

Wheat scam culprits Selective punishment may erode government's credibility

GOVERNMENT deserves to be patted on the back for the two probe committees it had set up following the wheat scam that was revealed by the press. From what has been published so far we can also compliment the government for allowing the two committees to work quite independently, which has helped them to identify the culprits. Where however this laudable trend appears to be faltering is in the selective punishment that is being meted out only to the government officials and not to the political leaders whose names have surfaced in the probe. Such a selective punishment will erode public faith in the process of justice and the credibility of the government, which has risen because of the way the probe committees were allowed to function.

The wheat scam probe has shown a certain determination on the part of the government to get at the root of corruption, though in a very limited sense. To strengthen this impression in the public mind and for the sake of transparency and accountability of the government we suggest that probe committee reports, which have been submitted to the Prime Minister, be made public. By taking such a step the PM will send a clear signal to all her officials and party colleagues that she will not only NOT tolerate any corruption but will also not hesitate to go public regardless of who gets exposed and hurt. In making the suggestion, we want to point out that we have a right to know. It cannot be left to the discretion of government as to what the public should know and what it should not.

The protection given to the politicians, which the initial actions indicate, will not serve the government well. We think that the PM is being wrongly advised about the supposed negative impact that punishing political leaders of her party may create. We think the very opposite will happen. If she punishes all those who are guilty and not protect her party colleagues it will greatly enhance public confidence in the government, in her party and on herself. On the contrary if some are saved because of partisanship a very wrong signal will be given to other party members who may already be mired in corruption or are waiting in the wings that they will be protected as and when they are caught.

We also think that scam reveals that our whole food procurement process is extremely vulnerable to corruption. The process is too dependent on arbitrariness and whims of the officials and political leaders of the day. Therefore we strongly suggest a review of the food procurement process itself. The government will do the nation a great service if it acts now.

The DMCH story

Public hospitals need immediate care

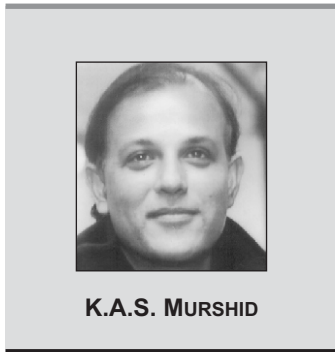
HANDICAPPED by inadequate logistics and beset with mismanagement and corruption, the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) epitomises the miserable condition our public healthcare system is in. There have been mighty plans all right to revolutionise and revitalise health services in the government sector -- from hospitals down to thana complexes; however, these have never been implemented to the full. Some were deserted halfway through while others never took off. Even though the physical network of health complexes left little to be desired its capacity to deliver services has severely been constricted by mismanagement toppled off by personnel shortages. Whenever plans to overhaul the squeaky healthcare system are taken up with external assistance, politicians and their cronies deem these as potent source to make quick money. Eventually, the plans never get implemented and crores of taka simply gets flushed down the drain while the poor and the marginalised remain beyond the public healthcare coverage.

The health and population sector programme (HPSP), the multimillion-dollar five-year plan which envisaged unification of general and reproductive healthcare down to the district and thana levels, is a case in point. Almost four years into implementation, it has been supplanted by another health plan. The donors were displeased with the go-slow implementation as they found out some crucial areas had been simply ignored. The new national health plan (NHP), which integrates nutrition into the health coverage spectrum, could meet with the same fate, if the government goes about implementation with typical indifference.

The DMCH and other public hospitals remain the only resort for the poor and the marginalised for emergency medical care. Unfortunately, in most cases, they don't get the minimum attention they deserve. If it is not shortage of medicine and other logistics, then it must be inadequate number of doctors and medical staff staring them in the face. Just imagine the plight of the three young men, who, after a stomach wash for some toxic food intake, lay unconscious on the corridor of the DMCH on Monday, completely unattended. One of them was in such a critical condition that he needed respiratory support but oxygen cylinder was not readily available. Had a senior professor not intervened, he might have been dead. The time has come to shake up the public healthcare outlets and the sooner the government does that the better it is for the poor and the marginalised and, of course, its own image.

In requiem

ETV



K.A.S. MURSHID

THE highest courts in the country have given their verdict. There is nothing more to be said, except good-bye. I am not really a sentimental person and not certainly given to tearful good-byes. And at any rate, I never did manage to watch a lot of TV. Nevertheless, it is sad to see a good, efficient, institution go, especially in a land where efficiency is scarce and competent professionals even rarer, not just in the media but just about everywhere. It is easy to dismantle a structure but to create one from scratch and make it work, indeed excel, is slightly more difficult.

An aside

At a moment like this, one cannot really help but speculate a little about the 'nature of the State'. What should the scarce resources of the State be directed to? What are its priorities and objectives? If for example, law and order be its priority, where is the effort, the mecha-

nism, the strategy, the monitoring system, the check and balances that are a prerequisite to effective action? How useful is it to find different branches of the government and different officials contradicting themselves in their statements, e.g. with regard to the Kolaroa incident? How useful is it to keep talking vaguely about 'conspiracies' every time you find yourself in a spot, looking sheepish if not downright silly? Let me add as an aside, that it

simply insurmountable. However, I would totally agree that there are likely to be numerous 'one-person conspiracies'. These are people who spend their whole lives silently plotting to take you down, and when they fail, they ascribe a sinister motive to somebody else. Quite frankly, I would be delighted to see a good plot, worked out in detail, taking into account every possible contingency and executed with minute precision! Why -- because

ETV again

ETV, after all, was an illegal channel, and our deep sense of justice and commitment to fairplay demanded that it be shut down. It does not matter that it produced some decent news coverage and some very enjoyable programmes. It is absolutely irrelevant that general public opinion was not in favour of closing it down. The law is the law and it must be upheld, and seen to be so. If you break it, you pay. I like

Now in the case of ETV, there was no inaction because no one shouted, called hartals or even issued a press release asking for its liquidation. Thus our hearing remained unimpaired, penetrating the walls of wisdom with crystal clarity.

One is now hopeful of our future. Perhaps this is just the beginning of a new dawn that will usher in a new-found respect for the 'rule of law', fairplay and justice for all. I have no

ble.' And most ingeniously: 'It was a conspiracy to foil our celebrations. But sorry about those journalists -- they hurt themselves while crossing the road'. But of course I am not going to pay any attention to such silly voices -- at least not in my sleep.

Parting thoughts

The thought crosses my mind for a brief, fleeting second that there are some interesting unresolved cases that have been hanging in the balance for some time. There is this famous murder case that has been crying out for justice for many, many years now. It has been so long in fact that it has managed to become a rich source of embarrassment for us all. There are numerous other 'sensational' cases including the Rubel Murder Case along with a string of other cases related to rape and murder that too await disposal. While all these cases are undoubtedly less important than the one against ETV one wonders whether the new commitment to justice will also ensure that these too will see the light of day? Let me end with two additional questions: (a) who stands to benefit from the closure of ETV? (b) The ETV licence was granted by the government, so what action has it taken against itself? The first question is inevitably speculative but the second should not be. If anyone knows the answers please do get in touch!

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BETWEEN YOURSELF AND ME

The law is the law and it must be upheld, and seen to be so. If you break it, you pay. I like this logic. It would have been marvelous if it were followed so thoroughly and vigorously in all other cases as well. I mean we are fed up with never ending discussions in the print media on e.g. the problems of maintaining law and order. We are shouting ourselves hoarse in a futile attempt to get some results from the law keepers. But I am afraid all our screams have been in vain so far -- and now I know the reason. Excessive screams lead to impaired hearing that in turn result in inaction. Now in the case of ETV, there was no inaction because no one shouted...

is perhaps only in Bangladesh (and lately in Bush's America) that words like 'conspiracy' and 'sabotage' have attained vast popularity. At the drop of a pin we are able to identify plots, conspirators and evil design, forgetting that the act of conspiracy requires a kind of organizational ability and talent that, if I may say humbly, is simply not available in these parts (not even in Iraq). In a country where no three people can agree on an agenda the problem faced by would-be conspirators is

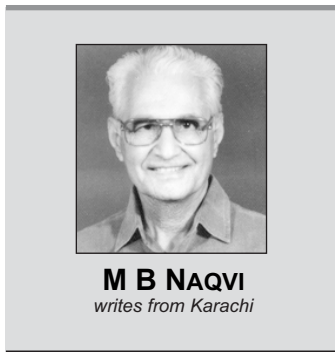
that would change my opinion about my fellow countrymen. I would regard them (and therefore, myself) with greater respect and deference.

Now that was a longer aside than I had intended. But then 'columns' are not academic publications, and columnists have the right (I will not call it a licence -- that carries legalistic overtones that is best to avoid in these sensitive times) to lengthy asides. But I did start out by talking about ETV, so let me go back to it for a moment.

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doubt that there is now a renewed sense of right and wrong, and an earnest desire to stamp out the malaise of violence, corruption, nepotism and cronyism from the fertile soil of the delta. Just as I find myself fully convinced of the coming of the new age what is this nagging but insistent voice that I keep hearing in my sleep? 'Nothing happened at Kolaroa! They shot themselves on the foot -- We just clapped! They don't really belong to my faction -- it's that other faction that's responsi-

Who will vote for what and why?



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

LET'S look at facts. At least 50 per cent of all Pakistanis are poor by any standard and making two ends meet is a problem for another 20 to 25 per cent of Pakistanis. The basic cause is widespread unemployment, both structural and temporary. Price level is high and inflicts pain on the poor. The economy is, all said and done, underdeveloped and technologically backward. Such development as has taken place has only aggravated the problems the people face. Elections are being held amidst economic stagnation and in a climate of doubt about the political future -- immediate or distant -- and continued social, political and economic backwardness. There is need therefore to put the main election issues in perspective.

The first question that anyone should ask is why should a perennially unemployed and poor villager or a resident of Katchi Abadi vote -- or for what. How do the polls relate to the actual problems he faces? Parliament, President, parties, civil liberties, and national security are all very well. But if half the population can only worry about where its next meal is coming from, its interest in 'national' matters can only be perfunctory. It is true the various problems of ideology, national unity, democracy and the like do concern the common Pakistani. But why should the poor take a conscious interest? His interest would be kindled if a party is actually promi-

ing, and credibly, a bare minimum of *roti, kapra or makan* for all Pakistanis. Interest in the future of democracy, civil liberties, free political campaigning, religious and social tolerance and all the other good things can follow -- and not the other way round.

That economy should be re-oriented to meet the felt needs of the people is the paramount task. Not that the larger political issues can be de-linked from common people's day-to-day problems and be treated separately. The two should form a

willing adults. As for those who cannot get jobs, there has to be some social security assistance. This assistance must be enough to provide two square meals a day to all Pakistanis -- old persons, women and children and the unemployed adults -- and two pairs of clothes again for all. There should be a firm prospect for all Pakistanis having a pucca roof over their heads, alongwith best possible education and health services.

That there are no resources available to the Government of

often ill-intentioned. Either system is democratic provided the common man's civic rights remain guaranteed and the government is subordinated to law and prevented from acting arbitrarily. The parliament has to fully control the finances and for spending each Paisa the government must prove its need to the Parliament.

In the parliamentary system the power of its Chief Executive (PM) is checked and balanced by that of the Parliament directly, from day-to-day and in the case of presidential

make the parliament honest and competent. Citizens have to exercise the ultimate check on the entire political system by making the life of corrupt and incompetent representatives difficult from day to day. Honest representation evolves.

The point is that the priorities of public policy need to be reoriented. First priority should be: economic security to the people and the very next is how to make them politically secure: i.e. their fundamental rights must remain inviolate and the government must remain subordinate to

old, and noted, politicians by rigging the election rules. These minimise common people's choice and scope for action. Imran Khan has complained of pre-poll rigging; many others suspect polling day malpractices and doctoring of results. Musharraf government's political intentions are not seen as clean: it wants Musharraf-loving parties to win and the desire is writ large in its actions. The point is can we, the common people, defeat skullduggery?

The first duty of aware citizens is to explain the precise nature of the problems that Pakistanis face and underline what voters should do. Voting is a moral and political duty; one must exercise his option to preserve or change the government -- or fight for that right. He should say loudly and clearly if he wants a change, indicating which political force should come centrestage and why: It has to institute Social Security through legislation and implement it through participation of the people. Unless an informed citizenry creates a government for the specific purposes that the aware citizens set for it, there will be no progress. The country will continue to flounder in the thoughtlessly created crises. It is conceded that the problems are a cumulative result of the cock-eyed and irresponsible policies pursued by quasi or undemocratic governments in the past. The required change is for the people becoming citizens, taking themselves seriously and becoming sovereigns by simply acting like citizens. It is their business to drive politics out of the well-appointed drawing rooms and persuade common citizens to get involved qua citizens in bringing in a new government that would tackle the problem of unemployment squarely.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

The point is that the priorities of public policy need to be reoriented. First priority should be: economic security to the people and the very next is how to make them politically secure: i.e. their fundamental rights must remain inviolate and the government must remain subordinate to the law (Constitution) through a free and vigorous Parliament, to be backed by aware citizenry that is neither silent nor inactive. Indeed the ultimate guarantee of democracy is citizens' activism.

coherent social, economic and political whole. It is hard to believe that any empowerment of the utterly poor can take place or poverty reduced -- the word *alleviation* is an abomination -- can proceed without political energisation of the silent majority, which has to stop being silent. This is where democracy begins. The two have to go together and stay together.

But as for the election, anyone asking for vote should be asked: what would you do about the poverty of so many millions? He should be forced to give a detailed answer. If he cannot, he has no right to be voted into any Assembly. Whether the country can afford giving jobs to all or not, the majority of Pakistanis, i.e. the poor, have an inalienable right to subsistence. If the state cannot provide it, it forfeits the right to anyone's allegiance. The next government should be the one which promises to create the maximum possible number of jobs for all

Pakistan for the purpose is true as a statement of existing fact. But that is no concern of the people who are going without necessities. Let the state be re-organised and its government must find resources for popular purposes. That should be priority number one: A Social Security Scheme on a sustainable basis has to be instituted for all. All development and fiscal policies should be the means to that end.

One is not downgrading pure politics. There is no intention here to discuss the precise form of political system that should govern the country. Treating people's social and economic security as an imperative will, or should, determine the political system. It is not enough for it to be a democracy: the rule of all people over themselves. The practical question is not whether but how it is to be done. There is debate over the relative virtues of presidential and parliamentary form of government, much of it misconceived and

system it is exercised through separation of powers, the tight control of parliament over key appointments and scrutiny of major policies through committees and tight control over money; the President must prove the need for every Paisa that he wants to spend. Both require the supremacy of the rule of law and respect for human rights without exception.

The people of this country have learnt through bitter experience that the advocates of presidential system have generally wanted an authoritarian system in its garb, not democracy. It is true, as some critics have suggested, that an incompetent or corrupt Parliament can fail to be a check on the arbitrary exercise of the power by the Prime Minister. But a President can be even more arbitrary if separation of power is incomplete. But that does not necessarily invalidate either parliamentary or presidential system. The task before the people remains how to

the law (Constitution) through a free and vigorous Parliament, to be backed by aware citizenry that is neither silent nor inactive. Indeed the ultimate guarantee of democracy is citizens' activism.

There are difficulties. The present situation of the country is perilous. Law and order is breaking down; the society is racked by religious and social intolerance and prejudices; national unity is under threat largely on the perception that civil and uniformed bureaucracy, largely Punjabi, is intent on subverting democracy; the economy is not growing at an acceptable rate; the country remains heavily indebted despite the rescheduling; the poverty reduction efforts are inadequate and misconceived; the army is not only ruling after overthrowing a constitutional government (even if it was not a paragon of virtue); it is threatening to remain in power through constitutional gimmickry; it has ousted from the election many

Let elected upazila be revived

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

IT was BNP's election manifesto to hold the upazila elections. It is now BNP leadership's mismanoeuvring to lead the matter to a controversy. This shows not only how the election manifestoes of the political parties can turn out to be hollow frustrating the electors but also how our political parties are apt to take leaps backward.

A six-member cabinet committee made to deliver on the subject seems sharply divided on the issue. Despite as many sittings as its members count it could not thrash out the differences to come to a consensus. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has asked to refer the upazila bill to the Council of Ministers. It betrays her concern to get the matter fully weighed by all ministers before her pronouncing a decision.

Meanwhile unwitting comments from leaders of the BNP have come up to create embarrassing situation for the government. According to a section of the press one influential minister of the BNP remarked that the BNP put the agenda on the election manifesto as an electioneering strategy. Such a remark can at best

contribute to harming BNP's credibility. The BNP secretary-general and LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan when asked why the government was wasting so much time over the issue, somehow skipped over the situation replying that the government hoped to settle the matter within two months next.

What agitates people's mind is why the BNP leadership is failing to arrive at a decision. According to knowledgeable circles two different sets of opinion have clouded their mind. One is the belief, shared by most of the Ministers and MPs, that elected upazila chairmen, supposed to be coming mostly from the BNP cadres, will hamper the pre-dominance of the MPs in the locality. The MPs, barring a few exceptions, desire to exercise absolute control over all affairs of their localities including allotment and distribution of wheat, development works, controlling officials and staff, appointments and transfers etc.

In recent times the MPs of Bangladesh have developed a peculiar mindset. They first aspire after ministership. Denied that berth, being limited in number, they seem to look upon their constituencies as

largesses that no one can have a bit of share.

Whereas it is the Parliament that constitutes MPs' actual field of activity. Their main business centres on legislative exercises and policy making. The more a country excels in levels of legislation the brighter is its image in national and interna-

men for that objective. As a result the nation has suffered a lot and the dignity of the Parliament gone down miserably.

The root cause of this erratic bent of mind of the majority of our lawmakers lies hidden perhaps in their inordinate lust for pelf and power.

Till now our administrative sys-

responsibilities, ensure close and on-the-spot watch and monitoring and fruitful co-ordination among different sectors of development.

The political leaders and activists who could not get party tickets for contesting assembly elections do have an earnest desire to go for the

Upazila gave the rural people somewhat of a taste of modern life. It brought gadgets of many a government agency to their doorsteps. Of course it was not an unmixed blessing. Because it brought in its train some vices of town life too. People's participation in the upazila administration through elections shaped the system democratic. For quite some time past upazila polls have been kept stayed mainly owing to narrow political wranglings. The BNP leadership must not lose sight of the truth that upazila elections cannot be confined to the desire of the MPs and ministers.

tional forums. The people have voted the candidates to the rostrum of the national assembly not for wheat distribution or bullying down local officials to their (MPs) pleasure but for debating national issues on broader spectrum, drawing realistic national policies and incorporating laws and acts to guide the nation to the desired goal. Unfortunately most of our MPs have not shown either enthusiasm in or ac-

tem stands highly centralised burdened with the responsibilities of overseeing the affairs of the country that practically remains unmet. For effective administration and countrywide development decentralisation of the present overburdened system is a must. The elected district, upazila and union councils are positive steps in that direction. These can arouse local enthusiasm and re-

chairmanship of the local bodies to nurse their leadership and training in politics. Why will they be deprived of this genuine aspiration of their own? It is here where exists their domain apart from that of the MPs and Ministers. What logic on earth is there that to unduly put the suzerainty of the local institutions and establishments into the jurisdiction of the law makers and ministers the elections of the upazila parishes

no obligation to be answerable to the local bodies. Further, will the BNP wisdom in the centre fail to realise that negating upazila polls will stifle the dormant leadership qualities of local lads and lasses to bloom and blossom?

The apprehension of the MPs that elected upazila chairmen will render them (MPs) insignificant in the local affairs particularly the development works may not be ac-

cepted as correct. Because the MPs shall have the authority to monitor the local activities as advisers even when elected chairmen will go on functioning in full blaze. Besides it is learnt that the Ministry has allocated Tk 1.00 crore for development works to be placed at the disposal of each MP.

Frustratingly, the upazila poll, apparently, is no ideological controversy; it is seen more as a conflict between individuals over personal aggrandisement of power and pelf. It has once more proved that recent politics has ceased to remain linked to people's welfare and national development agenda. In this there is practically no difference in attitude between the lawmakers of the BNP and those of the Awami League. The whole thing seemingly provides a base for corruption to shoot up. That is why when the Transparency International (TI) rated Bangladesh as number one amongst corrupt counties of the world under their review in 2001, people found it nothing unusual. Again when the same ranking is repeated for our country in 2002 by the TI no surprise comes

across our mind. Upazila gave the rural people somewhat of a taste of modern life. It brought gadgets of many a government agency to their doorsteps. Of course it was not an unmixed blessing. Because it brought in its train some vices of town life too. People's participation in the upazila administration through elections shaped the system democratic. For quite some time past upazila polls have been kept stayed mainly owing to narrow political wranglings. The BNP leadership must not lose sight of the truth that upazila elections cannot be confined to the desire of the MPs and ministers. The opinions of intelligentsia, civil society groups, professional communities, thinktanks of the nation are to be respectfully counted. Above all it is the vast multitude of people within the BNP and without it that are the true deciders of the issue. Shelving the upazila polls without consulting their opinions and sentiments is not only impolitic but also unethical.

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