

Politicisation of administration

Transparent promotion policy needed

THE fact that promotions and assignments in the civil administration are unduly politicised is nothing new. This kind of partisanship and favouritism in the administrative services have been going on since independence. However, when the politicisation is so widespread that it calls into question the efficiency and smooth running of the administration, as is the case under the present government, then this is certainly cause for comment and concern.

What we are seeing today is an absolutely unprecedented scale of politicisation, which is having a number of negative impacts. The first is that the quality of service has plummeted precipitously. Civil service officials are in charge of important matters that affect every corner of the country, and if the best people do not get the most sensitive positions, then it is only natural that the quality of services rendered will be diminished.

More worryingly, the morale within the administration is now at an all-time low. The demoralisation of the common civil servant is a cause for great concern because it will of course have a negative impact on his or her quality of service and will also impact the kind of person who the services are able to attract in the future. When things have come to such a pass, it is time for corrective measures.

A transparent promotion policy in the government services is long overdue. If there were some level of transparency and openness in the process, this would go a long way towards ensuring that the most egregious breaches could not be covered up and would thus be less likely to occur.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to hope for any change in the one year left to this government, but we remain optimistic. It is still not too late to reverse course and clean up the administration. This alone would be a salutary move which would improve governance considerably to the credit of the government by showing that they are willing to put national interest above party interest.

We appeal to the more sensible parts of the government and the ruling party to see that the partisanship be halted if not reversed in the time left to their tenure. The naked politicisation of the past four years, the flouting of long established standards and norms of seniority and merit, have not only crippled the bureaucracy, they have also contributed in no small measure to the public's lack of confidence in the government.

Fixing the problem would not only be in the national interest, it would be in the interest of the government as well.

Private university fees

Rationalise through mutual consultation

AN impression is growing among observers of the private universities' expanding role in imparting higher education to increasing numbers of young men and women that their tuition fees are on the high side. It appears that there are no specific rules to govern the fixation of charges by the university authorities, or if there are any, these are not applied.

It is possible that some of the private universities have engaged foreign faculty members and a high percentage of PhD holders on their teaching staff, so that their overall costs can be higher, but there is also an element of missionary zeal and social commitment that ought to go with such an enterprise and help strike a balance between costs and services.

There are more than four dozen private universities and if one were to do the averaging of the fees across the board it would strike one as being pretty high by Bangladesh standards. Besides, barring a notable few, most of the universities are hardly offering anything more than routine courses. That is why people in general tend to believe that the tuition fees are not compatible with the overall academic standard in most of the universities.

In the none-too-distant past there was a row over some private universities running without the minimum facilities required for setting up a university. But some private institutions, particularly the ones which have succeeded in attracting a good number of students, continue to raise tuition and other fees, though the facilities offered by them are not increasing correspondingly.

The government will be well advised, therefore, to be immediately taking up the matter with the university boards with a view to arriving at a rational basis for determining the fees within a framework of rules.

Big Brother is taping you

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

"[In] the past no government had the power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance. [Now] every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed. The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time."

- George Orwell, "1984"

IN the time of the General, news media operated under strict controls. The urban adda circles were the main conduit for passing around information. On the Dhaka University campus, the talk would range from the serious (Jatiyo Party statements, AL-BNP's latest moves, the next hartal), to the frivolous (Ersad's golf game). But every now and then, as the talk heated up, one friend would always raise a finger to his lips and softly intone, "Shabdhan, dewal er o kaan ache (Careful, even the walls have ears.)"

Not much has changed under democracy, AL and BNP style. Surveillance and intimidation are very much in play today. Regardless of which party is in power, activists are always at odds with the state. Drishtipat, a human rights group I'm a member of, was blasted by AL government for their campaign on behalf of journalist Tipu Sultan and then by BNP government for their campaign on behalf of Annadaprasad's Hindu villagers and the Ahmadiya Muslims. If you wash dirty laundry in public, you are tagged "enemy of state," "doing

anti-state activities abroad," etc ad nauseum. For NGOs and citizens groups working in human rights areas, government surveillance is a perpetual presence. Many activists I work with are always cautious in their e-mail and phone conversations, because the government is presumed to be bugging these exchanges.

Very soon, the pleasure of the security agencies' eyes and ears will be extended to millions of Bangladeshis, thanks to the freshly passed amendment to Telecoms Act 2001 which allows full government spying on citizens. Not only can the agencies now tap every

dhorbo? People have so many crises to worry about, they just get exhausted." But exhausted or not, if people understood how a law affects them, they would still take to the streets. A few years back, Grameen Phone changed a pricing plan and soon there were crowds of subscribers protesting outside their office. Today, if Bangla Link decided to serve a "Tok Komla" rather than a "Mishti" one through a rate increase, they would be besieged by angry protests. So people still have the capacity for outrage, but it needs to be channeled properly. Perhaps some feel that this law will only be used for "dabrano" of AL (and BNP

on their list of "Next 11 Economies" in a recent report. Grameen Phone, Bangla Link, Aktel, City Cell, and BTB cell are now being joined by the Dhabi group. About 36 licenses have also been given for private land phone lines. Of these, four have already started business, including Rangs. As more private mobile, land and internet companies arrive, a ferocious fight for customers will result in more services for lower prices. The mobile phone is already a semi-mass tool, no longer limited to the city middle class. The same will soon happen to land lines and internet. A World Bank report in 2003 predicted that the total mobile

politics. At some point, you make some casual joke about JMB. That night there is a knock on the door. Intelligence agencies are there, alerted by the conversation to think you have some link with JMB. You are dragged away to Dhaka Central Jail. It takes a week for you to get a hearing in front of a judge. Unless your family is well connected, it may be weeks or months before you finally get out of jail and end this nightmare. Does this sound like a far-fetched scenario? Remember the young Hindu man who was accused of sending threatening e-mails to Sheikh Hasina from an internet cafe? How long was he in

backed by others has initiated the move. The agencies also want access to the subscribers' database of all fixed phone and cellular phone service providers and the internet service providers (ISPs)." Two years later, the JMB bombings have given the excuse needed to push this through on a scared population.

Popular protest and media coverage is beginning to chip away at other surveillance states. Last week, the *New York Times* revealed that President Bush secretly authorized the National Security Agency (NSA) to monitor the international telephone calls and e-mails of US citizens without court warrant. The revelation, with its echoes of 1970s' spying on anti-Vietnam war activists, provoked a storm of public protests. Kate Martin of the Centre for National Security Studies called it "an astounding and frightening incident of lawlessness." Hours after the report was published, the Senate rejected White House efforts to re-authorize key surveillance provisions in the Patriot Act. Several key Senators said the *Times* story was a key factor in changing their vote.

Can we look forward to moments such as this in Bangladesh as well? Shahjalal University's Zafar Iqbal was one of the key individuals spearheading the campaign against unitary track education. It's time for thousands of such citizens, and the telecommunications companies, to step forward to oppose this amendment before it is ratified in January 2006. Bangladesh's Big Brother moment has arrived, but people power can still pull him down.

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Last week, the New York Times revealed that President Bush secretly authorized the National Security Agency (NSA) to monitor the international telephone calls and e-mails of US citizens without court warrant. Hours after the report was published, the Senate rejected White House efforts to re-authorize key surveillance provisions in the Patriot Act. Several key Senators said the Times story was a key factor in changing their vote. Can we look forward to moments such as this in Bangladesh as well?

phone call and e-mail, these records can be used in a court as evidence. According to this amendment, they will also have the power to stop any communication they deem harmful to "national interests." In a time when internet and phone use is skyrocketing in Bangladesh, this new law will affect the lives of millions. There have been the predictable muted condemnations, but there has not been enough outrage. Something similar to the level of protests generated by unitary education proposal is necessary to stop this before Parliament ratifies the amendment in January 2006.

A friend responded to my frustration over this issue by saying, "Look, in Bangladesh, *kon-ta chere kon-ta*

when tables are turned), NGOs, and activists. As long as they keep their nose out of politics, they will be all right. But do things ever stay limited like that? At the height of Cold War paranoia, the United States was spying on innumerable numbers of its own citizens, and the FBI kept voluminous files on people (including people such as Martin Luther King). Is there any reason to believe that our government would behave any more reasonably?

There are now 9 million mobile phones, and an additional 1 million land phone subscribers in Bangladesh. Mobile phone usage had approximately 35 percent annual growth in the last four years. It was probably statistics like this that inspired Goldman Sachs to place us

addressable market in Bangladesh was only 13 million. That prediction has already proved to be too anemic. I predict mobile phone usage will double to reach the 20 million range in next two to three years. As our world turns upside down, a huge amount of daily transactions -- work, conversation, activism, buying and selling, etc -- will pass through these communication lines. And the government will be armed with the power to spy on every such movement, with potential for unlimited abuse.

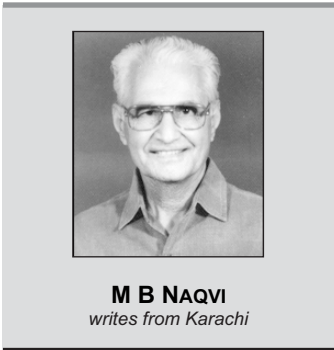
Is it only activists who have to fear the government? Imagine this scenario. You are walking in Bashundhara City mall, buying a drink, talking to friends, flirting with girls. In the middle of this, someone calls your line and starts talking

jail before there was any due process?

Still think this law doesn't affect you?

The government claims these powers are necessary in order to stop suicide bombers. But is it phone surveillance that resulted in the recent captures? Or was it intelligence work, combined with JMB insiders who wanted to turn in their former comrades for reward money? In fact, the government has been trying to pass a law like this for a long time. According to research done by Asif Saleh of Drishtipat, on September 4, 2003, the Daily Star first reported a move to amend the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act 2001. The report said, "A leading intelligence agency

Would Iraqis rise to the occasion?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

LECTIONS to a 'permanent' Iraqi Assembly have been successfully completed; American political architecture there for a democracy is nearly complete. Is that QED? It all depends on how Iraqis view the credibility of these polls and above all on how they utilize the theoretical opportunity thus afforded circumscribed by the presence of occupation armies, local circumstances and the framework of American geostrategic purposes. Despite American presence and the sub-rosa role of Israel, a lot depends on how Iraqis make use of the opportunities they can create.

Earlier Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had called a conference of significant Iraqi groups in order to forge unity in their ranks to promote American objectives. The conference, despite early negative indications, did succeed in maybe papering over their differences. They did produce a common statement that was a breath of fresh air.

The conference of chosen -- by whom? -- representatives of the Kurds, Shias and Sunnis agreed to preserve the integrity of the Iraqi state. Their resolve to live together in one state was reaffirmed. The outstanding feature was they agreed to demand "immediate withdrawal" of foreign occupation

troops, hitherto the chief Sunni demand. There was some mutual accommodation whereby the results of the Referendum on Constitution were accepted and that opened the road for the elections. But the key question is whether a federal dispensation will now be accepted by some Sunni groups remains unclear.

Thus, it is too early to say that the hump has been crossed. But a hopeful vista is now open in which

the entire Middle East. All old faultlines will become active.

There are Shia minorities in most Middle Eastern countries and in some states they are a sizeable majority; the important eastern oil bearing region of Saudi Arabia is Shia and Shias are a majority in Lebanon and Bahrain. In other places, they are a minority of varying sizes. They are also sub-sects of Shias in Yemen, Syria and Egypt. No Arab country will escape the

nent leaders of each group must sit together in a democratic spirit to steer Iraq out of violence's vortex.

True, it is easier said than done amidst so much bloodshed. And yet nothing else will serve the best interests of both Shias and Sunnis. The violence, now directed at Shias, originally began as acts of 'national' resistance against foreign occupation forces. That had a justification of its own and posed no danger to Iraq's integ-

the Ottoman Empire that were held together by Ottoman Caliph's power. Because of historical quirks and British overlords' policy of preserving the status quo that Sunnis have remained in a dominant position. They occupied most of the key seats of power and pelf. That position has to change; both history and democracy demand a change. Democracy means end of special privileges for any set of citizens. The Sunni elements in

PLAIN WORDS

The ideal course would be for all the three major sectarian groups to agree to a federation, as the constitution formally lays down. The three main federating units would be the Kurds in the north, the Shias in the south and the Sunnis in the middle. So long as democracy is honestly worked, and no particular community is discriminated against, the road to progress and preservation of Iraq will be open, provided foreign troops actually withdraw.

inter-denominational cooperation can flourish. The acid test of it would be whether the daily suicide bombers and car bomb attacks would subside, if not end. Unless that happens the hopes of a peaceful future for Iraq would be unrealistic. That would mean anti-occupation insurgency continues.

The danger inherent in the situation is a drift into a full-scale Shia-Sunni civil war, while Kurds would consolidate their zone's autonomy and probably move towards independence. That would involve trouble from, and to, neighbours of Iraq: Syria, Turkey and Iran. But that remains a relatively distant possibility while the ugly consequences of a continued Shia-Sunni split can speedily lead to the demise of Iraqi state. That had better be avoided to preserve the region's stability and all Arabs. The dynamics of Shia-Sunni split in Iraq, apart from Iraq's own future, will open a Pandora's box for

consequences of that event.

While the Cairo Agreement was a hopeful factor, its success cannot be taken for granted even after the election. Its success would require substantial acts of faith from both Shias and Sunnis. The Iraqi Shias hitherto have behaved with a sense of responsibility. While Al-Zarqawi's men have been attacking Shia targets for many months, the Shia retaliation has not been equal and opposite; it is strangely forbearing. But this cannot last for ever.

The Sunnis have to come to terms with the other major elements of Iraqi society: the Kurds and the Shias together constitute 80 percent of Iraq's population. For all of these three groups to hang together, the glue can only be equal rights and democratic freedoms for all amidst true rule of law. Much bad blood has already been accumulated. These sectarian attacks must end and the promi-

ity. How or why did this change of targets come about? It seems so short-sighted. Everyone must remember that there is a huge overhang of past sectarian killings in Iraq's 84 years history. Shias revolted in 1920-21. The British suppressed them brutally and the Sunni domination from the Ottoman days continued. Then Saddam bloodily suppressed them twice in order to maintain the power and social status quo in Iraq, the last time being after 1991 war. There is enough motivation among Shias for revenge. The mischievous friends are misleading Sunnis. The Sunnis will do themselves a favour by reciprocating the Shia forbearance to preserve Iraq's integrity.

Few can be surprised at Iraq's splitting up three ways along denominational lines. This state was invented in 1921 by the British. It comprised various provinces of

Iraq have to reconcile themselves to the demands of democracy and not insist on what they have had. The past is dead; it cannot be recreated. Any attempt to recreate the past would plunge Iraq into bloodshed once again.

Doubtless much will depend on the policies and purposes of the US, Israel and America's Industrial-Military Complex. It remains a mystery why did the US invade and occupy Iraq without an exit strategy. Evidently their regime change policy carries no ascertainable methodology. Nor was there clear idea of how to disengage after achieving the primary objective. It makes no sense. That is why conspiracy theories abound. One such theory concerns American Neocons' coup to occupy key decision-making slots in Washington. But that begs the main question: How come the strongest, most organized and demo-

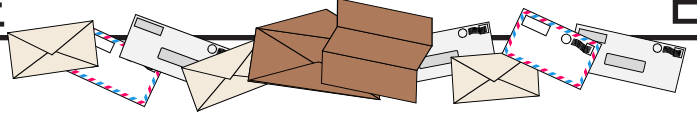
cratic hyper power can undertake an expensive military invasion without thinking through the project and fixing intermediate and ultimate objectives? Character quirks of George W cannot explain what the US has done unless it is to be assumed that ultimate objectives cannot be disclosed. Iraqis should beware.

The ideal course would be for all the three major sectarian groups to agree to a federation, as the constitution formally lays down. The three main federating units would be the Kurds in the north, the Shias in the south and the Sunnis in the middle. So long as democracy is honestly worked, and no particular community is discriminated against, the road to progress and preservation of Iraq will be open, provided foreign troops actually withdraw. If this course is not adopted with honesty and determination, the future would be bleak for both Iraq and the Middle East.

Compromise requires normalization of concrete material interests with an enlightened view of what history demands. Take Iraqi Sunnis: they are confronted with loss of oil revenues if Shia South and Kurd North become autonomous to appropriate oil revenues from their respective soils. Good Lord has not chosen to bless Sunni areas with hydrocarbons. It is just their hard luck. They can work for a stronger federation, able to ensure investment of oil income in all areas on merit -- optimum returns - so that all Iraqis would benefit. But for that guns are an unsuitable way of arguing while reasonable argumentation and emphasis on commonalities of history and common purposes with both Kurds and Shias are needed.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Uni-track education

The controversial uni-track education system is finally postponed for a year. There are chances that it would never be implemented in its present form. Science is neglected in this system, and believed to degrade our primary and secondary education system. It is strange that the bureaucrats and politicians did not think of consulting with the country's educationists before thinking of implementing it. Thanks to Prof Zafar Iqbal of Shahjalal University and others, who tried to prevent it from being implemented. Now we should ask the government, about the huge amount of public money spent for planning of uni-track education. Can a poor country like ours afford such a huge loss of money for the experiment of our bureaucrats and politicians? We should also ask the government to investigate into how the money is

spent by these people responsible for the implementation of uni-track education system.

Haidar
Toronto, Canada

Weekly holiday

I fully endorse the letter of Rezaul Huq from Lalmatia entitled "Weekly holiday and man hour wastage" published in the letter column of your newspaper. I wish the present BNP coalition government realised the importance of working on Friday with an hour break for the mandatory prayer for the Muslims as it is practised in many other countries. I quote the PM and Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, "We are a Moderate Muslim Country" not an Islamic Republic like Pakistan or Iran. Since we are a moderate Muslim Country with only 85% of the entire population being Muslims, we can easily switch over from Friday to Sunday as our weekly holiday. I am sure the change will

help the present and future governments to help Bangladesh come out of the number one position of the "most corrupt country in the world." We have had enough, nothing concrete has been done to reduce corruption.

Therefore, I firmly believe that changing the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday will greatly help our country, we need to work on Friday and compete with the developed countries and not the underdeveloped ones.

Taher J.
Sharjah, U.A.E.

Alternative energy options

It is reported that the Honourable Prime Minister has approved setting up of an independent unit for expediting use of renewable and alternative source of energy for generating electricity. It is to be named: Sustainable Energy Development Authority. I welcome this,

more so as I presented two technical papers in IEEE (Bangladesh Chapter) in 2002 and 2004 on two aspects of the subject. These very viable and unique opportunities for power source (one with no fuel needed!) should be important issues for the newly created SEDA.

It seems that possibly more emphasis is on power generation, and not on renewable energy; which includes sources like biofuels, all energy efficient appliances among others. There are viable and attractive avenues of exploration some of which also need to be incorporated in our import tariff structure. The impact of hybrid (very low fuel consuming) automobiles and other road transport vehicle is another area which can reduce our import of liquid fuel by over half the present figure! Furthermore, the possibility of producing biodiesel and ethanol from agricultural residue, wood waste and animal offal opens up interesting prospects of fuel for the

road and riverine transport sector. All these and more can be explored if we actively take up the challenge and not get bogged down in bureaucratic tangles.

At least a start in the right direction has been made; better late than never! Since it has been my favorite subject; one may call it a hobby; I would love to participate in this worthwhile journey!

S.A. Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka

Who builds the nation?

In a democracy, it is people who decide who will rule, and in turn, the rulers along with all their principles, ideals and values are expected to reflect popular demands and choices. Furthermore, the dedicated and resourceful political brains are supposed to work out far reaching policies and programmes for the welfare of the people and the country, which would command the

respect of the countrymen.

In a rich political culture, the rulers can ignore the valued opinions and criticisms of the civil society, rather the well-thought-out, diverse and far-reaching programmes to do good to the society are true examples of their philanthropic, creative and welfare-motivated thinking. In contrast, in a poor political culture, the so-called politicians, the power-greedy malevolent people, are busy sidestepping the insightful opinions, analyses and reviews on socio-political progress of the country. In such an ill-fated country, the rulers, right after their rise to power, are surprisingly found caught in a circle of malicious viruses like corruption, favouritism, misuse of power, tampering of laws to serve self-interests, absorbing party-branded activists in administration, influencing the judiciary to legitimise the unlawful activities, making parliament to pass laws

only on majority merit, and many other ill practices. All their sanctified (?) works are in fact devoted to evading the will of the people, the aspirations of the society!

Our experiences say that our leaders seem to have the solutions to all problems - they know how to educate the nation rapidly, how to break the poverty circle overnight, how to make a healthy nation, how to ensure social security and what not. But the reality is different - when the civil society alleges that most of the citizens suffer from insecurity of life and feel the absence of social justice, the rulers claim complete security of life; when the former alleges that the poor people of the country are getting poorer day by day, the latter claim that the country is over-flooded with development; when the former alleges quality of education is falling gradually, the latter are happy with the misadjusted literacy rate.

How the rulers think has been

proved faulty again and again. When the social researchers and the newspapers were repeatedly warning the governments of the rise of strong extremist groups with serious threats to social and national life, the governments not only ruled out their warning, but also went as far as planning to curb newspapers. These anti-social elements, the blood-sucking vampires, could show up, we think just of because of the government's indulgence.

The political ideals are now a distant past. The political parties are now empowered by the businesspeople-turned business-like politicians who act on tactics rather than on ideals. So, the fundamental differences in principles, objectives, ideals or declarations in the party constitutions are no more a factor, because these can easily be put aside when the sole concern is power.

Saidur Rahman
Mirpur, Dhaka