

## Ex-private secretary spills graft beans about Khaleda

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As examples, we can take wheat purchase from the food ministry, the purchase of machinery parts for the civil aviation and tourism ministry, the purchase of pillars and transformers for the power division, and the allocation of abandoned gas fields for the mineral resources ministry. These matters have come under the national media's spotlight. But the government's inaction on these matters is particularly noticeable. There is even evidence that there were attempts to cover up these cases by all levels of the government.

Four classes of people close to the government were directly involved with the corruption of the past five years: Firstly, decision-making ministers and government officials; secondly, the ministers' sons and relatives who illegally influenced the decision-making ministers and government officials (socially influential); thirdly, members of parliament (politically influential); and fourth and finally, professional lobbyists, beneficiaries and agents (financially influential).

**PA:** Who were the most influential among the four classes?

**NI:** The former prime minister's son and relatives. The prime minister's (eldest) son Tarique Rahman himself used to visit the PMO occasionally. But one of the PM's political secretaries used to implement his agenda. The PM's close relatives used to visit the PMO more frequently if big purchases decisions were due to be raised in cabinet meetings. They used to influence the PM and several PMO officials on big-money purchases. They would often and openly frequent the restricted red-block of the PMO. The PM's former personal secretary Saiful Islam Duke used to assist them in accessing the restricted zone. He is a close relative of the PM.

**PA:** Who among the PM's relatives were seen most often at the PMO?

**NI:** I saw the PM's son Tarique Rahman most frequently right before the Canadian company Niko was allocated the abandoned gas-field for exploration and development. In addition, the PMO used to be frequented by the PM's youngest son Arafat Rahman, her sister's son Shahrin Islam Tuhin, her brother Syed Iskander, and the brother-in-law of the PM's other brother Shamim Iskander.

**PA:** Did Hawa Bhaban's name come up regarding corruption in the last five years?

**NI:** I have never seen any direct relationship between Hawa Bhaban and specific corruption allegations. But during this time, a lot of corruption and irregularities have taken place with the help of several ministers and secretaries. These ministers and secretaries maintained uninterrupted links with Hawa Bhaban and enjoyed its support and assistance.

**PA:** After taking over as PM, Khaleda Zia appointed Haris Chowdhury and Mosaddeq Ali Falu as her political secretaries. What was their role in corruption during the last five years?

**NI:** The first person used to serve the purpose of a 'bhaban' (Hawa Bhaban). He would also be involved in lobbying for (deals) in different sectors. Reportedly, in most of these cases the lobbying was in exchange for large sums of money. He would also implement the wishes of the PM's eldest son. The second person worked as the PM's political secretary for three years. I only want to say that he did not have the ability to legally earn the wealth he stated ahead of the elections. People think that his undeclared wealth far exceeds his declared wealth. He would also manage the illegally earned funds of a special group of people. A lot would be revealed if these matters were investigated.

**PA:** Can you remember any big case of corruption during the coalition government?

**NI:** In 2002-2003 after the coalition government came to power, the food ministry started a programme to purchase domestically produced wheat, which created a big scandal. It came under the national media spotlight in a big way. An investigation committee was formed which was headed by a secretary. The investigation report by the committee stated that Indian animal-fodder was passed off as domestically produced wheat and purchased under the national food collection policy. The funny thing is that when the wheat was purchased, domestically produced wheat was not even on the market. The government incurred a massive loss as a result. Along with others, the names of former food minister Abdur Al Noman and former Bogra MP Helaluzzaman Talukdar were raised. Helaluzzaman Talukdar was a close associate of Tarique Rahman. Every time Tarique would visit Bogra, Helaluzzaman Talukdar would always be by his side. A number of government officials' names were also mentioned involving this case.

Although the PM acted against a number of the government officials, including sacking a number of them, she did not act against any of the political leaders concerned. The issue was then quickly covered up. The government could not take steps against the corrupt politicians, thanks to the Hawa Bhaban influence. The corruption in this case was very clearly proven.

**PA:** When these corruption cases came to light, did the PM try to suppress them?

**NI:** If there were clear signs of Hawa Bhaban involvement, then the PM would abstain from taking any action against the accused, regardless of probe reports. If a minister was specifically accused of corruption, other ministers would come out in their support. As a result, no effective measures

were taken in the big cases of corruption.

**PA:** Can you recall any other instances of covering up investigation reports?

**NI:** A number of incidents were probed, of which the wheat incident is one. I can recall another incident. In 2002, the police raided Shamsunnahar Hall, which was later investigated by a judicial investigation committee. (The brutality of) A number of police officials close to Hawa Bhaban were mentioned in the committee's report. Under Hawa Bhaban's orders no steps were taken against these police officers and the probe report was not released. I remember one of the police officer's name, the much-talked about Dhaka Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Kohinoor Mia. He was in charge of the scandalous operation. He was transferred to Barguna as a result of the probe report. But he did not have to spend even a day at his new posting as he was transferred to Mymensingh as the superintendent of police under Hawa Bhaban's orders.

**PA:** What about the irregularities regarding contractual appointments?

**NI:** Irregularity and corruption in relation to contractual appointments and transfers was one of the most talked about issues of our time. The pre-requisites for contractual appointments were never followed. The government only considered who would be the most helpful in corruption and irregularities; these people were appointed violating regulations and laws.

Ziaul Islam Chowdhury was contractually appointed the chairman of the Rural Electricity Board (REB) for three years. But his past record and capabilities never fulfilled the government's guideline criteria required for appointing an official as the REB chairman. Other officials who received two-year contracts in similar fashion were chief engineer of the Public Works Division Abul Kashem Chowdhury, Social Welfare Secretary Kazi Manowarul Haq (who was a deputy secretary at retirement), Post and Telecommunications Secretary Mahmud Hasan Mansur (who was a retired official from the audit and accounts cadre).

Several other officials were also given contractual appointments in violation of government guidelines. They were even promoted after retirement, which breaches current guidelines. At least, 200 officials received contracts without fulfilling the requirements outlined in the government guidelines. These appointments need to be investigated for the sake of good governance.

**PA:** The matter of politicising the administration has been reported by the media a number of times...

**NI:** The establishment of the Janata Mancha in 1996 by secretariat officials deeply affected Khaleda Zia and she considered it the prime reason for BNP's defeat in the subsequent elections. After the BNP-led coalition government came to power in 2001, they planned to appoint their trusted people in the administration and the police.

The work to make the administration partisan started from the first week of the coalition government. A former CSP (civil service of Pakistan) led the Chittagong Port Authority in 2003 mentioned the contract would be awarded for five years only. Interestingly, this company had no previous experience in this field and did not have the necessary machinery to operate an ICD. I remember, the former prime minister's son Arafat Rahman visited her several times to lobby for the company before the purchase committee made their decision. The purchase committee had once rejected the proposal. But through intense lobbying the proposal was raised in the purchase committee again and the contract was approved.

**PA:** What was the PM's reaction if her sons were aggrieved about anything?

**NI:** At the start of 2003, the PM's youngest son went to Hong Kong with six or seven of his friends. The foreign ministry informed the Bangladeshi Consul-General AKM Atiqur Rahman about his arrival, but the foreign ministry did not act this way in her first term. She would pass on her relatives' request straight to ministers. They would assist (relatives) as much as possible remaining within the law. But, during her second term there was a touch of desperation. To me, this seemed to contradict the Prime Minister's oath in accordance with the constitution, not something I would think under the influence of emotions or ethics. In our country, it is not a crime to breach the constitutional oath; in many other countries it is equal to treason. But, these things were definitely unethical, illegal and assisted in corruption. I saw Begum Zia do these things without hesitation.

**PA:** For what reason did the former PM take the decision to remove you?

**NI:** On April 4, 2004, an allegation emerged headlined "Wanting coalition government busily misappropriating thousands of crore by signing agreements to big contracts on Chinese suppliers' credit". The PM's eldest son Tarique Rahman's name was in the allegation. At least 50 such allegations arrived at the PMO every day.

During their preparation in the Caribbean, Bangladesh will play a warm-up triangular series with Canada and Antigua & Barbuda before facing Scotland and New Zealand in the two build-up matches.

The Tigers' World Cup campaign begins against India on March 17, followed by matches against Sri Lanka and Bermuda on March 21 and 25 respectively.

The appointment proposals for

the first class officers were sent to the president for approval through the PM. Khaleda Zia would check with Haris Chowdhury whether these officials were AL sympathisers before sending those to the president. In reality though, finding out the identities and their background from all corners of the country was time-consuming, so Haris Chowdhury would request the omission of some names without checking their identity first. The PM did not consider a large number of candidates because of Haris Chowdhury's instructions. The 'promotion list' would be re-created in accordance with Chowdhury's request. The biggest problems arose when names were taken off from the Public Service Commission's recommended list. The omitted names in most cases were Hindu.

Promotions down to the general manager (GM) level of state-owned banks required the PM's approval. Haris Chowdhury was particularly keen on snuffing out AL sympathisers from these bank officials. We would often hear of large financial transactions related to the inclusion or exclusion of names from this list. If the recommended names from the ministries or the PSC were to be examined, it would be found that the most capable candidates were not selected for promotion. No reason was provided for the inclusion or exclusion of these names. It gradually became a highly automatic affair.

**PA:** The media has also reported the sale of state resources for next to nothing.

**NI:** Another sector for government corruption was the works ministries allocation and sale of state-owned houses, land and government mills to the private sector. I specifically recall one specific incident in this regard. A company named Lira Industrial Enterprise manufactures PVC pipes. It is located on a 10-bigha piece of land in Tongi. The land was sold to them for only Tk 2.8 crore. In an area like Tongi a bigha of land goes for Tk 1 crore. But the property worth Tk 18 crore, including the 10-bigha land and fixed assets of a mill, was sold for only Tk 2.8 crore. One KS Alamgir bought the mill. Haris Chowdhury himself was running around to finalise the deal. He was seen to be very active with the files for selling a number of state-owned entities.

Another example of handing over state assets for a paltry sum is the abandoned houses of the works ministry in Gulshan. Former works minister Mirza Abbas played the prime role in these cases. Most of the houses were purchased by businessmen and others close to the coalition government. Only two or three applications would be submitted for each property. A probe now would reveal everything.

**PA:** Can you remember any particular incident?

**NI:** The PM became very worried when the proposal for purchasing the machinery for the state-owned Teletalk was rejected twice by the government's purchase committee. One of her sons was involved with the third-lowest bidder to sell the machinery. When the post and telecommunications ministry tried to give the third-lowest bidder the contract, the lowest bidder took the matter to court.

The court took steps to resolve the matter. Since the third lowest bidder's asking price was seen to be higher than the approved budget, the approved budget for the project was raised. It was passed in the third meeting of the purchase committee after being rejected twice. But, only former finance minister M Saifur Rahman and former state minister for energy AKM Mosharraf Hossain were present at the meeting out of the ten members. While the others stayed away from the meeting fearing they would be entangled in legal hassles in the future.

**PA:** There have been reports of getting contracts by favoured companies through irregularities. Do you remember any specific examples?

**NI:** I clearly remember that Global Agro Trade Private Ltd was given the contract to handle the inland Container Depot (ICD) for seven years in 2004. But the post released by the Chittagong Port Authority in 2003 mentioned the contract would be awarded for five years only. Interestingly, this company had no previous experience in this field and did not have the necessary machinery to operate an ICD. I remember, the former prime minister's son Arafat Rahman visited her several times to lobby for the company before the purchase committee made their decision. The purchase committee had once rejected the proposal.

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But, during her second term there was a touch of desperation. To me, this seemed to contradict the Prime Minister's oath in accordance with the constitution, not something I would think under the influence of emotions or ethics. In our country, it is not a crime to breach the constitutional oath; in many other countries it is equal to treason.

**PA:** Is that what started the degeneration of your relationship with the then PM Khaleda Zia which resulted in you being sent into forced retirement?

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Khaleda Zia came to politics suddenly, after the death of her husband president Ziaur Rahman. She was weak in understanding various fundamental and theoretical matters related to politics, democratic system, administration, economics and social policy. Naturally, she had to take others' help in understanding these things. After she had become the PM, numerous individuals who had access to her for different reasons, also tried to mislead her. The PM did not hesitate to often neglect the advice of ministers and MPs to listen to these illiterate, half-educated and ill-motivated associates. Some examples would illuminate these matters further.

The government approved the Planning Ministry Purchase guidelines 2003 under donors' advice. The main goal of this initiative was to ensure transparency and accountability in government purchases and to treat tenders equally. But she was persuaded by her followers to stall approval of the policy for three months.

These people managed to stall the process with the help of the Department of Film and Publications (DFP), because they were the sole authority in publishing advertisements for government guidelines. The guidelines were finally published right before an important World Bank meeting later that year.

The Anti-corruption Commission Act suffered the same fate. In 2004, the Bangladesh Development Forum met between May 8 and May 10. The government was severely criticised for not passing the act. The government finally approved the act on May 9, 2004.

A number of the PM's close aides tried to convince her that if the act was approved, the ACC could act against her and her family members. The ACC was then also made ineffective. Begum Zia was blind to the acts of her sons, brother and relatives. She was always desperate to meet their requests, irrespective of how illegal or illegal the requests might be.

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