

Ignoring trained personnel

This waste of talent must end

ALL too often, administrative specialisation in Bangladesh has been stymied by a wrong placing of people in responsible positions. This truth has been highlighted once again through a report carried in this newspaper yesterday about the problems we have had in handling such sensitive areas as the World Trade Organisation. There can hardly be any cause for surprise here, given that our suspicions of how government functions have only been reconfirmed by the report. Indeed, when not long ago the then minister for commerce returned home from a significant WTO meeting abroad, he had hardly anything to report home about.

It is, however, equally true that our capacity to handle crucial global subjects is often marred by the people deputed to speak for the country. As the news report in question notes, of the thirty officials trained in WTO affairs, only three happen to be making use of their expertise. The others have clearly been sidelined through their places being taken over by individuals from the administrative cadre. And that, basically, has been a perennial problem for the government. Where experts or well-trained personnel, both at home and abroad, are required, it is the patently untrained who through questionable deals are allowed to fill the positions. One can stretch the idea to include such centers of governmental activity as our diplomatic missions abroad. Where officers from the commerce ministry should be manning the offices of trade counselors, it is individuals from other departments who are sent there, with predictably bad results. There have even been instances where journalists have been deputed to work as economic ministers at important missions, to the consternation of the country.

It is time matters relating to placing people in expert-level positions were clearly and definitively prioritized. At the WTO, indeed even in such international organizations as the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, it is essential that we send men and women who can argue for the country on the basis of the concrete homework they do beforehand. The nepotism and favouritism that have regularly afflicted governments undermined our efforts to come level with the outside world. Let that be brought to an end.

Fertiliser question

Does it have to be an annual feature?

LIKE in the previous years, our farmers, mostly of the northern part of the country, are short of fertiliser. This is the Boro season when the demand for it grows. In recent years, we have been able to achieve a kind of self-sufficiency in food; with the import of foodgrains having been markedly reduced easing the burden on our economy. In order to make the trend sustainable, it is essential that we ensure timely supply of agriculture inputs to our farmers at affordable prices.

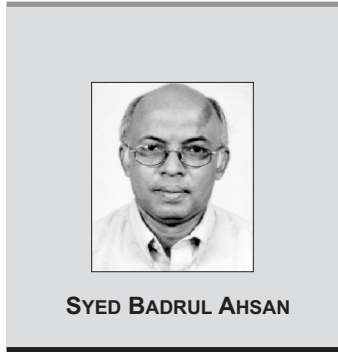
Our agriculture production cycle is divided into different seasons and also dependent on climatic conditions and hence supply of inputs should conform strictly to the seasonal time frames. We simply must guard against any single seasonal crop failure that may affect the entire foodgrain output.

With the cycle and pattern of fertiliser needs of our farmers being nearly the same each year, with some modifications, if any, it is not understandable why we fail to cater to their annual requirement without any incident. The problems must be settled on the dealers' and middlemen's levels. With claims as to stocks of fertiliser being sufficient, there are evidently distribution bottlenecks that must be eliminated. And time is of the essence.

Some of the causes behind the crisis is often attributed to smuggling of the product across the border including hoarding by dealers with a motive of making high profit by selling it in black market. On the other hand, stocking of fertiliser may also have an adverse effect on its quality and potency. Fertiliser is basically a "quick sale product" with a limited shelf-life.

It is high time that this man-made crisis be dealt with in real earnest. It is our belief that given the determination and a proper management plan in place we can surely overcome it.

All the men who have done us wrong



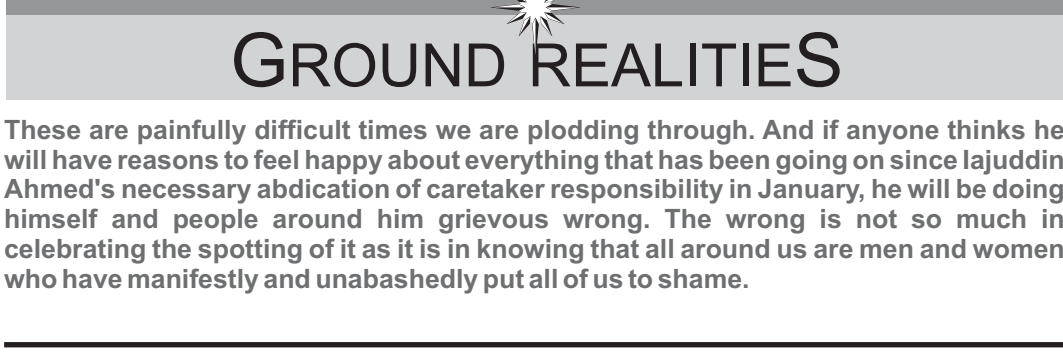
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WELL, the truth is out. With the syndicate of Chittagong University finally informing us that Justice Faisal Mahmud Faizee is indeed guilty of having had his mark sheets tampered with, we understand perfectly clearly, yet once more, the moral decline this People's Republic has been going through.

There will now be little point in making too much of the issue, save only to suggest that we now need to go into a serious study of how matters came to such a pass. Of course, Faizee owes us all an explanation. He has a right to be heard, something that we will not deny him, but whether or not he has any defence on offer is a question that needs a swift response.

There is, too, the little and yet significant matter of dealing with those who have, or may have, conspired to provide wrong information about Faizee's academic record to the country.

There is forever a dark tinge of criminality about a peddling of untruths and then pretending that they are the unassailable truth. When Faizee's father, a lawyer



himself, took it upon himself to drag two newspapers to court over what he thought was an attempt to tarnish the reputation of his child, he probably lost track of the idea that at the end of the day it is the wheels of justice that grind, before coming to a necessary halt once incontrovertible evidence about the wrongdoing in question has turned up.

These are painfully difficult times we are plodding through. And if anyone thinks he will have reasons to feel happy about everything that has been going on since Iajuddin Ahmed's necessary abdication of caretaker responsibility in January, he will be doing himself and people around him grievous wrong.

The wrong is not so much in celebrating the spotting of it as it is in knowing that all around us are men and women who have manifestly and unabashedly put all of us to shame.

The politicians we elected to office five years ago now appear to have been elements rapacious enough to leave the state high and dry through all their accumulation of property. You only need to observe their gleaming vehicles, SUVs and

the like lined up at the police stations, to know of the extent of plundering that went on in a mere five years of government by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its rightwing religion-based allies.

You elect a government to reassure you that your welfare is what it will constitutionally and morally promote. That is surely what modern politics is all about. Indeed, that has been the way with politics in this country, in times that now seem increasingly to be part of a lost legacy.

But now that we stumble, day after day, into newer discoveries of the homes once-upon-a-time ministers and lawmakers built for themselves, of the thievery they resorted to systematically, we ask ourselves if the state we inhabit is the state which arose out of the ashes of a dying East Pakistan in December 1971.

Back then, it was a dream we launched into the future. In these bleak times, we are being brought squarely up, from moment to eerie moment, against nightmares that leave us all wounded in spirit.

Morality, Sir, has gone missing;

and if you think it will be restored in your life or mine any time soon, you are badly mistaken. Proof? Think back on the efforts an elderly, partisan journalist put in recently to justify the hand-over of prime government land by a minister to a human rights organization personified by the ministerial spouse.

And how does our journalist try solving the riddle? It was the communications minister, says he, who was helping a human rights organization. And that's it? With journalism in such a horrific state, with politics hitting rock bottom, you do not expect starlight to guide you out of the woods.

When educated, politically corrupt men and women do not spot any conflict of interest in patently questionable situations, you know how far down the state has slipped.

And just how steep such a descent has been comes through in the efforts of ministers of the now departed four-party government to explain why they could not have the judiciary separated from the executive in a long span of five years.

When the Latifur Rahman caretaker administration readied itself to

How far is going too far ?

It is an incontestable fact that the CTG is stewarding the nation towards a new beginning, a representative government and parliament free of the pests of the past; a government and a parliament that will not return the country to the brink; a Bangladesh that will no longer be taken hostage by the perfidy of election engineering and the duress of highway blockades. So far, for almost two months, it has been good going.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE time we are passing through can prove to be a turning point in the history of our nation building. The present crisis is the culmination of years of drift in terms of governance and accountability.

It was driven on by partisan and bellicose politics, abetting personality cult and unwholesome invasion of national life by avarice. For all these years an honest bi-partisan national initiative was missing, while the pathogens of greed were devouring the hopes and aspirations of the country.

Sadly, the underlying failure is of political nature. Rescue had to come, and it has come. It is a national call of duty for the caretaker government. The task they have before them needs a durable solution. Considering the seriousness, and the intractable nature, of the crisis any vacillation will only defeat the national duty.

There are a few basic facts about this national duty. It has to be attended here, and attended to well. The bottom line of this national duty is to return Bangladesh to the democratic road in good health and spirit. This is of utmost importance because there is no other sensible

alternative to it.

It should, however, be kept in mind that a hasty rush to the polls will have the expedience of an indiscretion. The foremost task before the CTG is to build a climate of confidence and trust that all tasks of the interim government are geared to returning the country to a democratically elected government.

Any vacillation, waywardness or foreign meddling will make the task vulnerable to mischief mongers and ill-willing detractors. In the final analysis it means the erosion of its credibility.

To begin with, there is a set of questions, why, who, what, where, how and when. Precisely, why is the CTG here, who brought them here, what are the faults that the show-down has exposed, what should be done, what is being done, where the country is moving on to, how much sensible time the national restoration will require, and when that will be.

It goes without saying that the CTG is here because the political fracas was riding the doomsday express. It was hurtling down the track into the abyss. Indeed, the catapulting device was the last round slugging between the two political alliances. The most culpable thing they did was to spread

terror, and paralyze national life.

Pitifully, they took the whole nation hostage. The national frame of mind was one of utter disgust, and it was eager for a new beginning. Here is the chance for the reforms to chart a new beginning.

Let there be a reckoning. What has the national catharsis brought to the fore? As we see, the most revolting of all ills is that the national crown lies on the head of greed. It finds the personality cult an abetting force.

The gluttony of the pampered princes, the plundering cohorts, the disdainfully dishonest public office holders, and the scornful Taipans, trashed the system and made governance a feast for the privileged. It made Bangladesh a nation of abandoned hopes.

The national initiative was robbed of justice, while the rewards were being feasted on. It was spreading dismay that sulked under the veneer of an outwardly growing economy. Unattended dismay, as we know, turns into rage with time. The country was headed in that direction.

Thankfully for the nation, the CTG has started on the right track and with the right set of priorities. They have started with restoring the credibility and dignity of the institutions that matter.

It is assuring that the task has begun with the removal of the relics of the tainted past, beginning with reconstitution of the Election Commission. The EC should naturally be at the heart of the initiative in matters of building confidence.

The last fifteen years of democratic experience have seen how the credibility and integrity of public representation has plummeted because of rampant greed. A repeat performance at the next polls is, therefore, the last thing the nation needs.

The nation should be rid of the malaise if that is not to happen. The CTG is well focused in its campaign for accountability. And the institution for it, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been entrusted to well-regarded professionals who have given a worthy account of their conviction and fairness.

As a matter of setting an example, it has done the right thing by bringing the bigwigs to their date with the law. The road to the elimination of political pests should rightly go through a process of law.

It will take time, and that has to be conveyed to the people. The morale of the people has to be kept high by making the process of elimination credible, and not a mere replay of the past.

Meantime, the CTG is also sending a strong message to the wrongdoers, and to those that took law and governance for patronizing buddies. Public land is being reclaimed from wrongful occupiers, and are being rid of illegal structures. These are useful steps for creating a climate of respect for

put the judiciary outside the pernicious influence of the executive in October 2001, the incoming BNP-led government prevented it from doing so.

The reforms, it averred, would be implemented by the new powers that were. And then, for five agonizing years, the elected government did all it conceivably could to undermine the fundamentals of democratic politics. The Faizee case is but a small instance of the iniquities we have been going through. There are others.

When nondescript lawmakers suddenly turn into business tycoons through setting up newspapers and television channels, you know, even if you have no evidence to back your claims, that there has been a precipitous slip in morality once more.

The police force that you always thought would reassure you about your security mutates, through the sinister behaviour of ministers unable to see beyond their noses, into a squad that exists to beat up citizens on the streets. The months and years in which Bengalis were barricaded into being small pockets of protest, and so stopped from exercising their democratic right to march or demonstrate, were times when you and I and all of us fell down while outrageous mis-governance reigned supreme.

As you reflect on the darkness that has been part of your life, you cannot but feel a bizarre sense of satisfaction in knowing that men who once ensured that other men were put on police remand are, today, themselves in the grinder. And once you remember that, you tell yourself that all that the care-

governance.

The legacy of crises left behind by the outgoing government, particularly in the power sector, is also seeing sincere handling. It is good to see that the Chittagong port has returned to normalcy, and that the don has submitted to the CTG. At least a sense of relief has returned to national life after the tumult and turmoil that buffeted the last CTG.

But governance for a common man in Bangladesh is all about the price of daily necessities, and safety on the roads and in the neighbourhoods. Stray cases of mugging are going on, particularly for the three-wheeler passengers. Even a journalist was not spared. It is even more menacing that two Rab personnel have been gunned down.

The holiday market is honestly not enough to compensate for the earnings of a week. The murmuring is there. As a matter of fairness it has to be said that the CTG has not yet been able to curb the price hike.

The outgoing government shrugged it off as a phenomenon of market economy. Others were talking of highway extortion, and of the manipulations by the syndicate. Whatever it is, the prices are on the rise. And it is sending the wrong signal. The CTG has to work more vigorously in this respect!

An ordinary citizen, in his elemental understanding, believes that the CTG can make a difference that lasts by working on rule of law, transparency and accountability. These three will make a marked difference in governance that will reach the common man. Beyond that will perhaps be aiming too high.

As for the structural changes, a

taker administration has been doing must be sustained, must be carried through to a good, healthy conclusion.

Men who have terrorized us, only because they have been ministers or ministers of state or lawmakers or mere flunkys of powerful people, ought not to be given a chance of a renewal in politics.

Does it not occur to you that all these men who have been hauled away to prison are individuals who stand accused of financial impropriety or plain political hooliganism? Time was when politicians went through persecution in prison because of the idealism they based their beliefs on.

You and I and all of us then identified with them, to force the bad men in power to let them go free. Today we ask that those who have pilfered and consumed in the name of politics be locked away, for a very long time.

Faisal Mahmud Faizee has done us terrible wrong. So have others. It is time for legal justice to work, for poetic justice to restore our collective self-esteem.

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representative government, and a parliament elected on the basis of reforms done in the above three fields, will be best equipped to carry them out.

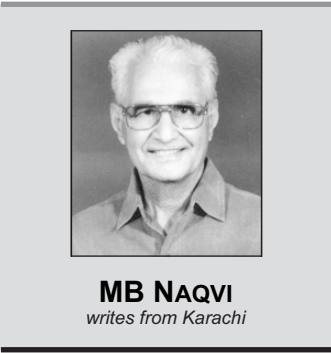
It is an incontestable fact that the CTG is stewarding the nation towards a new beginning, a representative government and parliament free of the pests of the past; a government and a parliament that will not return the country to the brink; a Bangladesh that will no longer be taken hostage by the perfidy of election engineering and the duress of highway blockades. So far, for almost two months, it has been good going.

And how much time will the CTG need for successfully completing its national duty? It will certainly not be as long a time as an autocrat needs. Most of all, haste is a spoiler of the initiative. Procrastination, on the other hand, plunders on the purpose of the initiative.

Winter, by all standards, is the ideal time for holding an election. A calendar year is a good bet. Let the coming year mark a new beginning for Bangladesh. It can be a reasonably good focus for the nation.

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Nature of the crisis



AMERICA'S high officials, media and think-tank community are demanding what the Musharraf regime finds hard to do. The thrust of the demand is that Pakistan should prevent the Taliban from using its territory to attack Afghan targets. They think that Pakistan owes it to them.

Given the spreading chaos and crises in the Middle East, an assessment of what will happen if Pakistan were to comply with endless American demands would show that it may soon be asked to participate in American campaigns against Iran. The troubles in that region cannot be compartmentalized into Afghanistan, Iraq and other pressure points, of course.

Pakistan has already shown that it remains loyal to the American camp by holding an OIC Foreign

PLAIN WORDS

It is contingent on a political revolution that liberates the state structures of Pakistan from the stranglehold of the army. What can one say and do about it at this stage? If the people do not win back the sovereignty that ought to be exercised by them soon, Pakistan is going to be in serious trouble. Hopes for a brighter future will fade for a long

Ministers' conference in which Iran, Syria or any representative from Hezbollah or Hamas, were not invited.

That showed where Pakistan stood: as pro-American as they come. Despite that, the current rift with US threatens to grow. US anger flows from Pakistan's inability to unstintedly use its armed forces against all suspected of being Taliban or their supporters.

What position can a Pakistani commentator take, especially when he has never endorsed Islamabad's Afghan policy? The American demand is surely impractical. Many Pakistanis have explained they have already done the maximum they could.

They say that the problem is not of Pakistan's making; it is an Afghan problem, for Afghans or US occupation forces to solve. To leave the issue at that is not too unreasonable

an expostulation. It is that adequate or satisfying?

Pakistan is troubled by divides even within its elite, let alone the basic one between the elite and the plebeians. The common people have never counted for much. The elite are divided today in various ways, and the state remains under the occupation of the Pakistan army that has controlled and guided the nominal government even when it comprised civilians.

The policies that Pakistan has followed since Ayub Khan, and even earlier, were army dictated. Civilian input has been pitifully insufficient. The position that an independent citizen can adopt depends on how he views the military's control over the state. This is inescapable.

It is false patriotism to rush to Islamabad's defence in all the twists and turns vis-à-vis America, in which the impact on Aam Admi was

never a consideration. Outside the charmed circle of power, nobody matters.

As for the plebeians, some crumbs did indeed fall from the high table for them, because some development has taken place. The Pakistan economy of 2007 is much bigger than 1947's. That development has greatly enriched the elite, but has not substantially reduced the growing numbers of the poor.

The quality of economic development has been demonstrated by virtually nonstop inflation, at least from the 1960s onward. Ordinary people, including ordinary writers, do become cynical and apolitical. They want to know, what their input is, or what they receive.

What is wrong is that Pakistan foreign policy has been built around just one need: how to find enough resources to sustain a modern military that needs constant mod-

ernization, because local resources were not enough and, even today, had it not been for the inflow from the west of something like \$ 12 billion in additional help during the last six years, things would have been worse despite normal Paris Club loans.

Thanks to the American connection, Pakistan has in 60 years received something like \$ 100 billion in aid, and some of these dollars were much stronger than today's. The country today owes \$ 38 billion, and there may be more in the pipeline not yet finally registered. The amount of development and the total foreign aid do not quite match.

For one thing, the trickle-down effect has been painfully slow, and there was much corruption in implementation. The quantum of aid so far, in today's dollars, must be equal to \$ 200 billion, while for this much industrialization less than half the amount should have sufficed. The Pakistani elite's financial health shows that a substantial portion of foreign aid has, in fact, been cornered by them.

Anyhow, when a great power especially funds a poorer and smaller state, it expects a quid-pro-quo. It was that liability that converted Pakistan into an American satellite. Pakistan has often bridled against American demands at

various stages; even these elite have sometimes found them to be excessive. The People of Pakistan, as such, have always disliked this status, and the Americans are unpopular for these reasons.

To be brutally frank, Americans treat Pakistanis as a bunch of mercenaries who will do anything for money, and some of the speeches one has heard from Blair and Bush after 9/11 amounted to saying: "here is cash on the barrel. Now be with us."

The Americans are all too conscious of what they have done, and demand compliance with their wishes. They are in a huff because Pakistanis have failed to live up to their expectations.

As for Afghanistan, Pakistan has always incongruously tried to act the big brother. It has not observed the five principles of co-existence, which are practical and fair in inter-state relationships.

Pakistan was a part of the big international intrigue that ultimately resulted in the Saur Revolution of 1978, and was a major actor in America's proxy war against the Soviets for almost the whole of the 1980s decade. That enriched some Pakistani officials no end.

After 1989, Americans left Afghanistan to Pakistan altogether. Pakistan's relations with its Afghan

cronies, later known as Northern Alliance, did not remain friendly for long. Islamabad won back its suzerain-like position in Afghanistan by using its secret weapon: Taliban. The latter quickly conquered the Pushtoon parts of Afghanistan and established a Taliban Caliphate.

Pakistan started dreaming dreams of strategic depth and a confederation, and so on -- supposedly to confront India better. But even the Taliban were not as pliable as the Pakistanis wanted. Ultimately, against Pakistan advice, the Taliban fell out with the Americans, and after 9/11 the US invaded and occupied Afghanistan.

Now, Pakistan and Afghanistan are both helpless satellites of the US. Why should one sympathise with Pakistan's military rulers? True, the Taliban are a grave danger to Pakistan. But Taliban were Taliban even in the 1990s. Shouldn't some heads roll?

Where do we go from here? is the question. This government would do whatever the Americans may want, as if it was its duty, expostulating and supplicating all the while. The thing to do, of course, is to learn to stand on one's own legs.

Unless the country can reinvent itself as a people-friendly state and start an economic development that is integrated, self-sustained and

self-reliant, there will be no future. Pakistanis cannot regain their independence and dignity without economic independence.

International loans are all right, so long as they produce something with which they can be repaid. Building infrastructure is Pakistan's own duty. It has no business to take loans for projects that do not add to the productivity, or financial ability to repay within, say eight to nine years.

But that is for the long haul. It is contingent on a political revolution that liberates the state structures of Pakistan from the stranglehold of the army. What can one say and do about it at this stage? If the people do not win back the sovereignty that ought to be exercised by them soon, Pakistan is going to be in serious trouble. Hopes for a brighter future will fade for a long long time to come.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.