

Role of the intelligence agencies

Need for reform to address contemporary challenges

SHAIKH Hasina's critique on the role of intelligence agencies notwithstanding, we would like to take an overview of the tasks such agencies ought to be performing given their legal duties and responsibilities.

Needless to say, the functioning of any state agency, not to speak of the intelligence agencies, is governed by the Constitution and the law with the term of reference clearly spelt out. We cannot overlook the fact that their input is extremely important in determining national policies that go to uphold national interest by ensuring the nation's security.

Unfortunately, national interest came only second to partisan interest during last 15 years of elected government. It is not only during the military and quasi-military rule that the intelligence agencies were used to prop up the regime that enjoyed very little public support, the distressing aspect is that popularly elected governments could not resist the temptation either of employing these agencies to steal a march on the political opponents or harassing them to put them on the back foot. In fact misuse of intelligence resources was quite blatant during the last decade and half of BNP and AL rule. Some of the agencies were made to work almost like a party apparatus, and used in the most opportunistic manner. This has been more evident in the case of agencies like the NSI and SB. The consequence was the dilution of national security, something that became only too evident when the perpetrators of the simultaneous bombings in Aug 2005 got away scot-free after the act. However, there are glaring instances too of the use of the forces intelligence, that being under the PM who happened to be the defence minister also, to chastise political opponents or 'bring them in line.'

Intelligence agencies created to serve the paramount security interests of the country have onerous responsibilities in today's world to protect the nation from different forms of threats of subversion, both international and internal. So the imperative need for not only enhancing their professional capabilities but also they are required to be fully depoliticised in their day to day operations. During the time when there is so much talk of political and systemic reforms it is time we considered bringing appropriate reforms that would insulate the agencies from all forms of pressure, especially partisan, and allow them to fulfill their national obligations.

Rescue of Danida official

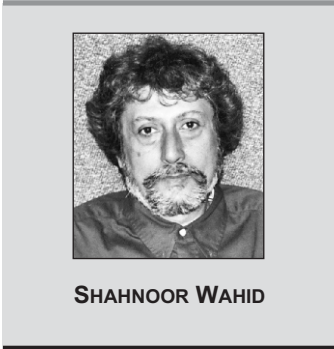
BDR men are deserving of praise

THE rescue of kidnapped Danida official Shahid Sumon by the Bangladesh Rifles from a remote location in Thanchi upazila on Sunday causes a sense of relief everywhere, especially within his family. At a point when many had already given him up for lost, not merely because of the two weeks spent looking for him but also because of the difficult terrain through which he was constantly being moved by his abductors, his return to normal life will surely be regarded as a miracle in a country where the missing hardly ever come back to their families. In this instance, the abduction and subsequent murder of Chittagong businessman and politician Jamaluddin Chowdhury are a reality we as a society cannot get over any time soon.

It must be noted here that the strenuous, unceasing efforts put into the search for Shahid Suman by the BDR, whose men earlier recovered his driver, are truly commendable. The men in the BDR patrol worked day and night, through the hard terrain made worse by the weather, in their efforts to find the Danida official. For two whole weeks, in the same attire and without any chance of relief or rest, these men scoured the entire region around Bandarban. They would not give up, until they found the spot where they believed the kidnapped man was being held by his abductors. It was their persistence that paid off. The kidnappers, leaving a hapless, nearly devastated Sumon to be recovered, fled the scene.

Now that the BDR men have done their job, it remains for the authorities to zero in on the disparate elements allegedly involved in such criminal acts as kidnapping and murder in the south-eastern hilly region of the country. Such an operation could begin by a serious attempt to nab the kidnappers of Shahid Sumon. Let the operation then be expanded to include those who have kidnapped people earlier and bringing them to justice.

The vortex of lies and denial



SHAHNOOR WAHID

LYING is a magnificent art only when one can get away by saying one. But most of us are not deft liars. For example, we try to smuggle out a bottle of whiskey from a friend's house and then get caught by the police on the road. We try to lie about it by saying it's for mother. We then make attempts to strike a deal with a silly smile on our face. The eventuality is preordained.

A kurukshetra begins at home when a strand of long black hair is discovered on the collar, and we try to lie about it in a most clumsy fashion. Here again men have been so unsuccessful throughout the centuries in coming up with a great convincing act. In the political front, our great "leaders" who have been showing their pompous finger at us for so many years have

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Separating their half-truths from the lies, or vice versa, often seemed like a Sisyphean task for commoners like us. Is he telling the truth? Is she lying? Why is he denying everything now? Such questions clouded our minds as soon as these people opened their mouths. By doing so they have committed acts of misdemeanor and, at the same time, demeaned the institutions they represented.

set the example of lying-to-jail comic act for their dedicated followers to emulate in future.

For such poor liars, wise men of the past have said many interesting things that are worth reproducing here to substantiate this article. For example, way back in time Greek sage and scholar, Aristotle, warned: "The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold." Meaning, one lie will lead to another. The chap with the long black hair on his collar will be able to elaborate on this point.

Abraham Lincoln said: "No man has a good enough memory to make a successful liar." So, future liars, do not rely too much on your memory while lying. And here is what Thomas Carlyle had to say about the liars: "Make yourself an honest man, and then you may be sure there is one less rascal in the

world." A bit hard on the glib liars isn't it? Can we get away by saying a half truth? No way. Listen to what an old Yiddish proverb says: "A half-truth is a whole lie."

Let us sum up this journey into the realm of truth and half truth by quoting from the greatest short story writer, O. Henry: "There is no well-defined boundary between honesty and dishonesty. The frontiers of one blend with the outside limits of the other, and he who attempts to tread this dangerous ground may be sometimes in one domain and sometimes in the other."

Let us now come back to the real world. Since January this year, and since many episodes of incredible events happening in quick succession, we have been getting caught between lies, half-truths and denials coming from

questionable people occupying respectable positions, such as prime minister, minister, judge, lawyer, university professor, college teacher, high government official and so on.

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Backtrack a little. Respectable judges behaved and performed in a shameful way to hold on to positions of power. They worked at the beck and call of some corrupt politicians, but denied it at every

opportunity. The EC is the best example of this drama. Then we have seen the free-for-all spree of corruption going on in the PSC. Here again, we have seen how educated people resorted to lying and telling half-truths. In the law ministry the "anointed one" sat there for the last five years with a copy of the constitution under his armpit, scripting the acts of the drama staged outside. But he never said anything straight. For five years he smiled his way out of trouble. But he could not go any further in the end.

Then came the turn of the plunderers and looters. Once apprehended, the looters had stories to tell about the 300 crore, 500 crore, 1000 crore in banks, Hummer, Lexus and Prado in the garage, tons and tons of corrugated tin in ponds, bottles of foreign liquor in bedroom, 130 flats in Dhaka, numerous flats in Dubai, Malaysia, London and New York, acres and acres of land throughout the country (100 acres acquired for Tk. 500 only!), numerous TV channels/newspapers, and so on. Everyone claimed to be telling the truth until the "real" truth came out, just as the one crore Taka in cash popped out from inside the mattress of the chief conservator of

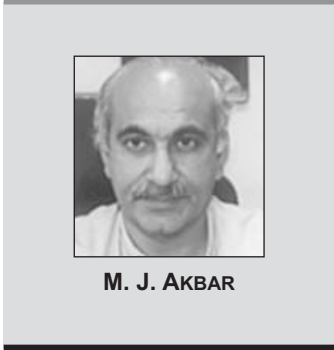
forests.

Today, the nation is caught in a vortex of lies and denial. Whom to believe really? Can anyone blame the commoners for having lost faith in the "talkative" leaders who are in denying mode today? But aren't they the same people who had taken the country to the edge of the precipice? Aren't they the same people who had told us that great progress was being made in the "dialogue?" Didn't they tell us every month that electricity would be available in plenty the next month? But everything turned out to be a rude joke on the people.

But what surprises and angers us most is that none of the leaders has ever apologized for the wholesale plundering of national wealth by his/her party men! The denial mode is glaringly obvious even behind the tinted sunglasses. The arrogance embedded in the voice and body language totally betrays any trace of remorse for the anti-people activities of the party, therefore, can we trust people having no worthy antecedents with state power? Shouldn't we look for better ones?

Shahnoor Wahid is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Gordon's knot



M. J. AKBAR

ON the evening of July 5, with the unerring instinct of an ass, I missed a great opportunity to become a sycophant of the new British prime minister Gordon Brown. We were at the summer party of the Spectator in the garden of their new offices in London. There had been an unfamiliar stiffness at the entrance as invitation cards were checked, double-checked and ticked off in the manner of a functioning police station, but once inside it was again very British and very jolly. A very British fellow guest, upon being introduced, welcomed me to the Mad Mullah side of the fence, and then described how his daughter had been converted to Islam. Apparently, her maternal grandfather, a Muslim, had picked her up when she was born and whispered a prayer in her ear before he, a fulltime agnostic like most other Londoners, could do anything about it.

I escaped to the back of the garden, away from such moral dilemmas, to chat with old journalist friends, when a small gate near the hedge opened. Gordon Brown strode in without fuss, and made straight for our group to greet my columnist friends. Here is what I

BYLINE

Gordon Brown used the word "change" eight times in the short speech he made the day he became prime minister. It is already evident what he meant. It is not simply the fact that he has created a cabinet of young people who would probably not be considered old enough to lead the youth wings of Indian political parties (the new foreign secretary is only 41 years old, and certainly got his job as much for his youth as for the fact that he was publicly critical of Blair's warmongering).

wanted, very sincerely, to tell the new Prime Minister of Britain. "May I, Prime Minister, use the opportunity of this accidental meeting to say how relieved most of us are at the quiet, efficient, unfussy manner with which you have handled the terrorist attack at Glasgow airport. You refused to make political capital out of this nasty business. You set the tone for London and your country with your calm, reminding us that 'phlegmatic' is a British rather an English word. Within three days you actually reduced the threat perception level, rather than pushing it up further. This may not seem very much, but the rest of us, particularly in the Muslim world, have seen how your predecessor, the unsurpassed drama queen Tony Blair, flooded every television channel with his quivering lip. Blair would have probably banned all transatlantic flights from Scotland, rushed across to visit George Bush, and prohibited all carry-on luggage on every plane by now, even while his home secretary debated the merits of more legislation to curb British freedoms."

In my imagination I see Gordon Brown listening intently, if modestly, to this fulsome praise, his eyes lighting up only once, at the

description of Blair as a drama queen, then summoning the aide lurking pretty obviously two steps behind him, and asking him to take my mobile number so that he could sip at the fount of my genuflecting wisdom for the rest of his decade as prime minister.

Alas, the truth is different. I was more or less a silent bystander, not because I am tight-lipped by temperament, but because I had absolutely no clue to the subject they were discussing. What do the high and mighty ask a prime minister at a social gathering? It would clearly be crass to discuss policy or war. They discussed the comparative merits of 11 Downing Street, Brown's home as chancellor of exchequer for ten years, and 10 Downing Street, the famous official residence of British prime ministers. I know now, from the sidelines, that No. 10 has an extraordinary number of rooms behind that unassuming, even deceptively quiet, facade. Had Brown actually moved in yet, despite being PM for a week? No, not yet.

My cue to butt in. "You aren't waiting until you've been properly elected, are you?" I suggested gingerly.

Over a lifetime of journalism, I

have experienced my share of dirty looks. This one was brief, very brief, but unmistakable. And a few seconds later Prime Minister Brown had moved on to a more salubrious group.

For those who might miss the point, Brown is a bit touchy about the fact that he has become PM through a mechanism of the House of Commons and the Labour Party, rather than the morally proper process of a general election. Be that as it may, let it not be said that a mere, fleeting, dirty look put me off my admiration.

Within a week of being in office, Brown has altered the culture of power beyond recognition. I am writing this column on July 7, the anniversary of the horrific London bombings that left 52 dead in underground trains, and shattered a nation's nerves. Brown remembered that moment with dignity and calm, recalling the pain of families who had lost their loved ones and reaffirming national resolve, without stopping traffic or massaging tears. The clever manipulation of pseudo-hysteria, always carefully monitored to remain below the top rather than go over it, the continuous mobilisation of spin doctors and media hype, has suddenly vanished like

a punctured bubble.

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Where is Tony Blair? No one vanishes faster than yesterday's prime minister. After a decade of media dominance, he is nowhere. He can be glimpsed occasionally, bland and uncertain, lost in the withering fire of drawing room jokes. But you can still gauge the success of his extraordinary media management skills. Most people in Britain remain convinced that he is the new Peace Czar of the Middle East, even though both the White House and the European Union (more gently) have clarified that peace talks are outside his mandate, and that his only job is really as the new fund collector for Palestinian institutions.

Gordonian sobriety is certainly good governance, but does it also make for good politics? Blairite

hype may be distasteful to columnists who do not have to get elected, but it won Blair and Labour three general elections. You do not argue with such a rate of success.

The answer to such a question is not available in the murky logic of an opinion, or the opaque density of a government position. It can only be found through a general election. One of the finer points of British democracy draws a distinction between legality and legitimacy. Brown became prime minister through the support of Labour MPs. That is perfectly legal. But his tenure at 10, Downing Street will not become legitimate until it has been endorsed by the British electorate. It is Brown's decision as to when he takes the legitimacy test. Some are urging that he go for an election as early as in October, particularly since he has a bounce that has taken Labour once again ahead of the Conservatives. That must be a hard call. When you have waited ten years to become PM you want to savour a little more of the satisfaction before risking a gamble. No matter what opinion polls might say, every politician knows that every election is a gamble.

Democracy is a huge casino. But that gamble is compulsory, not optional.

Gordon Brown will shift, in his mind and his heart, from No. 11 Downing Street to No. 10 only after the results of that gamble are known.

M. J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Reform: The undiscovered country



HARUN UR RASHID

IT appears that our top political leaders have entered an unknown and uncharted phase of their careers in undertaking reform of their political parties. That is why, it seems, each one has reacted differently.

Some top leaders had, at first, rejected the necessity of political reform, imagining that their undisputed powers would continue, and because they thought that it would mean their departure from politics.

The top leaders appear to think that they are saviours of political parties in difficult days, and have ruled and will rule the country through some kind of medieval theory of "Divine Right" of dynastic heritage.

BOTTOM LINE

Political leaders may have a hard look into the matter of reforms in political parties, and how to dissociate the parties with known or perceived corrupt politicians, young or old. They may bring in honest and dedicated politicians and rejuvenate the party. Politics is the highest call of service to people. The nation needs good, honest and committed people, for whom power is a vehicle for serving the common people.

Although there is no barring of relatives of leaders to get involved in politics, one must climb a ladder to a higher party position. One cannot "hop-step-jump" to a top position of a party just because one belongs to the family of the top party leader.

As a moral example, a chairperson of a party/prime minister must accept the responsibility for the good or bad things during her/his tenure, and denying it would make the case worse. As a prime minister, she enjoyed all the perks and facilities at public expense, so there should be acceptance of responsibility to the public, which is the norm in democracy.

Many of the leaders took the ordinary Bangladeshi people for a joy-ride, in which they believed that

rampant corruption and politics were tolerated in a country where an individual could turn into a millionaire by entering politics. Politics became the best investment in the country.

Politicians seem to be oblivious to the fact that people in the countryside may be illiterate, but are worldly "educated" and that they have witnessed the politicians' game of power, corruption, and use of muscle power in the name of pseudo-democracy since 1991.

US President Abraham Lincoln once said: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time; but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time."

The crunch time came on January 11 this year. Political lead-

ers did not initially understand what they had landed into. Soon, suspected corrupt leaders were arrested and are now behind bars, awaiting trial. The arresting of some leaders of major political parties has surprised people, because they had always talked about their service to the people.

What is extraordinary is that some of the leaders believed that if they were arrested massive protests would pour onto the streets. When they found that they were alone and that their game was up, it was to their severe disappointment.

Against this background, there are statements from the civil society, the people, and many suppressed but otherwise vocal leaders of major political leaders, that political reforms are imperative for restoring

the people's trust and confidence in political leaders.

Political leaders are high-profile persons in all countries, and their activities are always under the sharp gaze of the public and the media. In democratic countries, when the media writes something negative about their actions, they tend to take note of the views and attempt to modify or correct their actions. After all, the media is the mirror of the society and reflects the pulse of the people.

The role of the media was misunderstood in Bangladesh, and many political leaders blamed them. The more a political leader became critical about the media, the more recognition that person got from the top leader. The conduct of many leaders with the media is like shooting the messenger without looking at the message.

Nature of reform

Civil society has been reiterating the nature of political reforms, and the media has given it wide publicity. The Election Commission has circulated a paper on electoral reforms, yet some top leaders remain confused about reforms.

The bottom line of political

reforms is simply that concentration of powers with the party leader must go. Whatever decision the top leader takes must be a joint, or consensus, decision. There must be adequate checks and balances within the party organisation.

Other reforms suggested by the civil society include:

- Intra-party democratic way of choosing leaders of the working committee or council. No nominated persons can be placed in these vital bodies.
- Suspected corrupt leaders are to be dissociated from the party, however unpalatable the decision might be.
- Wealth statements may be made mandatory in fighting corruption among political leaders. They must declare their wealth statement before occupying a ministerial or government position, and when they leave office.
- There exists a large number of non-corrupt people in major political parties. They should be given recognition and their due role in the higher echelons of the party.
- Funds and expenditures of the party are to be made transparent, and be audited by compe-

tent auditing firms.

- Donations from business people or organizations must be made transparent, because they do not give donations for love of a party, as there is a saying there is "no free lunch" these days.
- Limit the tenure of chairperson or prime minister to two terms, so that others get a chance, and apply them to existing chairperson/prime ministers.
- Easy mechanisms for removal of the chairperson by the party members must exist in the party constitution.
- Separate the party from the government. The government must be accountable to parliamentary party members.

Reforms so far

Major political parties are also undertaking reforms, often leading to splitting of parties on the basis of individuals. One or two new political parties are being organized with honest politicians.

On May 25, the BNP secretary general unveiled a 15-point plan of reforms of his party, that is likely to end the power of the chairperson, if approved. The chairperson of BNP reportedly expressed reservations on such reforms on the ground that

they were inconsistent with the party constitution. She, reportedly, will present her own reforms.

Some of the AL senior leaders have their own proposals for reforms in the party, and have begun to present them to the media. Many of their reforms are common, and could be a basis of reforms of AL. The chairperson of AL is also presenting her plan of reforms.

The proposals of various leaders manifest only one thing -- there is no unity.

In the light of the above paragraphs, political leaders may have a hard look into the matter of reforms in political parties, and how to dissociate the parties with known or perceived corrupt politicians, young or old. They may bring in honest and dedicated politicians and rejuvenate the party.

Politics is the highest call of service to people. The nation needs good, honest and committed people, for whom power is a vehicle for serving the common people.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.