

Oversized cabinet serves no purpose

ABMS ZAHUR

SMALL is beautiful. This does not mean that big is ugly. It is, however, difficult to manage anything big. It is a common knowledge that an alliance government has to accept a bigger cabinet to accommodate the partners' demands. The present BNP-led cabinet is big because of BNP's own need. For some unknown reason no member of IOJ (Islami Okya Jote) was inducted into this alliance cabinet. The party tried hard to get at least one portfolio. But to no avail. Instead it is alleged that the government (on advice or instigation) suspect IOJ's involvement in the recent terrorist activities. On the other hand Jamaat has grown into a formidable force in Bangladesh politics during the last twenty-five years because of their 'discipline,

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perseverance, dedication, courage and realistic attitude.' Though BNP may be aware of the fact that Jamaat will grow at BNP's cost in future it is extremely difficult for BNP to discard Jamaat.

With the start of American war on terror and American atrocities against the Muslims the position of Jamaat has assuredly improved in Bangladesh because even those Muslims who were thought to be indifferent to

religion are made to realise that the other major religious followers of the world are not well washers of Muslims as such the Muslims of the world have no option other than standing together to save themselves from physical, economic, political or cultural onslaught. Thus Jamaat has an international appeal. No other Bangladeshi political party possesses this feature. It is therefore seen that Jamaat will be a real competitor for

obtaining more seats in the parliament in near future.

BNP has become a big party mainly because of the failure and mistakes of Awami League. However its organisers deserve credit in bringing the party at this level. The main problem with BNP is that due to accommodation of too many opportunist politicians and retired bureaucrats of dubious past its front leaders are not seen as dedicated as they should have been. It was not discreet for BNP to accommodate such heterogeneous elements only to make its size big. Poor attendance of BNPMPs speak of their lack of interest in political process.

At the start of the present government it was expected that the prime minister would carefully watch the performance of the cabinet ministers for one year and consider replacement of ministers where necessary. Apparently this could not be done because party's interest was given preference to performance. Thus inefficiency, hidden or exposed, remained, in certain ministries like health, home, commerce, foreign affairs, communication and energy. Apart from this, we do not understand as to why 13 ministers have been made ministers without duty (MWD). Some of these MWDs are at least more experienced. They will, as far as we know, not make silly public statements to the humiliation of government. If the government has any respect for democracy how can it justify spending millions of taka to maintain more than a dozen ministers without any job? On the other hand, the finance minister is desperately trying to wipe out the revenue shortfall and tackling the various financial and economic problems.

Some political analysts try to compare the efficiency of a caretaker government with that of a regular government. This does not seem to be acceptable because a caretaker government's job is mainly to hold the national election and to complete all arrangements for the start of a new regular government. Its life is ninety days. It is non-partisan. It has nothing to do with the activities of the political parties. It has not to bother about state policy matters. It has to perform only routine functions of the government.

It may be too late for the government to adopt measures like rightsizing or downsizing the cabinet. It is, however, time to utilise the services of those MWDs to save them from their political doom and to save the poor country from (criminal) wastage of public money and to control the bureaucracy from gaining more and more power at the cost of political mismanagement.

The government may not have a good number of efficient highminded politicians yet it must try to utilise those able few in building its image. It would not be appropriate for BNP to nurture the rich and the corrupt, people with influence over the underworld or people who are too docile to raise any issue strongly. To keep the reputation of the party high it is advisable to encourage really honest, dedicated (to the party), well educated and mature (politically) members.

It was perhaps a wrong assessment of BNP leadership to forget the popular adage that too many cooks spoil the broth. The party made too many commitments during the last election perhaps without thinking much about their implementation. The capability of the government severely eroded, perhaps due to politicisation of administration, dominance of certain junior ministers and declining level of efficiency of bureaucracy. Furthermore, it seemed BNP chairperson tried to follow what AL chief did during AL regime without caring much about outcome. BNP showed better performance during 1991-96 though Khaleda Zia's experience of running administration was nil at that time. This time it seems too many sycophants and some immature and inexperienced advisers, perhaps led her to take some wrong steps. Her authoritarian way of dealing with opposition, her way of dealing with the donors and her failure to control the terrorist activities committed by so called Islami fundamentalists are supposed to pay off negatively. The only way out appears to be adopting measures like the following:

- (i) Creation of proper environment to start dialogue with the opposition on major issues like reformative measures in regard to caretaker government, strengthening the office of CEC etc;
- (ii) The ministers who have failed to show good performance may be dropped from the cabinet immediately;
- (iii) Quick decision may be taken about the MWDs;
- (iv) Better understanding may be developed between cabinet ministers, PMO and advisers of Hawa Bhaban;
- (v) The size of PMO should be reduced and ministers be encouraged to take decisions independently as far as possible;
- (vi) The RAB may be made more accountable; and
- (vii) Work should start for rightsizing the administration through reorganisation to keep the administrative expenses within a bearable limit; and
- (viii) The process of politicisation must be contained as much as possible.

It is seen that Bangladesh is really weak at the implementation level. Almost all government decisions either flop or falter at the implementation stage. It will certainly improve if the process of politicisation stops and honest and neutral workers are allowed to work freely. Good decisions are meaningless if they cannot be implemented due to government's own creation of hindrances. It is unfortunate that too many ministers could do too little.

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Partnerships for urban development

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OVER the last four decades the world's population has doubled, with around half living in or near cities. While urban centres can greatly contribute to a nation's wealth, it also demonstrates ever widening economic and social disparities between the rich and poor. This is particularly true for developing countries where significant portions of urban populations reside in squatter settlements, large amounts of urban waste is left uncollected, and unsafe drinking water and inadequate supply of water considerably contribute to diseases.

The needs of ever-increasing urban populations are stretching or exceeding the capacity of municipal authorities, especially in less developed cities. Housing, infrastructure development, and utility services are inadequate and governments either do not have the resources or the capacity or the political will to improve the situation. Based on the assumption that competition ensures greater efficiency and transparency, many "experts" have proposed privatisation as a solution. Critics have argued, however, that privatisation fails to address the needs of the poor.

With governments being inefficient and markets not always providing for the poor, there is an increasing emphasis on public-private partnerships for managing cities. Two such partnerships in waste management and supply of water have enabled Dhaka residents – rich and poor – to improve their quality of life while the sharing of resources has resulted in a win-win situation for all concerned.

Waste management

Dhaka city is experiencing particularly serious difficulties in dealing – or failing to deal – with ever increasing waste generation. With a population of over 14 million, the city's cash-strapped municipal government simply does not have the capacity to cope with over 4000 tons of garbage produced daily. Hence, considerable amount of waste is left uncollected and the remainder dumped in landfills.

Waste Concern, a non-profit organisation founded by two social entrepreneurs, saw the potential for composting household organic waste into a resource, i.e. organic fertilizer. They successfully initiated a community-based composting pilot project on land allotted by Mirpur (North) Lions Club. For the model to spread, however, Waste Concern had to find a different land source since leasing at market prices would make the project unfeasible. They identified significant amounts of unutilised public land and persuaded

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the Municipal Corporation and the Public Works Department to be partners by providing access to some of these lands.

The last piece in the puzzle involved marketing the end product – the bio-fertilizer. After contacting different fertilizer companies and conducting quality assurance tests, Waste Concern now has agreements for the supply of compost, and the market demand far exceeds their entire annual production.

Waste Concern also developed a system for managing waste in urban slums. As slum residents generally have no legal tenure, utility service rules bar them from receiving services. They modified a Sri Lankan barrel composting technique that took into account space constraints of settlements along with creating income opportunities. Four to six households share a barrel to compost their kitchen waste and Waste Concern purchases the end product from them.

Access to water

A large number of poor urban residents in Dhaka city live in overcrowded squatter settlements on either public or private land, with little or no basic services and utilities. As most low-income residents do not have the right of tenure on the land, they have been left out of the planning and allocation of government utility services. This forces the poor to look for "illegal" alternatives resulting in them spending far higher per unit cost for similar services than the rich.

Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK), a not-for-profit organisation, was initiated by a group of doctors and social activists to work on primary health care in slums of Dhaka. They learned from residents that access to safe drinking water was key to improving the health situation. Thus, they initially worked with hand water pumps, but had to soon abandon this idea as ground water levels were too low.

DSK then approached the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA), a statutory body responsible for water supply and sewer drainage of the city, for a piped water connection. DWASA rules at the time dictated, however, that services could be extended only to people or organisations having legal tenure to premises. As the poor pay above government rates for unofficial water supply, DSK persisted with DWASA regarding the economic viability of providing legal water connections to slum communities.

for the security deposit and payment of bills. Finally, DWASA agreed to make an exception.

DSK then organized slums residents to form a water supply management committee. Under this arrangement, DSK mediated with DWASA and facilitated legal access to water supply and sanitation and provided capacity building for the community to manage the program. The community was responsible for collecting fees, paying bills, appointing caretakers, providing minor repairs and maintenance and repaying investment cost to DSK. The pilot phase was a success and DSKs own work has since expanded along with being replicated by other NGOs in different parts of the city.

The above initiatives demonstrate how different stakeholders can pool resources to bring about efficient and self-sustaining systems for healthier cities while reducing dependency on

donor funding. In Dhaka city alone, where the urban poor number at least 6 million, it is approximated that only 55 percent, 20 percent, and 22 percent of them have access to safe water supply, sanitation facility and municipal waste collection services respectively. When we contrast this with another figure that estimates around 75 percent of contribution to GDP coming from non-agriculture, mainly from the urban sector, the need for healthier cities takes on an even greater sense of urgency. While the initiatives of Waste Concern and DSK have brought about a change in mind set regarding the utilization and access to public services, the challenge that now remains is the scaling of such operations to go beyond limited interventions to covering entire cities.

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