

Level playing field?

It was assumed that the non-party caretaker government would neutralize the administration, which is mainly manned by the loyalists who derived extra, and undue, benefits from the immediate-past government, for creating a level playing field. The last two caretaker governments had done the job skillfully within a short period of time after assuming office. But this time, the creation of a level playing field is uncertain because the process of reshuffling is going on in a sluggish manner, and the changes so far made are not only eyewash, but also have an ulterior motive. If we analyse the postings and transfers made so far in the administration, we can easily draw this conclusion.

NAZRUL ISLAM

THE go-slow tactics of the immediate-past government in resolving the political impasse has effectively been infused into the new caretaker administration headed by President Prof Dr Iajuddin Ahmed. The BNP-led 4-party alliance leadership, in a calculating manner, managed to drag the dialogue that had been initiated to reach an agreement over some proposals of the then opposition to the flag end of its tenure, and then abruptly drew the curtain on it on the plea of shortage of time.

In fact, the killing of time on various pretexts, from the very beginning of the placing of the 23-point demands by the 14-party, was a political ploy of the alliance to transfer the issue to the caretaker government, which, they think, would not be able to resolve those owing to the constitutional and time constraints. They also know that the 14-party alliance will not participate in the elections sans reforms, and, therefore, they would get a walkover in the fray, thus ensuring a cent percent chance to return to power.

Tactically, their plan was excellent, but, practically, it would be disastrous for the nation as well as democracy. Any election without participation of a major political party -- either Awami League or BNP -- would not get legitimacy from the country's people or from the world community. History also supports the notion -- the parliament elected through the 1996 election had a lifespan of less than one year and that of the 1996 February election lasted only 12 days. On both the occasions, either BNP or Awami League did not participate in the election.

Inheriting the problems left by the alliance government, the caretaker administration has, so far, also shown lack-lustre performance. Three weeks have already

elapsed since it assumed office, but the caretaker administration is yet to create a level playing field at all levels for holding a credible and acceptable election. The creation of a level playing field is a must as the administration, which plays a vital role in holding a free and fair election, or altering election results, was manned by the party in power.

This is needed, as most of our civil servants had become partisan in order to derive extra benefit from the party in power. The seeds of partisanship are sown during the process of recruitment, and later on during posting, promotion, foreign training or tour, and by giving undue advantage. The prevalence of the trend in the civil service is a long-standing phenomenon, but was followed in a subtle manner.

But the scenario started changing from the mid-80s, and it has taken an epidemic form since 1991 when a democratically elected government took office. It is widely accepted that during the last five years none other than party adherents got appointment in government or state-owned autonomous bodies. Outside of the party activists, the "colour-less" had to give heavy bribes to get even a fourth class job. The same thing happened in the case of promotion and posting in the civil service during the last five years.

The BNP-led alliance government during its tenure axed 713 officers and employees, branding them supporters of a particular party. It also denied promotion to some 2,000 officers of various cadres, departments, and autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies. On the other hand, it gave promotion to over 1,500 officials superseding their seniors, considering their loyalty. Not only that, over 500 officials were made Officers on Special Duty (OSD). Some of them remained OSD for the entire period of the govern-

ment. Moreover, the immediate-past government gave nearly 700 contractual appointments, including over 300 in various key positions of the government ministries, divisions, and other departments.

In fact, the caretaker government system had been established following the widespread politicization in the administration and election commission. It was assumed that the non-party caretaker government would neutralize the administration, which is mainly manned by the loyalists who derived extra, and undue, benefits from the immediate-past government, for creating a level playing field.

The last two caretaker governments had done the job skillfully within a short period of time after assuming office. But this time, the creation of a level playing field is uncertain because the process of reshuffling is going on in a sluggish manner, and the changes so far made are not only eyewash, but also have an ulterior motive. If we analyse the postings and transfers made so far in the administration, we can easily draw this conclusion.

As of November 18, the caretaker government cancelled contractual appointments of 82 officials, out of 300, working in various government organizations. The dilly-dallying in cancellation of the contractual appointments of politically biased officials raised questions about the sincerity of the caretaker government in creating a level playing field. The last caretaker government rescinded all the contractual appointments with a single official order.

Now, look at the transfer of the big-shots in the administration. The reshuffle at the secretary, additional secretary, and joint secretary level was entirely aimed, by a particular quarter, at tightening the grip of the administration, as the new incumbents are more loyalist than their predecessors. The examples of the secretaries of

the establishment and home ministries, and of the private secretary to the president, have been mentioned many times in this newspaper and other media. The transfer of 67 officials at joint secretary, and above, level was totally uncalled for. The aim of the transfers should have been to bring a meaningful change that could create a level-playing field. But most of the transfers at that level were made to create a false impression that something big has been done.

At the field level, out of 64 deputy commissioners, 32 have been made OSD, while the others have been interchanged. Interestingly, the OSD officers who were deprived of posting for long were not considered when the postings, at various levels, were made. The same thing happened when changes were made at the UNO level. Till November 18, the positions of 115 UNOs have been interchanged. No new UNO was appointed. In the police administration the situation was similar, and key positions were filled by identified party loyalists.

The go-slow move by the caretaker government has created doubts in the minds of the people about the sincerity of the government to hold an acceptable election participated in by all major political parties. The 4-party alliance was able to bring the 14-party onto the streets to launch agitation programs, thus bringing the people and the 14-party face to face. The successors of the 4-party government are also apparently following the footprints of their predecessor, closing the doors for the 14-party to participate in the election.

The government may announce the election schedule, or hold the election unilaterally, by adopting the path of coercion. But, ultimately, it will not bring any good for the people or the nation. It was the duty of the caretaker government to do everything needed for holding a credible election, by creating a conducive environment. But the activities so far have not brought a ray of hope to the people. One thing should be noted here is that the people mainly know the government, not the Election Commission. The government, not the EC, would have to shoulder the responsibility if a free and fair election is not held in the country.

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Perceiving corruption

There exists rampant practice of corruption in Bangladesh -- whatever may be the debate regarding the five consecutive championships in corruption. Corruption is indeed one of the most formidable challenges to good governance, development, and poverty reduction for any country. The vast majority of the people of Bangladesh are only victims of corruption by a limited number of powerful individuals. The failure of leaders and institutions to control or prevent corruption does not imply that a country and its people are most corrupt.

KHAN FERDOUSOUR RAHMAN

PEOPLE are corrupt as the system allows them to be such, and corruption takes root on a wide scale where temptation meets permissiveness. Such an environment is more likely in the emerging democracies where administrative and political institutions are still weak and pay-scales are generally very low, tempting officials to supplement their income.

Abuse of power for personal gain, and misuse of public resources for private interest also give birth of corruption, as the power is entrusted and is supposed to be used for the benefit of society at large, and not for the personal benefit of the individual that holds it.

Corruption exists where institutional checks on power are missing, where decision making remains obscure, where civil society is thin on the ground, where great inequalities in the distribution of wealth condemn people to live in poverty -- that is how corrupt practices flourish.

Corruption is as much a problem of the North as it is of the South. Around the globe, corruption impacts on people's lives in a multitude of ways. In the worst cases, corruption costs lives. In countless other cases, it costs their freedom, health, or money. Corruption makes life more difficult, or outright threatens the lives of many people all over the world. The costs of corruption cannot be quantified. Bribes do not take only monetary form: favours, services, gifts, and so on, are just as common. The social costs of corruption are even less quantifiable. No one knows how much the loss of an energetic entrepreneur, or an acclaimed scientist, costs a country.

The cost of any corruption is four-fold; i.e. political, economic, social, and environmental. On the political front, corruption constitutes a major obstacle to democracy and the rule of law. In a demo-

cratic system, offices and institutions lose their legitimacy when they are misused for private advantage. Accountable political leadership cannot develop in a corrupt climate. Economically, corruption leads to the depletion of national wealth. It is often responsible for the funneling of scarce public resources to uneconomic high-profile projects, at the expense of less spectacular but more necessary infrastructure projects. Furthermore, it hinders the development of fair market structures and distorts competition; thereby deterring investment.

The effect of corruption on the social fabric of society is the most damaging of all. It undermines people's trust in the political system, in its institutions and its leadership. Frustration and general apathy among a disillusioned public result in a weak civil society. That, in turn, clears the way for despots as well as democratically elected yet unscrupulous leaders to turn national assets into personal wealth. Demanding and paying bribes become the norm. Environmental degradation is yet another consequence of corrupt systems. The lack of, or non-enforcement of, environmental regulations and legislation has historically allowed the North to export its polluting industry to the South. At the same time, careless exploitation of natural resources by domestic and international agents has led to ravaged natural environments. Environmentally devastating projects are given preference in funding, because they are easy targets for siphoning off public money into private pockets.

Transparency International (TI), founded in 1993, is the civil society organization leading the fight against corruption. TI, currently with 100 national chapters around the world, has its international secretariat in Berlin, Germany. Transparency International is funded by various governmental agencies, interna-

tional foundations and corporations, whose financial support makes the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) possible. TI does not endorse a company's policies by accepting its financial support, and does not involve any of its supporters in the management of its projects. TI announced its CPI 2006 on November 6 this year. As per the CPI, Bangladesh has scored 2.0 in a scale of 0-10, which was 1.7 in 2005, thereby slightly improving its position to third, together with Chad, DRC, and Sudan, while she was last from 2001 to 2005.

There exists rampant practice of corruption in Bangladesh -- whatever may be the debate regarding the five consecutive championships in corruption. Corruption is indeed one of the most formidable challenges to good governance, development, and poverty reduction for any country. The vast majority of the people of Bangladesh are only victims of corruption by a limited number of powerful individuals. The failure of leaders and institutions to control or prevent corruption does not imply that a country and its people are most corrupt.

Corruption is operationally defined by TI as the misuse of entrusted power for private gain. The surveys used in compiling the CPI ask questions that relate to the misuse of public power for private benefit, i.e. bribery of public officials, kickbacks in public procurement, embezzlement of public funds, or questions that probe the strength of anti-corruption policies, thereby encompassing both administrative and political corruption. TI further divides corruption into two groups, i.e. "according to the rule" means facilitation payments, where a bribe is paid to receive preferential treatment for something that the bribe receiver is required to do by law; and "against the rule" means a bribe paid to obtain services the bribe receiver is prohibited from providing.

The TI CPI 2006 ranks 163 countries; in 2005 the CPI included 159 countries. To include a country in the CPI, TI requires at least three sources. The CPI 2006 draws on twelve different polls and surveys from nine independent institutions. TI strives to ensure that the sources used are of the highest quality, and that the survey work is performed with complete integrity. To qualify, the data must be well documented and sufficient to permit a judgment on its reliability. Surveys are carried out among business people and country analysts. The surveys used in the CPI use two types of samples -- both non-resident and resident, but both viewpoints have to be correlated. The CPI methodology is reviewed by an index advisory committee consisting of leading international experts in the field of corruption, econometrics and statistics.

The CPI, published annually by TI (first released in 1995), is the best known of TI's tools. The CPI ranks countries in terms of the degree to which the corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians. It is a composite index, drawing on corruption related data from experts, and business surveys carried out by a variety of independent and reputable institutions. The CPI reflects views from around the world, including those of experts who are living in the countries to be evaluated. A country with the lowest score does not necessarily mean that it is the world's most corrupt country.

The country with the lowest score is the one where corruption is perceived to be greatest among those included in the list. Countries that score 3 or less in a scale of 0-10, have severe corruption as per the CPI. There are more than 200 sovereign nations in the world, and the latest CPI 2006 ranks 163 of them. The CPI provides no information about countries that are not included.

As per TI, the CPI is a solid measurement tool for perception of corruption, though the reliability of CPI differs across countries. However, the annual CPI released by TI raises public awareness against corruption with a view to promoting better governance.

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For a true change

They are waiting for a change for the better. The people just cannot remain bogged down in the quagmire of political bankruptcy. I believe that the people hold the key to bringing the derailed leaders to their knees. Our independence was hard-earned, and so was our democracy, and democracy has provided us with the very weapon with which we can make them mend their ways. Political leaders also should start reforming their mindsets, and reading the minds of the people, so as to avoid being jettisoned by the latter.

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

HOW Long will the nation cry in the wilderness? How long will the nation remain hostage to their whims? How many more days will they play with the future of the people and the country? How long will they hoodwink us in the name of democracy, constitution, and so on? How long will a few people belittle national interest for personal ego? Why will the people have to engage in agitation for removing insane official incumbents? How long will our economy have to undergo gratuitous hemorrhage due to hartals, blockades, and political violence? How long will our kings, queens, and princes loot public money and use them lavishly to ensure further looting in future?

I am more than sure that the masses of the country don't like hartals, blockades, or any other activity that disrupts public life. They also don't want anybody to interpret the constitution to their advantage and implement their blue-prints. They don't like constitutional amendment for political gains. They also don't like weaklings taking the helm of the country, and that, too, without following the due procedures.

Admittedly, feudalism became history centuries ago. But, is it an overstatement that our leaders

still deem the country to be their fiefdom, and the people and resources of the country to be their spoils? So, they are at liberty to treat the masses whichever way they feel comfortable. They have, however, unity in diversity, and that is in the job of exploiting the common people. Interestingly, however, tedious platitudes are their weapons, for which we fall consistently. They claim to have the license and wherewithal to save our sovereignty, democracy, liberty, religion, and whatnot.

In Bangladesh, politics and the electoral systems have got polluted to the greatest possible extent. Black-money holders, loan defaulters, musclemen have taken full control of our politics and electoral systems. For the honest and good people it has become next to impossible to even contest the elections, let alone come out successful. Various civil society groups have long been trying to press home the demand for liberating the country's politics from the claws of unabated criminalization.

Interestingly enough, the joining and leaving of parties -- which is about to resume -- is a common feature in our country at the time of national elections. Many loan defaulters and ill-begotten money holders offer themselves at those times. They present wonderful and expensive gifts to party chiefs and leaders.

Groves of taka are also deposited in the leaders' and parties' accounts. Parliamentary nominations remain up for grabs for the capable -- in terms of money, no matter how the money has come -- ones at the time of elections. Black-money holders become pets of our leaders in no time.

Many dedicated political leaders are deprived of nominations, and are hardly preferred to the black money holders. Even the top party leaders mock at them for their desire, because they are not moneyed enough to run the race. Top party leaders often regret to the deprived ones, saying that they are being deprived only to ensure the party candidates' victory in the elections and that, in this age of fierce and unethical competition, candidates without hordes of money are unlikely to win seats.

Perhaps, money making is the easiest thing in the world for the black-money holders, corrupt officials, loan defaulters and, of course, political leaders of Bangladesh. That's why ill-begotten money holders find it really easy, and enjoyable, to waste money lavishly. By means of their ill-begotten money, they engage in buying not only votes but also the purified spirit of the destitute people. Necessity knows no law, and thus commitment of such people is purchased, or rather, plundered in

exchange for some money.

Many people have developed an antipathy to politics because of its prevailing murky nature. When our new generations are asked about their feelings about joining politics, they express instant abhorrence for it. But, who will take the helm of the country if all the brilliant students shy away from politics? After all, the politicians are supposed to be the people who make key state policies and decisions.

Such pessimistic thinking on the part of our new generations will definitely risk consigning the future of the country to the incompetent people. The people of Bangladesh who fought against the overbearing British, the tyrannical Pakistanis, and unjust dictators have shown a fair amount of resilience at the call of time. Never did they shrink back. Our country has no doubt reached another critical juncture of history. The people are awfully fed up with the callous activities of our major political parties.

They are waiting for a change for the better. The people just cannot remain bogged down in the quagmire of political bankruptcy. I believe that the people hold the key to bringing the derailed leaders to their knees. Our independence was hard-earned, and so was our democracy, and democracy has provided us with the very weapon with which we can make them mend their ways. Political leaders also should start reforming their mindsets, and reading the minds of the people, so as to avoid being jettisoned by the latter.

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Myanmar junta still standing

The conflict of interests, and lack of a "common and unified" approach have certainly emboldened General Than Shwe and his associates to blatantly go ahead with their so-called seven-point roadmap to democracy -- which is nothing more than a gimmick to give a civilian-face to, and perpetuate, the military rule. The opening of the national convention last month, which is being propagated as the first step towards seven-point democratization and national reconciliation, is a clear reflection of the fact that the military junta is in no mood to pay any head to an acutely divided international community.

IMRAN KHALID

I was pleased with the discussion with the Burmese leaders but the outcome of the visit depends on what concrete and positive decisions they are taking in a number of areas. I got the sense that my message was understood, and I think they must be debating as to how best to respond," said Ibrahim Gambari, the UN undersecretary for political affairs, who has just returned from Yangon after holding a second round of negotiations with the military junta and Aung San Suu Kyi.

These are routine diplomatic remarks that depict the underlying failure of Mr Gambari to have any tangible development on three main issues: restoration of democracy, release of Suu Kyi and initiation of a national reconciliation process in Myanmar. After six months of diplomatic engagement, the "good offices path" initiated by Mr Gambari in May this year has so far yielded nothing that could be labeled as "positive," except that the Myanmar authorities have shown some relaxation on the issue of Suu Kyi's contact with the outside world. Apart from permitting a meeting between Suu Kyi and Gambari, the military junta has not budged an inch from its stance.

Even after the passage of 16 years, the military junta is still so much entrenched that interna-

tional pressure has not been able to push for any change there. Now the pricking question is why has the international community, despite all the big noise and diplomatic interactions, so far failed to generate enough thrust to bring about the restoration of democracy in Myanmar. The answer to this question is two-fold.

Firstly, after the house arrest of Suu Kyi and the main leadership of her National League for Democracy (NLD), the lack of a physical infrastructure has been the key factor behind the failure of the NLD to mobilize and organize a mass movement against an exceedingly obstinate military junta.

Some 1,185 political prisoners, mostly belonging to the NLD, have been behind bars for a very long time, and there is no organized and coherent leadership structure left in the country that can stage any kind of popular uprising to dislodge the junta's grip on power. The iron hand with which the military junta has been dealing with the political forces has kept the shattered political leadership from taking any step in this direction. During the last 17 years of her house arrest in her rambling lakeside home in Yangon, Suu Kyi has continuously repeated her mistake of relying on international pressure, instead of generating and herself leading an indigenous mass movement to restore democracy in Myanmar.

During the past one and a half decades she has made no direct or indirect effort to mobilize an "organized and structured" local uprising against the junta. This is perhaps the major flaw in her political strategy, that she has inordinately depended upon international intervention to salvage the democratic process in the country. Obviously, in the absence of any internal pressure in the form of a mass movement, the military junta cannot be expected to pay any heed to the external pressures. And secondly, at the same time, the international community, too, owing to divergent political and economic interests of regional powers, has not been able to generate a synergy to compel the military junta to the point of mollification on the release of Suu Kyi, leave alone the restoration of democracy.

It is this conflict of interests among the "stakeholders" that has been at the very root of the failure of the international community to pressurize the military junta. Washington considers Myanmar a "serious threat to peace and security," but it has done little to convey its "concern" to the junta. It is just over the past year that Washington has started persuading the UN Security Council to adopt a tough stance on Myanmar -- even to the extent of pledging a resolution to impose sanctions on the military regime in Myanmar. And this is all that the United

States has so far done to register its concern. On the other hand, China and India, the two big players in the region who have been doing fairly good trade with Yangon, do not at all buy the "serious threat" notion being propagated by Washington.

The European Union has a rather lenient and less emotional approach -- Germany is still giving sponsorships to nominees of the junta. Factually speaking, Asean, being the most influential regional platform, should play the lead role to mould and influence the Burmese military junta. But, with the fear of creating any new rift among its ranks, Asean is preferring constructive engagement over sanctions, which has inversely encouraged the regime to further tighten its grip. Australia, despite its stern official stand, has been continuing with the indirect involvement and interaction with the military junta in the form of courses on human rights for Burmese police. So, there is complete division among all the stakeholders. This is the real problem.

The conflict of interests, and lack of a "common and unified" approach have certainly emboldened General Than Shwe and his associates to blatantly go ahead with their so-called seven-point roadmap to democracy -- which is nothing more than a gimmick to give a civilian-face to, and perpetuate, the military rule.

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