

CA's call to bureaucracy

Service to the people must be the bottomline

THE Chief Adviser has asked civil servants to fulfill their responsibilities to the people through ensuring a prompt delivery of services. That is truly an exhortation which resonates with the larger body of citizens. Indeed, the problems we have had with our bureaucracy are as old as the hills, to the extent that all our efforts to resolve them have yielded precious few results. That can mean only one thing, which is that a renewed and stronger emphasis must be placed on pulling the civil administration out of the sloth it has been in for years. The CA's call to the secretaries was for a simplification of the modus operandi of administration through dispensing with archaic rules and regulations.

The concerns expressed by the CA must be addressed in dead earnest. For starters, it is hugely worrying that once a file enters a ministry, it must go through no fewer than nine layers of approval -- and a horrendously long time -- before it is finally cleared. That is a sordid symbol of the procrastination that characterises administration. Besides, there is an absence of ministerial coordination when it comes to dealing with issues of grave public concern. Obviously, the efficiency and pace at which government should work are clearly undermined by the way officialdom conducts itself. The picture which emerges is one of too many theoretical deliberations on the issues and too little work on the ground. As if that were not enough, the presence of an inordinately high number of officers on special duty (OSDs) in the various ministries has only sliced away at the capacity of an already resource-strapped government. The Chief Adviser's call for absorption of the OSDs in the ministries should be followed up by action. As for promotions, it has been seen that big chunks of officers are elevated to such positions as deputy secretaries and joint secretaries without anyone having any idea of exactly where these officials with all their given antecedents will fit in. Another problem the bureaucracy has suffered from lately relates to the political partisanship it was pushed into by a ruling political class that should have known better. A clear idea of how civil administration can be undercut from within comes in the allegations of corruption around the conduct of the 27th Bangladesh Civil Service examinations.

In these different, perhaps even tumultuous times, with all the lessons learnt, a good opportunity exists for administration to be turned into a dynamic machine geared to the promotion of the public weal. In its own interest, and owing to the absence of parliament, the administration ought to establish and maintain links with the media as a way of keeping people abreast of the reform measures it plans to take. An efficient, non-partisan and professional civil service is the ultimate bedrock on which government functions. Let that be the principle we follow unwaveringly.

Welcome MOU between UAE and Bangladesh

A model for good manpower trade

WE are heartened to know that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been signed between Bangladesh and UAE aimed at ensuring better working conditions for and protecting the rights of Bangladeshi workers in the gulf state. It would be implemented by a joint committee comprising three members from each of the two countries. This will monitor matters relating to manpower export and working conditions for our workers in the UAE and put measures in place by way of corrective actions. The focus is placed on 'eliminating problems frequently caused by both recruiting and receiving agencies'.

Apart from falling prey to machinations of fraudulent recruiters thereby losing their last penny, our workers overseas have often been subjected to harassment by individual recruiting agencies both at home and abroad. They would land on jobs they had not contracted for with the terms and conditions of service deviating from what they were given to understand before departing from their home country.

It is high time we streamline the manpower trade sector as a whole with the cooperation of the host countries who have as much a stake in it perhaps as we. We have to address the problem of illegal immigrants. It may not be out of place to mention that of the 70,000 workers currently employed in the UAE about 16,000 are said to be staying there illegally.

Let us not forget that Bangladeshi wage earners abroad happen to be the largest contributor to our foreign exchange reserves. They are also contributing significantly to the economy of the host countries. So, it's a both way traffic that must be made the most of.

We suggest that following this MOU, the government should seriously consider forging similar understanding with other countries where there is a concentration of Bangladeshi workers.

The people, in this People's Republic



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

GROUND REALITIES

The people have, by and large, been at the receiving end of all that is negative and nerve-wracking in this land. The street you are wont to pass through everyday on your way to and back from work is suddenly cordoned off, in that certain sense of the meaning, by a neighbour keen on replacing his parental two-storied home with a money-spinning apartment complex. And he has done that through dumping his construction materials along more than two-thirds of the street.

IT is people that people talk about in this country, in season and out of it. The people, say these people, are the final arbiters of our destiny. They decide the course national history will take. It is the will of the people that matters. That is the wisdom you are always being pealed with.

When you sit back and reflect on the people, you certainly realise the invigorating role they have with good regularity played in the making of Bangladesh's history. Be it 1952 or 1969 or 1971, it has been the people who have caused the convulsions that would soon transform themselves into revolutions. They were the ones who forced a corrupt Muslim League government from office in 1954; and in 1969, they ran Ayub Khan and his cohorts out of town. By 1971, the people were ready to send the state of Pakistan packing, and they did.

That is history, for you, for me, for all our children. You might as well remind yourself that it was the people who confronted the winds and the storms head on, eventually to give themselves a country they called -- and still call -- a people's republic. Nothing in life or in politics

can be more pleasing than being part of a state which owes its fundamentals to the people who constitute it.

In a people's republic, you have every right, based as it is on every and all moral considerations, to inform yourself that the people matter. That is where theory comes in. The practice of it, as you have recently had cause to know, is quite something else. When the police forced citizens to stay put on a particular road the other day, compelled them not to move at all or, in other words, told them to freeze in that American way of saying it, we realised yet once more how the people have progressively dwindled as a social force in this country.

The chief adviser of the caretaker government, said the law enforcers, was on his way from home to his office and so the road needed to be empty, absolutely foolproof. Not even the footbridges could be climbed. That attitude made hundreds of Higher Secondary Certificate examinees burst into tears, for they would be late for their examinations, on the other side of the road. Their parents remonstrated with the police. As always,

those policemen appeared keener on ensuring an empty road for a VVIP than on encouraging the young to move on and into their examination halls.

There is something of humiliation that is regularly being heaped on the people. If you have been to the airport here, to welcome a family member home or to bid him farewell, you will recall with a squeezing kind of pain the many and varied ways in which the people of Bangladesh are put in their places. Thousands of eyes peer through iron bars in the hope that a departing brother or an arriving father will be spotted from that long distance between the terminal building and the road.

There are the ubiquitous Ansar men whose clear responsibility appears to be to push people (and it does not matter to which class or category they belong) rudely out of the way. Rudeness is the grammar they employ in their language. At Zia airport, then, you come squarely up against symbols of everything that has been going wrong for the society you are so much a part of.

It is not like this at other airports around the world, for in those places

it is the people who remain recipients of dignity. Over there, the police will not force you off a vehicle at the approach to the airport even if you are accompanying your son to the departure area. Your peripatetic spouse may have several pieces of luggage she needs help with. So?

That stubborn law enforcer will enforce the law; one that you did not know existed, because it has just been put in place.

Owing to rumours that a former prime minister will leave the country, and so will her family, through that very airport, you must stay away from that airport. You as a citizen have ceased to matter. How much more laughable can things get?

You go into a coffee parlour in Banani for drinks and then re-emerge to discover that your chauffeur has been pushed into a distant alley only because a just departed prime minister will be using that road any moment now. If that is what a former head of government can do to you, imagine how much more a prime minister in office can do?

The people have, by and large, been at the receiving end of all that is negative and nerve-wracking in this

land. The street you are wont to pass through everyday on your way to and back from work is suddenly cordoned off, in that certain sense of the meaning, by a neighbour keen on replacing his parental two-storied home with a money-spinning apartment complex. And he has done that through dumping his construction materials along more than two-thirds of the street.

One man, it should be obvious to you, has opted to treat everyone else with cavalier disdain. As an individual, you are able to do nothing that will roll back this misery. On a collective level, you are likely not to be offered the cooperation of your community in dealing with that bad citizen who has appropriated a big chunk of a public road for himself, at least for some months.

There are other forms of insult we the people go through from day to terrible day in this land the constitution says is ours. Try recollecting the many times in which Bangladesh Biman has given a bad deal to the people of this country. Changes in flight schedules are not always brought to the notice of passengers. It becomes your job to call up flight inquiry, to be stunned into knowing that your flight is delayed by a goodly chunk of hours.

There is a problem with civility here. When a minister, a minister of state and their families can commandeer seats on an aircraft, thereby evicting the genuine holders of those seats, and come home with nary a thought to the misery they have put all those good people to, you are appalled. You do not have to be, for that is merely one of the ways in which the people are made to bite

the dust day after day.

It is, again, the people who become a huddled, frightened mass on the streets of the city once the police swing into action against political agitators. They club the agitators, and then haul many of these people, almost all of whom are innocent pedestrians caught in the crossfire, off to prison. It is the scarred, pained faces of their wives and children, all their hopes reduced to the minimal, that you spot at the prison gates the next morning, and for many mornings after.

It is the tired, frightened and sweaty profiles of poor rickshaw pullers you see outside a fenced in area where their three-wheeled vehicles have been brought in because, as the law enforcers say, their licences are invalid or forged. There is surely a case for the law here.

But where has the humanity in it gone missing? But, then again, when in a sovereign state of a hundred and forty million people you set aside roads that you pretentiously call VIP roads, you ought not to expect the humane to come into the behaviour of those who should have behaved better.

The people, ladies and gentlemen, bear every pain with admirable fortitude. There is a resilience in them that keeps them going through all the charlatanism and pretension around them. But must such demonstrations of patient suffering be taken advantage of, through the days and the months and the years?

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Who's suffocating: Politicians or people?



ABDULLAH A DEWAN

NO NONSENSE

It would be quite inexplicable if politicians, under the prevailing conditions, didn't feel suffocated. If I were in their shoes, perpetually fearful of being booked for extortion, corruption, or some other crime, I would certainly feel suffocated. My suffocation would become compounded if my sons or party cronies were imprisoned, and I was being investigated or sued for extortion. And my suffocation would take the form of "strangling" if I found myself being challenged for my own party's leadership position.

believes, but she never denounced "Baksal," and her alliance (before the January 22 defunct election) with Khelafat Majlis -- an ultra-religious rightist party -- is a clear manifestation of her hypocritical character.

Can Hasina restrain her propensity to make hypocritical statements? Perhaps she cannot, as there is scientific evidence correlating deceptive behaviour with leadership qualities. A 1993 study by Colgate University psychologist Caroline Keating found that the best liars among pre-school children emerge as liars during play periods.

With adults she found that "leaders are the best misleaders." A succession of philosophers, from Plato to Machiavelli to Disraeli, has observed that lying is a legitimate element of governing. Sissela Bok, a Harvard philosopher who has written extensively on the subject, said that politicians often claim an ethical basis for deliberately misleading the public.

Although Hasina's contentious rhetoric (May 19 interview with Sumon Chakrabarti of CNN-IBN) that the CTG is employing "delaying tactics" is baseless, her distrust of

the army-backed government (ABG) is a widely shared sentiment -- and a justifiable one, if the past military usurpers are any guide.

However, as I explicated more than once, this ABG is uniquely positioned, not for grabbing "political power" but for circumscribing the "political influence" of the elected government over the institutions of governance, such as the ACC, the police, Rab, NBR, PSC, EC, and the judiciary, through reforming their modus operandi.

Regrettably, it's no coincidence that a former premier who has no record of undertaking any notable reforms during her rule doesn't see much virtue in reforms that have already been accomplished by this ABG.

Election will be held no later than December 2008. Both Hasina and Khaleda can expedite the reform process by cooperating with the EC while keeping the pressure on the ABG to drive the engines of reforms, including the on-going crusade against corruption.

Hasina, at times, seems to mix up people with politicians and. Of course, the politicians are feeling

marginalized because they're being restrained from politicking. But there is absolutely no evidence that the people in general are longing for the return of hartals, lockouts and aburros (barricade) and country-wide blockade of highways and seaports. All available indications are that the ABG has given the people a breathing space that is free of the rancorous politics that shaped the pre-January 11 period.

No one disputes Hasina's love for the country and the people. That is true of Khaleda also. But their actions contradict their claims, possibly because their loyalty to the country is overshadowed by their allegiance to family and party members.

Khaleda agreed to leave the country if her sons were released from detention. To Khaleda, family comes first, party next and the country can go to the dogs, as it surely did. If her love for the country was more than it was for her family she couldn't have been persuaded to leave the country.

One senior BNP leader recently suggested that it was the "kitchen cabinet" -- not Khaleda -- which

should be responsible for the mistakes and oversights that occurred in her administration. Did the "kitchen cabinet" also advise Khaleda to overlook her family members' indulgence in the limitless looting of the country?

Politics in both AL and BNP are certainly dynastic -- no question about it. It's obvious in Khaleda's case. Hasina, to her credit, has been practicing dynastic politics differently -- but only in format. A law professor of Dhaka University observed that Hasina's son Joy is received at the airport by the AL standing committee and other members, a privilege reserved only for senior leaders. 24 nominations were accorded to her relatives in national elections, many of whom

had no political grooming or academic competence. What would you call this if not family politics?

Her kinship with party hooligans became so close that she, for example, gave nomination for the January 22 defunct election for a Feni constituency MP seat to the notorious Zainal Hazari's sister, a woman who possessed only a fifth grade education -- that is Hasina's sense and sensibility. There are numerous such examples in both AL and BNP. Therefore, for a healthy and sustainable democracy, and corruption diminished governance, there's no alternative to groundbreaking intra-party reforms.

The CEC, Shamsul Huda, accurately diagnosed the reason why political parties may be hesitant in introducing intra-party reforms

when he acknowledged that reforms are unpleasant as there are both, losers and gainers. I'd say that the losers are the ones who find ultimate comfort in political power -- they are the ones the ACC are looking for, and they're the ones the EC and political parties must disbar from the political realm.

To give some relief to the suffocating politicians, I'd recommend their inclusion in consultant positions now being contemplated both for giving some political quintessence of the ABG as well as political party participation in governance. This will also be a rewarding orientation for learning about efficient decision-making free of political pressure in a corruption-free setting.

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Silence is better

During the cold war, the words of US officials served to encourage Soviet bloc dissidents suffering imprisonment and torture. Now, US diplomats don't even have words of comfort to offer prisoners of conscience such as Egypt's Ayman Nour, or to supporters of the democratic opposition in Karachi who were killed by pro-government gunmen. Can't Mr. Ricciardone and Mr. Boucher at least keep quiet if strategic compulsions of the moment prevent them from speaking out in favour of tortured advocates of democracy?

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THE US government appears to have changed its course away from where it stood in November 2003. Then, in a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy (Ned) in Washington D.C., President George W. Bush promised an American "forward strategy" of promoting democracy in the greater Middle East. Now, the Iraq war seems to have sapped the Bush administration's

energies. Democracy has advanced very little in most Muslim countries over the last three years. But some US officials are choosing to shamefully redefine the authoritarian status quo as democracy and freedom.

The world is not perfect. Most of us understand the difficulties and limitations faced by the United States as the world's sole superpower. Notwithstanding perceptions to the contrary, the US does not control the world.

American leaders and officials must deal with constant divergence between their ideals and the strategic compulsions of the moment. Even then, US officials do not need to lie publicly in an effort to curry favour with authoritarian rulers useful for current American strategic objectives. Consider recent comments by the American ambassador in Egypt, Francis Ricciardone, and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher.

The ambassador's proclamation,

and his spokesman's description of a regime that arrests and tortures dissidents as reflecting progress are far from reality. Even the State Department's annual human rights report, prepared by its Democracy and Human Rights Bureau and released in March, pointed out that the Egyptian government's "respect for human rights remained poor, and serious abuses continued in many areas."

Ambassador Boucher's characterization of Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf is even worse. To say that the "Pakistani government is moving forward" so soon after the government-orchestrated massacre of opposition supporters in Karachi is nothing short of an insult to Pakistanis marching in the streets of the country's cities for rule of law and restoration of democracy.

Mr. Boucher tried to cover his

tracks by saying: "I recognize that tensions do exist" in Pakistan, but his bottom line was an unequivocal endorsement of a military regime that is clearly undoing whatever little good it might have done in the past seven years. An important question is why does Mr. Boucher feel compelled to praise a client regime at a time when its actions merit criticism, whether public or private?

If the purpose is to reassure General Musharraf that the United States is still with him even if the people of Pakistan are not, then that purpose is better served during private meetings. Why must Ambassador Boucher risk his credibility, and that of the US government, by saying on radio or television what is already being communicated to General Musharraf with large sums of money?

The Bush administration has already provided and budgeted \$ 5,174 billions in aid for General Musharraf's regime for the period 2001-2008. Some of this amount has admittedly gone towards projects benefiting the people. But an additional \$ 80 to 100 million is given each month as Coalition Support Funds, and the total under that head until August 2006 was over \$ 4 billion.

Ambassador Boucher's false praise for the teetering Pakistani government is unlikely to strengthen it.

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