

Hartal : How Much Sensible Is It?

by Md Asadullah Khan

It is about time the middle class launched a movement to introduce probity and accountability in the system.

turing into an inflammable area. And it would be very hard experience for the country or the party that might come to power in future to get rid of this scourge of hartals.

Presumably, the higher a government's credibility with private sector, as experts opine, the higher will be private investment and economic growth. This calls for upholding the rule of law and establishing a judiciary independent of the interference from the executive. It must be emphasized here that no nation that disregards rule of law and ignores individual rights can prosper in the long run. So instead of resorting to frequent hartal call, on such flimsy issues, why not the aggrieved parties either protest or call hartal to free the judiciary from the interference of the executive? Parties or powers that be would never have dabbled or dared in filthy vote buying tactics or terror politics on the eve of election if only cases instituted against rigging were promptly dealt with. Because only an independent judiciary will have the power to protect the rights of an individual from arbitrary state action or from the tyranny of the majority. It is knowledgeably learnt that at present there are about 200,000 court cases pending for either decision or settlement including some polls cases instituted right after the election.

When people belonging to all segments of the society know that it is only the instruments of government that violate individual rights it is better to cure the disease than its symptoms. Although hartals are often used as a means to challenge the government of the day, but people in the country by now feel that it is being overtly used as a weapon to damage the economy rather than destabilizing the government. People are now convinced that hartals these days are not the means to register protest but violation of individual rights. Most importantly the right to earn a living for either an individual or his family. People have seen how this democratic right wreaked economic growth and development during the long hartal period for two years in 1994-96. On the other hand the ruling party must allow the opposition to express its views freely and openly and efforts be taken to dissolve the conflicting points through discussion. The opposition parties this time could have heeded the mediation proposal of the CEC to avert such an extreme measure.

This hartal 'practice' after independence has started in this country because of BNP's (then ruling party) nonchalance and intransigence in accepting parliamentary elections under a caretaker government after the Magura by poll fiasco. And since then people have been paying a heavy price through loss of lives and property whenever a hartal was imposed. And now, as we see it, the biggest casualty to this post-election fiasco and turmoil turns out to be the badly needed economic expansion, as foreign investors and donors grow wary of ven-

dollar per day. Truly speaking, there is hardly any reason on earth why the country should remain perpetually in such a bad shape. We have enormous resources of such large cohort of talented and labour worthy youth and sea, even beaches like Cox's Bazar and Kuakata where tourism could bring substantial earnings. But sadly true, because of medieval transport system, frequent incident of terrorism, violence and hijacking and in absence of suitable hotels and inns, such prospects are dying out.

In absence of sound policies and proper administrative action, we are losing whatever prospect we had. Even the glimmer of garments and shrimp export, that appeared to be so bright for a while even despite reports of mismanagement and corruption are now fading out because of these frequent hartal call and port lock-out. Most shocking and outrageous, the whole country is so frequently being held to ransom by a handful of hoodlums who are out on the street backed by the blessings of some unscrupulous politicians to protect the rights of the people. Whose rights are they protecting? If that was the avowed desire then these vast cohort of people would not have been languishing in poverty and destitution. It is about time to ponder whether general public, especially the poor and the middle class do ever care to listen to such hartal calls. Precisely true, these turn-coat politicians and their lackeys would always be getting seasonal payments from some business groups and even loans from banks without any collaterals and never minding to return it ever. But could the general people ever think of getting such facilities?

Conscious citizenry hold this view that all elections, be it Union Parishad, Pourashava or more precisely, Parliamentary, should be held in a fair and regular manner free from rigging, manipulation or vote buying, as it is often called these days. Issuance of voter identity cards is the first step in that direction. We have to ensure that each and every eligible voter gets his or her ID cards before election. The Election Commission should, from time to time, issue circular on methodology they are adopting to attain that objective and they must at the same time respond to public criticism without being over confident or bureaucratic in their behaviour and

Since 1973 upto this time all these glorious years! looks as bad as did in the early period of 1971. Nearly 70 per cent of our people have no job, live in abysmal poverty, more than half are completely illiterate, have no access to sanitation, safe drinking water or health care. Things are so bad in the countryside that hundreds of people pour into the capital city every day because life here is 'better' than it is in the villages. Our enquiry reveals that not to speak of the illiterate and the poor many of the rickshaw pullers in the city having no jobs or other means of living in the villages do now eke out a living in the city streets.

Many companies providing security guards to many offices and organisations, both private and government, have been recruiting personnel, many of whom are even graduates, just at a paltry pay of Tk. 1600 per month which is less than a

operational strategy. Reports circulated in a vernacular daily in the recent past about the slow progress of voter ID cards preparation in certain areas under Chittagong City Corporation seems highly disturbing. Reports have it that voter ID cards preparation by taking photographs of the voters was highly flawed since the programme was not given enough publicity through mass media. The convenience of working class men and women as regards presenting themselves for photograph was not taken into account. People in authority must remember that in next parliamentary election without issuance of voter identity cards with photograph, as agreed earlier in 1993, could spell disaster.

It is difficult to accept that politicians at the helm of affairs have inherited Bangabandhu's mantle. It is even harder to understand that a decade that has almost completed a decade and that should have matured in the meantime cannot produce men and women of sturdier political morality. Precisely true, over the years political awareness and participation have increased among all segments of the population and more importantly political mobilization is especially high in rural areas where 80 per cent of the country's 120 million people live.

The credit report on both sides of the fence looks very disappointing: Khaleq with a 'Razakar' background joins AL and then runs away for non-filament of hopes and aspirations and BNP accommodates Ershad, once its arch-rival, in the alliance! Ershad was rejected by people for his nine years of misrule, corruption, debauchery and lies. That is, these turn-coat politicians means political parties have hardly any semblance of principle or conviction or judgement in matters of art of the state. Taking all these ominous developments into consideration, it is about time the middle class launch a new political movement to introduce probity and accountability in the system. There is a dark despair in the air of the country to-day that Bangabandhu could not have predicted.

Among a people generally corrupt (in principle and practice) liberty cannot long exist. Edmund Burke said long ago, Bangabandhu, immediately after liberation of the country from the clutches of the tyrannical Pakistani hordes reiterated the same statement. His words as well as Edmund Burke's are no less true to-day, and it would behoove our people to listen carefully to the celebrated political icons.

cal parties is much less than that of their respective bureaucracies; (v) some good provisions for control such as government servants' conduct rules, hierarchy, efficiency and disciplinary rules, field inspection, auditing, judicial powers to the courts to control administrative decisions affecting people's rights.

In fact it is a common belief among older generation that more justice was administered during the British rule than during Pakistan day or in Bangladesh. There are good reasons for such belief. The British officers were not involved in the internal politics of the country. As such they could take a rational view in any matter. They were also aware of their alien surrounding. Such awareness prompted them to be more responsible.

An administrative reform commission is working on preparing recommendations for a bureaucratic structure appropriate for a democratic Bangladesh. At the moment strict compliance of existing rules operationalising the constitutional provisions for setting up of the office of Ombudsman and strengthening of administrative tribunal are necessary. Judicial control is dependent on development of more democratic institutions such as free press, stronger bar associations, free universities etc. Development of such institutions takes time; but without conscious and concerted effort we may not see such institutions even in the distant future.

The writer is a retired Joint Secretary, Govt. of Bangladesh.

The View from Dhaka

Euro vs the US Dollar

by A Husnain

A large section of Asians who deal with foreign transactions must be sighing with relief at the introduction of the Euro currency (290 million basic users) from the beginning of this year, signalling, hopefully, the end of the monopoly of the super American Dollar as the lone global currency in the third world.

It may tilt the balance and hedging of the USD, in a way not dissimilar to the turbulence in the Asian financial markets experienced since last year. The superpower (two assets, dollars and arms) will be facing competition, and military arms cannot be used to solve this new crisis.

The Europeans know what they are doing, besides they have been playing with the idea for many years (the UK playing safe in her weakness). The French and the Germans know when to take a stand, and how to defend it, in spite of a weak and disintegrating Europe trying to stabilise by putting up a joint front (unite when weak).

Current transparency is a desperate move, from any angle. No more raids such as those on Iraq and Afghanistan, and non-action as in Bosnia and Kosovo, and open partiality with the Israel as in Palestine, because the balance will be tilted by what would be happening at the Wall Street, and not at the White House (Grey House,

some cynics are quick to point out). Recently, at a BBC interview, one of America's top financial analysts predicted a fall of WS by as much as 30 to 40 per cent in the near future—the silver clouds have black linings looking up the financial horizon. The UN is gone, and now G Soros is looking after his business, and offering 'free' tips how to make the money roll or stack up (trying to manipulate the IMF indirectly).

Fluidity is the theme of the age, therefore ups and downs will be monthly featured in the monitored confirms the financial debacle in Brazil—eight per cent down, and billions of currency units withdrawn. Apart from the coming macro effect of the US impeachment trial, the EU is facing a major challenge with the demand for the resignation of the Commission due to internal corrupt practices. Will a new European arise, even after US filibustering (low-key polite approval now to the Euro, but how long is it going to last, knowing the US propensity for undue pressure tactics on selected targets, subjectively decided)?

If the global trading in USD is reduced by 10 to 15 per cent in the near future due to 'transfers', and the Euro threatens to become the second global currency, what would be the strength and image of the dollar? It is a critical monitoring

by all the nations. Anyway, new situations will appear and disappear. The sea is roughing up, and navigation cannot be rudimentary.

The Japanese Yen continues to live with a demure and isolated image, having missed the boat earlier to enter the global trading level to compete with the mighty dollar. Now it is all the more difficult with continuing deep recession extending into the new century, and value of the Yen (in the region of 110 to the dollar). Laureate Amartya Sen has just warned in London that India was facing a financial crisis (the explained how and why, China is living in a shell and its immediate impact on the global market may be ignored for forecasting purposes (HK is billious). Therefore the overall outlook in Asia is bleak. How to break up the vicious circle? It is a multi-billion dollar question.

The Europeans have to play their cards carefully, first to stabilise themselves, and then conduct marginal raids on the US dollar, as a move to simulation exercise, before bringing in the big guns. For the marginalised Third World, some semblance of openings and options might surface. The stakes are low, but any change might help. The Euro-dollar battle will affect liquidity globally. If the pace becomes uncontrollable, nobody knows what will happen.

Discarding the Practice of Extending Service

by A R Shamsul Islam

This is a wrong and raw concept that Mr X or Mr Y is indispensable in service and his departure will create a vacuum not to be filled up by another.

Of late the government officials have displayed a greater urge to obtain (capture) extension of service. In fact in majority of the cases, applications for extension are tabled sizing up the candidates as pro-ruling party. Though antecedents of a lot of them, if carefully verified, may not support it. However their advocates figure them up on paper like that to facilitate the task. Sometimes the final authority denying the sanction is deceived by her or his own so-called trustees.

The trumpet of reformation of public administration has been blown loud and long. The PARC (Public Administration Reform Committee) working presently has also customarily underscored the need for improving quality of administration, terming it as irresponsible, inefficient, unaccountable, not people-friendly. As a matter of fact, the government's prolific publicity to effect reforms in administration on one hand and exercising bulkier sanctions to extension of service of the officials on the other are anything but compatible.

Recently in a roundtable discussion convened by the PARC the ex-civil servants spoke, inter alia, strongly against the system of extending service on retirement. Of them four became ministers and two served as cabinet secretaries. Their unanimous opinion has all the merit to be considered in proper perspective.

Of course, there is a provision in service rules for extension of service. But it obviously enjoins an obligation to use it with high discretion. The implied conditions under which it is intended to operate do, in reality, scarcely exist. It may be mentioned that there are some provisions in the service rules that are meant to apply very rarely, if not never. As for example, there is a provision that an employee can be removed from service on three months' notice or by paying three months' pay in lieu thereof. But who puts the provision into practice and how often? Of course the latter provision may not be equated with the former.

There are instances of thunderous bickering against extension of service leading to untoward events hardly short of a pitched battle. A couple of years back when a chief engineer of R&H Division was given extension practically the entire division got divided over the issue and literally came to grips. Ultimately the situation was salvaged but not before a good

round of strikes, gheraos, scuffles were charged as tolls. What is more unfortunate is that an impartial probe into the matter could not render it convincing that the chief engineer's extension was necessary in the interest of the public.

Different cadres of services have registered almost unbroken protests against extension and warned the authority of its consequences. Still the government hangs on repeating this practice. Whatever pleas and apologies the government has explored to have, the hazards of sanctioning an extension, some of which are delineated below, should not be belittled and left uncared for by the government.

First, an extension blocks the promotion of subordinates in a chain. It gives them utter frustration and deep wrath with their job.

Second, in one sense it defeats the philosophy of service rules. An employee is sent to the LPR (leave preparatory to retirement) at the age of fifty-seven assuming that he has crossed the age usually permitting him to perform his optimum service. This concept does not hold good in extension cases. Of course there is no legal bar to extending service under extraordinary circumstances. But the exception should not be lowered beyond its sacred plane to reach the vicinity of the general. This is unethical and counter-productive.

Third, ill use of the rule of exception raises doubt about transparency of the government. It speaks against fairness. It smacks of politicisation which gravely harms governance. Employees are servants of the Republic. They should not be demeaned as tools of the party.

Fourth, questionable sanction of extension tures the employees to be politically biased. It robs the Republic of the fair service of the aspirant employees particularly in the lag end of their service life. It may degenerate them to wield their pen to the tune of party slogans. Further they may be pushed to indulge in activities accounting for political victimisation and repression. The Opposition and all regimes has protested and condemned this alleged unwholesome and undemocratic practice of the government.

Fifth, of late there have come up a lot of political touts crowding into government offices to tempt and trap the officials to apply for extension. Generally they approach them at the penultimate age of the LPR and deftly offer assurance

to achieve extension in return for what may be called in their language as tips or incidental expenses in cash or kind. Any but stern and outrightly fair personalities may be prevailed upon by these 'thugs'. They start exploiting victims till the last day of, and sometimes months after, the LPR. Most cases prove false to the utter agony of the deceived though sporadic successes occur hither and thither to keep the game of extension hunting on board. In the prevailing, tantalizing atmosphere a lot of officials are being victimised. A lot more who withstand lure of extension for their interest for work dry up.

Extension of service that was once confined to top level officials has now even reached down to the middle rung. 'Tad-birkaris' have increased and spread over every nook and corner of the country.

Even when extension of service is done without political or partisan motives there remain questions about its indispensability. In fact this is a wrong and raw concept that Mr X or Mr Y is indispensable in service and his departure will create a vacuum not to be filled up by another. Discarding this idea would better provide adequate arrangements to properly train up the juniors to ably and amply substitute the seniors. Public administration is like chain work. One incumbent passes out leaving the file to the next to pull it on well. The process goes on unendingly. Instead of caring to methodically groom up the employees to cope with the increasing burden of duties likely to fall upon them on retirement of their seniors, if the government unwisely and excessively risks upon the LPR listed elderly officers, the onward march of the files and facts will not only be hampered but retarded as well. This habit is not only futile but suicidal.

Hence the practice of extending service of the employees on retirement should be stopped forthwith without further ado. The question is which party—the Awami League or the BNP on either of which the mantle of the government will continue, in every likelihood—is required to fire the first salvo? The Awami League being the party in power at present is naturally called out first to meet this piece of great historic need.

There is an old saying: 'Man proposes God disposes'. We are afraid to add a new saying: 'People demand, parties deny'.

The writer is retired Principal, Pabna Govt Mahila College.

Bangladesh Bureaucracy

Accountability and Responsibility

by ABMS Zahur

An administrative reform commission is working on preparing recommendations for a bureaucratic structure appropriate for a democratic Bangladesh. At the moment strict compliance of existing rules, operationalising the constitutional provisions for setting up of the office of Ombudsman and strengthening of administrative tribunal are necessary.

organisational goals. Through the process of appropriations, the legislature can expand or contract the activities of agencies. The Bangladesh parliament has limited power in matters of administration as may be seen from Articles 76 (2), 82, 90, 91 and 93. Though article 76 (2) gives parliament the power to appoint standing committees to inquire into the activities of the ministries very limited powers under Articles 82, 89, 91 and 93 have made the parliament almost ineffective. The important reasons for limited public accountability of Bangladesh bureaucracy, as identified, are discussed below:

a. The bureaucracy of a developing country with a colonial past holds more power than the bureaucracy of a developed country. As such there is greater danger of abuse of power by such a bureaucracy.

b. British India did not give enough attention to public accountability because it was not needed in that pattern of administration. In Pakistan because of the dominance of bureaucracy upto 1971 accountability could not gain enough importance. This resulted in a gap between the bureaucrats and the politicians leading to rather maintenance of distance between the administration and the people.

c. Due to lack of public accountability sometimes even a sound government policy fails. In India one of the main reasons for the fall of Indira government was over zealousness of the public servants for making family planning programmes successful. The movement for separatism started from the police firing during political agitation of 1952 (an act of administrative indiscretion) ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh.

d. It may not be appropriate to consider the US congressional budgeting procedures as a model for Bangladesh at this stage. But more detailed discussion on development budget is necessary for reducing wastage through modification or change in the resource allocation. In fact the people, particularly the elite, may be informed about the expenditure of the government through such discussions.

Because of political instability it may be advisable for Bangladesh to develop internal controls to contain the conflicts arising out of multiple organisational goals or to determine priorities in achieving them. Keeping in view the need

for flexibility and openness to quicken the process of development the following measures are suggested:

(i) Replacement of complete audit of all expenditures with selected audits of some expenditures will save the auditing forces a lot of time and effort. If the sampling technique is statistically well prepared it results in no significant loss in financial control.

(ii) The present system of field inspection needs improvement. Field inspections may be made on an announced schedule basis. To an experienced and alert inspector, deception is not possible even if inspection is announced beforehand. The announced inspection does not create fear, distrust, and hostility, but encourages the positive and cooperative attitude which an organisation needs to perform in an optimally effective manner.

(iii) The instructions issued should be less ambiguous to make them really effective.

(iv) Though all the needs cannot be satisfied in designing a rule there is tremendous scope for ingenuity, expertise and sensitivity in devising new and improving old rules.

(v) Like other bureaucracies, Bangladesh bureaucracy over-react to failure of internal communication. What is needed is better integration of objectives, particularly the major political objectives rather than procedural matters. There must be a balance between the needs for legality, accuracy etc. and the need to respond promptly politically sensitive objectives.

Limits of Control Generally speaking, control has three main purposes: a) to ensure that bureaucracy carries out its functions in accordance with goals determined; b) to ensure non-violation of general wishes of the citizenry; and c) to ensure elimination of arbitrary bureaucratic decisions violating individual rights.

The administrators are expected to play an active role in improving public policies. As political actors they are expected to use their power resources to bring about outcomes in the public interest. In Bangladesh with its low rate of literacy and urbanisation the dominant pressure groups are counted in policy making. In such situation the concept of public interest can easily be neglected unless firmly grasped by administrators as an ethical imperative to guide decisions.

A big gap exists between the

policy makers' ideals of development and response to crisis in Bangladesh. This has generated strong social pressures to transform society. Such pressure may create violent dissatisfaction with the existing conditions. In a crisis-laden country such as Bangladesh, retreating to crisis tends to decrease the utility of majority participation in implementing critical decisions and increase the importance of bureaucratic expertise for defining problems and elaborating alternatives.

Developed system of controls has weaknesses as well. The more important of them are: (i) it may lead to inefficiency; (ii) it may inhibit administrative innovation and enterprise; and (iii) it may create conflict and distrust.

Like many other issues in social sciences it is difficult to give a clear-cut verdict on the issue of control of bureaucracy. Certain factors must be considered before giving any judgement on this issue. They are: (i) usually bureaucracy is relatively more developed organisation than any other organisation in the country; (ii) the majority of the population are illiterate; (iii) the information media are ill-developed; (iv) in developing countries with colonial past development of political

parties is much less than that of their respective bureaucracies; (v) some good provisions for control such as government servants' conduct rules, hierarchy, efficiency and disciplinary rules, field inspection, auditing, judicial powers to the courts to control administrative decisions affecting people's rights.

After President General Ershad we have had up to now witnessed the rule of two female Prime Ministers. Our first lady Prime Minister was the wife of Late President General Ziaur Rahman, Madam Khaleda Zia. She was followed by the daughter of Late President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Mrs. Hasina Wazed. Gone are those days when the female leadership was a topic of ridicule. 'A WOMEN'S PLACE IS IN THE HOME' statements like these have settled under the dusts of town history pages. In a country such as ours, it is quite difficult to imagine female leadership. Though one might argue that triumphant lady rulers have ruled in our neighboring countries too. Well, not exactly. Mrs. Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan is still under pressure politically and Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India had her entire family murdered. Compared to democratic countries as such, having two female Prime Ministers one after the other in our country is

quite amazing. Yet there could be only one conclusion drawn from this scenario. Either the voting system in our country is extremely fair or the rights of women are being properly implemented, at long last.

Unfortunately none of the last two points are. The voting system has never been fair in our country. Corruption starts from the grass-root levels and stems all the way up to the heads of governments. So who can we trust? Who are we to trust? A lot of these questions will go unanswered. And what saddens us all is that the rights of women have been violated so much during the last two regimes that one might think, exactly what are the authorities up to? Are they completely blind, or is an invisible force keeping them tied up? There is so much hype about 'Women's Rights' in our society nowadays that it gets one bewildered. Organizations are springing up everywhere like mushrooms. Donors

from foreign countries are simply pouring their coffers out. Big personalities are constantly making even bigger speeches in rallies and seminars, screaming at the top of their lungs, trying to make an impression that they know a lot. Once every year we see in the dailies ready-made speeches made by the PRs of the President, Prime Minister and the top brass concerned regarding women's rights in our country. We see medals and awards being given out to outstanding individuals.

This whole act is nothing but a big joke. Write-ups and articles are constantly printed in numerous journals by the extremely few ladies who dared to. The others remain MUM! Maybe this is one of those taboo 'things' that you don't discuss in front of the children. It doesn't matter whether a particular woman resides in the village or the city. Problems faced by them does not differ

much in quality but intensify as it gets worse the lower you go down the income scale. Living in an ivory tower one cannot comprehend the aches and pains a woman goes through specially in a developing country. Sitting in a fancy air-conditioned office and scanning through colorful charts just prepared by a gorgeous secretary shall never depict the true picture of how women's rights are being violated, every single second in our country. Therefore we need a clearer picture of what is really going on. Ours is a very religious and conservative country. And in such a country the young ladies are brought up even more religiously and conservatively. Therefore the problems women face are not only kept in the dark, the evidence along with the crime is destroyed. Many an article has been printed in the past by well known researchers and celebrities regarding this topic, and they have come up

with numerous constructive ideas. Instead of wasting time sitting we should turn those theoretical tasks into practice. It would be silly to expect the violated women to come to us, we should go to them instead. Not only is it difficult for a woman to live with the idea that she has been victimized, but discussing her problem is even worse. Education is the second most powerful weapon that can be used for women who have been betrayed. Each and every single woman should be taught what their rights are and what they are to expect. Under normal circumstances a woman isn't even aware of her basic rights until it is way too late. The first powerful weapon for dishonored women is the complete destruction of fundamentalism as well as the creation of equal rights and justice for all. Certain social and religious customs should be reviewed and modernized if necessary. More exposure of this social disease is mandatory. This virus cannot be eliminated but controlled.