

FOCUS

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 hatchetmen 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 their 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, *Ododesha ta k?* (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 one's political opponents or is trying to undermine some particular person for personal and/or political reasons.

Attributing malevolent 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 shortcoming 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 fair 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 share 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 devolves 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 practises of people along 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 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 practise 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 malevolent 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 their 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 bring 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 love to 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 academic critics to share their information and analysis 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 a 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 advise 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.

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 cleanliness, 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 meeting planned in 1995 was 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.

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 reelected, there are enough indications that he won't abandon the majority of his party for a presidential bid. But two years to 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 cleanliness, but how they might deal with the mainland.

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 eventually may be kept in mind that China has always regarded Taiwan as a renegade province.

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