

Security for outgoing PM

Can't it be administratively ensured?

Law is on the anvil to throw a security ring around a relinquishing Prime Minister of a kind the person concerned had been entitled to while in office.

The dispensation is available in India and Sri Lanka but with a big difference. There, the heads of government, on the expiry of their tenures, are entitled to special security arrangements because they continue to remain in position, albeit in caretaking capacities, till such time as a newly elected government has taken over. The same was the case in Bangladesh until we replaced the extended transitional role of the PM beyond the end of his or her term by a full-fledged caretaker government coming to rule the roost for free and fair elections.

The move, extraordinary as it is on several counts, has more to it if we should plumb deeper judging by the speculations surging around the possible contents of the proposed law. There has been talk about providing life-time security to Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana as surviving members of the Bangabandhu family. A protective umbrella could also be spread over members of Hasina's and Rehana's immediate families.

As if to divest the law of any partisan or personalised imputations, the outgoing President and the Opposition leader are also sought to be brought under the special security coverage formula. The whole pantheon of outgoing heads of government has been kept in view, so the conjecture goes. The law minister has, however, said the scope of the law is yet to be determined. But only a few days are left before the draft is readied for tabling before the parliament.

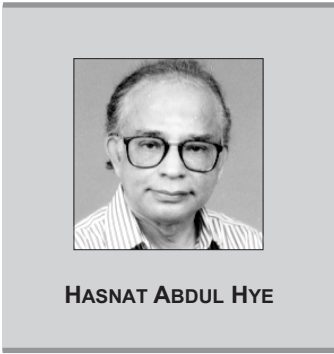
There is nothing wrong *per se* with security concerns for VVIPs and we are all for responding to them, but only by recourse to practices being followed in other countries. We need not look for any special device. The issue has to be dealt with administratively, not politically. The basic point to underscore is: why a law is needed to respond to any security threat, perceived or real? Could not the normal administrative contrivances prove equal to the task?

The whole rationale behind a caretaker government is based on the precept that free and fair polls are possible only where the ruling party and the opposition have a level-playing field to participate in the elections. They must be on equal terms as they go to the polls. But with an outgoing PM enjoying the incumbent's status and privileges, including residence in Ganobhaban and the exclusive SF security as she moves around, the Opposition leader is disdainfully put at a crippling disadvantage in terms of seeking votes.

The chief advisor to the caretaker government would act as the chief executive, so that he would be entitled to special security arrangements as the person in focus. The President has his own special security status; besides in the caretaker system the armed forces will be his charge. This is all in the system.

We must not do anything that impinges on the letter and spirit of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which brought about the caretaker system we have been so proud of. But if a law having a bearing on that amendment is at all deemed necessary then it has got to be passed by a two-thirds majority. Can this be lost on a party which was instrumental in bringing about the caretaker government in the first place to conduct free and fair elections in the country?

Whose policy is it anyway?



THE time is opportune, the initiative well intentioned. The mobilisation of expertise for the task delineated is impressive because it is comprehensive. A consultancy firm-cum-NGO which has been active in policymaking exercises through "dialogue" over the past few years has constituted several task forces to prepare policy papers for use by the next government. Whichever party wins the next elections, it is assumed, will find the policy prescriptions non-partisan and useful. Participation by politicians of major political parties in the deliberations for drafting the policy package, it is hoped by the sponsor, will ensure bipartisan ownership.

Not to be left behind in this laudable and challenging intellectual task another consultancy-cum-NGO has also embarked on a similar exercise using the same participatory approach and method of work through committees on various subjects of national importance with an apex body to co-ordinate. So, it seems that the major political parties are going to have two sets of policy recommendations on more or less similar subjects on the basis of the above two initiatives before the next general election. Does this give more immediacy, legitimacy and practical significance to what could otherwise be mere academic exercises by experts from outside the parties? Equally relevant is the question whether this is the best way of helping the political party that will have the mandate to run the affairs of the state in the next election?

Policymaking is an integral part of governance. It is required to dispose of tasks for which there is no precedence. Medium and long-term solutions to problems of national importance are also germane to policymaking. Tasks and problem requiring short-term policy decisions are mostly sporadic or emergent in nature. Often their scope is not national and as such individual ministries with some co-ordination with other ministries can decide in their regards. Problems or tasks that have ramifications over

ing subsidy or pay hike for government employees and workers. Such promises don't require detailed policy formulation working out their financial and other implications. Under the circumstances, the election manifestos of political parties become nothing more than a list of slogans some of which may actually be implemented if the party promising them wins in the election. But such populist measures being bereft of detail policymaking may entail unforeseen and unintended consequences that may not be

to the party elected to office is without a clear-cut policy package covering administration as a whole or it does not even have a clear vision for the same, the task is likely to be taken over by the either of two organised groups or by both of them. Firstly, the top-level bureaucrats fill the vacuum taking initiative on their own to formulate policies which are then submitted to the ministers individually or to the whole cabinet for approval. This may give the appearance of political ministers or the cabinet making policies but

sion and the pressure of accumulated tasks may not allow this scrutiny and amendment by the cabinet. Thus policymaking by bureaucrats even when it is by default of political parties and their representatives becomes undemocratic. It also increases the dependence of politicians in power on bureaucracy in undesirable ways and degrees.

The second group that takes policy initiative not only encroaches on the power of the politicians but of the bureaucrats as well. The dominant role of donors in policymaking

short run. With policy making as an ongoing exercise within the party the ground can be prepared to convince party members, supporters and the constituency about the beneficial impact of reform measures even if they may entail short term sacrifices. But the tradition of political parties that keep them pre-occupied with power politics consume bulk of their time and energy, making such policy making exercises unlikely and difficult.

The projects undertaken by the two consultancy-cum-NGOs have to be seen in the backdrop of the prevailing situation as discussed above. However well intentioned and efficiently completed their policy prescriptions are not likely to promote policy making within the political parties. Mere participation by some of the politicians does not result in a "transfer of technology" as long as requirement for the same is not urgently felt by the parties. If initiatives for such policy making are seen to be outside the agenda of the parties they will not have more than academic significance. More seriously, being extraneous in nature the policy package, however impressive, is not likely to be "owned" by the political parties. For lack of ownership such policy measures will then have little chance of implementation. Therefore, there is no alternative to having in-house think tanks within the parties that are entrusted to formulate new policies and review old ones on a continuous basis. External inputs can be helpful in such internal policymaking within the parties but it is no substitute for the same. If bureaucratic policymaking is wrong, being an encroachment into the politicians' domain, "technocratisation" is largely an exercise in futility. The ten or so volumes of Task Force Reports gathering dust bear ample testimony to that.

IN MY VIEW

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the whole gamut of governance and whose resolutions require actions that will impinge on the medium to long-term are the stuff of real policymaking. They have to be addressed by the government as a whole with decision taken by the cabinet and sometimes also by the legislature. These problems can be of long-standing and as such can be foreseen well ahead of assumption of power by a party. Sometimes they may also be sudden in emergence being contingent upon new configuration of forces generated both within and outside the country. It so happens that in most cases our political parties contesting in the election are either unprepared or ill-equipped to face these situations and issues with ready-made policy measures. Firstly, this inability is a matter of tradition which has not laid great store by policymaking as a continuous internal exercise within the party. To win elections parties have become habituated to make populist promises like exemption from paying certain taxes, increas-

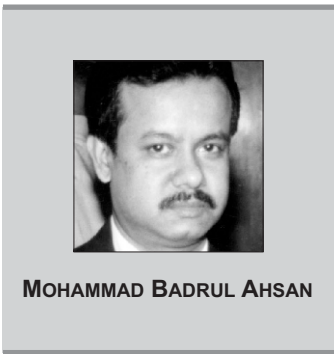
beneficial for the country as a whole. The failure to understand the repercussions of a particular decision over a larger area and in the long-term distinguishes ad-hoc decisions from a well thought out policy regime. Political parties often fall prey to this pitfall because they do not foresee the need to go beyond short-term decision making. As a result in-house expertise for policy initiative covering short, medium and the long-term is not developed within the parties. To complicate matters, after a party is mandated to govern it finds saddled with activities, projects and policies that are spill over from the past over which they have little choice or discretion. Finally, politics being what it is in a country like Bangladesh, a party in power remains mostly pre-occupied with thoughts and activities to remain in power which impose a short-term vision on its programme of action leaving very little time for long-term policymaking.

If for any of the reasons mentioned above politicians belonging

to the initiative having been taken by the bureaucrats make the whole process nothing more than a charade. For this, of course, the bureaucrats cannot always be faulted because governance on a regular basis does not brook gaps or delays in policymaking. But by taking advantage of lack of prior preparation or decisions in principle by the parties in power the bureaucrats usurp a very important role of politicians. Apart from growing dominance of bureaucracy in governance through such policymaking the risks is that some times the political costs of such policy is ignored. Moreover, bureaucrats not in close touch with the people, policy initiatives taken by them may not always be for the greatest good of the greatest number, a consideration which is likely to be uppermost in the mind of politicians. Some of these effects of insidious nature can of course be attenuated, even forestalled, if the matter is discussed threadbare in the cabinet. But time available for such discus-

for various types of reform is well known by now. This issue has been the subject of interminable discussions and criticism because of its interference into a domain that is perceived to be beyond the role and power of outsiders. Here again the donors often take the initiative and occupy the driving seat because of vacuum that prevails in policy making. For macro economic and other major reforms neither the political parties nor the bureaucrats are seen to take initiatives for a home-grown policy regime in advance. Faced with conditionalities attached to loans and grants for which negotiations have to be made all that the bureaucrats can do is to haggle and buy time from the donors. On issues like privatisation and financial sector reform lack of prior policy decisions by the political parties make it expedient for them to be dilatory when in power. The conditioned reflex seems to favour postponing policy decisions that are unpopular and may inflict pain on people in the

A trip to my village



A trip to my village was long overdue and I made it at last on a lazy afternoon. I reminisced all the way, pining for the bygone days of my childhood, which were embedded in the memories of its palmyra trees, riverbanks, grassy knolls and mango groves. I never grew up in that village, but frequently visited it with my father whose lifelong passion revolved around its people. All that time on the way to my village, I thought I was returning to a place on earth, which had a special place in my father's heart. For the first time in many years since his death, I felt I was close to him.

Julius Caesar is said to have professed when he entered Gaul that he had rather be first in a village than second at Rome. I have never had the chance to know the difference, but my father did. He always believed that he was a villager who lived in the city for the sake of his livelihood. For my father, the world began from and ended in this village; he compared the village to the seedbed if man was compared to a tree. He was indebted to it for the elements of life: earth, wind, water

and fire.

When I arrived at the periphery of the village, the landscape appeared to be more gray than green. Murky blotches of constructions took the place of its grassy knolls and mango groves, its tree-lined riverbanks claimed by spinning and dyeing factories. Many of the houses were converted from tin-shades and thatched roofs to brick buildings; the signs of affluence anointed everything from the freshly minted mosque to cars parked in front of

ries, bobbin factories, Palli Biddyt, Titas Gas, primary school, shops, BRAC office and Grameen Bank. Except for two of them, others looked strangers to me, who made me wonder if I had come to the wrong village.

My destination was the textile factory of my cousin, which was built on the land where snake charmers, clairvoyants, eight-metal ring and bracelet sellers, card jugglers, and sword-swallowing geeks used to gather for business on the weekly

market day. Now the monolithic structure of an industrial project had engulfed that space much in the way the soul of the village was encroached by commercial sense. People in the village would relate to each other with the calculated preparedness of a business transaction. Nothing was worth anybody's time and attention if it didn't have the promise of a bottom line.

My cousin was sitting on the grass in front of his factory, looking like the centerpiece of a small crowd gathered around him. When I arrived, I was asked to join them by my cousin, who brushed his hand in the air in the inbound trajectory of a dealer's hand sweeping in chips at the blackjack table. I wanted to

know if it was safe to sit on the grass, and somebody said that people's tongue held more poison than snake's fang and snakes fled the village once they had learned about it.

They were discussing the death of a former union council member, who had returned from Hajj only a few weeks ago. He had borrowed large sums of money from people and died before he could repay them. The discourse was what would happen if his sons refused or

ple in the village thought he was lying; he had taken money from both sides and didn't care for either god or man.

I was aware of the complications of village politics, how the dark impulses of self-seeking men are often propelled through atrocious eventualities. The chairman had safely distanced himself from another issue, which was attacking the village like a contagious disease. Half of the youth and many of the older people had grown

CROSS TALK

As the entire village slipped under the shroud of darkness, it subsumed the drone of textile machines within its eerie silence. My cousin pointed at the elusive silhouettes, which had begun to appear on the road. By nightfall they start descending on the village like locusts, the creatures of comfort who come from Dhaka for brisk business.

shops and houses. The village of my childhood had transformed - its sylvan purity invaded by the ghouls of modernity, its pristine tranquility dissipated in the flurry of progress.

The congregation for the Asr prayer had just started to disperse when I entered the village, a small group of kaftan-wearing people still gathered in front of the mosque. Some of them had turbans on their heads, and I was told that they were the followers of a holy man whose ambition is to govern this country by the precepts of the Islamic rules. Many of these people were outsiders, who came to live in this village by the way of their professions. They worked in various textile mills, dying, printing and finishing facto-

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failed to settle their father's debt. The discussants agreed that god wouldn't forgive what he owed to men, unless the creditors took mercy on his soul and forsook their claims. One of them retorted that the dead man should have known better to borrow from banks, not from men.

Another issue was a hot topic amongst them. The incumbent chairman had simultaneously endorsed and opposed the application for gambling permit in the village carnival. When asked how he could have contradicted himself so obviously, the chairman replied that he had endorsed in the fear of men, who had asked him to sign at gunpoint and opposed because he was a god-fearing man. Most peo-

addicted to phensidyl and heroine. Throughout the day the distribution network of these illicit substances remains very active through tea-stalls, grocery shops and mobile units. At night when the clients have conked out from daylong abuse, the drug dealers gather to have their own turn with fun. They drink and smoke, and their loud voice and crackle of laughter rise with the depth of night. Most nights they would fight amongst themselves and then wake up the whole village until the police arrived to round up a few of them.


Only a few hundred yards from where I was sitting, my father was lying in his grave, and as the evening descended on us I wondered if

he had any clue about what was happening in the village of his love. One of the villagers had recently discovered that the phensidyl-drinkers were disposing their empty bottles in the graveyard, and some of those bottles were found atop my father's grave.

My father often said that all great souls must return to their origins. The retired US Presidents return to their respective towns where they wish to be buried after death. Mao Zhedong, the great Chinese leader, wanted to retire in his village Shaoshan and live in a thatched-roof cottage, although his remains ended up in a mausoleum in Beijing after his death. My father was fortunate to have his wish granted. But what does he think of the place of his origin, which is undergoing transformation? Far from its pristine glory and innocence, the village now has all the vices of the cities short of few amenities.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Jail birds!

These tiny tots are not on the way to jail in a prison van, but to school gathered in a rickshaw-van. Rickshaw vans are cheaper than auto-rickshaws and the only mode of transport because many schools do not have buses. But these flimsy carriers are pulled by inexperienced drivers and therefore, accidents can happen. We want the authorities to make school transport safer. Compel schools to have buses or provide special public buses for young students.

OPINION

India, Bangladesh, and regional amity

A HUSNAIN

THE recent border incidents have acutely sensitized the relation between India and Bangladesh (spate of Letters in DS). Review of priorities is called for. 'Retire' the Farakka Barrage. Artificial (man-made) control of running waters in a delta region (from outside the delta zone) appears to be unscientific, or, has to be approached more scientifically, resisting political domination. The birth of this Barrage was an unilateral decision, without sufficient concurrence of the downstream riparian nation (Bangladesh). Besides, there is no joint, bilateral, or international control of this Barrage, may be just to save the dying Calcutta port (but the idea is not working, and the problems of Calcutta port appears to be proverbial).

The same is the case of the dying Surma river, according to a recent TV documentary, due to diversion of waters upstream. The Teesta

Barage future implications have to be examined by neutral experts very minutely, independent of political pressure. Bangladesh has been cornered into considering alternative dam and barrage concepts. Why this waste of repeated efforts at regular intervals?

Similar mentality can be spotted in not providing friendly access between Bangladesh and neighbours Nepal and Bhutan, specially for trade and commerce, and use of the seaport facilities in Bangladesh. India has to be sympathetic to the natural needs of the land locked countries in the region.

The greatest negative impact is that the concept of SAARC is not working, nor its smaller variations, in the form of specialised agencies (SAPTA, QUAD and what not). The big-brother syndrome has to go, otherwise the people will remain poor in all the member countries the average volume of internal trade within the region is only three percent, and India has to come out with suitable analysis to reverse this

traditional trend. The point to remember is that the people are not unfriendly, but the succeeding regimes.

The future implications of WTO restrictions urgently demand that the DCs in the Third World strengthen the internal bonds and communication, and bring down the mental barriers, and increase this three percent import-export figure to a growth rate above five percent per annum (it is a huge transaction involving one and a half billion consumers).

Also, politics and religion are mixing in a wrong way in this region, and the political leaders appear to be abetting. The inner space is lacking. The political leadership have to pay more attention to regional bonds than local party survival games and power-retention manoeuvres. A staggering head is unstable, regardless of the environment, and the supposed power base.

The latter is an important perspective point while debating future

solutions and working modules. The politicians, as a rule, are hardly interested in long-term proposals, as they wish to be in the limelight of topical situations, and reap the dividends of the mood of the moment. The political mentality in this region has resulted in many unhappy trends, introducing complications instead of making things simpler for the common people in everyday life. The people have seen several splits in this subcontinent.

The weakening of the capitals in the region appears to be one of the prime objectives of the updated colonial game: weaken, and rule. India has some problem, Kashmir, insurgency in NE India, and the Hindutva bogey (the corruption index is similar in almost all the member countries). In the South, Sri Lanka cannot get out of the civil war for more than a decade. Now Pakistan is weakened with the accumulated liabilities generated in Afghanistan, the Kashmir chronic sore, the crashing of the political base due to corrupt and feudal

practices, and the discontent in the immigrant and religious extremist groups; and the political loads thrust on the armed forces to providing recurring aid to the governance of the country at regular intervals during the last three decades. In Bangladesh, the politicians simply cannot run the country even after thirty years.

These weaknesses in the respective systems working in the region are not encouraging the leaders of the nations to come to a common regional platform. The main objective is simple enough: care for the masses. The pilot projects in governance exercises seem never to end, as these never take off properly, and lack of genuine motivation at the leadership level (it is not technical complexities). Self-survival priorities cannot bring about good governance.

The SAARC region can survive the WTO onslaught, but the relevant exercises are not on the agenda.