

Reform drill and servile politics



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

The projected reforms would no doubt facilitate the cleaning of our polity but to shake off our crippling servility the national conscience has to be aroused to such a degree that it will cease to tolerate falsehood and dishonesty in public life. Let us remember that obedience to democratic values which is enforced by the national ethos and not by the machinery of criminal justice is our best guarantee of a clean public life.

THE recent spate of political reform-oriented activities should surprise all thinking people because it required a military-backed and allegedly non-representative government to awaken the mainstream political parties and make them realise the imperatives of reforms including party reforms.

While deliberating on democratic reforms or political party reforms, we should not be oblivious of the reality that instead of long-term institutional reforms everyone wants short-term gains. In our situation the best politicians are one who never says 'no' to his voters or friends.

Since there is hardly any distinction between public property and private gains and no effective system of accountability, our politicians have always been ready to dole out favours to their cronies and sometimes to the general public. This generosity at public expense is appreciated by all and sundry. Thus it does not strike anyone seeing people of good standing appreciating the large-heartedness of wily politicians and slippery bureaucrats.

We continue to suffer from a quick fix syndrome that is based upon wishful analysis. It is amazing how over-simplistic and phony solutions are offered, accepted and often implemented for complex social and economic problems. For example, increasing crime against property and social unrest is always treated as a law and order problem which can be dealt with more force and coercion. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many of our educated people believe that we can make our townships havens of peace by imposing Saudi-style stringent punishments.

Democratic and the political party reforms have not received the due attention because our political elite have not believed in the con-

cepts of modern governance. They did not think that a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary and more modern universities and colleges for social sciences, medicine and engineering were essential for building a democratic and progressive polity.

The striking irony of recent times is that the suspension of democratic activities following the change of 11th January last has actually resulted in the sharp awakening of the political conscience of the nation. A realisation has perhaps dawned that the people are the only keepers of the constitution and that at poll time they need to exact a heavy price from those who have been manifestly notorious by indulging in the worst of corrupt and undemocratic activities.

Many politicians including the party heads did not sound credible when they pointed to the paramount necessity of the holding of party council session for carrying out the proposed reforms. This is so because at least one major political party did not hold any council session for the last 12 to 14 years. In fact, major party decisions have been mostly influenced by the sycophants and the time-servers, the cringing and the craven.

It is to be hoped that the present government will enact such laws and take such executive action as are not meant merely to deal with the difficulties of the moment but calculated to ensure the good of the country in the long years ahead.

Though political party reforms are no less important, the caretaker government would be rendering a lasting national services by effecting badly needed electoral reform.

The nation needs to be salvaged

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from the cesspool of degradation to which professional politicians have reduced our country. By voting such politicians to power we have kept a gifted and enterprising nation in the ranks of the poorest on earth. The survival of such politicians as public figures depends upon the continuation of the forces of ignorance. For many of our party politicians, goody in girth, public deprivation is good business: they talk continually about poverty without having the will, the expertise or the imagination to eradicate it.

The time has come when our citizens must wrest the initiative from professional politicians and insist upon individuals of knowledge, vision and character being chosen as candidates for parliamentary election. Simultaneously, there is a deep-felt need for an intelligent and adequate organisation of voters. Equally important would be to cast off the shackles of political feudalism. We need to commence the process of transformation which would enable the people to control the government instead of being dominated and dragooned by the latter.

The projected reforms would no doubt facilitate the cleaning of our polity but to shake off our crippling servility the national conscience has to be aroused to such a degree that it will cease to tolerate falsehood and dishonesty in public life.

Let us remember that obedience to democratic values which is enforced by the national ethos and not by the machinery of criminal justice is our best guarantee of a clean public life. What we need urgently is a morally enthused political leadership which can really lead to higher standards of ethics and decency in public life.

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Politics, plunder and sovereignty



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

Only changes in the political parties' structures and rules would not be enough. The members of the political parties must bring in real changes in the mindset with open promise to the nation not to indulge in any corruption, muscle power, grabbing of others' properties etc. What is needed is complete overhauling of the political, administrative and business systems. Only then real democracy can return to the country.

facilitate their reform work.

What it means now is it has to be a joint a decision making process and revolving presidency within the political parties. Some of the issues are already on the table for discussion. One view is that the people involved in the party management and administration must not be in the government. This means if Madam and Apa remain chiefs of the respective parties, which seem rather difficult under the present political situation because of widespread allegations of corruption and mismanagement against them, they must not be in the government.

The word politics does not seem to be well defined in the dictionary. Encyclopedia Britannica says the word politics came from Greek word 'polis' meaning city or state; this means affairs relating to a city or state. But in Bangla the word politics means *Rajniti* which should normally mean *Nitis* – the norms and principles created and practised by the Rajas, (kings and emperors) for ruling the subjects under them. Such *Rajniti* cannot bring democracy which obviously means *Nitis* or principles followed by the people to rule or govern themselves. The suggestion is – we should consider changing the Bangla translation of politics from *Rajniti* to *Gononiti* or *Jononiti* and politicians *Gononitibor* or *Jononitibor*.

Political reforms
There must be extensive reform in our political system. Unfortunately, politics in Bangladesh has really been Madam or Apa *Rajniti* as the parties went by whatever Madam or Apa said. But now things are changing. Even within the parties the reform proposals are being put forward.

Envoy's role
The Election Commission has also been rightly insisting on reforms of the present politics for bringing in democracy within the political parties. Such reforms are necessary for the purpose of registration of the political parties. The commission has said that such reforms are to be done by the parties themselves. It goes without saying that it cannot be imposed from outside. However, some guidelines can be suggested to

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such comments in one of his remarks some time ago.

One newspaper (The Daily Star June 19, 07) reported – "US Envoy discourages forming political party 'under pressure'". She openly said, "I do not want to see anybody coerced or forced to join a new party and certainly we do not want to see any military involvement in politics... I have made this point before that military should not take any sort of political role." She talked in terms of – "I". This is never done by an accredited representative of a country. We as citizens would like to put a question – why should she say things that infringe the sovereignty of Bangladesh? Can an envoy of any country in Washington do that? Certainly not. An envoy representing a great country and the superpower like the USA should particularly observe the limits set by the international conventions.

Our military establishment already made its position clear. This came in the daily newspapers. Unfortunately, one or two more envoys also made some remarks on internal affairs that infringe the sovereignty of the country. Some of our politicians are also to partly blame. The envoys apparently do such things as some of our political leaders do to them and seek their help.

Even our media people are not supposed to ask the envoys to give their views openly on internal matters of the country as they are not entitled to talk openly on such matters through media. They can always talk about culture, traditions, history, environment and other international matters that concern our respective countries. They or any delegations of their countries can also hold press conference if it is a joint one with our officials on agreed matters.

It has also been observed that some of our Advisers and important institutions allow TV cameras to

cover their meetings with such envoys and foreign delegates. This should be discouraged as envoys often talk things which should not receive open publicity. This is particularly valid for our foreign office as it often deals with envoys or foreign representatives on very critical issues. It would be advisable to be less "visible" as they are not politicians. This is being raised here as many people have been criticising these matters.

Concluding remark

In any case, a clean environment has to be created before the election takes place. The Road Map has to be set by the CTG with clearly laid down time frame for the major works to be completed by all institutions and particularly by the Election Commission. Only then the goal can be achieved.

However, only changes in the political parties' structures and rules would not be enough. The members of the political parties must bring in real changes in the mind set with open promise to the nation not to indulge in any corruption, muscle power, grabbing of others' properties etc. Service to the people must be the only motto. If the politicians do not indulge in these anti-social activities, others including bureaucracy and business men would also not indulge in such activities.

What is needed is complete overhauling of the political, administrative and business systems. Only then real democracy can return to the country. It has to be done in such as transparent way which may oblige the Transparency International (TI) to pack up and go back to Berlin. That would indeed be the real achievement of the One Eleven.

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People's participation in budgeting: Why and how

KAM MORSHE

POSTING the proposed national budget of Bangladesh for 2007-2008 FY in websites for feedback is a remarkable move. Perhaps, this novel move aims to gather voluntary feedbacks from the people to compensate for the parliamentary debate and, hence, does not indicate a policy shift towards 'participatory budgeting'. However, as I would like to argue here, participatory budgeting can be a credible policy choice for Bangladesh. Specially in the backdrop of Bangladesh's anti-poor growth and current strife to fight corruption, participation has the potential to create a back-up, if not a better, conduit to assess citizens' concerns in a more tangible and transparent way.

As Joseph Schumpeter once pointed out, "the budget is the skeleton of the state stripped of all misleading ideologies". Yet, like in most of the countries, budgeting exercise in Bangladesh largely remains an exclusive domain of the bureaucrats and the technocrats. Although in post PRSP era, one can also discern positive trends spearheaded by new generation civil servants, there is still limited room for citizens' participation. Additionally, lack of capacities outside the public sector to inde-

pendently analyse the budget makes it difficult to utilise whatever room that exists. Nevertheless, applied budget groups are taking root in a broad set of countries. Budget groups are taking root despite extreme paucity of data, repressive regimes, extensive corruption and political turmoil.

Why participation is important?

Participation in budgeting provides an important opportunity for the commoners to translate their aspirations into actions. As it is argued by Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, citizen participation is a sine qua non for pro-poor policies; it is not an either/or choice. Indeed, the formulation, implementation and monitoring of a pro-poor budget should be participatory in a manner that is equal, inclusive and collegial (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN, 2005).

Government enjoys perfect monopoly in producing public goods. Thus, market mechanism cannot judge the quality and relevance of public goods, like national defence, primary education, etc. Yet, direct participation of the people can effectively address this issue.

Besides, poor people often have limited access to express their concerns through established

channels as, Arundhati Roy once indicated, it "offers us a very reduced political space". A direct link with grassroots and their representatives, hence, provides a useful opportunity to measure, in market jargon, the "client satisfaction".

In this context, direct citizen participation helps build trust and promote transparency in government actions. Significantly, both of these elements are vital for achieving the MDGs, especially poverty reduction.

Dimensions of participation

Participation in budgeting process has different qualifiers. In Bangladesh, where most revenue is generated at the centre, participants in local budgeting focus on expenditure to address local issue. In contrast, participants need to have a holistic picture of national goals and appreciation of the revenue issue for their participation in national budget.

Scope of participation in budget formulation vis-à-vis participation in providing feedbacks on a proposed budget varies significantly too.

Additionally, participatory monitoring of budget implementation calls for a higher degree of 'collaboration' than otherwise is required.

Last but not the least, degree of ownership of the stakeholders is poles apart when

participation is approved by a legal statute than when it is only voluntary participation by the citizen.

Bangladesh situation

Authorities meet and seek opinions of several large national stakeholder groups during budget formulation process. However, absence of established framework for incorporating concerns of these groups undermines the potential of these meetings. Additionally, traditionally marginalised groups like landless, women, youth groups, almost never get to meet with the authority.

After budget proposals are made, grassroots organisations with their limited capacity and access commonly remain silent. A few 'think tanks' and industry associations usually offer formal assessment of the proposal from their own stand point. These bodies mobilise media support to express concerns and changes, often successfully. Yet, in the absence of participatory monitoring, bureaucrats, in the past, exercised administrative instruments (e.g., SROs) freely to undo any changes.

Finally, though a recent trend, sometimes government engage with a small group of representatives from the civil society organisations to gather inputs for budgeting process. Considering that most of the opinions expressed by these groups is

actually incorporated in the budgets, these engagements are more productive but not particularly pro-poor.

Challenges of participation

The first challenge is lack of an institutional framework for participation. Line ministries may finalise respective budget strategies in consultation with people's representatives before forming their budget proposals. This can open up scope for more meaningful participation at the formulation stage. In this regard, capacity of each line ministry may be strengthened to link their proposal to larger poverty reduction strategies and MDGs. Once finalised, the proposal should be made available to all to promote policy debate.

Similarly, the newly setup Budget Analysis Unit (BAU) of Bangladesh National Parliament (BNS) can effectively facilitate participation of the grassroots in several ways. The unit can conduct sectoral and thematic analysis of budget and publish their findings in a way that is well understood by the grassroots. They can also coordinate among the Finance Division, National Board of Revenue and the Bangladesh Bank and the grassroots organisations and facilitate exchange of views. Additionally, the unit can also collate the opinion and concerns of these

organisations for the Members of Parliament. As the only legally mandated discussant group, strengthening the Members of Parliament with people's perspective would be vital.

Mechanisms may be established to ensure interaction between grassroots representatives and relevant parliamentary standing committees who oversee the monitoring and evaluation of budget implementation. Such interaction would necessarily promote ownership and transparency.

The other daunting challenge in ensuring people's participation is capacity. The Sirajganj model, an internationally acclaimed working model of enhancing capacity to participate in local budget, can be replicated more vigorously in this regard.

Both government and the development partners can undertake specific steps to build capacity of grassroots to participate in the national budget. Lessons learned from a very successful intervention in Ghana to build capacity among various stakeholders can be mentioned in this regard. In that particular case, multi-stakeholder partnership worked together to spur the development of requisite capacity in grassroots organisations.

Finally, steps are required to

bridge the capacity gaps of the national planners too. Inadequacy and inaccuracy of data, limitation of national statistical system, lack of tools to monitor impacts from a holistic height, and lack of coordination with the budget implementation agencies are some of the most damaging issues. Often, these limitations discourage the planners to engage into wider debates and discussions. Ongoing initiatives in this regard can be strengthened from 'participatory budgeting' angle too.

Conclusion

Although participatory budgeting is useful as a tool to promote political inclusion and social justice, it is no panacea. Participatory fiscal decision making needs openness and sincerity from the authorities. Governments can use and have used participatory budgeting to advance their own shady agenda by simply hiding key information'.

It is also important to carefully examine which organisations are participating. There was near consensus in the development community that it is possible for civil society to move budgets to a pro-poor position [World Development Report 2000]. However, the tone of the World Development Report 2004 was much less optimistic and

pointed out how civil society can turn into pressure group of the rich and the famous.

People's participation is not an alternative to good governance and responsive political system. Having a reliable conduit of participation can only strengthen the decision making process in the context of a democratic system that is responsive to its constituents. Otherwise, as experience shows, even the participation is 'hijacked' by 'the rich and the lobbyists' and offer little to the most (Stephen L. Esquith, 1997).

Bangladesh has taken great stride towards enhancing transparency and ensuring accountability of public institutions. Participation is one key element of this initiative to make it sustainable. The move to include people in the budgeting process, although limited, is a good start in the right direction. I hope such inclusion would not remain as an alternative strategy but would gradually evolve as a strategy to include alternatives.

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Overcoming poverty with microcredit

MANIK CHOWDHURY

MICROCREDIT is not the panacea for poverty eradication. There is no panacea as such. But microcredit is an effective tool for poverty alleviation. And of course there are other tools as such. But microcredit perhaps has proven itself more effective by now. Quite a few big and many small NGOs are active with their microcredit programme across the country. Not that they have turned each poor solvent, but their coverage of the poor is rising.

The initiator of microcredit, Nobel laureate Prof. Yunus has recently said that if we try hard we can make poverty a thing of the past. He is not too far from truth. If the existing microcredit activities can be ten times larger, the coverage of the poor can be ten times bigger, perhaps not far from covering all under poverty line.

Bangladesh is a country of more than 140 million and majority of them are poor. The population growth is still not under envisaged control and the number of poor people is of course rising. But the rate of coverage of the poor by microcredit activities (increase in the number of membership of NGO programmes) has been estimated as much higher than the rate of population growth. And their lies the point to be hopeful. More because there are so

many success stories of poor and ultra poor NGO programme members turning considerably solvent within not so considerable length of time.

For instance, very poor Tara Begum of Mirpur under Sirajganj Sadar thana has become quite solvent and now owns a microbus and eight rickshaws that fetch her a good amount every day. But eight years ago she was too poor to think of two square meals a day. Her husband Nannu Mia used to ply rented rickshaw in the town. But what he earned was hardly enough to buy basic food for the family, not to speak of other essentials, some days they passed on only one meal or no meal at all.

Both the husband and the wife were orphans. Tara Begum could read upto Class VIII at the orphanage. Nannu Mia couldn't have even that. They were poverty stricken much below the line. During such hard time, one day Tara Begum saw a lady persuading a neighbourhood woman, a poor housewife like her, to be a member of her savings group and take loan to do something and earn. Tara Begum also got inspired and consulting with husband became a member of ASA's savings group. It may be mentioned that the lady was an ASA staff.

Then began her struggle for freedom from poverty. She took a Tk 4000/- loan in the first instance and along with husband Jahangir Hossain started their bamboo craft business. She also took further loans step by step over the years and expanded