

Administrative Reform, Whither?

WHAT was the point in instituting reforms commissions if their recommendations are not implemented? That's the question we would like to raise in today's editorial. So ludicrous the discrepancy between recommendation and implementation in every sector has been that it gives rise to doubts whether the government really means what it says. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the volubility about introducing accountability and transparency in every sphere of governance through expeditious reforms. The Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC) is a classic example of the government's over-enthusiasm in forming commissions and reluctance in carrying out their proposed reforms. Sloth in the approval of its recommendations to reform the bureaucracy towards making it transparent, accountable and, more importantly, accessible to the common people has made a mockery of the government's commitment to services re-organisation. The fact that only six out of its 30 proposals won the Cabinet's nod naturally leads to the conclusion that either administrative reform is not a priority consideration for the government and/or the bureaucracy itself has been a major impediment to implementation of PARC recommendations.

We see no reason why the government should be so lukewarm to the reform agenda which is widely recognised as the *sine qua non* for good governance. We don't want to believe that PARC was instituted only to pacify growing concern amongst the public over inaccessibility and inefficiency of bureaucracy. The bureaucrats have made no secret of their disapproval of any radical reform of their services and may still be pulling the strings towards stalling reforms. As a shield, they might be using political influence. Here comes the question of bipartisan commitment to push the reforms programme through. Once both the ruling and the opposition parties become unanimous on administrative reforms, it would put immense pressure on the bureaucracy to fall in line.

Internationally, the country is in a serious credibility crisis. Corruption and mismanagement at every sphere of governance have bred mistrust amongst prospective donors and investors, local and foreign alike. Such a loss of face impacts adversely on the economy which renders it imperative that administrative reforms be expedited.

Larma's Very Wrong Angle

JYOTIRINDRA Bodhipriya Larma, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) leader, has stirred up a controversy, this time more thought-provoking than the earlier versions he had willy-nilly whipped up. He has raised an objection to the process of electoral roll preparation set afoot by the EC in Chittagong Hill Tracts, as indeed elsewhere in the country, on the ground that it is violative of the eligibility criterion set by the CHT peace accord.

The accord stipulates that in order to be eligible for enlistment in the voters' list in the hill districts for the local elections, *rpt.* local elections, one has to be a permanent resident of the CHT owning a land as a proof of his such domicile. Now, what Larma is forgetting, apparently as a matter of expediency, is the local body election parameter of the eligibility stipulation as distinguished from the broader national election canvas. If he persists in stretching criterion to the voter enlistment exercise for the national elections, as he is obviously doing, then he surely is deliberately overstepping the limits set by the CHT peace accord itself. It is noteworthy that the CHT peace accord, even so far as the voter list for the hill district council elections goes, lays equal emphasis on 'permanent residence' of both tribals and non-tribals, viz Bengali settlers, to be eligible as voters there. In the words, even under a special provision of the CHT peace accord, tribals and settlers have been put on the same footing evidently as equal citizens of Bangladesh. So why should Larma reopen a settled issue drawing the blame for impeding the implementation of the peace accord which he never tires of faulting others for.

Under the Bangladesh Constitution, any citizen of the country who is not less than 18 years of age or does not stand declared by a competent court of unsound mind, regardless of where he or she resides (even overseas) is entitled to vote in the parliamentary elections.

We urge Larma to behave more as a signatory to the CHT peace accord and Chairman of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council than as a leader of the PCJSS with something of a baggage of the past still slung around his shoulders. Let him not create an issue out of a non-issue.

Summer Gets Too Wet

IF it is any indication of what lies in store for the citizens of the metropolis, then we had it. The photograph on the front page of this daily on Saturday of folks wading through sheets of water bodied early flooding and consequent water-logging in the city. Untimely but not unexpected heavy showers during the last few days have made city life miserable. In some areas health hazards have already been posed by the overflowing of sewage due to clogging of the drains and storm sewerage network at places. The situation is patently dreadful in parts of the city where the drains are narrow and remain blocked with polythene bags. Even many areas of the new town are submerged by rain waters because of the lack of a proper drainage system. It is interesting to note that while some areas were taken care of by WASA and DCC new areas have got inundated by rain waters. Last year WASA laid big dia-pipes in many areas of the city and tried to keep these open by cleaning many of them during winter. This has paid dividends in those areas in that they have not gone under water even after such heavy downpours during the past week.

Before the full fury of monsoon strikes the land every agency concerned should try to utilise the occasional dry spells we still have to clear the drains and keep the pumps in shape before the deluge came gurgling into our existence. Otherwise the citizens will be up against a torrid time during the monsoon, which, according to weather experts, will be severe this year. The citizen in their turn should cooperate with the authorities concerned to keep their areas, particularly the drains, clean and abide by the rules of hygienic living.

Putin's Forward March

by A M M Shahabuddin

Putin has now been caught in the horns of a dilemma. What will be his choice now? Will he be able to stretch his authority over the elected regional leaders, violating the constitution? Will Duma (Parliament), which is still controlled by the opposition, oblige Putin?

WHO is Putin? What does he stand for? These questions were perhaps the most vexed ones that puzzled and confused the already bewildered Russian nation suffering from both economic and political bankruptcy, when Boris Yeltsin picked up an almost unknown person in Russia's political arena, Vladimir Putin. Putin became his last Prime Minister after going through a long process of elimination of at least half a dozen Prime Ministers during the last two years or so. Russian were shocked to hear this unexpected news. Putin appeared on the Russian scene like a bolt from the blue. The Reuters news agency in a dispatch, *inter alia*, said that Putin was "one of the least likely candidates to lead this impoverished nuclear armed ex-superpower."

When in the process of 'pick and choose', most experienced and able Prime Ministers like Chernomyrdin and Primakov lost ground to the former KGB spy and chief of its successor agency FSB (Internal Security Service), the people looked askance. Perhaps Putin was made of sterner stuff than the 'fallen' experienced run-outs. Was Yeltsin then holding a 'proxy interview' on behalf of his distant well-wishers to pick a person who would successfully carry out functions, to be well appreciated by the vested interests?

History Plays Jokes

History sometimes plays very hard and cruel jokes when it puts persons of obscure origin to the limelight of leadership. Such was the case with Boris Yeltsin who appeared from nowhere on the Russian political scene with a much more magnified 'life-size' national hero to acquire leadership of Russia in the midst of the whirlpool created by the failed 'coup' against Gorbachev by the extreme nationalists. History played the same 'prank' after about a decade, bringing Vladimir Putin into the limelight, whom Yeltsin declared as his Prime Minister and an heir-

apparent to his presidency.

Thus Putin started his new political life, thanks to patronage at home and abroad, with a poor popularity rating of two per cent only. But for Putin to begin as Prime Minister was a big leap forward. But it was just a 'training period' for him as something much bigger awaited him. And not only the Russian people but also the outside world was dumbfounded when Yeltsin most unexpectedly and unceremoniously resigned from presidency on New Year's eve with a televised announcement to his nation with tearful eyes, making Putin as the Acting President, clearing the deck for him to plunge in the election campaign for presidency. He did it very skillfully, through the state-run TV Channel, launching a smear campaign against his rivals.

Putin Knows Where to Put His Nose

Before that, Putin had to do a lot of homework. He knew well that his poor popularity rating must be raised to a much higher level through a short-term agenda, rather than a long-term one, in order to gain mileage over his rivals in the presidential election. As they say the secret of camel's water storing capacity lies not in its humps, but in its nose; likewise Putin, an experienced 'spy-master', knew well where to poke his nose, how and when. The *New York Times*, in an editorial, titled, 'The KGB Diplomat', on the eve of the Presidential election in March last, said that Putin's primary source of popularity is the brutal military assault on Chechnya. There lies the secret of success for Putin. After the most humiliating defeat of the Russian army in the Chechen war (1994-1996), and an 'honourable' retreat from Chechnya, the Generals were looking for a plea to get back to

the 'job' again not only to regain their lost territory, but also their lost honour. And a golden opportunity knocked at their door when Dagestan, a neighbouring province of Chechnya, declared independence with the help of Chechen militants in 1999. It gave Putin a great opportunity to send his ground and air forces to crush the rebels in Dagestan and carry the war into the border of Chechnya itself.

Chechnya, after being run as a *de facto* independent state, as earlier admitted by Russian Foreign Minister himself has been on fire again since September last — hardly a month after Putin was made Yeltsin's new Prime Minister. Russian army has, no doubt, re-occupied most of Chechnya, but the Chechen guerillas, from their hideouts in hills and jungles, have bounced back, inflicting daily heavy casualties to the Russian army in men and material. Thus Putin proved to be a man of 'tough talk and firm action' to win his war game in Chechnya to make a New Year's gift to his 'impoverished' nation. He, undoubtedly, proved his 'metal', as expected by his distant 'godfathers' when he was picked up through a nicely-planned 'proxy interview' conducted by Yeltsin on their behalf. The western media, particularly, the US media, was all praise for his brilliant performance on the Chechen 'platform'. An American newspaper even dubbed him Bruce Willis. Credit, of course, must be given where it is due. And Putin deserved it from his 'friends, not masters', from abroad.

America 'Involved in the Process'

Now, let us recapitulate some past events to show the role played by America in selecting Putin as the most suitable can-



didate to assume Russia's future leadership after Yeltsin's exit from power. It may be recalled here that with the fast deteriorating health of Yeltsin last year, speculations were rife as to who would take his place to lead Russia — whether an ambitious Army General, like General Lebed, who came third in the 1996 presidential elections, or, a communist leader, like Zyuganov, who came second in the same election, next to Yeltsin, or an experienced politician, like Chernomyrdin or Primakov, both of whom earlier serving as Yeltsin's Prime Ministers. Perhaps the criterion of selection was who would be able to echo his master's voice more eloquently and skillfully.

New Troubles Brewing for Putin

So far so good for Putin as a rising star in the hazy political horizon of Russia. He has already made his mark as a 'tough guy' in crushing the Dagestan and Chechen rebels. But the new front that he had just opened by dividing Russia into seven districts to bring the powerful elected regional leaders under federal control, seems to be not a good omen, both for Putin as well as for Russia. And the new order issued by Putin has come just two days after he had suspended the politics adopted by the authorities of two of the regions as they were considered as contradictory to federal laws. But this move by Putin might put him at 'loggerheads' with the Russian constitution itself, which specifically states that presidential representatives cannot govern democratically elected regional leaders. So Putin has now been caught in the horns of a dilemma. What will be his choice now? Will he be able to stretch his authority over the elected regional leaders, violating the constitution? Will Duma (Parliament), which is still controlled by the opposition, oblige Putin?

Throwing a broad hint of US policy in this respect, a former CIA Director, Mr. Turner, let the cat out of the bag, when in a TV interview, in reply to a query, he said: "America is already involved in the process."

What more do you want? **Albright's 'Talks' with Probable Successors** Then began US Secretary of

State Albright's visit to Moscow, perhaps on a survey-mission, during which she held meetings, according to press reports, with a number of probable successors. But the net result of Albright's meetings with the "string of probables" was not made public. But after the "hatching" period was over, the egg shell was broken and the chick came out. The just-born 'chick' was standing there when Yeltsin picked up Putin and made him his last Prime Minister and later Acting President on the eve of his resignation, putting an end to all wild speculations.

'Fixing' in Russia

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that Putin, instead of opening a new front and creating new enemies, should rather concentrate on economic salvation of his country which stands totally bankrupt, just limping on the economic 'crutches' lent from abroad. Russian economy is in shambles, trade and commerce in doldrums. The people are in abject poverty, lacking proper food, shelter and healthcare. Their condition is perhaps worse than the poverty-stricken people of many least developed countries (LDC). They can be seen on Moscow streets either begging, or selling their used household goods to procure food for them, while the Russian government, which is not in a position to pay regular wages to the government employees, factory workers as well as soldiers, are now selling their war-heads, jet fighters and bombers, nuclear technology, arms and ammunitions and whatever is left in the 'arsenal of the ex-superpower' to earn foreign exchange. This is tragic, no doubt, but a hard reality.

There are many things for Putin for 'fixing' in Russia today to rescue Russia from its dilapidated and miserable conditions and to give a new and hopeful life to millions of Russians who are just gasping for breath and survival. Will Putin succeed? All eyes are now on him. There is much that needs fixing in Russia today," says *New York Times*. It is a question of 'do or die' for Putin.

The writer is a retired UN official.

The Most Important Event in Clinton's Presidency

by Harun ur Rashid

It will provide an easy entry of China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The membership of China in WTO will bind the country into a rules-based international trade environment. It means that China's trade will be regulated by international trade rules and China will be accountable to the WTO. China's membership of the WTO makes the global trading system more comprehensive and effective.

THE approval by the US House of Representatives on 24 May to grant China Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status could perhaps be seen by history as the single most important event President Bill Clinton achieved in his office.

Some political observers compare it to the historic visit of President Nixon to China in 1972, opening its diplomatic relations with China. While the Nixon's trip paved the way to constructive engagement of its relations with China, the grant of PNTR status is a step forward in the way of normalisation of trade relations with China. One was political, and the present one is economic and both the halves constitute the whole gamut of US's relations with China, an emerging world power in the 21st century.

The passage of the bill through the House was one of the biggest challenges for President Clinton. He invested time and political capital to get this bill passed through the House. He reportedly met with the members of the House individually and brought the Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan to his aid to emphasise the benefits to be accrued to the US in granting China the PNTR status.

It was also important to note that both the presidential contenders Vice-President Al Gore and the Republican challenger Governor George W. Bush supported the legislation.

Strangely enough many Democratic Party members opposed the bill together with the Trade Unions, a natural constituency of President Clinton, on the ground of China's lack of commitment to human rights and reform. It was the opposition Republican members which in fact helped President Clinton to get the bill through the House. In political terms it was a unique alliance which backed President Clinton.

In the House it boiled down to a contest between the supporters of economic benefits and human rights. Ultimately the supporters of economic benefits won the day. They argued that trade liberalisation

would force China to accept greater openness not only in trade but also in human rights. This would be a win-win situation for the US.

The members of the House Representatives voted 237-197 in favour of the legislation that would provide China PNTR status. PNTR is another name of Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) status. This bill is expected to pass through the Senate in June and once this is passed in the Senate it eases the way of China's entry into the World Trade Organisation by the end of this year.

What are the implications of the grant of PNTR status to China?

First, it will mean that China will not have to obtain the status of normal trade relations with the US every year. This will avoid the acrimonious

debate in the review of Chinese policies in the Congress. Ordinarily grant of the status was being tied with the human rights record in China.

Second, the approval of PNTR status to China constitutes a key component of a landmark Sino-US trade accord signed last November in Beijing between US Trade Representative Ms. Charlene Barshefsky and the Chinese Trade Minister Shi Guangsheng. The trade accord envisaged the access of the US companies in financial sectors, telecommunications, textiles, audio-visuals, and agriculture in China. Both countries will reduce the tariff duties of goods to each other.

Third, it will provide an easy entry of China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The membership of China in WTO will bind the country into a rules-based international trade environment. It means that China's trade will be regulated by international trade rules and China will be accountable to the WTO. China's membership of the WTO makes the global trading system more comprehensive and effective.

Fourth, this would also pave the way for Taiwan to join the WTO. Taiwan has been the third largest economic power-house in Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore China-Taiwan trade relations will receive a great boost. It may be noted that about \$40 billion have been invested in China by Taiwan in recent years irrespective of their hiccup in bilateral political relations.

Finally, it demonstrates the US Congress's commitment to free trade despite the opposition from the Trade Union. It is to be pointed out that the free access of Bangladesh ready-made garments to the US markets is being opposed by the Trade Union leaders on the ground, among others, that it might lead to unemployment in the clothing sector in the US.

However the critics of the grant of PNTR status hold the view that it would take decades for the US companies to receive tangible economic benefits from China. One media report suggests that 60 per cent of the foreign companies in China have been performing below av-

erage and 75 per cent could not penetrate into Chinese market because of unwritten rules and national pride.

Furthermore given the per capita income of the ordinary Chinese, majority of them would not be able to afford to purchase most of the manufactured goods from the US and other industrialised countries. It is not the number of people (1.3 billion) in China which counts; it is the purchasing power of the ordinary Chinese which matters for the western businesses.

Another view they hold that by doing business and letting things take their course would not improve human rights record. They argue that WTO membership of Myanmar (Burma) did not lead to noticeable improvement in the human rights record of its citizens.

Conclusion

Whatever might be the future outlook, foreign businesses in China were relieved and looked for brighter prospects. No 3 House Republican Tom DeLay said: "Freedom and the taste of freedom will grow in China." The vote demonstrates that the American people can rely on their elected representatives to do the right thing at the right moment, no matter how frustrating it seems the system often presents to the electorate and the outsiders.

The author, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

To the Editor ...

Parks--easy targets!

Sir, The way our parks and urban open spaces are being treated, even by the government machinery, is really alarming. Reports on vandalism, illegal occupation and inappropriate construction by persons in authority and their patrons have been flowing in from the press over a long period. The latest is the occupation of the Gulshan Lake and the felling of trees in the Chandrima Uddayan for the construction of a power substation for the upcoming NAM summit.

Whenever the need for some urban development arises whether routine--for instance, power, water, gas substations, educational institutes, or special needs such as the NAM summit, or residential plots for the privileged, we first target our dwindling parks and open spaces. Absence of accountability, forward planning and the mechanism for planned growths of our settlements leads to this undesirable trend.

Environmentalists and planners have been raising hue and cry to stop this suicidal practice and alarm bells are ringing but we seem to be oblivious of the danger. With phenomenal rise in population density, not only should our meagre parks and open spaces be retained and taken care of they should be enlarged.

In western cities, acre upon acre are devoted to parks and open spaces in the central city, where land values are phenomenal. Hyde Park in London occupies 640 acres of prime land without a single structure except for a few toilets. There are many such examples. Even eastern cities of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore are scattered with parks and

open spaces. Will the government listen and ensure that the vital lungs of our cities -- the parks and open spaces are not compromised with, for any reason what so ever. "Open spaces are not a luxury -- they are of fundamental importance to health and happiness, it is a need that MUST BE MET."

Zarina Hossain
Architect/Planner
Agrabad, Chittagong

Transit: Bangladesh-Bhutan

Sir, It is hoped that the transit trade between Bhutan and Bangladesh would not be affected by ponderous delaying tactics. To cite a precedent, in spite of the agreement, the transit route between Bangladesh and Nepal through Indian territory is practically blocked due to preconditions by the third party India (only a couple of trucks have passed so far, as reported in the press).

These two land-locked countries have to cross the formidable Indian barriers, and India would not be happy losing the monopolistic markets. The problem with the SAARC members is the great diversity in size and power; rendering the playing fields as unequal. Unless the Kashmir issue is solved once and for all, regional trade would continue to remain confined to three to five per cent, as at present.

This thaw has to be melted. Perhaps SAARC does not have the calibre of leadership to benefit the smaller states.

The super power US President came and left; but the fall-

outs are still not visible. It needs patience to face poverty generation after generation. Perhaps it has become chronic.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Ineffective RAJUK

Sir, The public image of RAJUK is nauseating, judging from the cumulative reports in the press during the decades of its existence. And the government is silent, and appears to be helpless, which is not at all in public interest. We boast about development, while even the daily routine administration cannot be guaranteed by the government; as the latter (elected) is the fountain-head of all inspiration. The inefficiency of RAJUK indirectly and adversely affects the image of the government. What is wrong in being tough? The corrupted and inefficient officials must be punished as per rules. Public duty is a sacred mission.

In this country, nothing happens unless the PM says something (as she did in cancelling some plot allotments sometimes ago). She should seriously consider about RAJUK and at least try turning it into an effective one.

It is a formidable task, as corruption has become institutionalised. There are honest officials, but they are displaced from the limelight, due to another punishment on the poor nation: severe politicisation at almost every sphere of life, in the public or private sectors.

There is another snag: election time is near, so why poke into the hornets' nest.

A citizen
Dhaka

OPINION

"The Vulnerable Vice-Chancellors"

Mesbah-us-Saleheen

The article "The Vulnerable Vice-Chancellors" in your esteemed daily (6-5-2000) seems to be a timely publication. The author Prof Bays in his usual straightforward style has illustrated the woes of the VCs and their vulnerability not only in our country but also in some of the universities of the commonwealth countries. I must thank him for writing on this serious matter -- of course with a pinch of bitterness -- and for speaking out about his own vulnerable conditions. Professor Bays has rightly gone beneath the surface but not far enough to bring out the causes of vulnerability of the VCs in our country.

He aptly points out some of the reasons, for which the VCs can become vulnerable. But he misses out several other reasons, which are of no less importance. Judging from my experience in a university for nearly 30 years, right from its inception, it could be said that in recent past other problems, mostly internal, cause a VC to become most vulnerable in his own university.

Ever since the process of appointing VCs through a panel was established, it has been taken for granted that the person (most often the leader or one of the top brasses) of a particular group of the university is the fittest to run for the post. For obvious reasons, a person good for one university is usually not considered to be good

VC for another. It has become a convention that VCs of a particular university should be from amongst the teachers of that university only. For a panel election, two other persons are needed as candidates. For the sake of the top post, a unity in the name of alliance is formed with other groups having contrasting ideology and thinking. The candidate with highest votes after intensive lobbying is generally considered for the coveted post. But the process through which the voters (the Senate members) are elected are interesting. Years of groupings, politicizing and of course spending of money make an aspirant candidate sure to run for the election. The biggest election of a university is the election of 25 registered graduates as representatives to senate.

In the election process the would be VC has to go from door to door of the Senators while vying for his candidacy. He even has to go to the MPs, teachers, students and government officials to establish his credentials. A VC, thus appointed becomes vulnerable right from his first day of taking office. He has to (whether likes it or not) comply with the requests of his own supporters who worked tirelessly for his VCship.

The job of Pro vice-chancellor which is to assist and give advice to the VCs has turned out

to be a negative one in many universities nowadays. In several universities the relationship between the VC and the Pro VC has been strained. They become poles apart within a few months of their respective appointments (although in some cases they contest the election from the same panel). It has also been observed that the government without consulting or knowing the needs of a university appoints VC, Pro VC and Treasurer in one go. Recently through parliament the government has also raised the number of posts for Pro VCs in several universities. One should remember that almost all the public universities are being run with deficit budget. A substantial portion of the budget of a university is being spent for a post like this.

In conformity with our tradition, a VC has to depend on a group of people for advice and smooth running of the university and sometimes, a group of people become very close to him and seek undue advantage. It all depends on the personality of the VC to cope with this situation. Unless he maintains, as far as possible, neutrality in his administration, the degree of vulnerability shall only heighten.

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