

A year of missed opportunities

Governance must be taken more seriously

PAST hang-ups cast a shadow over quite a good deal of BNP-led coalition government's first one year. This happened on three levels.

First of all, current ills were blamed out on the preceding AL government as if to explain away a gingerly start on the tenure. In the process, an impression was created in the public mind that the new government was missing the underlying message of its electoral victory with a two-thirds majority. It was a mandate for change that the electorate gave them calling for tangible work on the part of the ruling party to bring that difference about and not to see political parties trading blame against each other from the day one. Voters speak every five years and once they have spoken, the elected government have only work to do and the opposition their part to play; for, they both are ultimately answerable before the bar of public opinion.

On another level, a good bit of the BNP-led coalition government's lead time was taken up by a head-long plunge in a tit-for-tat filing of cases of corruption and abuse of power against former AL government ministers, leaders and MPs. There is nothing wrong in principle to be doing so where sufficient evidence was available but it smacked of vendetta by the speed with which it was done. In terms of the plethora of cases lodged against political opponents, it was obviously a repeat of what the AL had done during its stint in power. Simultaneously, the efforts to disentangle BNP leaders, ex-ministers and MPs from cases processed against them by the erstwhile Awami League government took their time as well. Then came the sweeping away of criminal cases that the former AL government had allegedly filed against BNP activists involving several thousand accused under the SPA or PSA.

The third time-taking activity for the new government was the massive reshuffling in the bureaucracy and police resorted to in the belief that the 'docks needed to be cleared of AL partisanship'.

The net result of all this has been administrative confusion and stupor at a time when the people were anxious to see a quick forward movement of the wheels of governance and development as a harbinger of change in their lives.

Initially, the government appeared to be realising the need for drawing a line between the party and the government. This was evidenced by its dissolution of the JCD central committee and letting the police arrest BNP elements involved in criminal acts and excesses. But down the line, a criminal arrogance of power has been shown around by Chhatra Dal and Jubo Dal factional leaders and activists thereby bringing to focus the lack of any central control over them. The BNP has to neutralise these Frankensteins rising from its ranks if it is to mean business and take a firm grip of governance.

The BNP came to power on a pledge to improve the law and order situation more than anything else. But it's in this crucial area that the party's first year in power has proved a debacle. Hooliganism, thuggery, extortionism and murder were unbridled. Incidence of human rights violation, including atrocity on women and children, increased.

An oversized cabinet, lack of coordination between ministries, administrative loose ends and a degree of indecisiveness have admittedly held back the government from realising its full potential.

On the positive side, mention must be made of the initial breakthroughs achieved in the urban road communication and environmental sectors. The closure of the Adamjee Jute Mills must be counted among boldest of acts by this government, which sets a totally new tone to its disinvestment and privatisation policy.

Some economic indicators have improved: remittances by overseas Bangladeshis, foreign exchange reserve, volume of export and revenue earning are up. Imports, however, have slid down reflecting sluggishness in the manufacturing sector.

Investments are down with internal savings falling. The latter calls for critical infusions of FDI which is not forthcoming. Insecurity of lives and properties and scant regard for contractual obligations, the latter making a strong case for financial law reforms, are keeping investors, both foreign and Bangladeshi, effectively at bay.

In a sense, seldom have the objective conditions for the government to seek cooperation of the opposition in the effective running of democracy been as congenial as these are today. Hartals are remote now and the opposition have taken to parliamentary politics in a healthy policy shift. This bus the government better not miss to start building bridges to the opposition by initiating an early dialogue with them for a better tomorrow. It is pivotal to both politics and governance that in their common interest they forge a working relationship in the very least.

Blair at Blackpool



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

TONY Blair was both at his best and worst in Blackpool. At his party's annual conference he was visibly tense and restive, almost like a predator about to pounce on its quarry. Paradoxically, he also exuded the apprehension and alacrity of a hunted. Faced with strong opposition and threats of disaffection over his foreign and domestic policies he could retreat for safety or press ahead pugnaciously with a dubious outcome. In the event, he opted for risk and uncertainty. It was a role and decision few politicians would envy. To put up a demeanor that is at the same time both bold and assuring, in such circumstances, is a delicate exercise. No wonder, he appeared nervous, grim and uncertain. It goes to his credit that at the end he came out bruised but unvanquished.

At the conference Blair started off with foreign policy, Iraq in particular, an unusual gesture made plausible by the urgency and immediacy of the issue. He sought to take his critics unawares and draw his supporters closer with his remarks about Ryder up, the biennial golf competition just won by the European team against the Americans. The flippant remark about "Bush on one side and Blair on another" seemed in this context to suggest that when occasion demands Britain will be on the right side. Then leaving aside metaphor he plunged into an emotional pitch about the virtues of America as a champion of democracy, freedom, justice and tolerance.

In the course of this harangue history was exhumed to highlight the beginning of Britain's special relationship with America, particu-

larly its blossoming during the second World War into allied power against Nazi Germany. The experience of the past was used more forcefully and at greater length than the evidence or justification of the present in defence of the present alliance forged by him and President Bush against Saddam's Iraq or Iraq's Saddam. This was his Achilles' heel. He was vulnerable to critics over the thinly veiled threat of unilateral action by the Anglo-American alliance underlying the

approach of the Bush Administration have increasingly become vocal. But in Britain, not to speak of public acquiescence, even support from within the government is problematic for Blair. Blair faced opposition from quite a few of his colleagues in the cabinet which he has managed to calm down after the UN was called upon by President Bush to take appropriate action, a stance supported by Britain.

If the two heads of govern-

anti-war protesters, the biggest since the peace demonstrations in the seventies, brought into sharp relief the extent and depth of popular discontent in UK over a policy that puts war at the centre. Internationally also, the Anglo-American policy on Iraq has not received any significant support. Except Italy, no member country of EU has declared itself behind the policy while Russia is not even convinced about the need for a new resolution. France, on the other hand, has

Even the former American President, and his old friend Bill Clinton did not provide the moral support that he hoped for while inviting him as a special guest at the conference. Astutely, though not very subtly, Clinton endorsed the 'UN' route as the only desirable option and complimented (backhandedly?) Blair for bringing Bush around to this stand. Blair must have smarted from this remark because while Clinton seemed to have an overriding role of

tain terms that his government was determined to replace 'big' with 'enabling' public sector. It meant that an unprecedented investment of public fund into health services and education system will continue to be accompanied by a much sharper distinction between the financing and the provision of hospital services and school education. Government will provide cash but not to the same old monolithic public sector organizations or agencies like NHS. He left no doubt that his government was anxious to get out of the welfare state tradition of funding and public provisioning of services because the time and needs had changed. The emphasis, according to him, is to be on quality of service and consumer preference. In pursuance of this equality can no longer be the goal but only the means (equal opportunity) to the goal of social justice. To the jaded public reform and modernization are much overused words in the New Labour lexicon. Too often they have become cheap substitute for the absence of a clear-cut policy and tangible programme.

Now Blair has made it clear what reform means. In implementing the reforms he has also promised his government's determination to continue despite opposition from trade unions, Labour Party's prominent supporter and main financial backers. His declaration in the conference, "I have lost my love of popularity for the sake of popularity", was not a show of bravado or defiance. It was a rare demonstration of political leadership that goes beyond the exigencies or expediencies of present with vision and courage. In respect of domestic policy, particularly reform of public services, Blair at Blackpool did not blink his eyes nor mince words. He tried hard to lead and not allow himself to be swept away by populist slogans or demands. If in the Party conference Blair was both at his best and worst, the former clearly triumphed over the latter. Blackpool gave him his finest hour.

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IN MY VIEW

To the jaded public reform and modernization are much overused words in the New Labour lexicon. Too often they have become cheap substitute for the absence of a clear-cut policy and tangible programme. Now Blair has made it clear what reform means. In implementing the reforms he has also promised his government's determination to continue despite opposition from trade unions, Labour Party's prominent supporter and main financial backers. His declaration in the conference, "I have lost my love of popularity for the sake of popularity", was not a show of bravado or defiance.

demand for a strong UN resolution, which would make war inevitable. His reference to the 'UN route' as the first choice was a clear ploy to befuddle public opinion because the UN was already under pressure by their two governments to make a fresh resolution that would have war against Iraq built into it.

Having supported President Bush's call to the UN 'to live up to its obligations' to take action against Iraq over past resolutions, Blair has already placed himself squarely behind a potential unilateralist intervention. In fact this is a path that has been trodden by the two Atlantic partners for quite some time in their enforcement of no-fly zones in Iraq outside UN mandate. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair might have relied on the assumption that because of the precedence of their unilateralist action in the no-fly zone tacit support or indifference of the public had already been won. In America greater popular support enjoyed by President Bush after 11th September may have reinforced this view, though critics questioning the advisability about the gung-ho

ment/state decide to attack Iraq unilaterally, on the ground of UN's failure to come up with a new resolution and thus paving the way for military action, Blair may lose the support of quite a few ministers who are certain to resign. Similarly, his attempt to win over Labour back-benchers in the Parliament with the use of a flimsy dossier on Iraq's military build-up backfired and only managed to help keep the crisis smoldering. A unilateral military action will find many Labour MPs in open rebellion, which may threaten even Blair's leadership. His battle to win the hearts and minds of rank and file members spilled over into the Blackpool conference. Though a hard-line resolution opposing the war against Iraq was defeated in the conference it mobilised the support of no less than forty per cent of the delegates. Faced with strong opposition and apprehending defeat, a resolution in support of war, with or without UN mandate, was withdrawn by the party executives.

Meanwhile, the spectacle of more than two hundred thousand

proposed for two-step resolutions, the first of which concerns resumption of arms inspections in Iraq. The isolation of Britain from Europe is stark and is a cause for concern for many who see the future of the country ensured more in an integrated Europe. They have little doubt that Britain's tilt towards America can only damage this prospect. Even if Britain joins Euro in future its record of such extra-European allegiance may come to haunt minds and delay the actual process of integration over a wide front, including foreign and defence policies, they apprehend.

Both for the present and the future, Blair's Iraq policy, therefore, cannot but be a liability, according to many. In view of this it is incomprehensible that he should have gone to such great lengths in defence of a policy that is patently false, reckless and unpopular. He sounded more defiant than pragmatic when he declared in the conference: "I believe in this alliance and will fight long and hard to maintain it." It was hardly a seasoned statesman's voice and did no good to enhance his stature.

the UN in mind President Bush and he had designs to override it if the desired resolution was not passed.

Blair had his moments of glory and greatness, too, at Blackpool. He must be admired for the courage of his convictions in domestic policy matters. He was at his best when he remained steadfast in his government's policy to reform public services. Undaunted by stinging defeat by trade union over Public Private Partnership (PPP) and Private Financing Initiative (PFI), he declared the determination of his government to continue with the policy of reform through the two programmes. He was neither willing to put on hold the 500 projects under PFI nor willing to review the PPP as demanded by the trade unions. He even went beyond existing policy framework and hinted that the Health Secretary had his sympathy in his proposal to allow the foundation hospitals run by private sector to borrow beyond the ceiling fixed by the Treasury, something considered fraught with risk by the Chancellor of Exchequer.

He told the audience in no uncer-

Education is going south, bub!



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1894 Mark Twain wrote, "Cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education". Ignore the humor of what he said, and it resonates with the optimism that education has the power to transform. Alexander the Great said that his father had given him birth, but he owed his life to his teacher, Aristotle. Lest we forget, that was the purpose of education, bub! It was meant to transform our lives.

Of course, there was the loftier notion as well. John Addington Symonds captured that notion in this hymn, "A loftier race/Than ever the world hath known shall rise/With flame of freedom in their souls/And light of knowledge in their eyes." Education was supposed to uplift men, a touchstone that could turn savages into rational beings.

Herbert Spencer captured that transformation in a famous one-liner: "Education has for its object the formation of character." Funny to think that you sat in the classrooms hour after hour! All those alphabets you learned and the lesson you crammed! The science, mathematics, history, the midnight oils you burned! The medals you

earned, the grades you scored! You did all of those to bring traits and features, which could give you a character.

But education was rooted in something else. In the palaeolithic and neolithic ages of hunters, food gatherers, and hoe cultivators, care was taken to teach the skills and knowledge necessary for the survival of communities. Character either came much later or it was implied that man would be judged by his contribution to the society.

When the educated man is busy maximizing his return on investment. Like the moral maxims of the Victorian copy book such as "A stitch in time saves nine", we created credos to promote education. Parents encouraged their children with enticements that cars waited for those who studied hard. Thus a prize was sublimated in the character of a student in the manner a patient, while trying to cure his pain, gets hooked on the painkiller. Let us say the popularity of education was built on a unique value proposition. It transforms the lives of those who successfully traverse its course of action. People have emerged from dire straits of poverty by dint of education, and

divorced from life and didn't last very long. One of the greatest achievements of modern civilization is that it has successfully streamlined education worldwide. There are common standards and methods, although one could still argue if the British system of education is better than the American one.

Yet another achievement of modern civilization is that it has integrated life with education. Career is nothing but a way of life

they still do. The sons of farmers or labourers have migrated from rural fethers to urban glitters, the dream of success anointed in their eyes by the glory of education.

So there is no denying that education has the power to transform lives. But somehow it also created doubts. Oscar Wilde wrote with sarcasm in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England, at any rate, education produces no

ought to have its telltale signs. But that was part of the character-building process that reminded a man of his identity at every step. Not to say that it always worked. There were rascals then as there are rascals now. There were the pretenders and the thugs, those who committed mischief hiding behind a mask. We still have them, but the problem is that now the mask has taken over the face.

If you remember where we started, education is a life-

form for survival when he is willing to take any shape, which brings him success. That, mind it, was not part of the deal, bub! Education was never meant to ensure that one was going to have a successful life. It was rather meant to ensure that one could have a useful life.

One of the many failures of modern education is that the difference between those two forms of life is forgotten. Goethe said that what was important in life was life itself, not a result of life. It is not important to go through life with eyes on the prize. Instead the prize should be in the eyes as one looks for the best use of one's earthly times.

The alternative has been a disaster. The rise in crime and violence is the outcome of a competitive life where end justifies the means and one is hellbent to win no matter what. And that desperation justifies elimination of whoever stands in the way, an essential theme that is the central tenet of gangster world.

Perhaps that is why H.G. Wells wanted to caution us in *The Outline of History*, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Let us recall one of the many credos of education, "Pen is mightier than the sword." It is a delicate situation, bub! The sword hangs over the neck so long as the pen goes on writing. I am doing my bit, bub! Would you not do your bit?

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CROSS TALK

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effect whatsoever." The college education doesn't necessarily turn the cabbage into cauliflower. If you look around, you wouldn't even know the difference at times.

There was a time when education at least provided the excuse to dress well. You weren't allowed to wear a wristwatch until you reached a certain level of education. You could look at someone wearing shoes with pajamas and tell he couldn't have been in the civil service. If you saw a man in his suit and tie, you knew he wasn't somebody you wanted to mess with. The toe of the shoe could tell in one go whether a man had good taste, education and upbringing.

This is not to say that education

enhancing process where a cabbage is transformed into cauliflower in the course of time. How does it happen? According to B.F. Skinner, "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten." A man touched by the ray of knowledge is expected to undergo fundamental changes whereby his values and ideals would permanently refine him into a definitive identity, which could be called character as well.

That is not true anymore, though. Education, on the contrary, brings the flexibility, which compromises character with convenience. In other words, it is difficult to define a man these days, because he is engaged in a polymorphic struggle

membership roll. There is one impatient nation waiting for these men and ideas to synchronise and deliver the much needed changes. If not the BNP, then who? If not now, when?

The one year old government has taken some significant, often courageous, steps on the road to political and economic reform. It deserves our commendation for such. Admittedly, even at the best of times Bangladesh is a strikingly difficult place to govern. That is precisely why we elect shrewd people to run the affairs of the nation.

Yet, after all the anniversary celebrations and protest meetings are over this week, it is perhaps impossible to escape the sad conclusion that the gap between

the current government's potential and its performance is gargantuan. It is similar to the distance between the nation's hopes a year ago and its disappointment. Or to that between the exuberance I had in January of 2002 and the embarrassment I feel now at the prospect of exchanging thoughts with our well-wishers.

The good news is that the BNP-led coalition has another four years to bridge the gap. The bad news is that it is yet to show a political will, as opposed to a World Bank mandated mechanical routine, to institute the sorely needed reforms across the entire administrative and economic landscape of the world's eighth biggest democracy.

OPINION

Potential and performance: The gap after one year

ESAM SOHAIL, writes from Kansas, USA

THIS past January I had run into a great well-wisher of Bangladesh at a social gathering. Both of us were happy to note yet another democratic transition of power. Knowing our mutual interest in the goings on in Dhaka, he had asked me what I thought of the then newly inaugurated government. With an exuberance that comes with heady youthfulness, I had promptly told the gentleman that I expected significant reforms in democratic consolidation, human rights, and market freedoms. The gentleman had politely nodded and wished Bangladesh good luck.

In a few months I will probably

run into my Senator Sam Brownback again. I hope, however, that I can avoid that chance meeting with the ranking member of the United States Senate's South Asia subcommittee. Most likely, out of politeness and academic interest, the genteel former law professor will ask me about my thoughts and I would be too embarrassed recalling my excitement from a year ago. The fact of the matter is that I had been a bit too optimistic about reform when power changed hands in October of 2001.

It is not that the coalition government has not made changes for the better. For the first time in history of independent Bangladesh, a couple of coercive laws were actually rescinded by Parliament! That in itself is a major psychological

milestone in a Third World nation—black laws are generally stiffened, not rescinded in these parts of the globe. Similarly, the regime showed incredible uniqueness when, in sharp contrast to its predecessor, it actually had the police pick up one of its own lawmakers and subsequently stripped the MP of party offices.

In the economic field, notwithstanding the now well-known free tongue of the Finance Minister, the government made some courageous decisions. That whitest of the white elephants and bleeder-in-chief of the economy, Adamjee Jute Mills, was finally put on the market. So were several other smaller jute and textile mills. The stagnation of the privatisation effort during the previous government

was seemingly reversed. In spite of the tremendous pressure exerted on the economy post 9/11, somehow it has survived.

And yet, the overwhelming mandate given to the BNP should have been reciprocated with something more than mere survival. By giving the coalition a landslide of seats unheard of in free elections in this land, the people have a right to expect significant progress, if not outright miracles. They are owed an explanation why bold moves to actually overhaul the rotten bureaucracy, the sick public sector, and the dilapidated public universities have not materialised yet. Bangladeshis have a right to know why their life and property is more at risk today than any other time in their recorded history of three

thousand years. The lame excuse that 'it takes time' is simply not tenable when you control almost seven out of ten seats in the assembly, your ministers run the roost in the secretariat, and your chosen appointees head the law enforcement and military forces.

Why, may we ask, does it take a few minutes to pass a law increasing the remuneration of ministers (who do not need it anyway) but a year is not enough to pass the Constitutional mandated law for an Ombudsman (which we do need)? We also need to cleanse the universities of the poison called student politics and the public industries of the cancer called trade-unionism. The taxpayer needs to be relieved of the dual torture of paying for the upkeep of entities

like Biman and T&T and then being treated criminally by the same.

Yes, we need to see all those good things done and then some. Blaming the Opposition is not going to cut it. The Awami League was not elected to deliver on much needed reforms and security, the BNP was. Two rescinded bad laws, one privatised white elephant, and one arrested lawmaker is a good start for a government with a small majority and a few months behind it. It is an unenviable scorecard for a one year old regime elected with a massive mandate.

The coalition has a mandate for drastic reform. It has years of studies and sheaves of paper to show what reforms, political and economic, are needed. There are scores of brilliant men in the BNP's

membership roll. There is one impatient nation waiting for these men and ideas to synchronise and deliver the much needed changes. If not the BNP, then who? If not now, when?

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