

# Saga of a politicised civil service

## The non-partisan civil servants must be protected

AHMAD MAHMUDUR RAZA CHOWDHURY

THE very essence of democracy is that the civil servants will work under the guidance of an elected government and implement its policies. But there is proviso that the orders received or acts done are lawful, in accordance with laid down rules and not ultra vires of country's constitution to which one's supreme allegiance lies. He is not obliged to carry out unlawful orders or directives for which he is liable to be prosecuted. Not only the end, but the means too have to be transparent so that people at the receiving end should feel that they have been given a fair and impartial deal. The scrupulous adherence to established rules and ethics and treating people equally without fear or favour endows the civil service with an image of impartiality that has been its greatest strength and time honoured expectation of people in many countries around the world including Bangladesh. But reported scandals surrounding recent recruitments at district level, then canceling the recruitment process and subsequently rescinding the cancellation order have not only marred the image of the government, but also imperilled the credibility of civil

servants.

There was a time when civil service meant and included only officers of the hard-core covenanted cadre who ran the district administration and manned top posts of secretariat. Now we have an amalgamated civil service consisting of as many as 13(?) BCS cadres and the BCS (Admin.) is only one of these 13 cadres. Members of these myriad cadres are holding top positions in the secretariat, planning commission, sector corporations and attached departments besides holding positions at field level. So the civil administration has to be viewed, analysed and judged in totality through the prism of present day service structure. To hold any particular cadre responsible for all failures is unfair and smacks of ignorance in terms of prevalent realities.

Today, a civil servant works under tremendous pressure, whether in the field, attached departments, corporations or in the secretariat. When he refuses to tow the line or resists partisan pressure, he is often subjected to harassment or punitive actions. Some civil servants succumb to pressures or often volunteers in lieu of personal gains while many more suffer for their commitments to rule of law, impartiality and conscience. The result is a growing frustration among civil servants who are alienated for being fair and non-partisan. They go unsung and un-honoured. Conversely, the impartial image of the civil service is tarnished by few who joined hands with thugs.

The syndrome is unleashed in its ugliest form when a new government assumes power. It has become trendy that alongwith the new political party enters a set of civil servants in the corridor of power. They are the confidante of political elements with

governments come and go according to the popular wish of the people expressed through credible periodic elections. It is the permanent bureaucracy that maintains the continuity of the government. The new government has to depend on its professional civil servants and take them into confidence to fulfil its commitments. The success of the government largely depends upon how efficiently it is served by the civil service. But in a suffocating atmosphere filled with mistrust and

actually, this sort of paper I have been looking for. We shall go through the details and get into work soon". He just paused for a moment and said "Well, Mr. Cabinet Secretary, I cannot resist the temptation of asking you one question. How, you and your colleagues knew before the election that my party would return to power?" Replied the cabinet secretary confidently, "Sir, we have prepared another volume for the other party too. We would provide that book if the new PM

In fact, there had been two possible sources from where a civil servant could get protection. One is protection provided by bosses and seniors and the second one is given by the law. But the doors of courts are open and in fact, some had gone up to the Supreme Court in quest of justice. But that entails a protracted legal battle and involves colossal expense which a civil servant cannot afford with his meager income.

If the expectation from the civil service is fairness, impartiality and professionalism, then in all fairness and for the sake of rule of law, they should be provided with a window where an aggrieved civil servant can get justice and fair treatment so that he can work with courage and high morale. Hence the need for a Permanent Civil Service Commission that will hear such cases or a credible office of the Ombudsman or an empowered President of the country to whom appeal shall lie if a civil servant feels aggrieved of political or partisan victimisation and harassments.

The justification for such an impartial and non-partisan institution is not to undermine the authority of a political government. Neither all politicians are self-seekers nor all civil servants are angels. There are civil servants who committed excesses and got politically involved while in service for their personal aggrandisement. But they are of microscopic minority. Still, by far the vast majority of civil servants are careerists who want to abhor political involvement and pursue an honest, impartial and professional track. The bad elements should be identified, tried and sent home through a transparent and judicious process. But those who are yearning for a straight, clean, and non-partisan career should be given opportunity to pursue that time-honoured trek. The cost of politicisation has been exorbitant and unless kingpins at the bastion of power could fathom its malignant ramification, the nation will have to pay in dearer terms for generations to come. The Frankenstein has to be put into the cage before the monster maims the civil service for ever. Sooner the realisation comes better it is for all of us. We cannot change the past. But definitely we can shape the future.

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whom they have been maintaining surreptitious contacts. In the incubatory days of a nascent government, they wield tremendous influence and use this fluid situation to settle their personal scores with fellow colleagues. The result is retirement, super session, posting as OSD, even framing corruption/ criminal charges and so on. In the first few months, the situation reached such a pass that an officer would hurriedly scan the daily newspaper before going to office in the morning only to be sure that he was still in job. Those were indeed nerve-wrecking months for many civil servants.

As time rolled on, symptoms of politicisation was more pronounced in matters of promotion and transfer. Hundreds were made OSD and the set criterion for promotion was flouted. There are instances of officers making meteoric jumps from the level of Deputy Secretary to the charge of a ministry in less than two years whereas officers working as Joint Secretary for more than 12 years with requisite qualifications were denied promotion. In a hierarchical service structure, when an officer with requisite qualification is superseded and made to work under his juniors the situation is like that of a woman disdained publicly, unable to show face in the society, hiding in shame, humiliated and disgraced.

Some posts have become too dangerous to work. The postings are those in the PMO, Cabinet and Establishment Divisions, Home Ministry and private secretaries at the centre while Commissioner and D.C. in the field. Officers are hesitant to work for fear of vendetta with change of government. But these posts are cadre posts and some one has to be placed there. Thus, many hapless officials became victims of rivalries and politicisation for no fault of their own. At times, atmosphere was so vicious that officers thought not in the good book of the political government (OSD, superseded or compulsorily retired) were avoided by their long time colleagues and friends in service for fear of reprisal. The civil service was shaky, unnerved and demoralised. This deprived the new government of a momentum that was essentially needed for a jump start in its first 100 days of rule.

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ernments come and go according to the popular wish of the people expressed through credible periodic elections. It is the permanent bureaucracy that maintains the continuity of the government. The new government has to depend on its professional civil servants and take them into confidence to fulfil its commitments. The success of the government largely depends upon how efficiently it is served by the civil service. But in a suffocating atmosphere filled with mistrust and

would have been from the other party. That was based on the other party's manifesto and election pledges". The PM was satisfied. No grudge, no suspicion. And perhaps there was no inquisitiveness to see the other volume. Civil service did its job efficiently and impartially. The continuity has been ensured. Such a tryst is inconceivable in the context of our political cul-

ture. Regarding legal protection, except for dismissal, all other punitive decisions end up at political levels with minister or the PMO. Although proposals for dismissal go up to the president, he is constitutionally bound to act in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister. The president has no independent machinery or mechanism to verify the allegations or to cause an independent enquiry in to the

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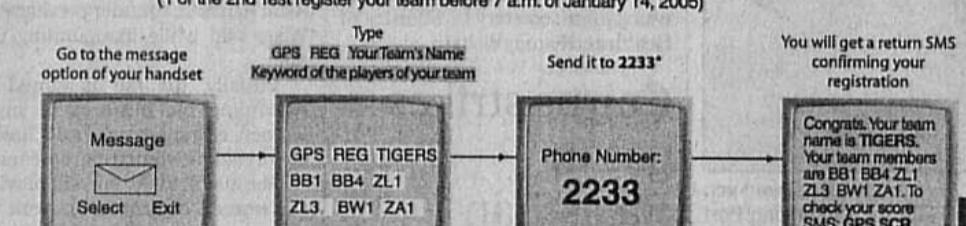
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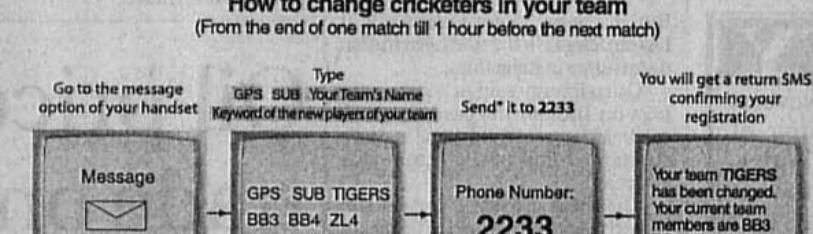
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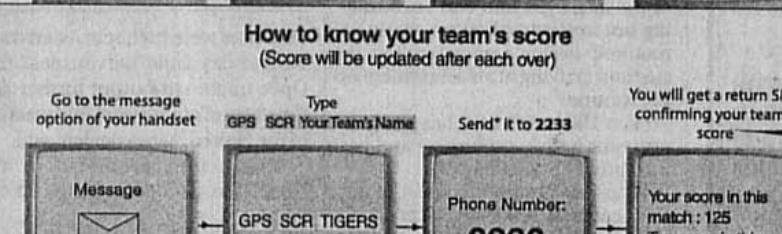
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