

Strict Financial Control

AN international conference on "Oversight Functions", dealing with making the government accountable in its financial transactions, with special reference to the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG) office of the government, ended in Dhaka last Tuesday. In our view few areas of governance deserve as much of our urgent attention as this. The more a country is starved of resources the more is the need for stringent financial control. But ironically the very opposite is the case in most developing countries, including Bangladesh. There is enormous wastage of public money the way our government runs its business. This habit of wastage permeates into every branch of our public function leading to inefficiency, corruption and the consequent high cost of getting anything done.

The first thing we need to do is to change our mind set about public accounting. To start with we must understand that the budget amount that a government spends is "public money", meaning that it belongs to the people, and it is given to the government of the day to spend in a manner that adds to public welfare. There are two necessary concepts that need to be emphasized here - people's ownership of the resources, and the government being allowed - repeat, allowed - to spend it under clearly laid out rules and for publicly approved goals. In other words, the relationship is clearly that of a "master" (the public) allowing its paid "servant" (the government) to spend resources for only those ends as approved by the former. Hence the term "public servant". But in our case the political governments and the bureaucrats pay only lip service to the above notions and make use of public funds in the most arbitrary, unaccounted for and non-transparent manner. Almost as if the money belonged to them, and not to the people. A change of mind set is needed to create the requisite demand from the side of the general public for stringent accounting of public fund and the provision of punishing those who misuse it.

Two steps must be taken immediately to move in this direction. First is to strengthen the mechanism for parliamentary control over public expenditure. All committees that deal with public expenditure must be strengthened. They should be given more staff and equipment for speedy performance of their job. Secondly, the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) should be totally separated from the executive branch and placed directly under the Parliament with its independent budget and staff. The appointment of the C&AG should be made for a minimum term of five years, or even ten years. We have good examples in Canada, South Africa and UK to follow in structuring this vital overseeing office in Bangladesh.

Many important recommendations came out from the conference. It is our hope that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will pay particular heed to them and adopt them, at least the most important of them, as pointed out above. We all know that corruption has become widespread in Bangladesh, and most of it centres around public funding. It will be suicidal on our part if we fail to stop the wastage of our resources through lack of financial accountability of our public administration.

Power Situation Desperate

WHEN something gets rotten to the core the innards would come out no matter how desperately we might try to shove these in before people saw them. This holds true about the massive grid failure between two major power stations - Ghorasal and Ashuganj - within three weeks of another one we had the misfortune of suffering in the Ghorasal-Ishwardi Transmission Line. Even the facade of normalcy we had thus far shown to some high profile places by keeping them off limits for loadshedding to dope people into thinking that things were not too bad in the power sector after all lay in tatters. Even such exclusive places like the Bangabhaban, PM's secretariat, the national secretariat, Jatiya Sangsad and Zia International Airport had to take the brunt of power failure this time around. So, the crunch has eventually caught up with the exclusive preserves or privileged persons. If from this point on, things don't start looking up in the power sector then the latter would never get back on the rails.

The crisis was doubly serious this time as the power transmission failure between Ghorasal and Ashuganj led to the stoppage of power generation in various units across the eastern and western regions of the country. Ten out of 12 power production units were affected.

The disruption has been vaguely put down to technical problems, but how much of it was technical and how much man-made is something that needs to be determined by a neutral body of investigation. Customarily, however, two probe committees, one led by PDB chief engineer (planning and development) and the other headed by a joint secretary of the power ministry, have already gone into action to ascertain the reasons behind Wednesday's massive gridline failure. The relevant question to ask at the point would be this: have the lessons drawn from the previous gridline accidents been utilised? If not, why not?

People are weary of excuses and explanations offered everytime a major dislocation takes place in the power sector. They have also seen through the game of endless shooting at moving targets raising false hopes for improvement. They want to see results now - pure and simple.

Not a Commonplace Misadventure

LAST hostage drama at Khagrachhari should drive home some serious messages for people at the helm of affairs. No matter how strange and repulsive his methods might have been, Abul Kalam Azad's demands included eradication of corruption from the society, enhancement of salaries and wages of the police force but execution of those policemen found taking bribe, closure of all tobacco industries in the country, payment of all bank loans by the defaulters within two months, imposition of fine of Taka 10 lakh on ministers and political leaders if found corrupt, a stop to the use of timber in the brick fields for at least 50 years and security for his life. Most of these demands might strike a responsive chord in people. His actions also in a way symbolise the sheer helplessness of the people who badly want a social change to mitigate their suffering. We won't be surprised if more episodes like this take place in far stranger manner. Such ominous possibilities call for prudent analytical attention before it is too late. Why should people "turn violent" in order to "restore desired stability" in the social system? Simple. What people are living with is way short of their expectations. Let the law take its own course against such a misadventurist exploit of a pseudo terrorist but the underlying causes for the societal restiveness will have to be removed or at least leaders must show signs of coming forward to help solve people's problems.

The Azad incident also gives rise to the fear that country's law and order situation might have taken on another dimension. Some might feel tempted to imitate Azad just for the heck of it. We advise the law enforcers to mount a timely guard on it.

Democracy, Autocracy and PM's Statement in UN

She, indeed, spoke her mind and, for that matter, the mind of all democracy lovers in expressing utter displeasure and disapproval of any individual or body taking recourse to force to supplant democracy. But one must also realise that this idea is not unique and, indeed, have occurred to many leaders and on many occasions in the past, but they never broached this subject for the world body to take concrete action in this regard, obviously for practical and other reasons.

democracy, though at a relatively later stage. The United States adopted democracy as its political system from the very beginning of its statehood.

The developing world started achieving independence only after the commencement of the process of decolonization following the Second World War. It has continued so long over a long period and almost reached its end. It is, therefore, not unnatural to assume that these countries, like the previously described ones, would take long to transform into mature democracy. This reasoning, though logical, can be termed by many as a veritable excuse. According to these critics, the differences of epochs have resulted in substantial differences in people's capacity to digest much and to attain more. The pathway to democracy may, therefore, take long but not that long, they argue.

The second factor that may be cited about this issue relates to differences in standard of living and wealth of people of the two sets of countries. If people have reasonably sustainable living facilities, they will not have the urge, at least not that much of urge, to indulge in graft and corruption. A happy and satisfied person is unlikely to take the risk of doing things, which may be both illegal and dangerous. Give them employment and legitimate means of earning to pursue a decent life, even terrorists, except

perhaps the diehard ones, will be prone to adopt a normal peaceful life. Professional student politicians would also then devote more time to their studies in order to make themselves belittling citizens and to provide future leadership to the nation. The problem for the less resourceful

imparts legitimacy to a military coup only if it becomes successful. The initiators and actors of the coup consequently become great heroes and are generally hailed as saviours of the nation. If, on the other hand, the coup fails, the perpetrators of the coup are not only branded as traitors

choose. These have been regarded more often than not as an excuse or an exaggeration of facts in order to attain selfish personal aggrandizement of the persons concerned.

Only very recently, Pakistan witnessed a Military coup. General Pervez Musharraf overthrew the democratically elected government of Nawaz Sharif and assumed the state authority as the Chief Executive. It still remains a moot question to decide whether he had planned the coup or the prevailing situation obliged him to stage the coup. Whatever may have been the case, the democratically minded people of the world would no doubt abhor the principle and action of a military takeover by overthrowing a democratically elected government, notwithstanding any cogent arguments advanced in favour of such action. Yet, there were vast public demonstrations of support in Pakistan for the General, whom Prime Minister Sharif sought to remove from office, thereby precipitating the military election.

No doubt, also pro-Nawaz Sharif demonstrations exhibiting public sympathy were held, though at a much later stage. The second administration of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was marked not only by widespread corruption and nepotism, but also by his encroachment into the independence and authority of

the President of the Republic and the Chief Justice of the country. The President was dismissed by him in a high-handed manner and the planned use of public wrath and physical intimidation against the Chief Justice were cases in point. If the autocracy prevails in the garb of democracy, what should be the public reaction? This is a serious but moot question posed to citizens, even by General Pervez Musharraf in his press conference only a few days ago.

Our Prime Minister in her speech at the UN Security Council on the 9th September suggested that the world community should not recognise any regime who assumes power by force by overthrowing elected constitutional government. She urged the United Nations to take action to that effect. She, indeed, spoke her mind and, for that matter, the mind of all democracy lovers in expressing utter displeasure and disapproval of any individual or body taking recourse to force to supplant democracy. But one must also realise that this idea is not unique and, indeed, have occurred to many leaders and on many occasions in the past, but they never broached this subject for the world body to take concrete action in this regard, obviously for practical and other reasons. In any case, the important question arises whether Prime Minister was serious in making suggestion to boycott such regimes? Was she practical in her suggestion and, in doing so, did she further our national interests? The answer is no.

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Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

group of nations, therefore, boils down mainly to their economic shortcomings. A nation, which has just shaken off the yoke of age-old colonialism and exploitation, must be given sufficient time to secure economic emancipation following their political independence. Again, to many, reasoning of this nature is nothing but a futile exercise and self-defeating excuse.

A lot has been written about military coup d'état its genesis and prognosis. I recall lively debates raging in our class of International Law taken by the world-renowned authority on jurisprudence, Professor Emeritus Leo Gross of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Boston as far back as in 1959. Shunning complex theories, simple and popular one and belief

but run the risk of being executed, with or without trial. As the popular adage goes, nothing succeeds like success. Similarly, as a successful military coup heralds great rewards, so a doomed uprising would generally call for capital punishment. Yet, the high risk inherent in such a dangerous endeavour has not deterred many from undertaking such adventures in the past and will not do so in the future, at least not in the foreseeable future.

If one takes experience as a yardstick of knowledge, one realises that most of the perpetrators of the coup sought to justify their action on the collapse of some aspects of the domestic scene. It may be economic, it may be law and order or it may be anything the perpetrators wish to

On the Road to a Failed State?

by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin

What we need now is to address the burning issues related to good governance. Here, apart from the political parties reforming and cleansing themselves, the larger civil society also have a role to play. They need to come forward and develop popular associations to exert pressure on the political process.

some are repressed into oblivion, yet others reach fruition. But under no circumstances there is an automatic switch over from a feudal and backward society into a grown up nation state despite perhaps the formation of the state itself. This transition is what the struggle for a democratic society is all about.

History of nation state is the history of capitalism. During 17th, 18th and 19th century in Europe when capitalism was first unfolding and then expanding gradually, different national aspirations grew by leaps and bounds. Eventually by 19th century several nation-states were carved out of empires and monarchies. Also several princely states of more or less same national origin grouped into nation states like Italy and Germany. The more capitalism developed, more the nation state structured itself. With gradual increase in power and wealth nations grew hand in gloves with the state. Simultaneous growth of the nations and their respective states paved the way for modern day European democracy by adopting regular reforms at every level ensuring checks and balances. Since the new emerging class in society called the bourgeoisie was the driving force of capitalism the new form of governance was thus termed bourgeois democracy. However, the road towards a democratic society certainly did not prove smooth. The transition in some cases like for instance France took more than a century from late 18th to late 19th century to graduate from a feudal society into a modern democracy though even then women did not get to vote. They had to wait another generation. In countries of Europe, parliaments and other institutions of a democratic government were the organic

growth of relentless struggle within each society through continuous social engineering.

No society has ever developed uniformly anywhere. Effort of various and diverse interest groups often clash within the movement while progressing towards a common goal. It carries so many cross-under-slow and often dead-currents that uniform development becomes an absurd proposition. Same rule applies within the broad framework of a democratic struggle. Likewise a society wrenching itself from a feudal past may take, in some cases, quite a long time before maturing into a bourgeois democratic order. This too requires a relentless vigilance. In this light Bangladesh's attempt towards becoming a nation certainly did not end with formation of the state. Rather it was a decisive victory on the road to self-determination that proved on hindsight very bumpy often bloody and regularly divisive. True, track records of other nations in this region do not suggest any brighter picture either. But that cannot be any consolation. India even after more than half a century has not been able to resolve the issue of smaller nationalities or even the issue of secularism. A tottering democracy riddled with an incredible amount of horse-trading is a glaring example that even bourgeois democracy does not come on a platter. Bangladesh is no exception. So, what are we worried about?

The different social formations and classes that gave rise to national aspirations in Europe did not correspond with the societies in the developing world at the time of the latter's formation into states. Of course the radicals would probably have us believe in the age of globalisation of capital

classical grooming of the nation and the state cannot be repeated in the developing world. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and a Red China pursuing the economic policies of bourgeois democracy it is pointless to debate on counter arguments. Unless nations are already in the making from within, any particular people or society if imposed with the compulsions of a modern state are bound to end it up with all sorts of mal-adjustments and deformities. Like, for instance, most people of the African continent even before growing beyond tribal social formations found themselves as citizens of numerous nation states. It obviously did not help social engineering rather aggravated it to a point where any dispute can only be resolved by employing primitive method of mutual annihilation. Genocide in Rwanda is a burning example. Pakistan in 71 can perhaps fit in as an Asian example.

Here I find the temptation of quoting Eric Hobsbawm irresistible. The history of the makers of the third world transformations of this century (20th) is the history of elite minorities and sometimes relatively minute ones,.... apart from the absence of the institutions of democratic politics almost everywhere only a tiny stratum possessed the requisite knowledge, education or even elementary literacy. (Age of Extremes, The short 20th century 1914-1991, page 202) Particular social and economic classes play particular political roles. In absence or weakness of those classes other social forces that may not perform to the rules of the game will fill in the allocated role with detrimental results in the growth of the nation as well as the state. Bourgeoisie played the central and unifying role as nation builders in European

context. Bourgeoisie as a class were very weak at the time of Bangladesh's emergence. Within four years the military and civil bureaucracy moved in and took control of all state apparatus. In addition with the sanction of the middle class their desperate drive to catch up with the west without considering the inherent forces or the institutions of governance have resulted in the empowerment of the state apparatus with unbridled power.

Despite a vibrant political process and, however, an ineffective parliament during the past one decade the preponderance of the state institutions over the nation have not changed much. When the nation recedes in the background and the state machinery overtly or covertly for all practical purposes in calling he shots it becomes passionately involved in self-preservation alone. First casualty is the alienation of the state from the nation. A sense of unity, purpose, empowerment for deciding one's destiny, which are the driving forces of a nation get bogged down in the quagmire of the state apparatus and its numerous paraphernalia. Decadence become inevitable. The despair and the hopelessness we the ordinary citizens feel today is the result of the weakening of the trust and alliance between the nation and the state. Corruption is the manifestation of the breach in social contract. Terrorism is the extension of the state's drive for self-preservation at whatever cost. Partisan politics in Bangladesh, like in Bangladesh, like in most part of the developing world, while preaching democracy practices autocracy. Autocracy can only sustain by employing terror. A belligerent society at war with itself becomes a normal affair. And like in any war zone,

women and children become the worst victim.

Does it mean we are on the road to a failed state like Pakistan? There, let alone the nation even for holding the state from disintegration regular military intervention has become a necessity. Peaceful people sincerely hope not. We are at the crossroads of transition. But with further erosion in our moral ethos and loosening of bondage we might end up as another failed state like many others in Asia and Africa. I wish, to believe we still have a fair chance to embark on the road to an expanded economy and a stable society. Despite all odds our farmers have achieved near self-sufficiency in staple food. We have progressed considerably on primary education and reducing birthrate. Our achievement in rural micro financing and coping with natural calamities has drawn world attention. Last but not the least an expanding middle class with all their limitations and opportunism and a legacy of rising up to the occasion to resist decay is our asset.

What we need now is to address the burning issues related to good governance. Here, apart from the political parties reforming and cleansing themselves, the larger civil society also have a role to play. Folded arms and a bagful of complaint will not help. They need to come forward and develop popular associations to exert pressure on the political process. If not for anything else minimum consideration of enlightened self-interest should drive them into action. No amount of self-security arrangement will secure their livelihood if the nation no longer holds. We need to rediscover ourselves and in the process rediscover the nation and bring it into focus again. Our struggle for democracy and helping the nation grow simultaneously with the state is a battle that has to be fought by the larger civil society every hour, every day and at every nook and corner of the greater society.

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To the Editor ...

Misuse of govt transport

Sir, It is an open secret that government motor vehicles are generally misused by the controlling officers of the vehicles, for private and overtime use. Certain very senior officers are entitled to full-time use of cars, and there is a provision for payment of overtime to the drivers.

Sometime back it was reported in the press that the government was considering sanctioning loans to eligible officers for purchase of private vehicles on instalment basis, along with a fixed monthly car allowance (like house-rent allowance). There is less risk of loan default, as the service career may be adversely affected, and the movable property can be recovered at any time. This step may reduce the overall government expenditure on vehicles and its maintenance, and discourage

misuse of official vehicles.

But the politicians in power seem to be reluctant to annoy the civil service, as they have to depend quite a lot upon them, openly or otherwise. Besides, now extreme politicisation has taken its toll, and it may be too late for the existing administration to take regulatory action; when the government is facing mounting criticism for raising the fuel prices several times.

There is a government rule for use of public vehicles for private and personal use, and for deducting the expenditure from the monthly salary packet, after checking the vehicle log books. But private trips are hardly logged by the officials. This rental rate may be raised, proportionately to the recent rise in fuel costs; and strict inventory procedures introduced for monitoring and logging of all trips. The extra payment to the government drivers for overtime private duties

may also be arranged through reimbursement by the authorised hiring of the vehicles.

Also, the colour-coded number plates of government vehicles may be reintroduced for secret monitoring; notwithstanding the possibility of attack on government vehicles by miscreants due to political or other agitations. In short, adequate administrative steps may be taken to ensure transparency in the public sector. The whole issue may be reviewed in depth, for substantial saving in the exchequer. It is a challenge for the political masters to introduce the right reforms in public interest.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Beautification of Dhanmondi Lake

Sir, Dhaka City Corporation certainly deserves a pat on the

back for doing a magnificent job in landscaping and beautifying the Dhanmondi lake. At a time when the lake was choking with pollution and dumping of refuse and was slowly being consumed by encroachers, someone drove sense into DCC to salvage the beauty spot. And what a respite!

The change is such a refreshing one. The newly constructed walkways, the structures probably for snackbars, angling and paddle boat wharfs, the flower plants and the green banks of the lake promised a respite to the city dwellers. We were finally looking forward to take a morning or evening stroll down the lake side breathing fresh air, without being bothered by beggars or attacked by muggers and without the mortal fear of stepping on human excreta or having to hop-step pools of urine. Alas all this seemed too good to be true and the signs are already showing. The littering in the lake area

particularly during the week-ends, is getting alarming. Polythene bags have already begun to line up the shores and I am afraid, will soon fill up the lake. The snack vendors particularly the *fuchkawallahs*, the *jhalumuri wallahs* who are free to sell their stuff, contribute to the littering. The structures for snackbars or whatever, have turned filthy with free-loaders using those as their shelters. And as elsewhere in Dhaka, it is not unusual to see many relieving themselves at will, some into the lake waters. The walls have already started to reek of urine.

I am not sure if the situation has escaped DCC's attention but I would hope that they do something about this and fast. So much of the tax payers' money has been spent and for a good cause. I am sure DCC will think of effective measures and I have a few suggestions for their consideration:

1. Garbage bins or drums be placed at regular intervals along side the lake.
2. Public toilets and facilities be made operational without any further delay.
3. Security guards be posted at the entry points and within the lake areas to prevent anti-socials and food vendors from entering the premises.
4. A heavy fine be imposed for littering and committing nuisance. This must be strictly implemented.
5. The structures should be freed of the free loaders so that cleanliness of the area can be preserved.
6. A manager should be appointed and made accountable for the maintenance of the park and preservation of the environment.

Shahriar
Dhanmondi, Dhaka