

# The Daily Star

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## Administrative Reform Agenda

Judging by the piles of recommendations made by different commissions on administrative reform and the plethora of symposia held on the subject so far, one would have thought that the issue had received the priority it deserved. Only that we have got nowhere even after such straining of the vocal chord. This means that while reorganisation of the services has been a long-felt necessity, withdrawal syndrome invariably set in whenever the chips came down. In other words, when hard decisions needed to be taken to push the recommendations through, we relented. As a matter of fact, at the back of every government's mind worked a fear complex that perhaps it was too uphill a task to undertake; for an attempted overhaul might send tremors through the very administration with which it had to work. That a gradualist but determined approach was feasible within a definitive time-frame never apparently occurred to the professed change-seekers.

All of this negative pull boils down to lack of political will on three specific levels. First, the ruling party resigned itself to a rhetoric mode preferring a laid-back attitude to a hands-on one lest the applecart were upset. Secondly, two successive opposition parties since the return of democracy in 1990 engaged themselves in movements to 'topple' the government of the day with the result that the ruling party became too self-protective and insulated to stir up the hornet's nest of administrative reform. On the contrary, it succumbed to a passion for politicisation of the administration ending up undercutting the very 'political will' they so direly needed to embark upon reforms. Last but not the least, there had been some bureaucratic top-brass who got cold feet on the reform agenda for fear of losing their predominant position in the system. Those who were supposed to be vanguarding the reform process had their minds set against it.

So, it is not an ordinary political will we are looking for; to all intents and purposes, bipartisan political consensus has to be forged on at least four points of mutual concern: One, an elected government should be allowed to run its full course to make the reform possible. Two, there ought to be a common understanding between the ruling party and the opposition to the effect that 'properly' reorganised services would be in the equal interest of both sides whose positions in a democracy are inter-changeable in terms of being in power or out of it. Three, in light of that basic approach, both sides need to reach a consensus at their experts' level on the basic contents of the reform package. Finally, if the above three conditions are fulfilled, the bureaucracy would be wholeheartedly behind the reforms.

The three-day International Seminar on Administrative Reforms for Development of Bangladesh, held under the auspices of PARC, CPD and BUP took a close look at the options available and put forward a few core recommendations for administrative reform. The downsizing of the government can start by straightforwardly abolishing one lakh posts which have remained vacant over the years. At least, thereby, one-thirteenth of the bloated 13 lakh-strong officialdom will be curtailed. What is, however, central to 'less governance' is how quickly we can reduce the regulatory control of the government machinery at all levels. An effective local government system not only do that but could also help curb the partisan administrative culture and the unhealthy competition between the ruling party and the opposition across the politico-administrative spectrum. For the sake of striking at the root of corruption and ensuring transparency in the administration the long-standing rule requiring that government servants and politicians declare their assets and properties needs to be strictly applied now. As for greater transparency and accountability we do need to do away with the Official Secrecy Act, 1921 together with openness practised in signing contracts with foreign companies. The reform cycle will be complete with an effective decentralisation of powers to the local government including those of decision-making, service-delivery, accounting and auditing.

The core thrust of administrative reform has to be on transparency, accountability and ultimate answerability to the parliament, all rolled into one.

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HAN Suyin, eminent writer and faithful chronicler of post-revolution China, reminisces about growing up in Beijing in the '20s. And she writes: "when I was ten years old, I went to school in Peking in a rickshaw, a vehicle pulled by a running man. In the winter I could see along the sidewalks big small bundles of rags. They were the dead bodies of men, women and small babies, dead of cold and starvation. There were many babies."

Later when she was a doctor in Hong Kong what she remembers most were the suicides. "There were sometimes five or six a day. These people killed themselves not for love but because they were dying anyway - dying of hunger. Brought back to life they cried: 'Now I shall have to die all over again'."

Again, in the early '60s as she was travelling by train through a region in Central India made desolate by famine, she saw hordes of skeletal people trying to get on the already full train at every station. They were hoping to run away from death to big cities. "But it was no use, in the city, they lay about the streets, too weak to beg, waiting for the mercy of death."

I am reminded of what playwright Bejon Bhattacharya saw in 1943. "I spotted in a Calcutta street a crawling baby fumbling over the corpses searching for its mother's breast. The mother was already dead".

Now that peasant revolution has transformed people's lives in China and democratic reforms, albeit at a lesser speed and pace, in India and South Asia, why am I haunted by the nightmare still? Because hunger and death through hunger persist, although not in such overwhelming dimension as before. Because Freedom from want still eludes sizeable segments of population and without this freedom the others are nothing but written in the wind. Man or woman does not live by bread alone, but without bread she or he cannot live at all. Because I want to underscore the tremendous change in thought of the poor that this freedom is made by man and not a gift of God. What has happened, during the transformation process of the last three to five decades is this renewed belief in man's right and his ability to master his environment. "Disease, ignorance, want can be conquered by the collective, united efforts of human beings working together for the good of all." One could argue that the demobilized, fragmented and systematically degraded poor are finding a new base of strength in cooperative togetherness, in the collectivity of solidarity groups.

That brings me to the earlier situation so graphically presented by Han Suyin. One can easily discern the then common strategy of the poor namely, that of loyalty to predetermined social formation of which they must take account in their action, but which they play no part in perpetrating or changing. An extreme and sinister example is in study by anthropologist William Torry of isolated villages in India and their response to famine situation.

It is foreseen that there will not be enough food for everyday. So the power-holders in the system provide

shorter rations to the disenfranchised, the marginal and the politically ineffectual. The victims in such a situation do realize who is destined to starve. Whatever the principles of exclusion from security - whether by birth, sex or age - these exclusions determine who will get less as resources diminish and who will finally be left to starve. The pre-ordained victims meekly accept the fate. When the crisis is over, some of them survive but surely have lost their children or kin. Do they resent? No. They recognize the doom of their families as a normal part of crisis conditions. They take up their old relationship of services without grievance and gratefully. Why? Because they know vaguely the system, however unjust, exists. Their alienation from the system and isolation from each other due to the precariousness of their livelihood render their understanding of the system's structure as partly confused and as given. Without shared understanding of the situation by the isolated victims, they do not possess the wherewithal to identify possible leverage points for its modification. So the only liberty they are left with is that of death.

Some of them take the riskier option of 'Exit'. A few fortunates may succeed. For the many Han Suyin's experience of desperation and death in the then Hong Kong or Central India hold true if brought back to life, they cry out: "Now I shall have to die again". They riskiest option for the poor is that of voice in the form of collective organization, solidarity groups, protest and resistance. That is what happened in China during the peasant revolution. The poor peasants got organized to reclaim their right of freedom from feudal oppression. That is what happened with the poor tribals in ten villages of Bangladesh in a non-revolutionary situation and in the wake of severe drought and near-famine situation in 1979, so well documented by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. That is how Kojtun an abandoned woman who joined the Grameen Bank made a difference between life and death and regained here self-esteem and dignity.

But there is an imponderable there. How can the poor get organized without the basic security and knowledge of champions strong and firm enough to assist? Peasant societies divided among themselves are vulnerable to retaliation if they join together or speak out. Women and sharecroppers, day laborers and the tribals have been routinely brutalized. Recourse to judicial system is not only expensive but also out of reach for them.

Peasants in pre-revolution China only got organized when they had the security ring of the Red Army as they advanced from village to village. Even in a non-radical situation as in West Bengal when the government first tried to register share-croppers so that they would hand over the legal maximum of one

quarter of the crops to their landlords instead of the traditional one-half, some share-croppers pleaded with tears in their eyes not to be registered. They feared the insecurity that would follow if they alienated the landlords - the loss of loan to meet contingency needs such as when food ran out, a child was sick, a dowry had to be found or a ceremony performed. It is only when the local party and government cadre assured them of subsequent support that they organized themselves and got registered.

The examples in Bangladesh that I referred to earlier of BRAC and Grameen also underscores the importance of outside intervention for the poor to get organized. Thus they can have access to means of production from outside as also to means of thinking to fully grasp the complex social relations of which they are a part.

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## Of Fate and Freedom

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access to credit and capital which GB provides. What is equally important, however, is the common knowledge they are creating through shared experiences of the group and the outside information that goes beyond their immediate experience. On that basis they themselves build up their activities and networking of institutions growing out of their own requirements.

There are more questions. In the revolutionary context of Chaina's transformation the security for mobilization of the peasantry was provided by the Red Army. In peaceful evolutionary changes that the social movements in Bangladesh are unleashing, the critical limiting factor is not the insecure poor themselves, it is the sustained commitment of catalysts and facilitators.

Some may argue further that the need for personally disinterested external catalysts represents a contradiction. Every elite has a few deviants willing to set a side their own immediate material interests to serve their poor compatriots. Such individuals can work the miracle of social mobilization. But how does one find enough clones of Professor Yunus to touch

more than marginally the lives of millions of poor? Or again, committed individuals may be willing to make heroic sacrifices in the short terms, but to expect them to do over the long haul is something much more difficult. Even the saints get tired of misery and squalor and, most of all, isolation from the elite culture. Will it be different for the cadres of Grameen, BRAC and other such organizations?

My response is, first, perceptions of rational behavior do differ from one cultural context to another, second, as we look around in our country, young people professionals and activists are coming out of the system to unite with the poor for overwhelming modest but sometimes spectacular and radical efforts. Condemning these cadres as romantic utopian from the right and compromising diversionary from the left represents the cynicism of a given culture regarding human relatedness and creativity. Again, the social activists even in individualistic interpretation may not be disinterested at all. They may be interested in gaining new esteem as opposed to competitive indifference or perhaps the recognition they may be acquiring from factions of the ruling elite.

In other words, by linking incidents from different villages, by comparing what happens with what is supposed to happen, and by discussing and recording the oppressive activities of the power-holders, the poor tribals could develop a new and shared consciousness. Their acquiescence to a supposedly pre-ordained system has given way to a similar perception of injustice of the system and a confidence for common action for change.

Similarly K star, and her peer-group needed and continue to need

Third, as for the marginality of segregated local organizations, the

reality in Bangladesh and South Asia today is that the growth in awareness among the poor is not confined to a small number of localities where outside catalysts elicit new perception. It is an aspiration of large segments of the poor with indigenous and communal leadership, even when no one systematically provokes it. There is still a more intractable question and that is whether prior seizure of the central power of the state is necessary before the powerless can organize themselves. Local struggles, it is argued, is subject to co-optation and repression, without an overarching mediation through political parties or macro-organizations.

Social movements all over South Asia question precisely this conventional wisdom that the transformation of the existing power and social relations has to be mediated by a totality. If power does not radiate from centralized authority alone; if power is multi-dimensional or a reciprocal interplay between multiple centres of authority discipline and practices covering the relations of everyday life at various sites, a great many social, cultural and everyday practices then must become transformed for political conditions to change fundamentally. Simply trying to seize power will not work. Rather, it may perpetuate the prevalent asymmetry of power-relations.

Further, the possibility to hold a limited and partial perspective and the need to defend a space for more immediate group-action may, in fact, be more relevant and pragmatic for the oppressed who are scattered all over a country. It is true that macro-polices like that of land reform in China, Japan, Taiwan or in our neighboring West Bengal did facilitate formation of peasant organizations. State-power, on the other hand, can stamp out local popular movement. Therefore, the more plural the voices, the longer will be the chain of equivalence among a number of democratic demands, each respecting the rights of the other. That will deepen the democratic process, thereby making it more difficult to neutralize certain struggles.

In other words, the more plural the solidary groups are, the better are the possibilities that the voices of submerged groups can be heard, that the subjugated knowledge can be resurrected and that the unequal power and social relations can be transformed without a mediating totality.

It is a sad but indisputable fact that for sizable numbers of the poor, Homer's verse in *Odyssey* sounds almost prophetic: *The saddest of fates is to die and meet destiny from hunger.*

The difference that numerous social movements have made is that the poor no longer accept the saddest of fates as ordained by God. They know that such fate is inflicted by structural oppression and can be reversed. It is only through solidary groups that they can break out of their systematic degradation and exclusion and fashion their own freedom themselves.

## Let's Turn a New Leaf in the Fight Against Terrorism

**Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating terrorism. The Awami League, because of its current position, bears the major responsibility in initiating such a combined front. The BNP shouldn't shrug its responsibility either and, for once, should extend an olive branch.**

THE defining feature and the most revolting aspect of terrorism is that it deliberately targets innocent people, not those who are able to defend themselves. The revulsion that terrorism creates is intended. It seeks both to astonish and frighten people. In that single, repellent sense, the terrorists who killed eight innocent people by detonating explosives in Jessor were successful.

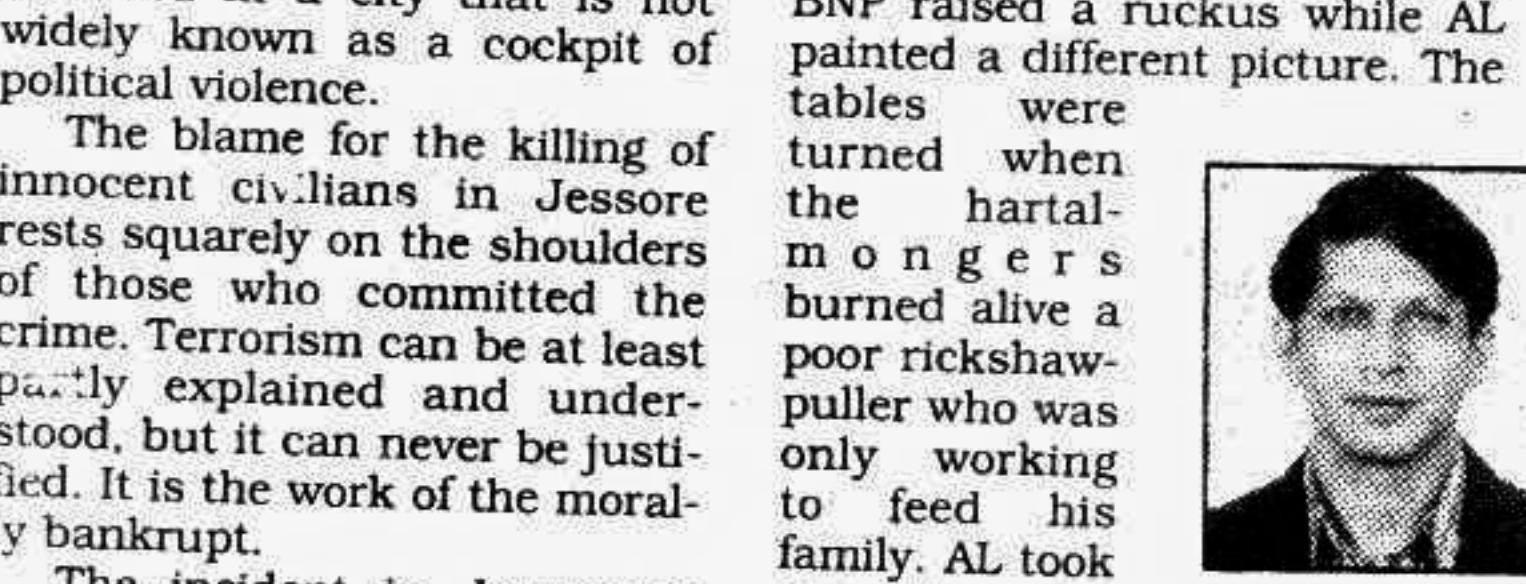
The killings were particularly shocking, perhaps because of the barbaric fashion of the act and because the atrocities occurred in a city that is not widely known as a cockpit of political violence.

The blame for the killing of innocent civilians in Jessor shoulders of those who committed the crime. Terrorism can be at least partly explained and understood, but it can never be justified. It is the work of the moral bankrupt.

The incident in Jessor is not an isolated event. Recent killings of Kazi Aref and his associates, the attempt on poet Shamsur Rahman's life, and events in Chittagong, among others, show an alarming pattern that would leave any rational individual concerned about the direction the country is moving towards. These acts, both individually as well as collectively, undermine civil society, political system and the country's sovereignty by normalising violence and graft and introducing a corrupt cancer into the political structure.

There appears to be a concerted effort to destabilise the transition to democracy. Whoever is involved in unleashing these violent terrorist activities on innocent people should be brought to justice. The ruling party has a dual role. On one hand, it should take decisive actions against those involved in these activities. On the other hand, it should also prevent its own supporters from participating in similar acts of violence.

It is unfortunate but true that no major political party is immune from the criticism of using armed cadres to suppress their opponents. Awami League has done it. BNP has not been far behind. Who can forget Jatiya Party's activities during



its heyday. Extremists, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, have a long history of annihilating those with whom they differ on political issues.

The fight against terrorism is difficult under any circumstances, particularly in areas where terrorists can run and hide. It doesn't help either when, supplying virtually no evidence, political parties exploit the killings for political purposes.

When Sajal died allegedly in the hands of goons associated with a ruling party legislator, BNP raised a ruckus while AL painted a different picture. The tables were turned when the hartals long on gers arrived a poor rickshaw-puller who was only working to feed his family. AL took over the voice of sanity while BNP fell silent.

Domestic terrorism by disenchanted individuals and groups is sometimes difficult to prevent due to the less predictable nature of this type of threat. A number of contentious issues which elude consensus can attract few people who would move their political agenda through conflict. Inspired by extremist beliefs, or by real and imaginary grievances, they resort to random unconstrained violence.

With the appointment of a new Home Minister, it is time to turn a new leaf in the fight against terrorists, irrespective of their party affiliation. Given Mohammad Nasim's closeness to the party hierarchy, it can be assumed that he will have a freer hand, than his predecessor, in weeding out terrorists from his own party. His recent public statements are quite assuring. He has been quoted as saying, "I will not compromise on the question of curbing terrorism. Stern action will be taken against any terrorist to whichever party he may belong to" (DS, March 15). We can only expect his deeds to match his words.

Faced with this scenario of terrorism, the prospect of achieving radical improvement in the Awami League government's measures to combat terrorism lies in its consistency and courage in maintaining a firm and effective policy against terrorism in all its forms. They must abhor the idea that terrorism can be tolerated as long as it is only affecting someone else's democratic rights. They

During every single incidence



And finally, tough legislative measures should be introduced to penalize sponsors who provide terrorists with safe haven, explosives, cash, and moral support.

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## Friday Mailbox

### Hamoodur Rahman

#### Commission Report

Sir, Mr Ikrak Seghal's article "Dhaka Doing" (DS Mar 14) is interesting as a Pakistani journalist is for the first time suggested publication of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report. We have never been able to understand the reluctance of Pakistan to make the report public. Who does it protect? The India Papers were published by the British Government much before the deadline of Official Secrets Act. It has made a great contribution in understanding the historical events and the part played by the politicians leading up to the creation of independent India and Pakistan. In the United States there is Freedom of Information Act. In most democracies the barriers of official secrets are coming down and there is greater transparency in the interest of the people and good government.

Mr Seghal says, the Hamoodur Rahman commission Report has documented well the "atrocities of '71". This is of great interest to us in Bangladesh where much of history is clouded with emotion and unconfirmed reports. We think publication of the Report by a well known jurist (who is a Bengali by the way) would go a long way towards healing the scars of the war of liberation. It will also be a source for the historians to draw upon. Non-publication of the report will lend support to the feeling that Pakistan has much to hide about the reported atrocities of its army on the defenceless civilians of East Pakistan and the active connivance of the Pakistani army and political leaders to deny the people the rule of law and their democratic rights.

There are two other documents in possession of Pakistan of great historical importance to the sub-continent as a whole and to Bangladesh and Pakistan in particular. Pakistan should consider to make these documents public. One relates to the trial of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Dr Kamal Hossain after they surrendered to the Pakistani authorities in Dhaka and were flown to Pakistan where they were tried in camera. The second document relates to a report said to have been prepared by the Pakistan Planning Commission on the subject of investment by the central government in East and West Pakistan and the inter-wing trade between the two wings. The report was prepared, I believe, to study the net flow of development assistance and investment, both foreign and domestic, and of trade between the two wings and between each wing and foreign countries. This will assist in evaluating the claim of East Pakistan [now Bangladesh], which Pakistan seems very reluctant to admit, for the division of the assets and liabilities of the erstwhile Pakistan Government. It will also lay at rest the allegation of diversion of foreign exchange earned by East Pakistan and of central government revenue to West Pakistan.

We hope Mr Ikrak Seghal and other journalists in both Bangladesh and Pakistan would continue to write on the subject in the interest of greater understanding between the people of the sub-continent. This can be achieved by transparency and greater communication between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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### Nonchalant ambivalence

Sir, A lot of public sufferings could be done away with or at least reduced to a considerable extent had there not been a nonchalant ambivalence on the part of the guardians of public interest.

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.