

Needed administrative reforms

JAHANGIR BIN ALAM

THE administrative system that is currently in practice in Bangladesh is a legacy of the colonial past inherited from the British Raj. After the partition of India in 1947, the Pakistanis continued with the system and did not bother to undertake any reforms because it perfectly suited their purpose.

British rulers devised the system in order to keep complete hold on their subjects of the then India who were ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse in nature. The administrative machinery was so structured and the bureaucracy was so groomed that it made the bureaucrats the masters of the people and not their servants. Bureaucrats, in their turn, obediently served the causes of their foreign masters and happily enjoyed the attendant perks and privileges.

Though belated, it is now being realised that an administrative system devised to serve the cause of foreign colonial rulers is not suitable for serving the cause of the people of an independent and developing country like Bangladesh.

The experience of last three and a half decades shows that by keeping the age-old administrative setup in place, successive post independence governments of Bangladesh have failed to deliver and fulfill the people's aspirations. One may say that in spite of shortcomings of the system, the country has achieved significant development in almost every sector of the national economy. This may be true. But, at the same time one may also say that with much needed reforms of the system, the achievements could be much bigger.

Perhaps it will not be impudent to mention here that one of the main reasons behind the current pathetic state of affairs in the country's governance is the negative mindset of the bureaucracy coupled with incompetence and inefficiency.

Unlike the pre-independence era, these days, bright students, do not opt for civil service, as most of them feel that it has lost its so-called old charm, pomp and grandeur. This is more so because of availability of better career opportunities for them in the country's burgeoning private sector. Further, it may be noted that during the pre-independence days, the civil servants at the time of attending the training academies before job placement were given to understand that they were the masters of the people and that they were an elite class by themselves. This phenomenon, one understands, still exists in independent Bangladesh.

Civil servants have the wrong perception that they are the only custodians of national interest and that it is their responsibility to look after country's well being. They often try to influence government decisions by giving wrong advice to the ministers, hiding facts and resorting to procrastination at the behest of various interest groups. Unfortunately, at times, this is done in collusion with the ministers for obvious reasons. When the government changes, it is the ministers who face the conse-

quences, but the civil servants remain unscathed.

Bureaucracy is the backbone of any administration. But when the backbone is too stiff, it is painful for the body. Hence, it calls for necessary curative measures. The existing large centralized and top-heavy bureaucracy of Bangladesh is standing in the way of speedy decision-making and the implementation process. Instead of smoothing the process it creates roadblocks, sometimes intentionally and at times unknowingly due to sheer ignorance.

There are too many tiers in our bureaucratic hierarchy, thereby creating scope for procrastination, to the detriment of national interest and at times individual interests of the citizenry. Ironically, according to most recent finding of a local vernacular daily, there are around

Expert professionals from outside the government could be appointed as advisers in various ministries by the incumbent governments for the period of their incumbency to help ensure appropriate decision-making. Public Service Commission should be constituted with persons having no political bias keeping in mind their educational background, standing in the society, integrity and honesty. Recruitment and promotion of all government officials should be based on recommendation of the public service commission.

300 officials without any job to do as they have been made officers on special duty (OSD). Most of them remain so for quite a long time and in addition, quite a good number of retired officers have been appointed at senior levels on contractual basis purely on political consideration. All these idle officers are being paid their usual salary and emoluments from the national exchequer. What a waste at the expense of the poor people.

Under the existing system, there is no scope for specialisation. Hence, the bureaucrats become jack-of-all-trades and master of none. In general, they are not given the opportunity to specialise in any particular field. Even if some one is lucky enough to receive specialised training in a particular field, either at home or abroad, he/she is not allowed to work in that field for long as the officials are frequently moved from one ministry to another without any consideration being given to the specialised training they received. Sometimes, promotion and transfer of officials are made based purely on the whims of the influential quarters and/or on political consideration. This is an unhealthy practice which is responsible for creating discontent and group rivalry among the civil servants to the detriment of good governance.

In view of the above, and in order to streamline the country's administrative system, it is imperative to undertake immediate reform measures keeping in mind the needs of the day if Bangladesh wants to improve its image and achieve the millennium development goals by 2015.

The first step to the above end should be towards decentralisation of the administration with a view to

taking it to the district level in order to ensure peoples' involvement in the process. Administration at this level could be referred to as the "District Council" or "District Board" or whatever. The head of the administration could either be designated, as president or chairman and the position must be an elected one. Elected chairpersons of the union councils and municipalities under the district could constitute an advisory council, which could function as the local parliament without having to perform any legislative function, but to collectively monitor and oversee the performances of the local administration.

Responsibilities of the district authority should be to maintain law and order, plan and execute local development schemes/projects in sectors such

as - infrastructure, agriculture, education, rural development, health and family welfare, oversee land administration and to extend necessary assistance to the central government in revenue collection. It should have the authority to issue licenses for doing business outside the jurisdiction of municipalities under the district and also to collect local tolls from market places (hats and bazaars) and water bodies (hairs, bills and johomhals) under commercial exploitation. In addition to annual fund allocation received from the central government, the district authority should be allowed to spend the fund raised locally through collection of tolls. The administration should be answerable to the district advisory council for its activities including all expenditures made.

The tenure of the district council should not be more than five years. President/Chairman as the chief executive of the district should be responsible for running the administration through various district level officials to be deputed by the central government for a period of five years minimum. The chief executive should have the prerogative to appoint a District Secretary on contractual basis for a period of five years with prior approval of the advisory council. The District Secretary would be the principal staff officer of the Chief Executive.

The District Secretary, who could either be a retired civil servant not below the rank and status of a Deputy Secretary to the central government or a suitably qualified and respected local person, shall function under the direct supervision and control of the President/Chairman as the case may be. But it must be ensured that

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A new death trap?

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ONE person was crushed and several others injured when a huge billboard collapsed on them at a CNG fuel filling station at Pragati Sarani in the city on June 16 night. The victim of the tragic incident was identified as Hazrat Ali, a security guard of the CNG fuel filling station. Another person was also killed in a similar incident in the city several weeks ago.

Unplanned and, in most cases, unauthorised installation of billboards and neon signs on weak and fragile structures at different city corners and roof tops have been posing threat to security of lives of city dwellers.

Huge billboards, as it appears, have been posing a new death trap for those living in the city and any body could become a victim any time. Unless steps are taken to bring installation of billboards or neon signs under discipline compelling those involved in the business to abide by specific measurements of such billboards on approved structures, the possibility of more loss of lives and damage to property due to collapse of billboards cannot be ruled out.

The question which is being raised in different circles whether any organisation will come forward to take responsibilities for the deaths and damage caused following billboard collapse. The reply to such questions is not expected to be readily available but the responsibilities for such deaths and injuries have to be fixed and those responsible shall have to come forward to pay compensation to the victims.

Some human rights bodies or lawyers' associations can on their own sue those responsible for such deaths and damage to property. There can be Public Interest Litigation (PIL) case holding the billboard companies and the DCC responsible for the loss of lives and also damage to property.

The court can act on its own as it

does occasionally as the repeated incidents of deaths following collapse of billboards and also often foot over bridge have become matter of concern for the people.

In this context, it needs to be recalled that the High Court recently ordered the ex-Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Anisur Rahman, who became a "disputed father" to send his wife and septuplets to Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore for DNA test to prove the parentage of the seven babies. The court order came upon a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) writ filed by Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association seek-

ing custody of the seven infants, airing doubts about parenthood of the children and apprehending a racket for trafficking them out. The court granted four months for submission of the DNA test report.

There has been installation of billboards and neon signs in an unplanned way at different city points and reportedly unauthorised billboards have outnumbered those approved by the DCC. It is being asked in different forums why the DCC can remain a mute spectator to such emergence of unauthorised billboards.

The total number of DCC approved billboards in the city has



Fallen billboard: A virtual death trap

been estimated to be around 250. Billboards have appeared at every nook and corner of the city giving sort of a jungle look to the city crossings. The initiatives of the DCC for assessment of city's illegal billboards and neon signs reportedly failed due to what can be seen, inefficiency of its zonal offices. There might be some underhand deals among those running the trade and a section of DCC officials.

The DCC had removed about 1,000 billboards and neon signs on the eve of the 13th SAARC Summit in November last year. Since then no further action has been taken against unauthorised billboards and neon signs. What is needed is immediate steps for removal of all unauthorised billboards and neon signs from city areas and also formulation of a policy with guidelines of size, measurement and structures of such billboards and neon signs keeping security interests on top of other considerations.

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The established companies do not sign contract with illegal companies involved in erecting billboards but less known or unknown companies do so for promoting their products. Illegal billboards and neon signs are seen even in some of the city's busy crossings.

When the comment of a relevant official of the DCC was sought in this regard, he said, "The advertisement policy-2003 has made it clear that the DCC would increase its revenue earnings and add to city's beautification through billboards and neon signs". It has been clearly stated in the policy that the organisations concerned would keep watchful eye on the safety of public life.

He failed to explain whether there are any specific guidelines as regards size (measurement), weight and structures on which billboards and neon signs would be installed.

What is needed is immediate steps for removal of all unauthorised billboards and neon signs from city areas and also formulation of a policy with guidelines of size, measurement and structures of such billboards and neon signs keeping security interests on top of other considerations.

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Central bank chief refuses to surrender

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

TOSHIHIKO Fukui has until recently been widely regarded in Japan as the instrumental figure who had skillfully guided the nation out of a prolonged economic slump. This recognition earned him respect, both among the public and in the media. But a recent exposure by the media in Japan of his involvement in a questionable dealing of shares in a disgraced fund has largely shattered that image, exposing the shaky foundation on which public figures stand in the world of name and fame. The tightrope they are to master walking crisscrosses many pitfalls that might at times seem lucrative, though a slight fall in one of those traps can deal a fatal blow to both their career, as well as their image that had been carefully cultivated. Fukui's case is a unique example of that harsh reality.

When Fukui was appointed Governor of the Bank of Japan in March 2003, it was hailed as a timely decision as he, at the time, did not represent the closed-knit circle of the bureaucratic lineup of finance ministry or the central bank. Though he started his career at the central bank, Fukui eventually resigned from the bank to take up a senior position in a private sector think tank. He was serving as head of the Fujitsu Research Institute since 1999 after resigning from the post of deputy governor of the central bank, following a scandal.

In order to ensure speedy decision making and transparency e-governance should be introduced without any further delay. Possibilities of outsourcing some of the services in various ministries and departments should be looked into seriously in order to improve efficiency. Expert professionals from outside the government could be appointed as advisers in various ministries by the incumbent governments for the period of their incumbency to help ensure appropriate decision-making. The rank and status of such advisers should be above the Secretary to the government. This system of hiring is in practice in most of the developed countries.

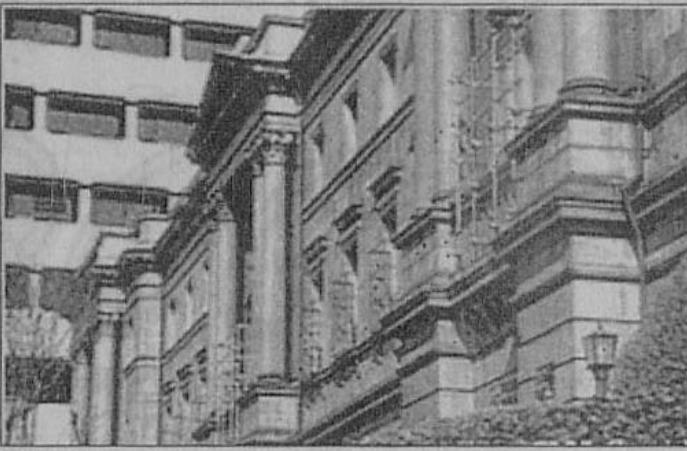
Public Service Commission should be constituted with persons having no political bias keeping in mind their educational background, standing in the society, integrity and honesty. Recruitment and promotion of all government officials should be based on recommendation of the public service commission.

Last but not the least, it must be ensured that compensation packages of different grades of government officials are attractive and commensurate with their social standing. Unless this is ensured, it will be impossible to attract persons with good academic records to the civil service and to reduce corruption.

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CLOSEUP JAPAN

The Bank of Japan's quantitative monetary easing policy with zero interest rate was implemented with the idea of shifting money from its interest-free current account deposits to equities and other financial assets. But the stock markets, particularly those for the start-up, came close to becoming gambling houses; as a result, the mere fact that the central bank chief took part in a money game is seen by many as a grave matter.



Bank of Japan

raised the question in the Diet. Fukui was later summoned to the Financial Affairs Committee of the upper house of the Diet where he said that he made the investment in autumn 1999, when he was Chairman of a private sector think tank. He admitted that his 10 million yen investment in the Murakami Fund had caused public uproar, but refused to step down, prompting intensified calls from the opposition members of the Diet for him to do so.

As Japan's economic downturn in 1990s is largely seen to be the failure of economic and financial policies of the earlier decade, Fukui's appointment was supposed to bring fresh air of private sector management to the functioning of the central bank. This was expected to help Japan steer out of a difficult time. He was successful in putting the central bank on the right track which helped the government to implement structural reform in the financial sector, thereby bringing an end to the deflationary trend in Japanese economy thus paving the way for its eventual expansion.

It had been revealed by the Japanese media recently that in autumn 1999, the present governor of the Bank of Japan invested 10 million yen in a scandal-ridden fund, whose former head was arrested by the Tokyo prosecutors' office in early June for suspected insider trading. The matter came to light when an opposition member

raised the question in the Diet.

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As Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi stated that he had no plans to replace Fukui, saying that there was no problem with Fukui's investment as long as they do not violate the rules. The Bank of Japan Chief is for the time being finding himself relieved of much of that pressure. But financial analysts in Japan are suggesting that despite the strong support extended by the government, Fukui's resignation might eventually turn out to be a matter of time.

The Bank of Japan influences

stock prices and interest rates

through the mechanism of its day-to-day adjustment of funds in the banking system. For monetary

policy to gain support, public trust

in the central bank's independent

and neutral position is vital. As a

result, if the chief of the bank him-

self gets involved in investment in

a private fund, the neutrality of the

central bank might become ques-

tionable. This is what exactly hap-

pened in Fukui's case.

The Bank of Japan in-house rules

clearly stipulate that the employees

of the Bank should refrain from

private investment activities, if

there is even the slightest possibility

of raising public suspic-

ions. Fukui is

claiming that he made the invest-

ment when he was chairman of

Fujitsu Research and there is noth-

ing wrong with a private citizen

making investment through appropri-

ate channels. But the ethical

question that those demanding his

resignation are asking is, is it right

for Fukui to continue accepting

returns from his investment even

after he became governor of the

central bank?

The fund that Fukui had

invested in was criticised by some

quarters for seeking only to make

quick profits by buying company

shares and then selling them at

higher prices.