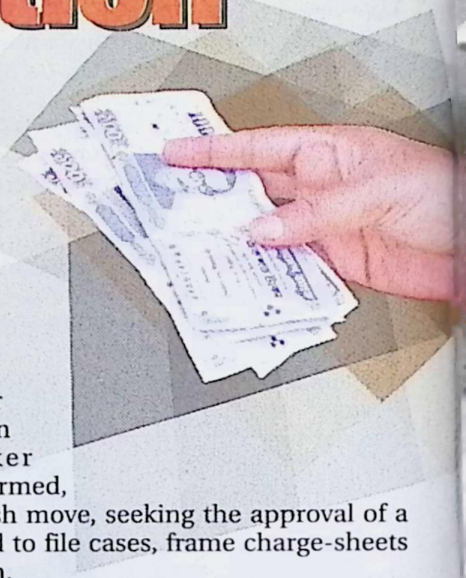
Chasing Corruption



The Anti Corruption Commission, the country's lone corruption watchdog, under the BNP government, reeled in the hands of corrupt politicians and inefficient bureaucrats. The current caretaker government has taken some initiatives to empower the beleaguered institution; can the commission start clamping down on the corrupt now?

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Faced with local and international allegations of corruption, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government, in November 21, 2004, decided to dissolve the Bureau of Anti Corruption to form a new corruption watchdog named the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC). The ACC, upon its inception, was welcomed by Transparency International, the global group that combats corruption. Even though the managing director of Transparency International, David Nussabaum, felt encouraged by this development, he was quite doubtful regarding the commission having adequate safeguards in terms of composition and funding.

Though back then the plan was to make it an independent body where areas of corruption like money laundering, stashing and foreign exchange would be investigated, the BNP government did not give enough jurisdictions to the organisation and somehow kept it out of reach from all the major areas of corruption.

"Initially, the body was formed with a set of commissioners, which was not satisfactory and was a debatable choice," says Dr. Ifteqaruzzaman, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh. "There were doubts about their skills and most importantly their vision in the big picture." When the act came into force, a selection process was begun for the appointment of the new ACC employees, who were handpicked from the BAC to work at the newly formed organisation.

What the organisation back then lacked was a good leadership, stable and dependable manpower or a working staff, accountability to the people and self-regulation within the body itself. "These employees were being scrutinised and going through several processes of selection, when the government gave a green signal to at least 500 employees from the bureau, randomly, to work at the ACC," he adds.

In more than two years, the ACC could not even finalise the rules and regulations necessary to make it effective. From the outset, obstructions kept coming from the bureaucracy as the last four-party alliance government, accused of wholesale corruption, remain oblivious to the situation. To be up and running, the ACC needed to have at least five rules finalised and approved.

Immediately after Prof Iajuddin Ahmed's caretaker government was formed, the ACC made a fresh move, seeking the approval of a draft of rules needed to file cases, frame charge-sheets and probe corruption.

But revamping the ACC has come to the fore after the caretaker government has formed a committee to revitalise the ACC. The seven-member committee, headed by Law Adviser Barrister Mainul Hosein, will be looking into legal, administrative and institutional issues of the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) to find its shortcomings that need to be mended to fight corruption.

According to Dr. Ifteqaruzzaman, the commissioners or the policy makers within the body should be as transparent as possible, to the extent of making their assets known and announced to the public. "The annual report, which is reportable to only the President, should also be discussed in the parliament, so that the issues can be made transparent to the people and they can participate in dealing with the issues as well."

What the ACC needs to work on are two basic drives, namely, a preventive drive which would be to enforce laws and a drive to purify or carry out punishments accordingly. That is how countries like Honk Kong and Singapore countries which had gone through a similar crisis 20 years ago have successfully demonstrated the strong will to root out corruption.

However, a single organisation is not enough to curb the evils of corruption. "People have to work at it as well," says Dr. Ifteqaruzzaman. "Incidents involving bribes or any other corrupt acts should be reported immediately so that proper action can be taken accordingly. There should also be proper jurisdiction and a political commitment in terms of taking these proper actions," he says.

Only time can tell to what extent this government go to empower the ACC or to fight corruption. ■