

New team at ACC

The body must have full autonomy

THE appointment of Lt. General (retired) Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury as the new chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission is a step we wholeheartedly welcome. We need hardly say that Chowdhury's career in the army has been an admirable one, especially the example he has set regarding austerity and simplicity. In recent times, the dedication with which he threw himself into the job of carrying out his responsibilities as an advisor to the caretaker government headed by President Iajuddin Ahmed was deeply appreciated by the country. More remarkably, the sense of integrity Mashhud Chowdhury demonstrated through quitting the office of advisor when he felt he was not being able to do his work to the nation's satisfaction only made his reputation go up by a good number of notches. The presence of such an individual of proven probity, as also of the two new commissioners, at the ACC is, therefore, an opportunity for the caretaker administration to make good on some of the more important of objectives it has set before itself as a prelude to general elections.

There can be little denying that Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and his team at the ACC will face a formidable challenge in fulfilling public expectations about the ACC. As matters stand, any programme of combating corruption entails the presence of a good, strong team of officials at the top levels of the ACC in addition to the mid and lower level employees already there. Apart from that, it is expected that the new ACC chief will lay bare his priorities as he goes about his new job. Foremost among such priorities will surely be the need to ensure that the ACC will have full freedom to frame its own rules and in line with those rules go after anyone linked to corrupt practices. Within the ambit of such rules must come an acquisition of powers that will enable the organization to compel individuals charged with corruption to appear before it. The ACC, in order to be effectual, must have the right to issue subpoenas and at the same time have a legal cell with authority to probe independently the cases it means to handle. In this regard, the backlog of cases as well as new or upcoming ones will call for careful, efficient handling, in a way that convinces the public that the new men at the ACC mean business.

In the ultimate analysis there is a strong case for grant of financial authority to the ACC as mark of a guarantee of their independent functioning from the executive in all vital respects. A financial provision may be kept in the budget for their specific use, subject, of course, to year-end government auditing. General Mashhud Chowdhury and his team ought to undertake the matter of financial autonomy for the ACC in earnest as part of an overall reform process at the organisation. That will mean setting a healthy precedent for the times ahead. We wish them God speed.

Of price and price list

Why the anomaly?

ONE expects the price list, displayed by the shopkeepers, to indicate the actual price of the commodities being sold at that shop. Regrettably, that is not being so. There is a marked difference from what is displayed and the actual selling price, according to reports. We understand, from the comments of the shopkeepers that the price on the list are ones that have been determined and written, rather arbitrarily, according to them, by the City Corporation officials.

While we appreciate the efforts of the caretaker government to address the issue of galloping prices we feel that one must not overlook the various factors that affect the prices of various commodities, particularly the perishable ones. The market mechanism must be allowed to play its natural role and that is what must determine the prices. The government should identify first what, if any, forces are tampering with the normal function of the market mechanisms. And that is what we will be able to keep the prices down. For one thing the perishable items like vegetables cannot find direct access from the producers to the market.

In fact the outside influence on the price is affected at two levels. One is the middlemen, while the other is the toll collectors at various stages that add to the prices. Here neither the seller nor the buyer has any control on the prices. Unfortunately, neither the producers nor the buyers benefit from this system, it is only the middlemen who do. The other cause may be the shortage caused artificially by the commodities shying away from the market because of the government anti-hording measures.

The government must undertake measures that inculcate confidence in the wholesalers as well the retailers. While we expect under the present situation the incidence of toll collection to go down, the honest businessmen must be encouraged to ply their trade without let or hindrance. There is also the need to ensure the interest of the consumers by enacting the necessary laws in this regard.

Mending Indo-Bangladesh relations



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

The tension between neighbours is time-worn, and has caused critical differences between them since the birth of organised political communities. For Bangladesh the duty remains to be on the right side of international law in resolution of bilateral disputes, and to be sensitive to New Delhi's security concerns. Perhaps then we can see the translation of our relations with India firmly on an "irreversible higher trajectory."

FOREIGN policy of smaller nations often is influenced by internal rather than external considerations. For the great powers of the world, a security threat is now defined not in terms of a country at imminent risk of being invaded before it can respond militarily, but in terms of the Bush doctrine of pre-emption where the interventionist power can intrude upon the sovereignty of another country if it feels that the country so invaded poses a threat to its security.

Recently, at the Munich conference on security policy, Russian president Putin pleaded for the deconstruction of this doctrine because, he said: "A world in which there is one master, one sovereign ... is pernicious not only for those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within."

Putin also questioned the rationale of Nato expansion and installation of military infrastructure by Nato on the border of the Russian Federation because Nato was conceived by John Foster Dulles and Lester Pearson as a military alliance to safeguard the religious beliefs and western political system as a counter attraction to communism, and to save what they considered as western values from the Security Council of the United Nations during the cold war period.

What Putin questioned was the efficacy of the expansion of Nato in the light of waning great power rivalry and the global task of fighting terrorism in all its forms, for which multi-polarity, and not unipolarity, should be the order of the day.

As opposed to that, the Bush administration appears to have embraced the philosophy of neo-

con guru, Irving Kristol, that, for a great power, "national interest" is not a geographical term, except for some prosaic matters like trade and environmental regulation. A smaller nation might appropriately feel that its national interest begins and ends at its borders, so that its foreign policy is always in a defensive mode. A larger nation has more extensive interests.

Barring extraordinary events, the United States will always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from undemocratic forces, external or internal. Kristol's idea found resonance in Bush's 2007 State of the Union address when, referring to the Iraq war, he said: "This is more than a clash of arms. It is a decisive ideological struggle."

From the above premises, one can divine that, regardless of the sovereignty and territorial integrity that the UN charter has guaranteed to all the members of the world body, the fact remains that, as much from its inception and as it is today in the days of American nuclear primacy, applicability of international law has always suffered from differential and deferential treatment among the member states.

In the light of the above, despite the Indian external minister's pronouncements during his visit to Dhaka a few days back that both India and Bangladesh have agreed to take steps to place bilateral relations on an "irreversible higher trajectory," and that India attaches the highest importance to its relations with Bangladesh, a welcome policy signal from an increasingly growing global player, a panel discussion by an Indian think-tank chaired by a former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh saw Bangladesh as follows: (a) a

centre of Pakistani ISI activities, (b) ISI and Bangladesh intelligence agencies have coordinated their efforts along with outfits like Ulfa, the Islamist outfit operating in Assam, the NSCA and NLFT, and ATTF of Tripura, (c) Bangladesh is seen as an extension of Pakistan's terror arm. Reports indicate that Pakistan-based outfits have relocated their camps and training to Bangladesh where the BNP regime was a willing partner, and (d) the presence of Islamist parties in power (the panel discussions were held before the latest caretaker government was installed), and their strong political support led to the gradual transformation of a secular Bangladesh to a more fundamentalist and radical state.

Undeniably, there is widespread anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh, despite India's crucial help in the attainment of our independence. The immediate past government, manned by anti-liberation forces with pre-conceived anti-Indian notions exerting disproportionate influence on policy formulation, strengthened this feeling. The dynamics of domestic politics, and Indian indifference to a fair treatment of Bangladeshi complaints, have been added factors.

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relations with China are seen by some Indian political analysts "in terms of the psychological threat that Bangladesh perceives from India, so that closer ties with China provide Bangladesh with a sense of security against India."

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Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Yunus and the scared politicians



ABDULLAH A DEWAN

No Nonsense

Is Yunus's political venture behind Hasina's growing impatience for early election? On February 21, she cautioned the CTG that people won't accept an extra-constitutional government. Other political hacks have pleaded that they will rescue the country from the present disaster. Are these portents of a brewing movement to hamstring the ongoing clean up of corruption?

BEFORE January 11, all of the news emerging from Bangladesh was bad news and hopelessness. Now, six weeks later, all of the news that comes across the TV screen bubbles with optimism. Why the change? Because knowing that the corrupt are being chased down and shackled, and that our institutions have been freed from the command of the loathed "rajnitibids" has brought all of Bangladesh a state of bliss.

Showing irreverence to rajnitibids by calling them loathed, dishonourable and corrupt won't possibly be as upsetting if one can identify what attributes embody such a class of people?

The synonym for the word "politician" in Bengali is "rajnitibid." It's been conjoined with three distinct syllables each has its distinctive nuance. The "raj" refers to "royal or state," "Niti" refers to "policy" and "bid" refers to "expert." The word "rajnitibid" implies much more significance and cachet in terms of both statesmanship and wisdom than should be accorded to most Bengali politicians.

Most people who are engaged in political activities (activists) and choose politics as their profession may not be called rajnitibid. Analogously, calling a person engaged in economic activities as "ortho-niti-bid" (economist) is a misnomer.

Why doesn't politics attract bright students like my Dhaka University physics classmate Haider Akbar Khan Rono?

This is because very few of our current politicians are versed in the science of governance. Since a politician is distinguished as someone who influences the way a society is governed through political savvy, altruistic service, and party dynamics I see crisscrossing of dismal pictures in our political landscape.

These politicians can be broadly classified into four overlapping casts and creeds: (a) Rajnitibid (people of wisdom and knowledge, such as Dr. Kamal Hossain, Barrister Moinul Hossain, and the likes), (b) Rajnitik organizers and activists (dedicated party leaders and activists), (c) Rajnitik hoodlums (opportunity seekers ready to commit criminal wrongdoings), and (d) Rajnitik party supporters (honest and exploited citizens).

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They take insurance coverage, but don't pay the premiums. They take loans, but don't settle their dues in time, or at all. Most of them don't take care of their employees well. Their contribution to the society or community is no way near to what the community or society give to them or is extremely insignificant. The list can go on further.

The bigger issue is that not only are these illegal activities prevalent, but also that the corrupt persons are never punished for their misdeeds. In many cases the unlawful practices have become the general norm. The lack of transparency and accountability prevents the honest businessmen to survive in the mainstream of economic activities.

While admitting to the lack of transparency and accountability, most business leaders blame it on the government, the politicians and the over all system. While there is a great deal of truth in that argument, the business community cannot just take shelter under that and avoid responsibility.

Most businesses hide their income and wealth in the financial statements. Many of them do not produce financials or possess any Tax Identification Number (TIN). Some businesses pay bribe and enjoy

obviously, a career in politics is arduous and uncertain. Furthermore, doing student-politics as a surrogate of a national party and achieving academic excellence are incompatible. But that should not raise eyebrows of professional politicians when we join politics at a later stage as Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus just did?

Yunus isn't the first to ascribe the nexus between joining politics and making money. According to Wikipedia: "Although politics has historically been considered an honourable profession, many people today have a poor opinion of politicians as a class. Not only do people often disagree with their policies, they are sometimes seen as unscrupulous, willing to do anything to gain power, or abusive of their position and privileges."

In our high-handed and dysfunctional party structure the true "rajnitibid" and those astute in statecraft (like the CTG advisers) are often bypassed or shut out of the process in order to make room for inferior minds with money and muscle. Many high political positions are held hostage by those who couldn't compete in academics but mas-

tered the art of organizing haralds, blockades, and the aggression of "dharo-maro-khao."

Yunus's observation that people join politics for money predictably ticked off some politicians. First the performance of the CTG advisers made them jittery and insecure. That insecurity was compounded by Yunus's foray into politics, as evidenced by Sheikh Hasina's recent indignant outbursts.

"Those who blame the politicians are now trying to be politicians. Why are you so eager to join politics after abusing the politicians so much," said Hasina on February 17.

It shouldn't be too difficult to comprehend that Yunus and many of us want to join politics of sanity and probity in abhorrence of polluters of politics. The country needs new direction while politics needs sanitization.

Sheikh Hasina, for all these years, was evenly matched with Khaleda Zia on many accounts. Under the looming political landscape where would the two mutually antagonistic rivals stand relative to the exalted stature of Yunus? The politicians have every reason to feel insecure and threatened by Yunus

and the changes he represents. In sum, they're afraid that Yunus might redefine politics as an honourable and altruistic profession.

Hasina's observations that one who wants to be a politician "all of a sudden" would bring disaster to the country and pollute politics is sheer nonsense. Can any one really make politics as disastrous as Hasina and Khaleda have made it today?

Another outrageous statement she made is that "there is no difference between the corrupt, bribe takers and interest takers ... Those who take interest not only failed to eradicate poverty, but also nurture poverty."

Demand for the rationale for the high rate of interest that Grameen Bank charges on micro-credit and Yunus's asset disclosure are fair game for discussion. But equating political corruption with the Grameen Bank's interest rate policy (knowing that collecting undisclosed political contributions from businesses is no different from bribes) is below the belt -- a crass, puerile, and shameless attempt to draw Yunus into the vitriolic politics that Hasina is accustomed to. Yunus chose the high ground, rebuffed Hasina's slurs, and refused to exchange vituperative diatribes with her.

Is Yunus's political venture behind Hasina's growing impatience for early election? On February 21, she cautioned the CTG that people won't accept an extra-constitutional government. Other political hacks have pleaded that they will rescue the country from the present disaster. Are these portents of a brewing movement to hamstring the ongoing clean up of corruption?

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