

No dialogue until parties reform?

EC's shifting positions perplexing

ELECTION Commissioner Sohul Hussain's statement that the EC will not engage in a dialogue with the political parties until intra-party reforms are carried out raises a very clear question: whether it is the commission's job to set its pace of work on the basis of what the parties undertake to do within or among themselves. Adding to the confusion is Election Commissioner Sakhawat Hossain's reported view that the EC is undecided about who to call in the parties to a dialogue. What the EC is expected to be doing here is send out letters to the parties at the level of general secretaries. Obviously, the EC will not be writing letters to politicians on an individual basis but to the office bearers of the parties. After they formally invite the parties to a dialogue the onus then is on the latter to send their representatives for talks with the EC.

In broad measure, the Election Commission appears to have made matters more difficult for itself and for the political parties, to say nothing of the questions it has raised in the public mind about its wavering policies. Indeed, there is an impression that it has been shifting the goal post at nearly every opportunity. In the early stages, Chief Election Commissioner A.T.M. Shamsul Huda went on record with his view that the ban on indoor politics ought to be lifted in order to allow the EC to get into discussions with the political parties. At one stage he went public with the statement that the commission would not request the government any more to lift the ban. Then came the time when the EC expected the parties to talk to it even within the ambit of the ban on indoor politics. It was at this point that the parties appeared clearly reluctant to sit with the EC without indoor politics being resumed. And now the EC has come forth with the precondition of internal party reforms being carried out before it will consent to talks with the parties. The dialogue plan thus seemed to come to naught.

The EC, in the broader national interest, ought to reconsider its latest stance. The reason is simple. Internal reforms happen to be a matter for the parties themselves. For the EC, the clear need is to focus on the electoral reforms it has placed on the anvil, a process with which the political parties would need to be associated though. Anything else on its part will amount to a sidetracking of the issues. In other words, the priorities should be clear for the Election Commission.

Declining RMG export

Heed the signals

A report appearing in a Bangla daily indicating a 30 percent decrease in the orders for Bangladeshi apparels reads disquieting. A whole range of events have combined to cause shrinkage in the demand of our readymade garments. Factors ranging from a mild winter in Europe to the US buyers spending less, to disturbances in Bangladesh, both in the garment sector and the political arena, have been responsible for this tumble. And we have been gradually losing some of our markets to the Chinese and Vietnamese manufacturers as a result.

We would like to believe that it is a temporary phenomenon, and as the president of the BGMEA has stated, the figures may move upward from the current month. In any case it has put us back by almost three months. There are, therefore, reasons to heed the warnings of those who advise that it was time we took note of the likely consequences of the downward trend.

Whatever may be the reason for the slide in the demand for our readymade garments, it is not an easy proposition to regain the lost market. While we have very little control on the weather conditions anywhere in the world, let alone in the countries we export our garments to, or to the spending propensity of the people of the importing countries, we can certainly make our products more competitive. One way of doing that is to ensure that the sector remains immune, to the extent possible, to any disturbances that hamper production. We have to make sure that the workers get the agreed minimum wage, and thus averting disorder in the garment industry. There are reportedly almost 400 factories that are yet to meet the commitment.

There is also the need to address the compliance issue, meeting the demands both in terms of quality as well as the welfare of the workers. Let's also not forget the fact that there has been a gradual increase in investment in this sector. There will be a lot at stake if the increased productive capacity of our garment sector cannot be utilised or our projected figure of almost 8-10 billion dollar RMG export by end 2007 cannot be met.



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

M AHBUBUR Rahman's decision to walk away from the position of chief prosecutor to the Anti-Corruption Commission certainly saves the country a whole lot of embarrassment. And, of course, it allows the ACC to claw back to the respectable perch it has generally enjoyed since Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and his team took over.

That a good scratch was caused to the reputation of the Commission through the appointment of Mahbubur Rahman is a truth which we all have known, and which the ACC and the rest of the government machinery have now acknowledged.

While Mahbubur Rahman's decision to quit will now give the ACC an opportunity to reclaim the moral space it had lost by appointing the elderly lawyer and politician as its chief prosecutor, it is nevertheless to be pointed out that appointments of such serious note and intent must be based on a thorough background check of the individuals being considered for the jobs in question. Obviously, Mahbubur Rahman's political antecedents were not looked into, or were looked over with less than seriousness, when his name came up for consid-

eration. It was a failing that ought not to have happened.

The reputation of the Anti-Corruption Commission matters, and matters absolutely. Having observed the ineffectual nature of the old Bureau of Anti-Corruption, as also the workings of the ACC as it operated under the cantankerous team that Mashhud Chowdhury and his men replaced, it hardly needs to be said that greater attention to detail is called for by the present set of men who preside over it.

Its emphasis on probity and on a strict enforcement of the law, as also the moral principles, which ought to come into the workings of the state, is a point that cannot be lost sight of. One way of ensuring that is through making sure that those under suspicion, or weighed down by allegations of corruption and other forms of crime, do not manage to flee the country.

Unfortunately, though, there have been instances when quite a few major figures accused of crime (and they have since been tried in absentia and sentenced) have managed to make their way out of the country.

How they came to do that, and who helped them in taking flight, are

matters that the ACC must deal with in the public interest.

Those complicit in the criminality indulged in by such men, as also those who helped give them safe conduct out of the country, should also be brought under the net and made to face the law. In this instance, it becomes important for the ACC to inquire into the matter of how a former political secretary to the former prime minister as well as a former minister have disappeared, and no one appears to know where they happen to be at present.

Much a similar case happens to define the matter of a former minister of state for education who, despite repeated summons by the ACC, has chosen not to present himself before the body with a statement of his assets. Now that a notice relating to his acquisition of property has been attached to his home, it must be followed by a concerted search for the man.

No one will take issue with the thought that the Anti-Corruption Commission has a huge load on its hands, which is surely why it has gone into the job of appointing a panel of celebrity lawyers to defend the cases it brings against those it

accuses of wrongdoing. Here, too, comes the question of the mechanism under which these lawyers, most of whom have their particular political affiliations or inclinations, will take up the ACC's cause.

One of the lawyers on the ACC panel has already sounded the caveat that should corruption cases be filed against former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, he will opt to defend her. That is perfectly all right, and the lawyer here is absolutely within his rights to be beside an individual whose interests he feels ought to be defended by him and people like him.

But now comes the question of the moral dilemma that some, if not all, of these lawyers will face once the trials of the high profile politicians now in custody are set in motion. Such a query arises for a very particular reason: if any of these lawyers feels that the aim of a corruption charge is little more than harassment of a political figure, how will he be expected to carry himself? The response will be nothing short of complicated.

A fine line might threaten to demarcate corruption charges from what could seem to be political

cases. Owing to such probable threats arising in the weeks and months ahead, it will be the job of the ACC to reassure the country that its stated goal remains a purposeful handling of corruption, and within that ambit of activity it will, even as it goes strongly after the corrupt men and women of this land, ensure that those it has targeted are provided with the legal opportunities of defending themselves through to the end.

In the days and weeks ahead, the Anti-Corruption Commission will be expected to go earnestly into investigating the case of a powerful former minister whose home has allegedly undergone a beautification programme per courtesy of the government exchequer. The tale of trees, tubewells and the like, all of which were allegedly put in place through means patently foul, calls for swift action on the part of the ACC. The sooner such action is taken the better will it be for the country, for it will serve as one more shot in the arm for the anti-corruption watchdog.

There are other areas where the ACC needs to move in, seriously and fast. The scandal relating to the plunder of forests has now widened to bring under suspicion a former adviser and a serving senior bureaucrat. To what extent investigations are being carried out about their role in the whole sordid episode, and what action is being planned against them, is what the country would like to know.

Corruption, be it noted, has dug deep roots in the bureaucracy. In its most recent list of the corrupt, the ACC has named quite a few government officials. But that is merely a tip of the iceberg. There are hordes of others who have amassed huge

fortune in the last many years. Definitive and decisive action is called for against these individuals who have betrayed the nation's trust.

There are, too, those members of the medical community whose professionalism has been undermined by their propensity to engage in corruption. The commercialisation of medical treatment through charging exorbitant fees from patients is just another instance of corruption that needs serious handling. Will the Anti-Corruption Commission be inclined, at some stage, to dealing with these men who have undermined their reputation through their questionable behaviour?

These are critical times, sensitive times, that we are wading through. And yet, where corruption is the demon to be tackled, no moment could be better, no phase in our social history could be more appealing, more opportune than the difficult era we happen to be passing through.

Handling corrupt politicians, penalising unethical businessmen, taking to task dishonest academics, journalists, bureaucrats, policemen, et al -- all of these stand a good chance of being undertaken and seen through to the end in these times. At the end of it all, it is an Anti-Corruption Commission that stays assertive and independent, is able to enforce its decisions and will, in future, be in a position to keep every government on its toes and every individual conscious of the law, that we look forward to, in that very broad and purposeful sense of the meaning.

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Shame



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R EFERRING to BNP-Jamaat's free-for-party loyalists' impudent corruption and looting of state properties and assets, Maulana Obaidul Haque, in his Friday khutba deliberations at the Baitul Mukarram mosque, pronounced the most amusing words yet. He said that the corrupt and the wrongdoers languishing in prisons think that their "honour" is still unblemished because they have been assigned "division" in the prison. After chuckling for a few seconds, I genuinely felt that the words "shame" and "honour" have deeper-felt implications than I had first realized.

Indeed, there is sobering confirmation everywhere for those who believe that our leading politicians are utterly without shame. People are no longer asking: "How could they be so shameless?" Instead, people are questioning their very upbringing, and wondering if their parents and teachers had failed to imbue them with moral values.

Nowadays, shame -- or the lack of it -- figures everywhere in most discourses of morality in Bangladesh. It's in the background,

NO NONSENSE

These politicians-cum-looters are disposed to believe that "if you're a reformer you will be a free rider." This has generated some concern that the authorities may be duped into selective punishment of the guilty and the culpable. The government must show that any such misperception of its actions is merely an appearance, and not a manifestation of a new -- and perhaps more insidious -- culture of power corruption. Otherwise, it won't be the herald of a new era in our politics; only a new player in our merry-go-round circles of shame.

mostly because we've exhausted the language to discuss shame openly, even as we debate issues that center on it.

Dr. Kamal Hossain's apology to the nation for his long association with the debauched politicians was gracious, but it's "too little and too late." Too little, because no one else has followed his trail; too late because the damage cannot be repaired until all the accomplices in Ershad, Khaleda, and Hasina's misrule and depravities are driven out of politics.

With few exceptions, the politicians of the pre-1/11 emergency can be dubbed a clique of people whose penchant for opportunism, self-service and self-promotion cannot be rivaled. The entrenched mind-set of these people is one of entitlement, privilege, and winning election at all costs. Doing away with entitlements and scaling down the perks and perquisites may be a way of dissuading these wheelers and dealers from remaining in the realm of politics.

In the American Journal of Psychotherapy (July 1981), E. Messner wrote: "Observations by a psychoanalyst who has served as an

elected public official reveal that exposure to conflicting demands from constituents may arouse a sense of depletion."

Add to this the ceaseless pressure from family members to live beyond their means. These propel an individual towards feelings of entitlement and self-indulgent behaviour -- a possible precursor to all forms of malfeasance. Messner prescribed preventive and therapeutic interventions for these deranged people.

Dov Cohen's article, "American national conversion about shame -- everything but (Journal of Social Research, winter 2003)" argues, "Symptomatic of our loss of vocabulary in dealing with shame is its murky definition. The Four Horsemen of Abasement are shame, guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation." Cohen elucidates:

- Shame is distinguished from the other three because it's a feeling that one's failings (especially one's moral failings) are, or would be, viewed by others with disdain.
- Shame is distinguished from guilt because guilt involves self-recrimination. With the burden of

guilt, we're our own judge, jury, and executioner for our moral failings.

• Shame is distinguished from embarrassment because embarrassment is something that ensues from trivial offenses.

- Finally, shame is distinguished from humiliation in one very important way. Humiliation entails a collapse of pretenses; it illustrates that the self isn't what it was pretending to be. It is, therefore, less about moral failings or failings in basic human competencies, and more about being put down or cut down to size.

To comprehend shame fully, one needs to highlight two other attributes: Honour and self-esteem. Obviously, honour and shame are opposites. Honour implies status and reputation of a person in the eyes of his or her peers, and is accorded by a reputation for good moral character.

Shame and self-esteem are completely different traits, because the "self is both, the one that's being esteemed and the one doing the esteeming." Hypothetically, no one else needs to be involved in one's

Give credit or not, the Four Horsemen of Abasement identified with our corrupt politicians and public servants wouldn't have surfaced without the patriotic army's intervention on 1/11, and the immediate crusade against corruption.

However, all the laudable reforms the government has consummated so far will fade from memory because of a few failings and indifferences. The government is increasingly finding itself under the international microscope for allegedly holding nearly a quarter of a million citizens without due legal process.

The governments claim of even-handedness is also being seriously questioned, when numerous corrupt millionaires are roaming around freely and maneuvering the political process system in the guise of reformist politicians.

These politicians-cum-looters are disposed to believe that "if you're a reformer you will be a free rider." This has generated some concern that the authorities may be duped into selective punishment of the guilty and the culpable.

The government must show that any such misperception of its actions is merely an appearance, and not a manifestation of a new -- and perhaps more insidious -- culture of power corruption. Otherwise, it won't be the herald of a new era in our politics; only a new player in our merry-go-round circles of shame.

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