

Four years of troubled time for coalition

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Claiming that they are fulfilling electoral pledges one after another.

In fact, the dreams that led people to grant a mandate to the four-party coalition in the last parliamentary election have been smashed in the absence of good governance.

An alarming rise in living costs, violations of human rights, corruption and unemployment have forced people to live their days in misery and fear.

On the other hand, the rise of militant activities has greatly threatened national security and caused panic. The countrywide serial bomb blasts on August 17 and bomb attacks on courts in three districts on October 3 have now emerged as a big challenge for the government, compelling it to tackle militancy in its last year in office.

In their electoral pledges, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies declared that their first task would be rooting out terrorism and corruption and keeping the price of essentials under control.

In reality, however, the situation has rather worsened under the alliance rule and does not bode well for the near future too, particularly ahead of the next parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of 2006 or early January in 2007.

The ruling BNP did not initiate any steps to disclose the stocks of properties of the ministers and its lawmakers, as promised in its electoral pledges in an apparent bid to ensure a corruption-free cabinet and parliament.

The government also did not pay any heed to the allegations of corruption and irregularities against a number of ministers and ruling-party lawmakers, although many BNP lawmakers in a parliamentary body meeting demanded that corrupt ministers be axed from the cabinet.

In the absence of effective measures to check graft, Bangladesh seems to have made itself the number one position in the corruption index of Transparency International.

The government last year formed the Anti-Corruption Commission in line with its electoral pledges, but is yet to give it free rein to combat corruption.

The parliament, which is commissioned to ensure the government's

accountability, cannot play its role due to the indifference of the ruling alliance.

The alleged involvement of an alternative power centre in corruption and irregularities in government expenditures has been a much talked-about issue during the present government's term.

The government, which let loose terror activities in different parts of the country by allowing its party men to launch attacks on opposition party activists and the minority community soon after the October 1 election, could not successfully cope with pervasive lawlessness.

Operation Clean Heart, a drive using the armed forces, and then the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) comprising members of the armed forces, has apparently failed to provide people with a comfortable law and order situation.

The masterminds behind the assassination attempt on Leader of the Opposition and Awami League (AL) chief Sheikh Hasina have not been brought to book even a year after the grenade attacks that left 23 people dead and scores injured.

Investigators are also still in the dark about the identity of those responsible for the bomb attack on British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Anwar Chowdhury, the killings of former finance minister Shah AMS Kibria, AL lawmaker Ahsanullah Master and AL leader

Manzurul Imam. Besides, they are yet to unravel the mystery of last year's arms hauls in Chittagong and Bogra.

The government's efforts to curb criminal activities have been questioned when the prime minister and dozens of senior ministers placed wreaths on the dead body of Jubo Dal leader Sagir Ahmed, who had criminal records and was killed in an internal conflict of the party.

Apart from the appalling rise in human rights violations in so-called "crossfires" in law enforcers' custody, activities of Islamist militants constitute a very dangerous threat to law and order, making the dream of good governance an unachievable object.

In addition to these, the skyrocketing price of essentials and the rise in transportation fares and scarcity of transport have made life difficult for the people.

The government increased the fuel price twice in the last six months, giving the pretext of a hike in the international market. This has ultimately caused an unbridled rise in transport fares.

Coarse rice, which was sold at Tk 12 per kg, is now sold at Tk 18 per kg. The prices of all other essentials are also increasing every day.

While ever-soaring costs of living coupled with unemployment have brought unremitting misery to the lives of commoners, the government has made party affiliation the only

qualification for public jobs. The government is lauding its steps in achieving economic progress, showing a record amount of foreign remittance reserves.

On foreign policy, many believe that the country has lost some good friends in the international community for the "wrong" steps taken by the government.

Diplomatic relations, which were already tense during the last four years, have become somewhat more strained with China and the European Union countries, especially after the government's recent refusal to the Tuesday Group's initiative to hold a seminar on the best practices of elections.

The relationship between Bangladesh and neighbouring India has also reached a record low in recent years.

About its pledge to separate the judiciary from the executive, the government seems to be dilly-dallying by repeatedly taking a time-extension from the Supreme Court.

The appointment of judges to the High Court during the alliance government has been bitterly criticised for alleged politicisation and nepotism in the process.

The government has not yet initiated any move to form a "national human rights commission", although the country has been witnessing a horrifying rise in human rights violations since last year, especially at the very hands of the law enforcers. Extra-judicial killings have surpassed all records.

The government ordered mass arrests and detention of people in an apparent bid to foil the opposition's movement in 2004.

The ruling BNP's pledge to establish and uphold the rule of law in the country received a severe blow when the government last January granted presidential clemency to a party man sentenced to death in a double murder case over 22 years ago.

To ensure administrative decentralisation, the BNP had promised to strengthen the local government system by introducing upazila parishad and gram sarkar systems to ensure people's participation in rural development.

The government policymakers have, however, split over reintroduc-

ing the upazila system and thus failed to reach any decision over this important tier of the local government.

The government finally reintroduced the gram sarkar, a non-elected body, to assist the union parishad, the lowest tier of the local government. But as rampant politicisation and irregularities in the process of forming gram sarkar drew flak from every corner, the High Court declared the system unconstitutional.

Elections of different local government bodies and by-elections in several parliamentary seats under the alliance rule have been widely criticised as they were marked by irregularities and the influence of the ruling parties.

The Dhaka-10 by-election held last year broke all previous records of vote rigging in the country. The election was held ignoring the High Court order to deploy the army at each polling station. The ruling party candidate, political secretary to the prime minister, ultimately won the prestigious polls.

The government did not properly carry out its pledge regarding the reintroduction of women's reserved seats in parliament. Instead of 64 seats and direct election, the government has introduced a system of indirect elections to 45 reserved seats.

The ruling BNP promised to raise the number of seats in parliament to 500 from 300 (now 345, including the 45 reserved seats for women) but has never discussed the issue in any forum after coming to power.

Besides, there is little possibility for the state-run radio and television to have full autonomy. The Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television are rather being used to serve the purposes of the ruling parties.

To meet the electoral pledges, the government has repealed the Public Safety Act, but did not repeal the much talked-about Special Power Act.

Its initiative to ban polythene and introduce CNG-run four-stroke autorickshaws to prevent environmental pollution, and controlling unfair means in public examinations, have been lauded. Recently the government drive against adulterated food has also drawn public support.



The Bangladesh Chhatra League took out a procession in the city yesterday to protest the skyrocketing prices of essentials.



Dr Ainun Nishat, country representative of the IUCN, visits different stalls of the annual science fair of Bangladesh International School (BIS) held on the school premises at New DOHS at Mohakhali in the city on October 8.