

Fighting corruption

It is difficult to convince ourselves that the government is serious

ONE of the more continuous topics of discussion in Bangladesh is corruption. It affects everyone and permeates every aspect of society and the state. We proclaim our hatred against it but do very little to stop it. Towards the early part of this year there was a decision to review the situation by setting up a committee of senior officials including from the Bureau of Anti-corruption and corruption tracking outfit, Transparency International-Bangladesh. But after an initial humming of engines the flight seems to have been grounded.

The method under which Bangladesh was termed as the number one corrupt country can be contested, but what cannot be are a number of reports both in the media and the development world as well as the personal experiences of millions who have to suffer at the hands of this all encompassing syndrome that corruption is everywhere in our daily life.

Transparency International has done a survey that shows that high level government officials are the most corrupt in the country and 65 per cent of the people think that the PMO under which the BAC is housed actually prevents cases from being investigated or actions taken. It estimates that Tk 11,000 crore was stolen in 2001 alone which is equivalent to 4.7 per cent of the GDP. Even the World Bank has chipped in with the figure that the GDP growth would have been 2-3 per cent more and the per capita income doubled had there been substantially less corruption.

None of which is news really but it does point to the enormity and the deep structural roots of corruption. The question is, if the senior most section of the government officials who run the government are most corrupt, how are they supposed to be major players in ending corruption through official agencies? It doesn't add up.

The stalling of the move by a section of officials to set up a body was expected but the fact that they would win was not. We are greatly disappointed at the turn of events. We warn the government that unless it moves decisively against corruption, most of its development goals cannot be reached. While pressure should be put on the government to set up an independent anti-corruption body, society itself must mobilise against corruption.

It's up to us to make a move. The corrupt are already moving.

Who is paying for the Mig-29s anyway?

We commend the bold decision and ask that defence purchase be made more transparent

THE government has decided to sell the eight Mig-29s that were bought two years back for US 124 million dollars from its revenue budget because they are too expensive to maintain. It apparently costs 100 crore taka a year to maintain these planes and so are simply unaffordable. While one congratulates the present government for taking a bold move in what has been traditionally a sensitive sector, one does wonder if the military establishment took these issues into account when the suggestions were made for their purchase in the first place. After all this is revenue money and that does belong to the people.

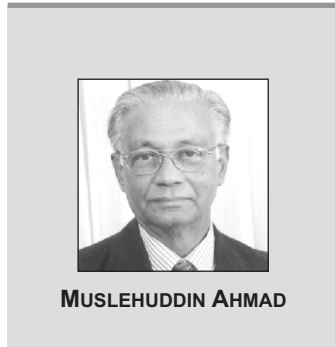
One also doesn't know what will be the loss incurred in selling these planes because used Mig-29s may not be the most attractive military product in the market. So we are really staring into a barrel of more losses. The Finance Minister could perhaps include such purchases in his constant diatribes to show the government itself causes loss to the government.

What seems obviously missing in all this is the process of accountability in matters of defence purchase. Traditionally, all matters relating to the military is kept beyond public knowledge but it's with public money that the armed forces are maintained. Yet accountability is not even an issue when the budget itself is not properly discussed in the parliament. In all cases security is cited as a reason. But then what security concerns prompted us to buy planes that we can't maintain and now have to be sold?

While we accept that certain matters will always be kept confidential, but defence purchase and similar budgetary and other issues need to be debated and discussed. A knowledgeable public is a better security component within the apparatus of comprehensive security than an ignorant one. In the case of the aircraft purchase, most of the media and civil society groups heavily criticised it then and now their apprehension seems to have been realised.

It's in the interest of all parties concerned that accountability and transparency in purchase including defence purchase needs to be put in place. If one wants the armed forces to be above controversy and not subjected to criticism, involve people who are to be served as part of a consensus system which itself is the best security guarantee of them all.

Corruption: Enough is enough - high time to stop it



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CORRUPTION in any form is a criminal offence under the law of the land and undoubtedly the most hateful thing in the eyes of the civil society. Earlier Transparency International (TI) described Bangladesh as one of the most corrupt countries of the world. Many of us expressed reservation over the correctness of the methodology used in such assessment. This time TI has come out with some facts on those who are involved in such nefarious activities. It identified Bureaucracy as the most corrupt section of the society. As a former bureaucrat I feel terribly ashamed of this. I am sure, many others like me would feel the same way.

Successful governments have been busy in taking the politicians of the predecessor government(s) to the court for corruption and other charges, but mostly on charges which includes corruption (misuse) of both power and money. But as soon as their party comes to power, the sensitive cases are either withdrawn or not pursued. Any way, the people have not seen much success in any of these cases. What would the people understand by such behaviour of the successive governments? Are these cases instituted on actual abuse of political power and swindling of people's money or on political vendetta? It is not surprising that the Anti-corruption Department officials also change their course. They quickly find so many faults with those politicians after their exit from various Ministries but could not detect any when they were in power. This means that basically Anti-corruption people could do their job if they were free to operate. The best course would be to have the Ombudsman

quickly and place the Anti-corruption Department under the office of the Ombudsman.

Often the newspapers carry stunning stories of corruption and in many cases the members of various Ministries and government departments are involved. The names that are often seen in the newspapers are DESA, PDB, Titas Gas, Petro-Bangla, BTTB, Police Department, Banking sector, Text Book Board and many others. The TI has reportedly flagged the police department to be one of the most corrupt departments. This is most unfortunate as this department is supposed to be

come up with their explanations on UNDP matter. Let the Ministry take up this matter immediately.

The delays in decision making involving government departments/bodies and businesses could be technical which one can put up with but those linked with ill motives -- both political and financial -- really needs to be unearthed and appropriate actions taken. One example, among many, is Petro-Bangla's bill to Unocal amounting to \$ 685 M. The people would certainly like to know why there was years' delay in sending and realising the bill and in the meantime the com-

pany Occidental which was really responsible was allowed to leave the country. Even now there are months of delays even in sending the bill because of the alleged interventions by the Ministry (ministry however, denied it officially). This amount belongs to this nation and time has come to fix the responsibility for this apparently motivated but highly skilful manoeuvre as it seems that Unocal might again get away with it.

Let our political leaders who have been in the business of running the country for some time be aware of the facts that the people of Bangladesh have always been right in their decisions. After upheaval in 1991 a major political party came to power but later had to quit; the reasons are known. Thereafter, the other major party came with a lot of sympathy of the people but unfortunately wasted the opportunity and had to pay the price. The people have chosen the other major party again with the hope that it would correct its past mistakes and set things right. Therefore, it should not continue to blame the immediate past government only for all the wrongs and bad governance; it had its own contributions too, the quantum may vary, when it was in power

earlier. The people are no more interested in the past. They would like to depend on the present government and it must try its best to overturn all the wrongs and work to set good governance. It is in a position to do so with its huge majority and can indeed bring necessary changes that would be good for the people of the country.

The first thing first -- it has to stop corruption at all levels and improve law and order situation. This would need changes in the political strategy and behaviour. The reported contributions by the candidates in the name of party(s) funds for

for any democracy is to have working relationship between the leaders of the two parties -- the Government party and the Opposition. It's unfortunate that in Bangladesh the chiefs of two major political parties are not in talking terms though reportedly the other leaders of these parties do exchange pleasantries and views too when they meet. As a member of Civic Watch-Bangladesh, a civic body that stands for the rights and obligations of the citizens, I can say that we have been trying for some time to achieve some results in this area. We feel encouraged to note that the chiefs of both the major

cabinet to half if not to one third of the present "jumbo" size. The general feeling is that Bangladesh does not need more than 20 ministers to run the affairs of the country. Any meaningful reduction would reduce administration cost and working environment for the Ministers would be better and the Ministers themselves would be more effective.

If Adamjee Jute Mills could be closed down, the teachers and students politics can also be banned. The students will, however, continue to learn politics through their set curricula and practical debates and exercises in the universities. The ban on teachers students politics will have widest support of the population except those, a very small number however, who profit from teachers and students politics. Such a ban would bring sanity on the campuses as well as in the management of the residential halls. This would also curb Mastanism (terrorism) considerably. The law and order situation will also automatically improve.

Time has come to be aware of one's own responsibility to the society and to the nation. If every one does his bit the society is bound to look better and this would make life easier and indeed safer in the days ahead. Money made by any available means, right or wrong, would not stay and would become a source of own destruction and indeed become a heavy burden in the Hereafter. When one leaves this world, he carries nothing with him; even a false tooth is taken out. Why at all name something after someone and create problems for others? Good works speak for themselves even one is no more. It's indeed high time to change. The change will come any way; why not start it right away? This may give one the peace of mind here and peace in the Hereafter.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and founder president of North South University. He is the Chairman of Civic Watch-Bangladesh.

The first thing first -- government has to stop corruption at all levels and improve law and order situation...The reported contributions by the candidates in the name of party(s) funds for party(s) nominations have to be fully transparent so that these do not lead to corruption...The general feeling is that Bangladesh does not need more than 20 ministers to run the affairs of the country...If Adamjee Jute Mills could be closed down, the teachers and students politics can also

the guardian of the society in terms of keeping not only law and order situation under control, but also stopping corruption by way of catching the culprits at the right moment and taking them to the court regardless of which party is in power. An appropriate pay increase of the police personnel may help the situation considerably.

It is, however, easy to blame the bureaucracy including the serving Ministers, but who pays the bribe in the first place? Who induces them to fall prey to this? Whose gas meters, electric meters, water meters etc are tampered with? Did they ever say that they did not want any tampering with their meters and were prepared to pay whatever was due and just? They have crores already and why can't they say that they would not give any money to reduce the charges which obviously mean cheating the public exchequer?

The cases of fake or excessive bills by BTTB are well known to the telephone subscribers. An organisation like UNDP had to resort to the press to vent their legitimate grievances regarding their excessive telephone bills. Why should UNDP pay bills for the calls made to Saudi Arabia? It's shame for the entire nation and let the BTTB openly

party(s) nominations have to be fully transparent so that these do not lead to corruption. For the good of the parties too the leaders may find some transparent ways to go about it as the parties understandably need funds for running the elections.

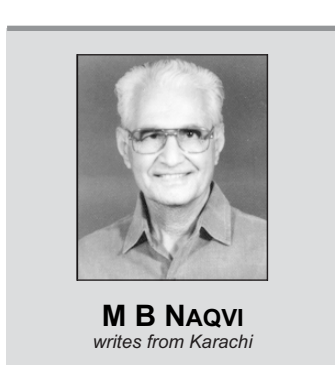
The Home Minister (sorry for becoming more specific here, the post is very sensitive and extremely important for the society and the other day the PM herself indicated some requirements for the post) responsible for law and order has to be a person of strong mind and high integrity and he should be free of unnecessary party obligations so that he remains neutral in terms of his job for the society as a whole including the opposition parties. If he means business, the others under him would think twice to go the other way. This also applies to all others who are in responsible for running the country. The Opposition is also equally responsible as they have also been elected to protect the interests of the electorate. This is why it needs to remain in the Parliament and watch the developments in the administration through its own shadow cabinet which it needs to form immediately.

The single most important thing

parties have very recently expressed their positive desire to have dialogue within and even outside the parliament. Indeed, the PM has 'appealed for national unity in order to create a self-reliant Bangladesh'. She also suggested that teachers and students politics be abolished. The Leader of Opposition, after some scathing remarks against the government party, was also very positive in her attitude and indeed called for a 'national dialogue with a view to reaching a consensus on national issues like independence struggle, Liberation War, dignity of the president, administration and police'. These are very good signs provided both the parties are serious and can rise above the petty party interests and work for the welfare of the electorate. I am sure, all the civic bodies would lend their support to any dialogue with a view to reaching a consensus on major issues that divide these two major political parties.

However, the government party will have to come forward first and go an extra mile to have the Opposition on board on all these issues. But before that the PM would have to implement the ideas that are already in the air and particularly those relating to downsizing the

The show goes on



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

ACADEMICS, commentators, political leaders and the government itself are busy in what can be called gazing at their own political navels; which system of governance will best suit us and what else does the promised 'real' democracy involves? The attention on these basic issues, in the context of the scheduled elections and the fierce controversies raised by General Pervez Musharraf's preview of the changes he wishes to make in the Constitution, has become obsessive. So much so that government's other and possibly more important, initiatives are not receiving the desired amount of attention from the populace.

For the last few days or more, Authority is emphasising the continuing danger of war with India because of the refusal of Indian troops withdrawal from the borders where they have an avowedly aggressive intent, the nature of Indian government's politics and various incidents and statements. To emphasise the danger, and perhaps also to impress and energise foreign facilitators -- two of whom, Jack Straw and Colin Powell will be on their way to the Subcontinent later this month -- Pakistan Army has started a 10-days long war games, though fortunately not involving the realistic troops' exercises. Various generals, beginning with General Pervez Musharraf, are emphasising how good the Pakistan Army is, how it can get the better of its Indian counterpart. Indeed, weaknesses of the Indian Army are supposedly being recognised and prescriptions for victory are being written in Rawalpindi's National Defence College where the wargames are being conducted and evaluated. General Musharraf himself was present at the start of the theoretical exercises.

PLAIN WORDS

True, it cannot be definitely asserted that the political designs of the generals are sure to fail. Pakistanis are expected by dictators to be swayed by patriotic sentiment during the often contrived crises while opposition parties have lived in the hope that the people will see through the games the authoritarians play.

The context is interesting: scarcely three months and a couple of weeks remain before national polls are to be held to inaugurate Musharraf's 'real' democracy. In the meantime all the required changes in the political system (constitution) are to be held under the thus amended system with new rules. The emphases of official publicity on India's aggressive intent, its armed forces' weaknesses, or perceived superiority -- depending upon the context or time -- and Pakistan Army's state of readiness to thwart the evil Indian designs is being drowned out in the cacophonous din of debates on old perennial issues about constitution, democracy and the more detailed issues of the place, role and powers of the generals in the political system. Attention of the public is now firmly focused on these matters.

India, Indian troops on the borders and their evil intentions have receded from the centre of public attention. In any case, the people also seem to have become inured to their presence: they indicate a war that has been in the coming for over half a year and the rest of the world has become sure that it will not come. So, why bother?

This underlying one of those irritants that many authoritarians have faced time with number. Popular reactions forecast by intelligence services scarcely ever matches with facts as they emerge. The official design seems to have been that renewed emphases on the palpable Indian threat will again evoke a strong patriotic response that would echo and re-echo in the country. In this state of heightened patriotic and anti-Indian passions, the government wanted to wrap up the enactment of constitutional amendments and the holding of the election under

new rules speedily. Its hope may have been that Musharraf-loving parties and individuals will ride into Assemblies on the crest of patriotic slogans in the expected climate of opinion.

True, it cannot be definitely asserted that the political designs of the generals are sure to fail. Pakistanis, poor devils, are simultaneously expected by dictators, all too frequently, to be swayed by patriotic sentiment during the often contrived crises while opposition parties have lived and worked in the hope that the people will see through the games the authoritarians play. This has gone on for at least 40 years. Which of these expectations has been more realistic? No simple or definite answer is available. No dictator ever failed initially. But the opposition parties were never totally forlorn either.

People of this country somehow do understand the dictator's game plans. But they do not believe they can stop them; they let the dictators proceed unhindered but without any illusions, nor do they give them real support. Whenever they get the gut feeling that now the dictator is weak or is on the ropes, they respond to the call of opposition for democracy.

But soon another military dictator appears on the scene, promising a new dawn. The people sink back into a sullen silence that is mistaken for acceptance of the change. Both people and opposition start waiting for that magic moment again when everyone suddenly feels that his shackles are breaking down and it is safe to shout lose majesty.

So, the show goes on.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

OPINION

Let the Opposition stay in

A H DEWAN

WHEN BNP lawmakers including the Leader of the House and PM do not find it disdainful to cast aspersions on the Leader of the Opposition in the House and AL lawmakers, who finally joined the parliament session, it does not give credence to the hearsay that BNP doesn't want parliamentary democracy to function effectively and promote its culture. BNP has absolute majority, so its members seem to turn the parliament and its milieu into their base of power to do anything at their will. Dr B Chowdhury's bowing out as the constitutional head of the country in a most unconstitutional manner is the latest and most glaring of their absolutism. We are again reminded 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' and given that philosophy pursued we are not unlikely to behold our democracy to nose-dive and autocracy under the garb of democracy take root.

AL, battered by election results, termed by its leaders as rigged and manipulated, followed by Gestapo-style persecution of its leaders and activists, manifestly out of political feud, had declared its members would resign en masse from the membership. But finally sanity prevailed and AL joined the budget sessions, thanks to the calls from the party in power including the speaker and those in the print media, the DS in particular. The whole country welcomed the gesture.

But how strange, you would invite a person to your home and pour down spite on him/her and hurl provocative words! It was stunning to hear of the BNP lawmakers making jest of the AL members and passing brusque and begrudging remarks like "they are in the House to protect their membership and privileges, to take share of the wheat" and so on so forth. It is stranger that BNP lawmakers forget that their colleagues had resorted to trickery while in opposition and joined the parliament on 90th day (just on the last leg of the 8th parliament) so on as not to lose their

membership and privileges it carried and they had availed of that without caring a damn to their parliamentary stints and the obligation to the electorate.

Nation wants BNP's oft utterances that parliament should be the place of resolution of all issues be not confined within their rhetoric but pursued in right earnest. The party in power, whatever absolute majority they have in the House,

The party in power must pave the way for the opposition lawmakers, as democracy entails, to take part in all deliberations in the House better without innuendoes and insinuations thrown on them...The opposition must also behave responsibly in the House to earn confidence of the people that they are in the House for the cause of the people,

must pave the way for the opposition lawmakers, as democracy entails, to take part in all deliberations in the House better without innuendoes and insinuations thrown on them, not to speak of carping, heckling and stymieing them. For that would call BNP's sincerity in question and the opposition may find excuse to stage frequent walkout as we have already witnessed in the current session. We do not want their walkout turn into permanent boycott of the House. Like all other games, the game in the House on every national issue/context must be played by two sides (those in the

position and in the opposition), each side contributing its mettle to the national cause, to the benefit of the whole population, and in the course of debate, if follies and frailties of the party in power are exposed, that would put them on their toes to rectify them or not to repeat the same. The nation wants that game played in the House, and also desires that the House of the Nation is used in full throttle to achieve national goals beyond party consideration, and the parliamentary democracy that we have been able to introduce after defeating autocracy of long years with sacrifices of many lives behoves the party in power to strictly follow the precept of fair play.

The opposition must also behave responsibly in the House to earn confidence of the people that they are in the House for the cause of the people, for focusing on the issues that relate public wellbeing, not only for wallowing in hollow criticism of the government and staging walkout putting blame on the treasury bench. The democratic countries in the world and specially those who are our development/investment partners seriously expect that happen in Bangladesh. For they know it well that without democracy institutionalised, our overall development works will get stumbled and foreign investment discouraged.

In fine, it is worth remembering that AL's going alone was termed by people at home and abroad as a defeating democratic practice and many of their decisions as controversial, so the treasury bench of the party in power now did away with them. Although in the meantime a Bangla diary made a lead story to parliament due to the Speaker's role, alleged by AL as biased, and BNP's reluctance to afford AL to speak at length, similarly alleged by AL, we cannot but implore BNP which bears special onus for the participatory show in the House to be accommodating to let the opposition stay in the House. This is for our democratic polity to survive and

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Hamida Ali hands over charge

This is in regards to Mrs. Hamida Ali's handing over charge as principal of VNCS. It seems cryptic to me as to why she made this delay to hand over the charge when her contract with VNCS has expired on July 9.

She should have realised that she reached the age limit of 65 and also the government is not willing to see her as the VNCS Principal any longer. Then wasn't it better for her to hand over charge before the students' street protest began?

Doesn't she know that in this country, it is very difficult for a person to do something good in the teeth of strong antagonism around? Has the government valued the

feelings of ten thousand students, the guardians or the governing-body recommendations?

The street protest is obviously reflective of her popularity but the outright rejection of the demands raised by the students and the guardians has downgraded her image. There are many examples in our society where many good people have been made prey of political whims and thrown away accusing with false charges. Therefore, it is better to leave with dignity.

We all should keep in mind that in this democratic country it is not important what the common people want, but it is important what the political leaders want to impose on the people, since they are LEADERS and we have voted them to power.

Islam

Tangail

"Shabash" BNP politics! BNP does know how to arm twist a person into submission, from the President to a dedicated teacher!
Saifur Rahman
London, UK

I am referring to the furore that erupted with the change (I won't say removal) of the Principal of VNCS Hamida Ali and the write-up by one Mr. Tarif R. Rahman (DS 17 July) "Ever since this govt. has come to power, it is creating a series of problems" and as many others did say, "why should the govt. interfere with the affairs of..."

But then tell me if the govt. does-

n't intervene in such things (viz. law and order out of chaos) who will? 'Yes' there are problems being created, but to come out of chronic problems that have been created by the previous govt. or administration someone has to bell the cat. You can not let things go unabated or go out of control only because of some emotions or political consideration. Just take the current case of AJM (Adamjee Jute Mills) and the case of Hamida Ali. While majority of the public have expressed great satisfaction and applauded the present govt. for the bold step to close the AJM, some leftists groups and the opposition (for opposition's sake) are trying to find faults and instead of encouraging govt. to take many more such steps for the safeguard of the country and betterment of the

people trying to agitate a section of people against this good decision.

Similarly, many people have expressed their views against the govt. decision and some for the decision--about saying 'NO' to further extension of Mrs. Hamida Ali's job. How funny some people have started talking about replacement by Mrs. Shaheda Obaid only to give it a political colour and that is also prompted by some journalists out of nowhere and this rumour also became sumptuous only because the person tipped for the post happens to be wife of a BNP leader!

Last but not the least I must mention that it was very unfortunate and wrong to instigate and involve the innocent child students in this fray and to end in a fiasco.
AF Rahman

Dhaka

Though if compared one may consider it as less important than the removal of Prof. AQM B. Chowdhury, but to me the recent attempt to remove Hamida Ali is no less important.

I condemn the attempt, side by side congratulate the members of the governing body of the institution for the strength they have shown.

Jkobir
Dhaka

Usefulness of defence establishment

I fully agree with our Prime Minister that 'The planes are sitting idle. The

state is losing money just to keep them.'

I earnestly appeal to her to save more money by downsizing the defence expenditure as most of the paraphernalia are 'sitting idle and the state loses money just to keep them'. I am sure 99 people of the civilian population will be with her.

MAH
Dhaka

Lavish perks . . . wilt in Hasina heat

After Moinul Hussein and late General Osmani's ineffectual role of the opposition in the parliament and in the creation of the BKSAL never did we feel good at the performance of the opposition in the parliament until Sheikh Hasina for the first time

floor for the cause of the people and made the perk loving government to step back and withdraw the perk gladdened bill.

Thank you Sheikh Hasina. This is what the nation and the world at large expected of you.

SW
Dhaka

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-Editor