

The deadweight of an oversized cabinet

What a costly ministerial redundancy!

It has been reported in the daily Prothom Alo that at least 13 ministers, state ministers, deputy ministers and advisers to the government have no specific job to perform. The oversized cabinet is virtually immobilised under its own weight.

This newspaper had opposed the formation of a 60-member cabinet on the assumption of power by BNP and its allies nearly four years ago. Since then there have been two successive cabinet reshuffles, basically redistribution of portfolios, that too quite a while ago, whereby nine ministers were jettisoned. But five new advisors were inducted entrusting them with the responsibility of some ministries which was mildly speaking unconventional.

Still, the existing government is hugely oversized, a fact that is only underscored by the lazing out of so many ministers. The lighter side of it is the ministers without any job are in the news for gossips and political bickering they have all the time for. But that ironically in a country where so much needs to be done with so little resource to waste on sinecure really.

There are other inherent flaws in the structure of the government. First, as many as 18 state and deputy ministers have no specified responsibilities. Secondly, the ministries in which a minister and a state or deputy minister work simultaneously, there is something of a duality of authority and a sizeable degree of working at cross-purposes. The resulting confusion percolates lower down the order bringing the overall level of efficiency of the government down to an abyss.

True, a political government couldn't set aside certain factors like regional pulls and pressures or the need for giving berths to coalition partners, but nothing can justify having a cabinet with so many ministers on the sidelines of the dynamics of governance, howsoever wobbly they have been. Basically, no amount of sound thinking went into the making of the cabinet; even the expertise and background of the ministerial candidates were not taken into account while portfolios were distributed among them.

It has now been proven beyond any shadow of doubt that an unusually bloated cabinet is responsible for the poor governance in the country. It may not be too late even now to reduce the size of government and save the national exchequer some money while ensuring a degree of efficiency in running the affairs of the country.

BRTA revamp in offing?

Good thinking but not enough

LET'S commend the decision arrived at a high level meeting of the communications ministry to send a proposal to the Cabinet for providing the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) with a special police force to assist it to curb mismanagement and irregularities in the transport sector. Deeper down, however, this is a reflection -- rather an indictment -- on how BRTA has been functioning.

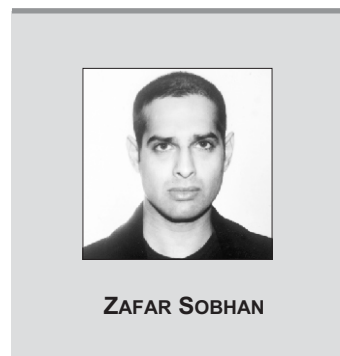
The BRTA lost a staggering Tk 250 crore in licence fees and other transport taxes in the last fiscal through corruption and mismanagement. A special police complement by itself cannot rein in corrupt practices within BRTA and outside in the transport sector to the desired extent. The simultaneous addition of eight mobile teams to be led by magistrates to enforce traffic rules and catch the violators, welcome though it is, remains a transient option.

Overall, the government needs to be cautious about one particular thing: every new dose of stringency and addition of outfit to the existing structure risk opening new avenues for corruption, rent-seeking and extortion which must be fought off.

Let's hope that no time will be wasted in equipping BRTA with the special police squads and putting the proposed eight more mobile teams in place. We have to face the fact though, that those who have been involved in corruption in the transport sector cannot be expected to change overnight into saintly persons. The police habit of collecting 'toll' from old vehicles may die hard. This is not to forget also that some postal department employees have been adept in depriving the government of revenue collection from the transport operators. So, there is a huge gap in coordination that needs to be bridged.

We know that it is possible to improve the situation, but not certainly by recourse to ad-hoc measures which has been the case hitherto. Unless a thoroughly professional, well-coordinated and institutionalised approach is adopted, chances are that corruption and irregularities will continue and the national exchequer will be deprived of its rightful earnings.

Time for a constitutional convention?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE good news is that the nation is now focused on the need for reform of the electoral process. The Election Commission has recently invited all political parties to a dialogue to share their views (admittedly with indifferent results) and in the past few months there have been any number of round-tables discussions and seminars and conferences held on the subject.

Reform of the electoral process was a key component of the slate of reforms recently announced by fourteen political parties and the demand has been reiterated even by parties who are not part of this loose alliance. So there is no question that electoral reform is front and centre on the nation's agenda.

The bad news is that there is as yet no indication that the government will consent to pass into law any kind of reform package, or that if they do, that the main opposition will consider this sufficient.

The government has evinced zero interest in even the most basic and indispensable reform proposals, even though it is by now perfectly clear that any election held without these will lack any credibility.

The principal opposition, for its part, has demanded an entire slate of reforms, of which election reform is but one component, and has shown no inclination that it will

accept anything less than the full panoply of its reform package.

Looking on the bright side, it seems as though there is fruitful ground for compromise which might give both sides a fair measure of what they want, which would permit reasonably credible elections to be held, and which would help advance representative democracy in the country, and thus be good for all of us.

On the other hand, this is Bangladesh, the country where mature

able to force the government's hand and will take to the streets to oppose both -- any election held without them and any government elected thereto.

Thus, if things continue along the way they are headed, we can look forward to a full-blown constitutional crisis, and there is every possibility that we will end up with the worst of both worlds. The opposition will not be strong enough to force the government to hold elections to its satisfaction (in contrast to 1996) and

empowering the EC. Nor does this solution address the issue of the appointment of the head of the caretaker government, which appears to be a non-negotiable demand.

The second solution is even more unlikely to ever come to fruition, but if the goal is to try to perfect our political system, or at the very least to make it more effective, is an idea that is long overdue.

Now might not be a bad time for a constitutional convention.

years old as a nation and our democracy is only really 14 years old and still evolving (one hopes). There is no shame in admitting that democracy has not worked out as effectively as thought and that it might be an idea to see how best to amend the system to try to finesse the dysfunctional political realities.

There can be no question but that democracy in Bangladesh is dysfunctional and that we need to give this problem closer scrutiny rather than assume that because we are

admission that the law and order situation is out of control and that the regular police and judiciary is corrupted apparently beyond repair.

Everyone complains about the role that money and muscle play in elections. Everyone complains about politicisation. Everyone complains about corruption. So in a sense no one is saying that nothing needs to be done. We all seem to agree that dramatic changes would be a good thing.

That said, with us heading towards a political showdown, now seems as good a time as any to see if we can fix some of these problems that ail us, if not once and for all, at least for the next decade, rather than accepting that there is no alternative to continue sliding further and further into dysfunction.

This is why now would be a good time for a constitutional convention. Let's put it all on the table for discussion.

Let's revisit Article 70 of the constitution which prevents floor-crossing and ensures that parliament remains nothing more than a rubber stamp for the executive. Let's look at whether politics could be improved with a bicameral legislature. Let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of proportional representation. Let's look at the parliamentary rules of procedure and see if we can come up with a system that permits more voice to the opposition.

No one is arguing that this would be an easy task. I do not know if there is any solution to the politicisation and polarisation and winner-takes-all mentality that is at the heart of the sickness within our body politic. But unless you think that government in Bangladesh is functional in any meaningful way, then a constitutional convention to try to root out the dysfunctions might not be a bad idea.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

There can be no question but that democracy in Bangladesh is dysfunctional and that we need to give this problem closer scrutiny rather than assume that because we are notionally a democratic country that all is or ultimately will be well. Even if we are able to hold credible elections, many of the problems in the body politic will remain.

compromise and statesmanlike conciliation come to die. Chances are that neither side will give an inch.

So where does this leave us? It is ironic to think that where a clearly defined path to avoid conflict and confrontation is available that our leaders are so unlikely to take it. What seems far more likely is a damaging showdown which will benefit no one and once again tarnish the country's image in the eyes of the world.

Success for the government means holding elections under the current dispensation, regardless of who turns out to contest them. The four-party alliance would obviously win any such election, whence it would claim a mandate, and then blithely go on to attempt to rule the resulting fractious powder-keg of a country with an iron hand.

Success for the main opposition would mean government capitulation to its slate of reform demands and an election under the resulting dispensation, which it may well win. More likely, however, they will not be

the government will lack the credibility to govern effectively or even to ensure that its writ runs throughout the country.

Is there any alternative? There are two. The most elegant and practicable one is a compromise on reform of the electoral process. I believe that a strong and independent election commission, with its own permanent secretariat from which the returning officers could be culled, an accurate voter list, and the institution of measures such as voter ID cards and electronic voting could ensure that the coming elections are fair and above reproach.

This is unlikely to happen. In the first place, the government, with typical short-sightedness, lacks the statesmanship to see how such measures would benefit both them and the country. Similarly, the main opposition has already stated that it finds the chief election commissioner unacceptable, and so is unlikely to be mollified by any solution that is premised mainly on

In the first place, the caretaker government reforms proposed by the opposition cannot be enacted except by amending the constitution.

This can be done by the government like in 1996, but that was hurried through, and I would argue that if we are going to amend the constitution then there is something to be said for taking our time and doing it right, and to also address other issues of constitutional significance at the same time.

The chances of this happening are more or less zero, I concede.

But if a year from now we are still mired in political gridlock that is getting more violent and ugly by the day (as will very possibly be the case), then it may not look like such a bad option for the government to amend the constitution to hand power over to a caretaker government to convene a constitutional convention to try to sort out some of the problems we face in our democracy.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this idea. We are only 34

notionally a democratic country that all is or ultimately will be well. Even if we are able to hold credible elections, many of the problems in the body politic will remain.

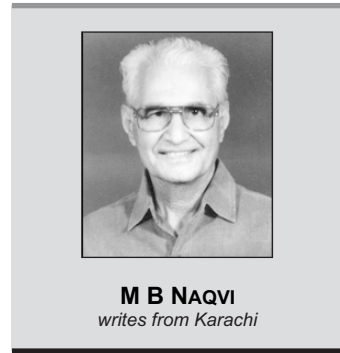
The main dysfunction is that we do not have a functional parliament. The opposition has either routinely been denied the opportunity to speak in parliament or has not consented to even show up, or both.

Furthermore, every corner of the country from the civil service to the judiciary to the police is politicised. Projects green-lighted or not, flood relief distributed or not, and primary school teachers are hired or not, based on political affiliation.

The government has even admitted these dysfunctions. The finance minister on record as conceding that corruption is endemic, and the fact that under the law even a bank robber (think about it) can bring his money into the legitimate economy with no questions asked speaks volumes.

The very existence of Rab that has extra-judicially executed over three hundred to date is a tacit

Changing equations in Asia



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

TWO recent developments in Asia need to be kept in sharp focus to better understand the changing equations in Asia. The first is the growth and growth of intense affair between the US and India. They have signed two major agreements in recent weeks. One of them is the framework for defence cooperation in which the Americans have offered maximum military cooperation. This includes India's buying of military equipment, training in the US of Indian military personnel, more joint operations by the Navies of the two countries, co-production of F-16s and F-18s and of course inclusion of India in naval operations to interdict suspected nuclear material being carried in Indian Ocean. The other agreement between them is over civilian nuclear reactors. India is required to sharply divide its nuclear facilities into military and civilian. While the military ones will remain outside the international inspections, the civilian ones will be sold by the US but will come under IAEA bailiwick.

Under this arrangement India would get the same treatment that America's time-tested friends have received from America because they have signed the Non-Proliferation

Treaty. There are many hitches in the implementation of the second agreement in the shape of resistance in the Congress and opposition from other friends of America within the fraternity that abides by NPT. The latter are likely to take umbrage at America rewarding a country that has stayed out of non-proliferation regime. Moreover, this agreement runs counter to current American laws. But the intent and the design of America is clear.

perceptions and their own thinking, America is now the sole superpower facing no cognizable challenge. True, there are many states in Asia that are not fully under US control and have begun looking askance at American policies. Insofar as the Eurasian landmass is concerned, this is where the US wants to ensure its military domination in all parts of Asia and control the key raw materials which would confer on them the ability to deny the supplies of that

Russian Navy and the Chinese Navy together are no match to American fleets. The Japanese, Australian and even Indonesian Navies are friendly ones. Now with the Indians actively cooperating with the Americans to keep Indian Ocean's oil lanes open, and patrolling jointly along the southern shores of Asia, threat to America in the Far East is reduced. Geography has taken care of seas north of Eurasian landmass. No naval competition is possible there. Thus it is

strong diplomatic reaction by China and Russia has ensured that Uzbek government has demanded that America winds up its activities and vacates the base. Kyrgyzstan is also saying similar things. This is a setback to the Americans though their economic advances remain in place.

China and the Russia are now close friends of the US the way the Europeans were. American strategic moves look uncommonly like containment and encircling of them.

popularity in the Indian middle classes. Russian security's demands will make it very hard for Russia to continue with its old ways of dealing with India. All this adds up to a new line up in Asia, while the rest of the globe is in tow behind the US.

As it is the south is America's redoubt: in the Persian Gulf, Arabian landmass and Diego Garcia, the American forces are well entrenched. American design to keep permanent bases in Iraq and Afghanistan is known. It already has four bases in Pakistan in addition to several in Central Asia. What happens to the Central Asian bases is uncertain but the American defences in the south are strong and with the accession of India it will make it stronger still. This line up should inform the intelligentsia throughout Asia.

Whatever the global significance of India's clambering on the American bandwagon, its domestic and regional fallout is likely to be considerable. The Manmohan Singh government can come unstuck; the Left can scarcely abide by India's radical departure from traditional stances. Pakistan has served notice that it will take counter measures to safeguard Pakistan's security in some ratio with India's enhanced military capabilities.

Russia is in a giant nutcracker between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans through America's naval domination of both Oceans. With Europe on the side of the Americans -- it is still so but the future may be somewhat less certain they are way ahead of the Russians and Chinese in power and influence. But areas south of Russia -- and China's west -- are vulnerable. They present a soft underbelly of both Russia and China.

The agreements with India underscore the American intent of making it a global military power; that means developing India into a counterweight to China that is growing at a roaring rate. They also drive a notional wedge between Russia and India. The Russians may lose their Indian market, if the Americans come in strongly in India, given their

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PLAIN WORDS

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The second major development is the rapid growth of Sino-Russian economic and political cooperation that began over a decade ago. In the backdrop of American designs, China and Russia had created a body called Shanghai Five that later has become the Security Cooperation Organisation. Its intent is clear: it wants to put a stop to the spreading of American influence and military deployment in Asia. Their main demand has now come: they have asked America to rollback its military presence from Asian mainland. The American answer is terse: since we are here on local invitation, if the country concerned wants us out, it will say so and we shall comply. Which leaves matters in Asia in political flux.

The overall American design needs to be understood. In common

only the southern borders of China and Russia that offer America opportunities and challenges.

America quickly seized the opportunities. It cultivated the post-Soviet republics very quickly and it has now a foothold in Georgia vis-à-vis the new oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to Europe, independent of old route of Russian oil pipelines to Europe. This pipeline is directly controlled by the Americans and American military is not too far away and America stands guarantee for its security and has arrangements with Georgia. It has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. What with American readiness to invest huge resources in infrastructure, mining, oil prospecting and helping modernize their armed forces and their readiness to lend, the Yanks had a field day in 1990s. But the

and again to support their cause. We can never conceive of our ambassadors playing a similar role in other countries. We must not give them an opportunity to act as a third party mediator. We should be able to resolve our own problems as a self-respecting nation. We should be ashamed of calling a foreign diplomat to settle our political differences. It is not their mandate to indulge in our internal feuds.

One needs only to be honest to oneself to see that the reason our diplomats do not show interest in the internal affairs of other countries is because we have nothing to offer to these countries unless they want to learn how politicians, who are elected to lead people to prosperity, exploit their own people through embezzlement and

OPINION

Diplomats, Constitution, and the Foreign Minister

DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

I find it almost unbelievable that a country's foreign minister would rebuke foreign diplomats for proposing a likely seminar on election matters (most likely academic in nature) to be held in December not even knowing, by his own admission, the subject matter of the seminar. The FM said, "I don't know about the 'Tuesday Group' and its terms of reference, and I don't know about the contents of their discussion. I've seen in newspapers that they are planning a seminar here." If such comments were to come from the foreign minister of a country, one may wonder, what country that would be other than Bangladesh.

The Daily Star reported that on July 26, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan lashed out at a reported move by the 'Tuesday Group' of western diplomats for holding an election seminar in Dhaka and categorically said the Bangladesh constitution cannot be changed following demand of any other country. "Foreign diplo-

omats cannot bargain with a government like trade union. Diplomacy is not a CBA job. No diplomatic norms allow a country to change the constitution of another country," he told reporters when his comments were sought on the group's planned election seminar here, likely in December.

Since the minister said that he is not aware of any 'Tuesday group' and didn't know about the contents of their discussion, how he then complains about foreign diplomats bargaining about constitutional issues and suggests that "Bangladesh constitution cannot be changed" is beyond me. The foreign minister categorically said that constitutional change cannot be demanded by any diplomatic club or any country. "Bangladesh will run in accordance with its own constitution," he said, adding "if any change is required that will be done by the elected representatives in parliament, reflecting the wishes of the people."

One wonders why the foreign minister is referring to all these nonsensical issues of foreign

The wealthy democracies of the world directly or through international financial institutions provide us aids, grants, and loans. Most often than not, they come with conditions about good governance, enforcement of rule of law, democratic values, human rights and freedom of the media. To uphold its pride, Bangladesh can certainly refuse to accept all conditional aid packages.

diplomats demanding changes in Bangladesh constitution and caretaker government reforms. It seems like he is under a lot of pressure and he knows everything but does not want to admit what he knows.

If foreign diplomats want to organise a seminar on our country's election matters and are willing to spend their resources doing so -- what's wrong with that? Does Bangladesh constitution forbid foreign diplomats from organising seminars on our constitution, economy, poverty alleviation, cultural matters, etc? How can a group of diplomats of foreign countries change the constitution of another country by simply holding a "get to know" seminar about our election matters and constitution unless the consti-

tution has a provision where it categorically suggests that such seminar outcome be mandated in the constitution with no questions asked? What a display of self deprecation and embarrassment for the people of Bangladesh that their foreign minister is so undiplomatic.

In any other western democracies, it would be welcome by the country concerned that foreign diplomats are interested to discuss their constitution, possibly because those countries are not afraid that the weaknesses and loopholes in their constitution would be discovered. Would the foreign minister rebuke the foreign diplomats if they organised a seminar, say, on Islam and tolerance? Would that seminar outcome alter the verses of our holy

book? What is wrong other people knowing about our constitution, election process, culture, etc? What if even they find weaknesses and loopholes in our constitution and recommend that we study them further for a more perfect constitution. This underscores the lack of our understanding and appreciation of what an open society in a liberal democracy is all about.

There was a similar story written by a former retired diplomat which recently appeared in a local daily. He wrote: "Western diplomats are commenting about our elections now and then. They have found a fertile ground in Bangladesh to interfere because some of our politicians have gone to them time

and again to support their cause. We can never conceive of our ambassadors playing a similar role in other countries. We must not give them an opportunity to act as a third party mediator. We should be able to resolve our own problems as a self-respecting nation. We should be ashamed of calling a foreign diplomat to settle our political differences. It is not their mandate to indulge in our internal feuds.

One needs only to be honest to oneself to see that the reason our diplomats do not show interest in the internal affairs of other countries is because we have nothing to offer to these countries unless they want to learn how politicians, who are elected to lead people to prosperity, exploit their own people through embezzlement and

corruption; how to accumulate corrupt money, that is black money, and then get political cover to whiten it. Our government can also provide expertise on how to intimidate and repress journalists, helpless minorities; how to increase religious fervour and fundamentalism in a society by building madrassas everywhere (without thinking about their future employment potential) etc etc. Obviously, these countries are not interested in any of these disdainful activities.

The wealthy democracies of the world directly or through international financial institutions provide us aids, grants, and loans. Most often than not, they come with conditions about good governance, enforcement of rule of law, democratic values, human rights and freedom of the media. To uphold its pride, Bangladesh can certainly refuse to accept all conditional aid packages. We seek foreign expertise in building big bridges, highways, underground mass transit, modernising our railways, building sea ports, power plants, solving the murder of the ex-finance minister, and

fighting terrorism -- because they have the expertise.

Aren't these all 'mind your own business' internal affairs of our country? So, what's wrong in utilising their experience and expertise in perfecting our democratic institutions and good governance? What's wrong to know what they have to say about our constitution and election process? What are we afraid of? When we look at our current generations of politicians grooming in college and university campuses, we see "all violence and no academics" reminiscent of the days of infamous Monaem Khan and Ayub Khan. There is not much hope for us to see a prosperous and stable democracy in Bangladesh during our life time. Equally dismaying picture flashes before our eyes when we see BNP's alliance with an ultra conservative religious party has been devised simply to hold the grip on power.

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