

Transparency in government procurement

Good for the country's economy as well as image

WE are at a loss to rationalise the reported resistance of some government ministries to the new policy guideline on public procurement.

The said policy that has been introduced some time back is yet to find its full implementation because a few top ministries are opposed to it, ostensibly because they see 'problems' in it.

Regrettably, one of the reasons that casts us in the ranks of the corrupt is the unbridled corruption in public expenditure. It hardly needs mention that our public expenditure procedures have been fraught with so many loopholes and scope for manipulation, which ultimately cost us almost a staggering three percent of our GDP. Just to consider an estimate that reduction in corruption by thirty-five percent in public purchase could result in doubling the annual GDP is in itself mind-boggling. Imagine the dividends if corruption in this area could be totally eliminated!

We on our part find the Public Procurement Regulations, 2003 timely, and, whatever be the extraneous compulsions behind its formulation, with several clear merits.

First, it will, hopefully, rid the system of lottery where a most odious practice of 'refrigeration' was resorted to, to pick the favoured bidders.

Another significant aspect of the new procedure is that it seeks to terminate the central role of the DFP, a role that was for most part full of opaque procedures that festered on the devious deeds of certain coterie at the DFP, which proved to be totally against the letter and spirit of competitive bidding. The result was poor quality work and cost and time overruns.

We also believe strongly that devolution of financial powers for revenue and development expenditures under the new procurement regulation formula will allow unhampered implementation of development projects. An oversight body in the form of Central Procurement Technical Unit to ensure rigorous implementation of the new procedures is a good arrangement also.

There are urgent compulsions that merit quick implementation of the new procurement system. Not only will it confer large financial dividends on us it will also help in expurgating the negative image about Bangladesh while at the same time ensuring overall invigorated development financing.

Jail grenade recovery probe

We hope it wouldn't fizzle out

WE are amazed by the news that the government is probably trying to 'bury' the probe relating to the grenade recovery incident at the Dhaka Central Jail just a day after the August 21 attack on Awami League rally. The discovery of the grenade, purportedly identical to the ones used at the opposition rally raised grave concern over the security lapse in Dhaka jail, the largest prison-house in the country. As it is, the country was already reeling under the shock of the multiple grenade attack on the opposition rally, and discovering a similar grenade inside the jail, and that also near the cells where high profile prisoners are kept, was more than enough to create panic and raise all sorts of question in the public mind.

Though initially the jail authority tried to pass it off as a grenade hurled in from outside, it did not sound plausible at that time, it still doesn't. What's more alarming is the fact the government does not seem willing to divulge any details of progress made in the probe which was initiated a long time back. The State Minister for Home Affairs, Lutfuluzzaman Babar has categorically said, the government, at the moment, doesn't want to divulge whether they found anything or not out of the probe, for the sake of smooth investigation. But as citizens of the country, don't we have the right to know at least how long the probe will continue and what if anything has been found well into the second month of the probe? More significantly, since some intelligence and police sources said that there were some 'alarming information' discovered during the probe, we demand to know what these are?

We understand that some of the information might be classified and sensitive, but why can't we be taken into confidence with the rest of the information since it concerns our safety and security. The procrastination can be explained in two ways, either the government has no clue on how the grenade was smuggled inside the jail and who did it or the vested quarters are trying to scuttle the probe. We hope the government would expedite the probe to allay all misgivings. Let it not pass into oblivion like many others.

The core values of the nation



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AN irresistible urge for certain way of life always propelled people seeking separate independent statehood. The turbulent process of decolonisation or national liberation movement usually through which it was achieved in most cases after the Second World War seldom allowed a formal expression of those urges. But deep under the concomitant upheavals there were distinct hopes and aspirations charting the nation's future course and outlining its aims and objectives which otherwise remained obscured by the turbulence of the process. Then there emerged a set of values synonymous with the state's objectives. In security parlance we call them the nation's core values. As a matter of fact these are the values on the rampart of which rests the state's edifice. Once this rampart is assailed by some visible or invisible force the national security is at stake.

Bangladesh is no exception to these rules. In Bangladesh also the national security, like in any country, revolves round two basic questions. First, what all we want to secure and second, how and where we perceive the threat to our security to be coming from -- in other words the perception of our threats. These questions are seldom addressed in some concrete team in our country either officially or academically. Worse still, the national security has

deal of ambivalence and misperception persist in our national security discourses.

With regard to the question of what we really want to secure it is said by the theorists that each state aims at protecting its internal values from external threats. While the values are indeed internal the threats are not necessarily always external. Whatever could have been source of the threat the recent grenade attack in a political meeting

temperament for democracy. It is not without a reason that the British chose the regulated presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay -- the earliest British possessions in the subcontinent -- to introduce, nourish and uphold democracy and granted to their population the fundamental rights. Democracy struck root in Bengal as early as mid thirties when through the introduction of the India Act of 1935 the Indians were given limited self rule. Since then democ-

ence is an abstract value and, of course, the most precious one we must be able to provide something tangible for our people -- long exploited by colonial rules. Although it is a long arduous process to reach that goal we must be able to keep that process going at any cost. Thus the maintenance of a congenial environment, a stable internal order, political stability and an economic discipline for a consistent national growth is a matter of national secu-

on our religio-cultural life. Our forefathers fought against the British from bamboo fort. They also fought for their dues against the oppressive landlords. We spear-headed the movements for the separate Muslim homeland in British India. Yet we have been tolerant people maintaining communal harmony and a measure of democratic norms. We subsequently fought against the internal colonialism of Pakistanis and attained our freedom. Ours is a heroic people with the tradition of fighting any odd including cyclone, tidal surge and standing up to the challenges of new life. All these factors constituted our intrinsic internal values which we must be able to safeguard. Because they provide us a distinctiveness to quality for separate statehood.

Fourth, in a resource poor country like Bangladesh a viable egalitarian society cannot be built up only on the basis of social justice. Unless we are able to share both the resources and miseries among ourselves there is really no escape from perpetual inequality in our social structure. In fact our people through all movements and uprisings fought for equal opportunities and fair play, among other things. Social justice should therefore be treated as one of our core values without which it is impossible to build up a stable, viable society.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

In a resource poor country like Bangladesh a viable egalitarian society cannot be built up only on the basis of social justice. Unless we are able to share both the resources and miseries among ourselves there is really no escape from perpetual inequality in our social structure. In fact our people through all movements and uprisings fought for equal opportunities and fair play, among other things. Social justice should therefore be treated as one of our core values without which it is impossible to build up a stable, viable society.

often been misinterpreted in our country by treating it synonymous with national defence or regime security. While national defence relates essentially to military security only against external threat the regime security attempts at illegitimately employing the state's security apparatus to sustain a ruling clique in power. But national security is much broader a concept and its scope cannot be confined only to its military dimension; neither can it be trivialised for the task of protecting a regime. Consequently a great

shook the national confidence because it directly assaulted the rampart of the democratic ethos of our statehood. Because what, after all, will be left of our statehood once it is shorn of democracy which is the cornerstone of our polity. Not only the architects of our independence put it as one of the state principles in our constitution our long struggle had in fact been to restore democracy strangled in the hands of Pakistani rulers.

Even historically the Bengalis displayed particular talent and

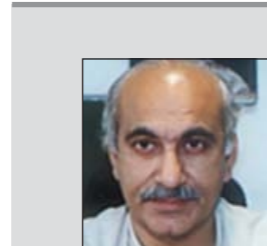
racy thrived in Bengal till the outbreak of Second World War and produced leaders of the stature of Suhrawardy, Fazlul Huq and Tamizuddin Khan.

Second, we must be able to ensure an internal order conducive to an uninterrupted socio-economic and all round development, because for an under developed country like Bangladesh security essentially means development having a civilizational connotation for the continued well being of our people. While political independ-

ence is an abstract value and, of course, the most precious one we must be able to provide something tangible for our people -- long exploited by colonial rules. Although it is a long arduous process to reach that goal we must be able to keep that process going at any cost. Thus the maintenance of a congenial environment, a stable internal order, political stability and an economic discipline for a consistent national growth is a matter of national secu-

Third, we have a distinct identity of our own, with a political culture and social values which are different from those in the rest of South Asian region. This is based on our history, heritage, traditional and peripheral, in the sub-continental landmass. The peculiar geographical factors and deltaic features of our land have great deal to do without total attitude and national psyche. We came under Muslim rules from thirteenth century onward and this left a deep imprint

The great American race



M.J. AKBAR

SINCE the only functional law of democracy places perception above facts, logic can only be a secondary guide to the fate of fortune hunters in an election. Let us attempt a new methodology. Why not throw random facts, picked arbitrarily from a day's reading of newspapers and a special issue on politics of the *New Yorker*, into a kaleidoscope and see if any pattern emerges about the Great American Race.

In the days of studio domination of Hollywood, when stars were given weekly wages, Warner Brothers used a scientific audit to rate the popularity of the stars on its payroll. The winner in 1941-42 had more support among girls of 17 than women of 30 or more; received more applause from moviegoers who earned \$25 or less a week than those taking home \$60 or more; and sold more tickets in towns with a population of 10,000 or less than in the big cities. His name? You guessed it. Ronald Reagan.

At the time he was still surging ahead in the primaries, the Democratic meteor Howard Dean permitted an enthusiast to pour a milkshake into a glass perched on his head. Dean retained his physical balance, but the first doubts began to creep in about his mental balance.

The Democrats cut short their primary process, gave John Kerry the nomination and then watched him cool down on the electoral thermometer even as George Bush warmed up by stoking up a fear psychosis. A guest on the Jay Leno

show, a bitter sort of comic, told Leno, "Jay, the poop I made in your dressing room has more heat than John Kerry". Kerry was sitting on stage at the time. He kept his cool.

The 20 electoral votes of the Midwest, and therefore currently conservative, state of Ohio will make the difference between victory and defeat as the contest goes to the wire. An executive of a company named Diebold proudly claimed that he was "committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to President (Bush)". Diebold is a maker of

its nuclear facilities, since moolahs are not going to be permitted the luxury of a nuclear arsenal. The military operation could be outsourced to Israel.

Nicolas Lemann notes in the *New Yorker*: "If voters give Bush a second term...he would pursue ends that are now outside what most people conceive of as the compass points of the debate, by means that are more aggressive than we are accustomed to. And he couldn't possibly win by a smaller margin than last time, so he couldn't possibly avoid the conclusion that he had

likes. He believes Bush is terrible for the world, America and him, in that order. Officially the Kerry campaign keeps him at arm's length, worried about any radical outburst. Clinton once kept him waiting so long that he had to send officials after him when he walked out. Soros was convinced in May that Bush could be defeated although the opinion polls put him so far ahead Kerry couldn't see where the frontrunner had gone. Since he is a Jew, rightwing attacks on him include more than a hint of racism. He says he is too old to care. His philosophy

intelligence, while living in a fantasy world of spiu."

Stanley Presser, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, believes that opinion polls should not be trusted if they merely ask whether respondents are for or against X or Y. There is no certain answer to "How are you?" There is a far better answer to "How are you compared to yesterday, or compared to someone?" A Gallup poll released on 17 September showed a 13-point lead for Bush. A Pew poll a day earlier found the candidates to be almost tied.

castrated without painkillers. Politicians who find they have won in the polls but lost in the ballot box may want to check if they have been flattered to deceive. Incidentally, when you read that a particular poll has been conducted on the telephone, remember a few facts: women answer the phone more than men, and young people don't hang around at home.

Zogby got the Bush-Gore election right with an unusual question. "You live in the Land of Oz, and the candidates are the Tin Man, who's all brains and no heart, and the Scarecrow, who's all heart and no brains. Who would you vote for?" The response was a dead heat: 46.2 per cent for each. He asked the question again in the last week of September. The Tin Man was ahead this time by ten points.

The share price of Halliburton, the Cheney-propped American multinational that received a multibillion dollar grace-and-favour contract in Iraq, has dropped sharply on the New York Stock Exchange, from \$50 to around \$30.

The day after Bush lost the third straight debate a news report from Baghdad said: "Prime Minister Ayad Allawi threatened Wednesday that a military assault would be mounted against Falluja if the rebel bastion did not surrender Iraq's most wanted man, the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." Translation: Musharraf can't deliver Osama bin Laden before 2 November. Hamid Karzai hasn't been asked to pick up Mullah Omar. So it's Allawi's turn to deliver an also-ran. Does it matter that the CIA says that Zarqawi had no links with Saddam Hussein, and that official investigations confirm that Saddam had neither weapons of mass destruction nor any connections with Al Qaeda? No.

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BYLINE

The first polling was done by a magazine called *Literary Digest*. It would send around 20 million postcards and receive an average of five million answers. It correctly named the winners of the 1924, 1928 and 1932 American presidential elections, and predicted in 1936 that Alf Landon would defeat incumbent Roosevelt by five percentage points. A young pollster who sampled only thousands, but went door to door, made a public bet that the *Digest* would be wrong. Roosevelt won. George Gallup went on a roll, and is still rolling.

the voting machines that will be used in the United States on 2 November.

When Bush's daughter Jenna got stuck in the elevator of a nightclub while on the campaign trail, she opened the door with a chopstick and later calmed herself with a tequila. Jenna is now so popular that she introduces her dad in the Republican heartland before he delivers his stump speech.

In the first of the three debates Bush attacked the "moolah" of Iraq. He didn't mean the moolah paid out to Cheney-crony companies like Halliburton. It was his preferred pronunciation of "mullah". Last year, he ended the nuanced Clinton policy towards Iran, in which the elected Muhammad Khatami was the good guy and leader of the clergy Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was the bad guy. Iran was placed unambiguously on the axis of evil. The word from the necons around Bush is that once Bush is elected Iran will be punished with a military attack on

been given a more expansive mandate." Lemann also recalls what Bush told Bob Woodward in December 2001: "I have no outside advice...First of all, in the initial phase of this war, I never left the compound. Nor did anyone come in the compound. I was, you talk about one guy in a bubble."

On 6 August this year, five billionaires and six liberals met at the Aspen Institute in Colorado's Rocky Mountains and swore themselves to secrecy. They then concentrated on a single purpose: how to defeat Bush. The moneybags were Peter Shore, chairman of an insurance company called Progressive Corporation and owner of a 250-foot yacht, Lone Ranger, that is often his home; John Sperling from Arizona; Herb and Marion Sandler from California; and George Soros, king of Wall Street. Soros, who started with \$6 million in 1969 and turned it into \$7 billion, is the most public face of this alliance. He donates some \$400 million a year to causes he

is simple. "If I want it, I own it." He is convinced that the Iraq invasion was a disaster, and America should pull out as soon as is decently compatible with national interest.

Kerry relaunched himself on 16 September in Las Vegas at the annual convention of the National Guard Association which, two days before, had cheered Bush to the rafters. Kerry said, "I believe he (Bush) failed the fundamental test of leadership. He failed to tell you the truth. (He) did not even acknowledge that more than a thousand men and women have lost their lives in Iraq. He did not tell you that with each passing day we're seeing more chaos, more violence, more indiscriminate killings. He did not tell you that with each passing day our enemies are getting bolder -- that Pentagon officials report that entire regions of Iraq are now in the hands of terrorists and extremists..."

You deserve a President who will not play politics with national security, who will not ignore his own

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Have you heard of the Push Poll? It is designed to push the respondent towards the answer the client wants. When Zogby did a poll for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) it asked Americans whether they would give up eating meat if they knew that chicken, only days old, get their beaks seared off with hot blades to prevent them from pecking one another in jam-packed cages. Or that bulls and pigs are

OPINION

Three-year score-card: Not a whacking success

ABMS ZAHUR

MANY of us still remember the 'decade of development' observed with lots of fanfare in Pakistan in 1968. To understand the political situation more clearly he depended (naturally, enough for a dictator) on advice of bureaucracy. A few months before his resignation he obtained a highly confidential report from his cabinet secretary about the political situation in the then East Pakistan. He was not satisfied with the recommendation of his trusted governor Abdul Monem Khan. As a seasoned administrator Ayub did not depend on a single source of information. Though political situation was not as bad as we see in Bangladesh to-day timely action by the dictator saved him from embarrassment and the people were also saved from further suffering. We do not see a similar thinking among our politicians.

There are, however, basic differences between the rule of Ayub Khan and the parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. Ayub Khan's 'basic democracy' was all but an apology for the term 'democracy', he remained a dictator throughout. The present democratic government of Bangladesh (though it tries to run

like dictatorship at times) is certainly accountable to the people. As a military dictator Ayub depended mainly on bureaucracy. We are confused as to the dependence of the present government. In its quest for fulfilling its vision or objective it has completely politicised bureaucracy following the bad lesson from the previous regimes. Even some more experienced and seasoned politicians of the party have to be contented with their existence at the periphery of power. It is true that to make a party dynamic the younger elements must be encouraged. This, however, does not mean that the more experienced and knowledgeable politicians should be sacrificed for attaining dynamism. Balance should be maintained between the old and the new.

Three-year rule of the Four-party Alliance, despite its minor successes in certain areas cannot be regarded as successful. It has, in fact failed miserably to fulfill its commitments in major areas like law and order and corruption. This is perhaps due to its lack of confidence (possibly because of lack of understanding) within and lack of courage to face the unsavoury truth, and lack of experience in handling a coalition government. Its habitual attempt to put all the blames on the

opposition parties (particularly Awami League) has resulted in losing its face as a true democratic government. As a representative government holding such a huge majority in the parliament there cannot be any sane reason as to why it tries hard to avoid admitting its follies. After all no government is infallible. There will be success and there may be failures. Admitting failures and taking remedial measures in time will bring sympathy of the people for it. Avoidance of admitting failures will create credibility gap. What is needed is transparency. People have the right to know the actual state of affairs and not just prepared statements which the people hesitate to accept.

Gross failures in controlling crimes and curbing corruption have tarnished the image of the government both inside and outside the country. It is also no use putting all the blames on the media, as it often does.

Right from the start of the government people were critical about the capability of the home ministry. However, it would not be correct to say that home ministry was efficient during the previous regime. The present deterioration of the law and order is apparently due to (a) lack of morale of police force, (b) lack of

logistics of the police force, (c) lack of modern arms, (d) lack of adequate training of police personnel, (e) politicisation and (f) political interferences. In fact politicisation started during the previous regime. The present government has adopted it as a precautionary and retaliatory measure. This has, however, affected the common people. Now people feel totally insecure. The problem of politicisation is that the neutral personnel (who may be more efficient) dare not remaining neutral and lose interest in service. This damages the overall efficiency of police force. If the police personnel are under pressure of political interference their morale remains low. With low morale, obsolete arms, inadequate logistic support and lacking in proper training of police personnel, it may be asking too much if one expects high level of efficiency. The operations like "clean heart" and actions of the forces like Rab and Cheela may only bring temporary relief, this is no permanent solution. Moreover, actions of these bodies may be restricted due to complaint against them of violating the constitution and human rights, etc.

Corruption is deep rooted in Bangladesh. Though corruption

existed in Pakistani days, some top officials were dismissed in Pakistan under martial law regulation 58. These personnel's history of services were thoroughly examined and all the evidences were meticulously analysed and they were found guilty. Awami League in looking only to its party interest, appointed a number of these personnel to important positions (prime minister's secretariat, ministry of finance etc). The present government has also accommodated a few personnel whose antecedents are dubious. Compromise with corruption appears to have been done in party's interest. It is, however, doubtful how far corrupt personnel can serve the greater interest of the party.

It is unrealistic to expect much from an oversized administration. It was expected that there would be drastic change in the jumbo cabinet. Nothing beyond some cosmetic change has happened. Thus instead of improvement in governance the situation deteriorated. In fact it has mainly become a government of inaction, intolerance and indolence. Inefficient handling of foreign affairs has resulted in branding us by some as 'failed state'. The fact is that winning at the polls and running an administration efficiently

and effectively are not the same. If bureaucracy cannot be handled properly, if bureaucracy is interfered by the politicians frequently, if bureaucracy is not allowed to remain neutral, if the quality of the bureaucrats deteriorate, then how a government can fulfill its commitments to the nation? We do not see any answer to this ticklish question.

But despite its many faults, follies and failures it may not be appropriate to ask for its resignation because our experience with the previous government was not also very happy. Thus it cannot be assured that a reelection will bring a government capable of handling the extremely onerous and difficult task of running the administration efficiently. What is immediately needed is (a) reforming the administration, (b) allowing bureaucracy to remain neutral as far as possible, (c) giving some exemplary punishment to those corrupt. There may be an attempt at forming a national government based on consensus among major parties.

Reaching a consensus among major political parties is a difficult task though not impossible. Politics is always a matter of compromise and adjustment. What is needed is holding of serious dialogues on continuous basis. If China and USA

could hold secret talks during the most dangerous period of communist-non communist confrontation, why BNP and Awami League cannot sort out their differences. In the past they fought together to establish democratic order in the country. To bring peace, prosperity and placidity in the country both the parties shall have to bring some changes in their political strategies. Following points may be considered by BNP:

(a) No easy access for professional turncoats, govt officials with bad reputation, inexperienced, less knowledgeable and less educated politicians or businessmen.

(b) Discouraging entry of rich and influential mastans.

(c) Maintenance of balance between the hardliners and the moderates and between the junior and senior party members.

Awami League may consider the following:

(a) Acceptance of the reality that Bangladesh is no longer the same it was three and half decades back.

(b) No difference be made between Awami League freedom fighters and non-Awami League freedom fighters and even freedom fighters and non-freedom fighters.

(c) Instead of showing a bent

for socialistic pattern of economy they may think more about the need for promoting private sector;

(d) Instead of spending too much time on recapitulating the memories of the war of liberation they must start looking forward;

(e) They must accept the bad effect of politicisation;

(f) Politicians living on the strength of mastan culture must not be allowed entry in the party.

To improve the present situation the BNP-led government should start taking positive steps for attaining healthy atmosphere in politics. Concentrating mainly on winning votes cannot ensure them of good governance. Without good governance they cannot fulfil their commitments. Whatever statements are made by the leaders of BNP fact remains that the country is neither "shining" nor its people are "feeling good". Therefore act now to stem the rot.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.