

Bureaucracy must be depoliticised

Quicker the better

WE welcome the Chief Adviser's words of advice to the public officials to act neutrally in the discharge of their duties but the fact of the matter is that the bureaucracy by and large remains politicised -- thanks to partisan appointments and postings by the elected political government. So, the first task is to depoliticise the bureaucracy and it has fallen on the caretaker government to clear the Augean stable.

The administration needs to be overhauled both for the sake of day-to-day governance as well as for conducting a free and fair general election.

We can categorise two groups in the bureaucracy; first, those who became politically linked under duress and those who became politicised out sheer enthusiasm. Without going for witch-hunting could we institute a probe to identify those who really went beyond all norms to flaunt their political connections and abuse their links to power that be.

Secondly, there are also instances where such officials punished and discredited others for not toeing their political line. Can't we not isolate such people and weed them out? It is regrettable but true that democratically elected governments of all shades contributed to the destruction of bureaucracy by shamelessly politicising them.

With limited time at its disposal, the caretaker government cannot perhaps bring about all the much needed changes in the bureaucracy. But we, in the media, are prepared to extend all kinds of cooperation in the caretaker government's efforts to depoliticise bureaucracy.

It is time for the bureaucracy to restore their professional pride by working in accord with standard professional ethics. Just as their self-esteem has gone down due to political meddling in their affairs so also public confidence in them has dwindled over time. They must by their deeds uphold the dignity of their profession and, equally importantly, restore public confidence in them.

Overhauling the ACC

A commendable move

THE caretaker government has a plan to overhaul the Anti-Corruption Commission, which has been dysfunctional since its inception in November 2004. It is a commendable decision as it will, hopefully, give the anti-graft body the much needed bite to strike at the root of widespread corruption in the country.

The move is part of the caretaker government's drive against corruption and all sorts of anomalies in the government, which stand in the way of good governance. It is pretty clear that nothing short of a thorough recasting will enable the limping ACC to function with the verve required to contain corruption, the scale of which is quite mind-boggling.

Now the task must begin with the ACC chairman and the two commissioners voluntarily submitting their resignations. They have to realise that they could not render any service to the organisation in more than two years of their existence. We know they are holding constitutional posts, but doing nothing or being unable to be of any use to the ACC should convince them to resign and make room for a new team to step in. They should make their exit honourably if they have the slightest regard for public opinion. And the incumbent chairman, who is now well above 80, may consider relinquishing after serving the nation so long.

An Adviser to the caretaker government has put the whole issue in the right perspective by saying that the ACC was deliberately crippled by the previous government. Obviously, the fight against corruption was reduced to a political slogan while the high-ups in the government never faced any charge of corruption, though many of them are believed to have been involved in dubious deals and activities. So, the ACC has to aim its guns at the corrupt elements, regardless of their positions and clout.

The need here is not only to punish the people whose corrupt activities have caused enormous loss to the nation but also to refurbish our image to the world at large, which has been lowered beyond measure by all-pervasive corruption in the government.

The caretaker government's dilemma

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

We would like to be certain that the government is aware of the pitfalls and the consequences of a prolonged tenure of an unelected government, albeit constitutional. Not only will it influence our international relations, particularly with our development partners, an unelected government may not be equipped or prepared to address national issues or problems that might crop up eventually in the way that an elected government can.

Brig Gen
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NOTWITHSTANDING the euphoria displayed by the media about the speech of the chief advisor (CA), it must have come as somewhat of a disappointment to those who would like to see an elected government run the affairs of the state sooner rather than later.

The reactions of the political parties are not surprising since they reflect the respective party position on the issue. Sadly, much as the common man would like to see the current dispensation to continue longer, we cannot have the benefits of the arrangements obtaining now any longer than allowed by the "book." What a pity!

The speech had very little of what some political parties wanted to hear, but it had plenty of what the people on the streets were eagerly waiting for the CA to spell out. It was full of undertakings, undertakings to bring in appropriate changes that would ensure "good democracy" and political stability in the country.

However, many feel that the caretaker government (CTG) has

many miles to go before it can fulfill the hopes that it has held out, and which might bring in positive changes in our democratic practices and political culture.

While many had expected the CA to spell out a timeframe, one understands his compulsion in not being able to do so. He has arrogated to his government certain tasks, completing, which may appear time consuming. But should the CA have so many "things to do" on his reform agenda in the first place?

The CA, if one is right in one's assessment, is at moment caught between determining what is the minimum that his government should do to put things right for holding a free and fair election, and the obligation to hold the election within the shortest possible time. The former is a compulsion that stems from the popular demands; the other is the constitutional constraint to return the reins of the government to the people's representatives. He can overlook neither.

Now, all are not agreed on what

the book says about the duration of the CTG in the really unique situation we are facing presently. However, to think that the constitutional loopholes provide an open-ended timeframe to the current incumbents would be a grossly misplaced basis for planning the course of action of the CTG.

If the government has been sworn in under Art 58 of the Constitution there is very little scope to think that it has more time than what the constitution provides for.

Very interestingly, we have now a concurrence of opinion between the two major alliances regarding holding of the parliamentary elections, that it should be held as soon as possible. It is only when party interests are threatened that we find the opposing camps agreeing on political issues. The political parties would always want a win-win situation for themselves, even if it were all lose-lose for the people and the nation.

It seems that we are expecting the CTG to do too many things. The common expectation is to go for

plugging the loopholes in the electoral system so that the impasse we faced doesn't become a regular feature, and so that we may exercise our democratic rights, as well as be governed, according to the true spirit of democracy.

Therefore, it must engage itself in prioritising the most essential tasks and initiate actions to set them in motion. It seems to me that the government is all talk but very little action in this regard.

If one looks at the list of "things to do" that the CA spelt out, one does not find any reason to think that it would take unlimited time to complete the necessary tasks. Much of those relate to recasting of the institutions and streamlining their tasks.

Some institutions need to be made autonomous and free of any future government interference in their functioning. Except, perhaps, for voter ID card on which we do not have ballpark statistics as yet, the process for other reforms or recasting need not take a very long time to complete.

Therefore, actions must com-

mence forthwith. For example, a fortnight has elapsed since the new government was sworn in and we are still hearing all sorts of comments on what might be the form of the voter ID card. Instead, it would have been better to get a panel of experts to carry out immediately a feasibility study regarding preparation of ID cards within a specific time limit. We have not seen that being done as yet.

It appears that much is being expected of the military, too. In fact, as a soldier, it gives me immense pleasure to see that the rating of the military, among those who were the most vocally critical about its role in anything remotely related to or resembling politics, has gone very high indeed after Jan 12.

We are in a very unique situation indeed, and there are many legal and constitutional questions that naturally crop up in the minds of any common man. We have had to resort to not one, but two, CTGs to fill the interregnum. Bad as it is to have an unelected body run the country for even a day, the unique system of CTG is the reflection of the poor political culture and weak political institutions in Bangladesh, the need for two CTGs was quite unforeseen.

The question that one would like to put to our constitutional experts is whether the tenure of the current CTG is open-ended? And what does "within the shortest possible time" mean. If the length of the time is predicated on fulfilling conditions for holding the election, which is the task of the CTG, should it not be for it to first determine, through either a backward or a forward calculation,

what a time agenda might be?

We would like to be certain that the government is aware of the pitfalls and the consequences of a prolonged tenure of an unelected government, albeit constitutional. Not only will it influence our international relations, particularly with our development partners, an unelected government may not be equipped or prepared to address national issues or problems that might crop up eventually in the way that an elected government can.

The public elation at the declaration of emergency must be taken with due caution. Like Bengali patience, the elation may be short-lived. We would be remiss to think that the military can be the arbiter of political impasse, or has the answer to all the problems. It should play nothing more than a supportive role to ensure that the peaceful environment leading up to the election continues. I suggest that the armed forces be not overjoyed at the public elation on their role in preventing the country from going over the brink. Because: "Our God and soldiers we like to adore Just at the brink of ruin and not before, The danger past, both are alike required God is forgotten and soldier sighted."

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Time to rethink

M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

HERE was déjà vu about Indian Foreign Minister Parnab Mukherjee's recent visit. People had unnecessarily raised high hopes, mostly because of the preparations he had made before coming. But remember, the Indians are still hiding their extreme pleasure at President Pervez Musharraf's new Kashmir ideas. This visit was, after all, only a decorous diplomatic formality: delivering a letter of invitation to Musharraf for attending the Saarc summit in Delhi. For the rest, Mr. Mukherjee took soundings in Pakistan about what India is precisely expected to do.

Why is it the time to rethink? Pakistan has pursued the holy grail of "normalization" for 35 years. This damned normalization has not been achieved after a bout of three wars, some skirmishes and war scares. Plenty of negotiations, including the three full rounds of composite dialogue, have taken place. Normalization however continues to elude. It is time to take stock and look this concept of normalization in its mouth.

Among the many problems between the two countries,

PLAIN WORDS

This joke of "normalization" has gone on for 35 years. Pakistan has normal relations with Iceland. India has good relations with Peru. Do India and Pakistan want that kind of "normalization?" Can normalization be a goal? The two had better spell out what they do want.

Pakistan assigned the highest place to Kashmir and staked everything on it. It went to war twice on the subject, and refused trade with India. The Pakistan PM still repeats the Mantra that without Kashmir's resolution, the subcontinent can have no stable peace. The Indians, of course, say that yes we are quite ready to discuss Kashmir, but this is not the only subject. For them people-to-people contacts is said to be the first thing, quickly followed by free trade on MFN basis, and resolution of all disputes should follow.

Among eight recognized ones, two disputes relate to territory: Siachin and Sir Creek. Despite all the talks these have not been solved, despite the ease with which they could be. Then, two relate to water: Wullur Barrage and Kishan Ganga projects. Had there been any goodwill these disputes, too, would not be there; one of which is being arbitrated by the World Bank. Some security issues are being discussed, which incidentally boil down to agreed CBMs to prevent unauthorized launches of nuclear weapons, and nuclear accidents. This is mainly procedural, and does not tackle the problem of nuclear weapons.

It is remarkable that a desirable visa policy could never be agreed upon by both countries. Any

improvement here, too, goes on eluding. There are dozens of minor issues on which a modicum of good sense would mean actual cooperation. There is the trafficking of women and children; there is narcotics question.

The maritime coastal services on both sides are fond of arresting often illiterate and simple seafarers (fishermen) from each other's country, producing them in a court and quickly putting them in jail. After a while, with trumpets blaring, the diplomats meet and agree to release the hapless fishermen. This sorry pantomime has gone on too long. Can the two maritime agencies not just warn instead of arrest; just shoot them off. Tell them where they are. These fishing boats cannot invade Pakistan or India.

Then, there is the question of journalists' visas. Despite all sympathetic talk by the former Indian foreign minister, Safma, and even a Saarc resolution, nothing has changed. The Indian immigration authorities have recently not honoured what was a Saarc visa for journalists. The fact is that so far no, repeat no, dispute has been resolved by the two.

Insofar as Kashmir is concerned, on which Pakistan had staked so much, the Indian PM and cabinet should be overjoyed that Musharraf

has given them all they could ask for: a de facto recognition of India's sovereignty over the Indian held Kashmir. Musharraf has withdrawn the traditional Pakistani demand in terms of UN resolutions about plebiscite. In other words, Pakistan is no longer a revisionist state; it accepts status quo. What remains is to tie up the many loose ends by constructive negotiations. The issue need no longer be put on a backburner. What is the situation, instead?

The Indians are still mulling over whether to say yes. The BJP is the main opposition party; it would be reluctant to say yes. What it actually wants is hard to guess. The real reason why the Indians are not jumping with joy is that their industrial-military complex, the mainstream press and the business community may not be ready for the consequences of saying yes. For them what is essential is there should be no slackening in India's military build-up. A Kashmir solution would seem like a hitch in the program. They even do not like the recent Indo-American agreement on civilian reactors, because some notional limits on India's sovereignty may result.

What is relevant for Pakistanis is that Indians have no agreed policy vis-à-vis Pakistan. There is no

consensus in India on the subject. Indian hardliners have reasons to be worried. Much of Indian effort is to expand its nuclear deterrent, complete with all the paraphernalia of missiles, tests for adaptation, and so forth. Notionally, more than half of these efforts have to be for containing and countering Pakistan's military build-ups. After a Kashmir agreement, logic will demand friendly relations.

How to make friends with someone who is to be countered? Both are developing the ultimate weapons. One asserts that where a nuclear arms race is raging between two feuding states that live cheek by jowl, no friendship or friendly cooperation is possible. Which responsible Indian can forget that Pakistan has atomic weapons that can be dropped on his cities by aircrafts or by missiles? Similarly no responsible Pakistani can forget that Indian military has a lot more nuclear weapons. It can take out any number of cities in Pakistan. These weapons have no defence. (The American talk of anti-missiles missiles is a rich man's fancy; no state can depend on an anti-missile system that is still unreliable).

India and Pakistan have been open adversaries, and each other's designated enemy against whom they have to be always alert. So long as they rely on nuclear weapons, there will be no real agreement and friendship, no matter what the terms.

For one thing, Indian capitalism is now graduating into imperialism; a military build up is a necessary supplement. The fact is that a country that is engaged in this larger effort of projecting power up

to Straits of Malacca and beyond is not likely to be overjoyed when Pakistan has given India what it has always wanted. Its leaders might be embarrassed that they will have to make some return gesture. But this offer by Musharraf they simply cannot refuse. All the ado about how "joint management" can work is bogus.

Where there is a will there is a way. If the two want to cooperate they can. The point is that they do not want to cooperate for other (nuclear) reasons. Without the nuclear issue being cleared out of the way, India-Pakistan relations cannot be normalized, much less expanded.

This joke of "normalization" has gone on for 35 years. Pakistan has normal relations with Iceland. India has good relations with Peru. Do India and Pakistan want that kind of "normalization?" Can normalization be a goal? The two had better spell out what they do want. Should it not be a historic people-to-people reconciliation from grassroots upward? The way French and Germans reconciled after the Second World War is a shining example. It can be copied. Regional integration in South Asia, so desirable economically, will not be available unless the Pakistanis and Indians trust each other.

Can the two sets of Mandarins find a basis to create trust in each other while both stay nuclear powers? One way or another, a regional nuclear disarmament may be essential, even for peaceful coexistence.

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Our Nobel laureate and the politicians

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ALTHOUGH there is, admittedly, no unanimity on whether politics could be described as an occupation or a profession, the mainstream politicians of Bangladesh have taken strong exception to the apparently sweeping comments of Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus on the comprehensive mercenary character of our politics and politicians.

A circumspect view would, however, suggest that the whole lot of politicians, perhaps, should not be reviled in this fashion. Some say that it is a natural weakness to revile that which we cannot do without.

However, that does not obviate the reality that the life-styles of too many politicians in Bangladesh bear eloquent testimony to the truth

STRAIGHT LINE

Many thinking Bangladeshis, at home and abroad, feel that during the present emergency, particularly during the incumbency of the army supported caretaker regime, a lot of cleansing efforts, including reform of vital State institutions, have to be undertaken. Their premonition is that a political government will not take durable and substantive action. Such a frame of mind is a sad commentary on politics and politicians of Bangladesh, wherein democracy had to be salvaged through the courtesy of the armed forces.

of the dictum that single-minded pursuit of money impoverishes the mind, shrivels the imagination and desiccates the heart.

The treason of the intellectual consists in his not speaking out loud and clear for the values that he, by his vision and the very nature of his personality, holds sacred.

The question is, therefore, did our intellectuals make significant noises when, in the eighties, the distinction between good and bad evaporated and crass villains were placed on the high pedestal of statecraft?

Our intellectual bureaucrats belonging to the exalted services have been no less responsible for upstaging those villains who stand accused of toppling a lawfully elected government through brute

power, and corrupting almost all the institutions of the State.

We cannot be oblivious of the fact that in Bangladesh the massive tarnishing of the electoral process was initiated by a military dictator, and the consequences are being felt now. His was a time when the patently immoral posed as guardian of public morals. It was then that the sense of propriety disappeared from public life and religion was put to unprecedented misuse.

Accountability, both administrative and financial, was at its lowest ebb, and conspicuous consumption was officially patronized. There was all-out effort to convert our society into a conglomerate of self-serving lesser individuals.

While we may be right to blame politicians for much of our misery,

can we really pardon those men and the institutions that hunger for profit in the form of power?

Many thinking persons have been willing collaborators to the mischief of autocrats. We cannot forget that when our polity witnessed the worst of autocratic rule in the sixties it was our bold politicians that spearheaded the movement for political emancipation. The legendary bravery of Bangobandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman galvanized a nation, leading ultimately to our independent existence. It was again the politicians who were in the vanguard of the movement for democracy in the eighties.

The vigour of a democratic society can be preserved and sustained by the widespread sense

of high aims. This is necessary so that men and women wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratifications. However, from our contemporary experience we see that self-indulgence, group jingoism, and power and acquisitiveness for their own sake have been conspicuously stressed upon.

In our recently resigned chief election commissioner we saw a classic example of a temper which pressed a partisan advantage to its bitter end, did not understand and respect the other side and, sadly, did not feel a unity between all citizens. He was not a politician, yet we saw in him a queer spirit of fanaticism that consisted in redoubling his efforts when he forgot his aim. Will he be taken to task?

Observers of the political scene are of the view that the personal and professional credentials of the politicians are central to the subject under discussion. In this regard the layman, in view of his experience, may wonder whether politics is a profession or a vocation, or simply a social service.

One considered view is that although some political parties may have full-time cadre of workers who are on the party's payroll, politics cannot be a full-time occupation in a democratic society. According to this view, while in power, holders of

office shall be adequately compensated by the state, although the compensation may not prove to be satisfying for a capable professional. But then, that is the price one has to pay for being in public service. The important issue here is that after one ceases to hold power one goes back to the parent profession or occupation. In other words, it is expected that politicians are in definite professions or occupations, and have the means to support themselves.

How close our political scene is to the situation described above may be the subject matter of serious discussion. Do we see people in the political scene whose true sources of income cannot be ascertained? One has to bear in mind that parasitic leadership can neither inspire nor help in the creation of a healthy political culture.

These issues should be discussed seriously by the political parties themselves because, barring honourable exceptions, politicians with income that can be accounted for command respect. One must add here that, simultaneously, there must be adequate check to ensure that affluent politicians do not become promoters or protectors of vested interests. In order to maintain societal balance, it has to be ensured that coterie

interests do not dictate the party.

One recommendation would be to enlist people of different professions or occupations in the party, and to attract educated and honest people to the political mainstream. Reaching the goal as above shall be extremely difficult, because no vested interest will voluntarily make room for another.

In our present situation only the bold and strong political leaders can take determined steps that may catapult the educated and honest people out of their somnolence and inertia and inspire them to join the political mainstream.

The time has come for a qualitative change in politics, but are we receiving helpful signals from the bold and the innovative? The situation does not generate sufficient hope, but we cannot be oblivious of the fact that "politics is the art of the wise people," and that politics is all pervasive. Politics has never been a particularly edifying activity. It has often belittled greatness and corrupted goodness, in addition to contracting the mind and hardening the heart.

Cynics say that while the consciences are engaged in introspection the burly sinners have ruled the world. In our case, by voting ignorant politicians to power, we have kept a gifted and enterprising nation in the ranks of the poorest on earth.

There is some point in saying that our political scene presents an incredible assemblage of pudding-headed mercenaries. They have to be replaced by men of honour and knowledge.

We have to be cognizant of the vicious circle that men of talent and integrity will not enter public life because of the filth and stench; and yet public life cannot be cleansed unless men of talent and integrity enter it.

For the arrival of morality in Bangladesh politics the period of gestation will prove lengthy, and the delivery promises to be painful, but one cannot dedicate one's life to a greater cause.

Many thinking Bangladeshis, at home and abroad, feel that during the present emergency, particularly during the incumbency of the army supported caretaker regime, a lot of cleansing efforts, including reform of vital State institutions, have to be undertaken.

Their premonition is that a political government will not take durable and substantive action. Such a frame of mind is a sad commentary on politics and politicians of Bangladesh, wherein democracy had to be salvaged through the courtesy of the armed forces.

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