets and it is difficult to assess the extent of lasting damage.

Seven years of inspection in Iraq has revealed that Iraqis have extremely well developed plans for moving weapons and factory machinery out of the way of bombs

— IANS

## Gains from Air Strikes Appear Modest at Best

Vasantha Arora writes from Washington

While damage assessments was not yet complete, "based on what we have seen to date, looking at these photographs, you can see that repair facility and its production capability for the missiles, that has been destroyed," Shelton said.

When asked how the Allies would know what Saddam Hussein was doing if Iraq refused to allow the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspectors back, Cohen said "All of the sanctions are going to remain in place. Saddam is not going to be in a position to rebuild or reconstitute in any easy fashion."

He also said the Allied forces "will remain in place... so that if he tries to reconstitute that capability we're prepared to take it down again". The UNSCOM inspectors were ineffective because they were being prevented from carrying out

their mission and mandate. When asked about why allied forces attacked the Republican Guards, Cohen said "We have always indicated these are the people who maintain control of the (Saddam's) weapons of mass destruction programme. They maintain the security of it. They also maintain the transportation of it."

Speaking about more air strikes in the future, Shelton noted that the US has remained "a very substantial force in the Gulf for over 20 years... and our plan is to retain that to ensure that Saddam does not threaten the region."

Shelton said the strikes were carried out "substantially by the force that was in the region and that we have kept in the region. We didn't have to build up almost anything. That is the same force that will stay there now and is prepared to do some-

thing equivalent".

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