

Changes in police administration

Good step, but more needed

THE recent shake-up in the police administration should be leading to matters of a positive note. The controversy in which the police have found themselves in the past many years and especially in the five years gone by has been regrettable. The sense of regret has everything to do with the manner in which individuals were recruited into the police service and the inexcusable way in which they were put to partisan use. The kind of disrepute which an organ of the state suffers from once it becomes pliable to political manoeuvring is precisely the ailment Bangladesh's police force has come down with. The expectation, now, that the caretaker administration appears intent on reforming administration almost across the spectrum, is that there will be a major, purposeful overhaul of the police in Bangladesh.

The transfers and relocations of senior police officers carried out on Tuesday are, we would like to believe, a sign that the old order may actually be giving way to the new. There are reasons to think that an attitudinal change may have come into the police administration mindset. Such an attitude, assuming there is no let-up in the present endeavour, cannot but contribute to a recasting of the police department. The new ambience arising out of the politically changed conditions in the country should act as a spur to the expected and planned changes. It will be fair enough to suppose that a mere juggling around of men will not be enough to solve the irritating puzzle the police force has become in recent times. We will point, though, to steps which do give the country the confidence that the changes we look for in the police might actually begin to occur. The cancellation the other day of the recruitment of more than seven hundred individuals taken into the force on a questionable basis is such a step. But that is only part of the wider cobweb that has settled on the police force, which means therefore that much more will have to be done to bring about a qualitative change in police administration.

The issue of reforms of the police system inevitably comes up here. That is indeed a fundamental issue. As the new men in charge go about changing things in the police department, serious thought must also be given to the matter of sensitizing policemen to such basic issues as human rights. In these present times, the police are happily free of the straitjacket they are usually wont to be in during periods of political government. Such a situation ought to be put to good advantage where an overhauling of the service, through reforms, et al, is concerned. Overall, it is a restoration of professionalism and ability we expect to define the police administration once again.

Relief material scam

Delve deeper into it

THE countrywide drive against corruption is bringing into light more and more cases of misuse and misappropriation of public goods. Only a few days after relief goods were found in a house owned by a former lawmaker, the joint forces are reported to have discovered similar goods allegedly at a Bogra residence of BNP leader Tarique Zia.

Now, this is a startling revelation that the custodians of public property and assets appear to have themselves been involved in misappropriation or misuse of such things. How did the material found their way to their residences will be duly probed. But the discovery of relief materials in privately owned places point to gross anomalies in the distribution of such materials, to say the least. There are a huge number of people who are in desperate need of help from the government or charitable organisations, but it is highly regrettable that the leaders of ruling party apparently grabbed the goods that were to be distributed among the poorest of the poor.

It was no secret before the caretaker government launched the anti-corruption drive that corruption had its crippling effect in almost every sector. But the drive is actually leading to stunning discoveries which put a big question mark on the integrity of the majority of those who governed the country for the last few years.

The major political parties can hardly evade the responsibility of having done nothing to combat corruption. They never charge each other for financial impropriety or corruption or pursue corruption allegations against anybody when in power so that the corrupt are ultimately left off the hook.

The cases of corruption that have been unearthed so far appear to be only the tip of the iceberg, as reports on such cases are regularly coming from not only the city but all corners of the country. The government, of course, has to carry on its campaign relentlessly to catch the corrupt elements who have thrived at the cost of the country and its people.

Sensing the political situation

The provision of a caretaker government is one of the best achievements of our post-independence political struggle. Some questions about the legitimacy of this provision could be raised since the caretaker government is not an elected one. Raising questions against any system is one's fundamental right. With due respect to that right, I would like to remind you that every caretaker government, except the one headed by Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, demonstrated commendable performance.

A.J.M. SHAFIUL ALAM BHUIYAN

LOOK at what the caretaker government is doing! It has arrested some influential politicians from the two principal political parties because of their alleged involvement in corruption, and is in the process of arresting more such people. The law enforcement agencies are enquiring into the sources of their money. People are simply in awe, seeing this happen.

Those of us who are optimists always thought that something good would happen one day. Thugs and looters would not be able to dominate our politics for long. But, surely, none of us thought that the symptoms of their fading domination would appear so soon. Three cheers for the caretaker government.

No doubt that corrupt politicians and their goons command a lot of influence in the two major political parties, but other parties, including the Jamaat and Jatiya Party, are not free from such elements. It is expected that the corrupt elements of other parties will also receive the same treatment.

Two Gramscian concepts are useful in explaining the situation created by the caretaker government. Antonio Gramsci was an Italian political thinker, and died in Musolini's prison protesting fascism in Italy. While in jail, he regularly wrote notes about Italian politics and society and social change. His notes had been published long ago as a compendium called *Prison Notebooks*. Social theorists revere it as a masterpiece of social theory, and political strategists read it as a guide to politi-

cal activism. In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci talks about two strategies for political change -- war of movement and war of position. The war of movement refers to a sudden, forceful move by which a particular social group changes a social practice for common good. And the war of position refers to a long-term effort for social and political change, and such efforts are inculcated by persuading people.

The caretaker government's move to make politics free from corrupt elements should be called a war of movement. But, to build on it, we need a war of position because corruption and lawlessness have made inroads into the every sector of the society during the last few decades. Files in government offices rarely move without a bribe, the police harass innocent people

but release criminals for money every now and then, the courts, particularly the lower courts, rarely miss any opportunity to rig judgments for kickbacks, and unscrupulous traders employ every dirty trick to make money. It is not easy to clean such a system where corruption has crept in over the years.

Our state system suffers from two fundamental flaws. First, the apparatuses of governance in our society are yet to stand on their feet. For a democracy to function smoothly some institutions such as an independent judiciary, an independent Election Commission, a free press, and mechanisms to check corruption and ensure equality for the people of all religions, races and ethnicities, need to be built and harnessed. Because of the hard work of thousands of media men and women we have a strong press, but we miserably failed to build the other institutions. Our judiciary is not free from corruption, our Election Commission (EC) is always in controversy, and our infant Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is crying for some room to breathe. The people of the subaltern classes are repressed, many Hindus are suppressed under

the enemy property law, and the Paharis are still far from seeing their rights to live with dignity respected. Every political party which ruled the country since independence is more or less responsible for the fragility of our governance system.

Second, quality people in our society are either neglected or suppressed, but inefficient people are promoted. Inefficient superiors in different institutions look for submissive subordinates. Our politicians do it more than anyone else, for their narrow personal and political interests. They can get away with it because our governance institutions are yet to be developed as independent units. One relevant example here would be the official and unofficial clout of the executive, more specifically the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), over state machineries. It has dominance over the judiciary, the EC and ACC. The ruling party utilizes legal loopholes to use the governance institutions in their favour.

The caretaker government is in the process of restructuring them. It has initiated a move to make the judiciary independent. This is certainly progress, but it needs a rigorous mechanisms to

deal with the existing corrupt elements in the judiciary. Otherwise, the corrupt elements will continue to corrupt the judiciary. The government is also in the process of reconstituting the EC and ACC. All these are signs of creation of a good governance system. But the caretaker government alone will not be able to establish good governance because it will ultimately transfer power to an elected government.

To cash in on the good work of the caretaker government, the role of the civil society is crucial.

People are ready to support, and allow, the caretaker government to finish the good work it has begun. But the government needs to be aware of three sources of influence which can subdue any government, more specifically an unelected government, in a developing country.

First, the army can unseat the government and take over. But the good thing for the present caretaker government is that the army chief has already publicly assured the army's support for

its actions.

Second, the international money-lenders like the IMF and World Bank can try to seduce or coerce the government to move ahead with rampant privatization of the economy, since their objective is always to create markets for multinational corporations. Asian success stories like Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan suggest that strong and prudent government control of the market and the economy is a necessity for development.

Finally, the members of the advisory council can get corrupted, if they stay for a long time. The advisers are not accountable to any formal body and enjoy almost absolute power.

The remembrance of an old adage -- power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely -- may be useful. Moreover, the corrupt elements in the different strata of the society are also in search of mechanisms to cajole the government. The government needs to remain increasingly vigilant against the last two sources of danger.

Let's be patient, and look forward to seeing good things happening.

macies of this provision could be raised since the caretaker government is not an elected one. Raising questions against any system is one's fundamental right. With due respect to that right, I would like to remind you that every caretaker government, except the one headed by Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, demonstrated commendable performance. They contributed to the grounding of our democracy, holding three credible elections. The special powers act, which had gagged the media for quite some time, was dismantled by a caretaker government.

The present caretaker government has also gained people's confidence, and raised aspirations for good governance with its non-partisan actions. People will not let it fail. It can only fail if it is ignorant about the sources of danger. If that happens, the whole society will be in shock for losing a golden opportunity to establish good governance.

A.J.M. Shafiqul Alam Bhuiyan is a faculty in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

We need local leaders not national personalities

Putting faith in another round of newly inducted national leaders, no matter how honest and capable they may seem now, will be a mistake, a disregard of lessons that our turbulent political history has taught us time and again. We should welcome new faces from the grassroots, but more importantly, we should think more seriously about institutional reforms to ensure that national politics becomes rooted firmly to the interests and needs of local constituencies, and represented through local leadership, so that at the end of the day, power remains dispersed.

JALAL ALAMGIR

FROM lofty policy speeches all the way down to adda over tea among friends, the big question volleys back and forth nowadays is, how do we return politics to serve the national interest?

In looking for answers, much of the current discourse has put emphasis on people, the players of the game, rather than on institutions, the rules of the game.

That's understandable. Yes, the past five years have given us a painful circus of corrupt politicians, including shameless BNP MPs who would stoop as low as stealing relief materials meant for victims of natural disasters.

Accordingly, the law adviser is promising swift justice for the corrupt. The army chief is pronouncing that politicians are the roots of the country's ills, as if the country had never experienced military rule. Foreign diplomats have also joined the bandwagon, calling for a purge.

Indeed, there seems to be an

uncritical consensus about this: kick out the old guard, and bring in new faces-honest, apolitical do-ers who can put national interest ahead of everything else.

The celebrated Dr. Yunus, riding the crest of this wisdom, has set aside his past disdain for politics and declared an ambition for national power.

The problem is, a change of guard will only address the symptoms, not the disease. The route to our political salvation is not in another national celebrity.

If anything, politics in Bangladesh has been choked dry for the last thirty-six years by larger-than-life cults of personality and their dynastic tentacles. Moreover, it's not even the national interest that we need served. What we need instead is to bring politics closer to serving local constituencies.

In political science, which is the subject I teach, the idea is simple: the heart of a representative democracy (like Bangladesh) is not in governance, nor in leadership, nor even in the holding of

elections.

Its heart is in the representation of constituencies. What is being represented can vary.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, for instance, believed that representatives should serve the interests, but not necessarily the will, of their constituencies.

Regardless, what is important is that politicians are there to be driven first and foremost by their local constituencies.

To adapt Lincoln's remark, they should be of the locals, by the locals, for the locals.

But in Bangladesh, a vicious cycle of barriers keeps genuine local leaders out of any meaningful political authority.

Let's examine the steps in this cycle. We start with celebrities who gain national prominence by hook, crook, or family ties, become inducted into central leadership, and then, only for the purpose of getting elected, choose to "represent" a local constituency.

Come election time, the top

leaders run in multiple constituencies.

This not only stifles local voice but presupposes that local candidates are not good enough, a condescending viewpoint given to us by Britain, where, not surprisingly, most laws introduced by "commoners" need approval by Lords. Moreover, it is the central leadership, not local supporters, who nominates other MP candidates from their party.

This process serves to reward loyalty over merit.

Once elected, MPs cannot vote against their party, which reduces the parliamentary process to that of a glorified debating club.

This rule also favours loyalty over merit and the interests of central leadership over that of local constituencies.

And finally, if the rank and file wants to change the leadership, it runs into a brick wall because no democracy exists within the major parties.

Parties hold national conventions, but they are irregular, and given the absence of any rotation requirement, used mostly to rubberstamp the same selected central leaders.

The upshot of all this is that regardless of a change of guard, the rules of the game will eventually result in the domination of politics by a few national-level celebrity figures.

Cronyism, subservience, and hero worship, instead of accountability and transparency, will

continue to be the likely by-products.

These rules need to be reformed in order to strengthen true representation. The notion to register political parties is a good move, and this can be used as a vehicle to force reforms within parties.

For example, if a party wants to participate in national democratic elections, the registration agreement should require the establishment of democracy within the party first, including clear rules about intra-party election and, importantly, rotation in party leadership.

In addition, parties should be required to let local constituencies decide who their MP candidates from their party.

Whether it is formalized like American primaries or not can be up to each party, but for representative democracy to work, local leaders must be allowed to compete fairly and rise up.

Nomination is not a democratic institution.

Additionally, parliamentary rules need to be modified. There needs to be a cap on leadership: two terms should be the maximum that a Prime Minister can serve.

Most importantly, MPs must be allowed to vote "with their conscience," that is, against their party if needed. Allowing vote across party lines would make central leadership more accountable, and also more serious about

resolving both intra-party and national issues, as they would always be in fear of defection by MPs who represent their local constituencies above the interests of central leadership.

North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il-Sung, long dead, nevertheless continues to hold the post of president, which has been bequeathed permanently to him.

Our politics, similarly, has hovered around great leaders, national personalities, and their legacies, but with dreadful consequences.

Putting faith in another round of newly inducted national leaders, no matter how honest and capable they may seem now, will be a mistake, a disregard of lessons that our turbulent political history has taught us time and again.

We should welcome new faces from the grassroots, but more importantly, we should think more seriously about institutional reforms to ensure that national politics becomes rooted firmly to the interests and needs of local constituencies, and represented through local leadership, so that at the end of the day, power remains dispersed.

Dr. Jalal Alamgir is Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA.

described the global response to climate change as "the largest economic opportunity this century."

And, paradoxically, the current high oil prices mean that countries in the Middle East may be in one of the best positions to take advantage of this opportunity.

They have the capital available now to invest in the technologies of the future: and that offers the chance to diversify economies and to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship across society.

There are potential political benefits, too. If we get our response to climate change right we can turn the tension over diminishing resources into a spur for regional cross-border co-operation.

The truth is that climate change is real, and it is here. The good news is that we have the technology, the capital and the knowledge to meet this challenge.

Governments need to set the political frameworks to encourage investment, businesses need to take new technologies to the market, consumers and citizens have to make the choices that keep up the momentum for change.

The choice facing the people of the world is whether we recognize our common humanity and join together to tackle this problem; or whether we walk, blindly and separately, into a bleak future. For me, that is no choice at all.

Hon Margaret Beckett is the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.