

Strengthening local government

Key to development & good governance

We note with satisfaction that the chief adviser (CA) of the caretaker government has asked an expert committee to put forward recommendations for recasting the country's local government institutions so that they may serve the people at the grassroots level better.

The seven-member expert committee on "Accelerating and Strengthening Local Government Institutions" reportedly made a presentation before the CA to this effect. We understand issues like building a time-befitting organisational structure, source of income, ways to increase revenue earning, autonomy of local government institutions, relation with local members of parliament, empowerment of women in local government institutions, setting criteria for candidates for election, structural reforms to ensure accountability of the elected representatives, determining needs of 'Gram Sarker' to ensure effective participation of people, and account and management system of the institutions will be given top priority while making the recommendations. And it is heartening to learn that the CA has shown his interest in doing something immediately once the recommendations are placed before him.

Notwithstanding the urgency of the matter, the issue of strengthening the local government for effective administration at grassroots level has been kept in the cold storage by all the previous governments. This was done deliberately so that the local MPs could manipulate all developmental works, control funds, appointments, transfers, relief distribution etc., through their supporters in collaboration with a section of corrupt government officials. Consequently, in the absence of accountability and transparency, the people's representatives not only misused government funds and relief materials, they also created and sustained rings of corruption in the area to perpetuate their sway.

Against such a bleak background, we believe the intended reforms of the local government institutions will go a long way to ensure development and good governance in the country. Powerful and autonomous local governments will have the freedom to prepare their own developmental agenda, set priorities, make financial proposals and follow-up with the government on its own terms. Once the institutions are sufficiently strengthened, governance at the local level will become transparent with the spontaneous participation of the people. We hope the CA will move quickly to take up an action plan once the recommendations reach his table.

Unauthorised recruitment

University authorities can't flout rules

TWELVE public universities in the country have appointed 2,000 teachers and employees without due approval from the University Grants Commission (UGC), which means an annual financial burden of Tk 16 crore on the universities.

This is an example of how public universities are being run these days. It seems the universities have not shown any sensitivity towards rules and regulations while introducing recurring expenditures like payment of salaries without the UGC's approval.

The fact that most of the unapproved appointments were made during the last year of the immediate past government points to political considerations influencing the whole process. Widespread politicisation of all important institutions has had a debilitating effect on every sphere of our national life. Such politicisation has a lot to do with rampant corruption. But the saddest part of the story is that even the highest seats of learning like the universities have not been spared by the politically motivated elements who were out to grab everything that came their way.

There is no denying that when a university teacher is appointed only due to her/his political connections, the whole concept of education standard is compromised.

The universities are showing all the signs of malfunctioning or coming under the evil spell of political activists who could not see anything beyond their own self-aggrandizement. We have come to learn about fake mark sheets, certificates and what not! Such fake things cannot but lower the standing of the universities in the public eye. Now the report that the university authorities have been following, in a good number of cases, an unauthorised recruitment policy will further corroborate the widely held view that even the arena of higher education has been vitiated by petty individual or party interests. How else could we explain the deviation from set rules and regulations? Obviously, there may be a few cases of recruitment that could not wait for the UGC's approval. But the university authorities should have got everything approved and regularised before any question could be raised regarding the legitimacy of their actions.

The UGC has to investigate the matter with a view to setting things right in the recruitment of university teachers and employees.

Film festival focuses on plight of refugees

CLOSEUP JAPAN

Arts and entertainments always serve as a powerful medium to create a better understanding of what is happening around us, and the Refugee Film Festival simply intends to use that medium to make our world a bit more tolerant place for each and every individual.

MONZURUL HUA writes from Tokyo

THE world is witnessing a disturbing trend of people being uprooted from their homes and forced to flee for fear of their lives. Less than two decades ago, when the Berlin wall had shown the first signs of crack as the wind of Glasnost was sweeping through the former Soviet Union, there were growing hope and optimism all over the world that our mother earth was probably at the long last heading towards a desired goal when tolerance would prevail and people would no longer be uprooted forcefully from the places where their roots go deep beneath.

As a result, many around the

Corruption -- is it a systemic or human failure?



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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Even if we have had most of the provisions required to prevent corruption, the system was either made dysfunctional, or exploited, by those that indulged in it. What we must, therefore, emphasise upon is a psychological drive that must start at the school level, and upon the necessity to ensure that the minimum needs of the public servants are met. But there is also the need to mete out the most stringent of punishments to those that corrupt the system or circumvent it.

ANATOMY of corruption is an enigma, or is it? Why is it that after having topped the list of the most corrupt (government I hasten to add, not the country Bangladesh) we have, until very recently, done nothing worthy of note to arrest its endemic influence. Social scientists argue that it might not be possible to eliminate the scourge entirely, and in the short term we may have to keep it at an endurable level till there is a pathological transformation in us.

This is a commentary on the real state of our psyche, which takes corruption and dishonesty as a normal phenomenon, quite happy to live with those who are involved in it. Let us get one thing clear before moving any further. Corruption is dishonesty of the mind as well as of material. And it involves many things that are within the spheres of ones existence.

Corruption is not unique to Bangladesh. It occurs in most countries, both developed and developing. With us, it has swelled over the years till it has become a

way of life. And it has snowballed primarily because of the culture of impunity, where the causal link of dishonesty goes right up to the top in the hierarchy of the ruling elite.

In Bangladesh, so long it has been a low-risk high-gain enterprise, with nothing to lose but everything to gain from it. Things will change in future, one would hope, with the ACC's on-going anti-corruption drive that must be a continuous feature of its work.

In this equation there are two factors, the man and the system. As for the man, corruption can be both need-driven and greed-driven. What we must ask ourselves is that while many people with low income barely manage to survive but stay above corruption, why is it that the major incidences of corruption occur in high places, in persons earning high salaries.

And social scientists see, too, a difference in the consequences of corruption at lower levels and that in the higher echelons of the government and bureaucracy. It is in high places that decisions and policies

relating to national issues and national interest are made, that can be derailed by the craving for self-aggrandizement; and those driven by greed can hardly differentiate between self and the nation. This has been exposed through the many corruption cases that are now under investigation.

The question is, is it the system, or the people who run it, that we ought to go after to start with. The system exists with its shortcomings, and those who are adept in misusing it often get away with it, not for long though. We are very good in blaming the system and appear more bent on trying to fix it, instead of really going into the causes of the malaise. What really happens is that we end up with a damaged system, but with the malady intact.

With the astounding cases of corruption coming to light, that involve civil servants to ex-ministers to CBA leaders, and even 'kanungos,' the premise correlating poverty and corruption and the social position of a person has

been thrown overboard. The common feature is the lust for money which is the root of all evils, a gospel truth that finds veracity in Bangladesh.

An interesting fact brought out in a finding of a research organisation is that the level of pay has no correlation with one's aspiration for more money. In fact, if anything, lust for wealth is directly proportional to one's position.

We ask how it was possible for a chief conservator of forests to stash away crores of taka in cash, at home, without anyone up or down the chain ever coming to know of it. How come that khas land was allegedly given away to a minister's son at a most ludicrous price? How can public universities employ manpower much beyond that authorized, causing loss of crores to the state? Was there not a system of oversight in place, and people put there to prevent such irregularities? Where did we go wrong? Was it in establishing a proper system, or in operating the system properly?

Let us briefly go into the factors that breed corruption, of which there are many, but some are germane to the society and the country.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of a cost benefit equation that is involved in such transgressions, whether it is intellectual, monetary or in any other form, and that the motive force is primarily a human being's proclivity for wealth, there is also the demand and supply aspect of corruption in which there is a need to get things done, but that cannot be possible without greasing the palms of the official. It occurs more acutely in cases where illegal things can be done with more ease by bribing the relevant person or persons. Like tango, corruption needs two to happen.

As for the system, let us see what needs to be in place to fight the malaise. Here, one is really looking at basically three things -- accountability, transparency and, while there should be oversight arrangements in all departments, a watch-dog institution to exercise oversight at national level.

We actually have all these in the system, but they are observed only in their disregard by those who run the system. Can there be accountability when everyone in the chain gets a slice of the salami? Where government acquisitions are apparently no secret, manipulation of the system by modifying bid documents to suit a particular seller is a practice not uncommon in the organizations.

Take also the case of the parlia-

mentary standing committees, which, had they performed their oversight task with sincerity, could have prevented many financial irregularities and cases of corruption in the ministries. The CNG scam case is a case in point, where the inquiry could not be completed because of alleged intransigence of the minister and, reportedly, of the uncooperative attitude of the ministry.

Thus, even if we have had most of the provisions required to prevent corruption, the system was either made dysfunctional, or exploited, by those that indulged in it. What we must, therefore, emphasise upon is a psychological drive that must start at the school level, and upon the necessity to ensure that the minimum needs of the public servants are met. But there is also the need to mete out the most stringent of punishments to those that corrupt the system or circumvent it.

As King Solomon had said thousands of years ago: "Because sentence against a bad work has not been executed speedily, that is why the heart of the sons of men has become fully set in them to do bad." The propensity to do bad has not decreased, nor has the punishment been heavy or timely, even after so many years of the utterance of the wise words.

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those killed or injured has relatives in the US, some ambulance-chasing US lawyer will see a great opportunity (for a percentage) to launch multi-million dollar law-suits against the Pakistani TV channels seen in the US, holding them liable for the loss (or injuries thereof) of the relative's life because of their interference.

One cannot find any example of media involvement in such fashion anywhere at anytime in the world. The media have to remain as impartial observers and reporters, and cannot become actors themselves in the ongoing drama. Abdul Rashid Ghazi may not have had a death wish, what forced him to have one? Could he have been persuaded by the electronic media that his demands would be met?

A controversy has been started about the number of deaths. In order not to allow that to become a subject of doubt, a "media pool" (selected by the media themselves) without cameras, and disclaimers about their safety duly signed, could have been taken around immediately after the operations. The news and videos thereof being shared by all the media, as is done all over the world.

The media are the best witnesses for facts because, as impartial reporters, they communicate to the public exactly what they see. If they do otherwise, they do so at the risk of their credibility. The "missing persons" center was established rather late. A "one-window" cell having capable operatives could coordinate news about casualties, arrests,

detentions etc about inhabitants of the compound, satisfying the anxious parents and relations as to the fate of their loved ones. One could have immediately set up a call center with an 800 number.

As much as most of us would have it otherwise, Lal Masjid has shown us to be in multiple crisis, mostly of our own making. While externally, Pakistan's image has been shot to pieces, internally the confidence of the intelligentsia and the masses has been badly shaken. Most people seem convinced that the days of the Musharraf regime are numbered. Unbelievably, some are even questioning our own existence as a state.

The question very well arises, is the writ of the government able to safeguard the interests of the state? If it is not, then is it time to separate the present government from the governance of the state? Can this be done gently, or is it likely to be violent?

While, according to some, the countdown to a substantive change has begun, independent observers do believe that the real solution is a power-sharing arrangement that will balance the country's present mode of governance, making it a more democratic and effective. Can it happen so, or are we already (in aviation terms) in a flat spin, headed for anarchy?

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Coping with the backlash

AS I SEE IT

As much as most of us would have it otherwise, Lal Masjid has shown us to be in multiple crisis, mostly of our own making. While externally, Pakistan's image has been shot to pieces, internally the confidence of the intelligentsia and the masses has been badly shaken. Most people seem convinced that the days of the Musharraf regime are numbered. Unbelievably, some are even questioning our own existence as a state.

After the cordon of Lal Masjid on July 3, intercepted messages confirmed information about a likely strike in Swat to seize control of the mountainous region in and around Kanju, a fairly recently built satellite town of Mingora housing the offices of many foreign NGOs, and Matta, a small town 15 or so miles north of Mingora and west of the Swat River. That could have opened up any number of horrendous possibilities.

To pre-empt the perceived threat, units of an infantry division were ordered to reinforce the lightly armed para-military Frontier Corps (FC) troops in the area. Suicide bombers attacked troop convoys in and around Matta, over 50 soldiers being killed and many more injured, on July 14 and 15. Simultaneously, another suicide bomb attack targeted intending police recruits in D.I. Khan.

A very bloody day for the army and the people of Pakistan. A comparison of losses in such a short time in one unit can be made with Dec 5, 1971, when Bravo Company 23 Punjab under Maj (later Brig) Akram tried to breakout

As for NGOs involved in education, they are invaluable for the poorest of the poor.

However madrassas in the hotbed areas of religious activism of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) must be cleared of weapons first. One can well expect casualties, which will be far less if action is taken immediately, or in the near future.

Similarly, in urban areas the problem can be handled if tackled promptly. The administration of the madrassas not involved in militancy must be taken into confidence and, along with assurances that no action was planned against them, given monetary and material help, seeking from them their vocal support in return.

The handling of the media left much to be desired, it has to be more sophisticated. A Media Centre must be set up to register media representatives with temporary passes that allows them limited access under supervision into the area between the outer and inner cordons.

Regular briefings (or immediately if there is "breaking news") must be given, and representatives should be available for questions.

There must be one focal point for media attention, the official briefing person. The president has made the right move by bringing back Rashid Qureshi, at least he is media savvy, who was the architect of the "glasnost" that got Musharraf plenty of media-mileage in the early years.

Everyone and his uncle in the electronic media got involved in "hostage negotiations." This is a complete science and the media must not (and cannot be allowed to) get involved directly. Whenever negotiations come into the equation, a "hostage negotiator," even though relatively junior, takes command of the operations, taking precedence over even the senior commander on the spot.

The commander on the spot will take immediate action only if he sees imminent danger to the hostages. Because of the various pressures on the psyche of the besieged, special expertise is required to gain the confidence of, and to persuade, those being besieged to surrender peacefully.

Communications to the compound should be cut, and only the hostage negotiator can communicate with them. If someone among

during a one-week period. It was a modest success that eventually encouraged the organisers to continue their effort and a second festival started on July 18 with increasing number of films as well as more screenings.

In the list of films being screened in Tokyo are a few award winning feature films and documentaries portraying stories of resilience and inspiration of people forced to leave their homes due to wars and persecution. Among such entries are *Iraq in Fragments*, winner of Sundance award for Best Director and an Academy Award nominee. This three-part opus offers a portrait of different faces of war: a fatherless boy is apprentice of the owner of a Baghdad garage; Sadar followers in two Shite cities rally for regional elections while enforcing Islamic law at gunpoint; and a family of Kurdish farmers welcomes the US presence, which has allowed them freedom previously denied.

Also in the program is a retrospective of French-Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh. Born in 1964, Panh is himself a survivor of the Cambodian genocide. His family joined those millions of Cambodians driven out of Phnom Penh in April 1975, when the Khmer Rouge emptied the city to start an agrarian revolution and take everything to a new starting point. Four years later Panh escaped to Thailand and eventually could make it to France. He is one of the only two members of his large family to survive. Among his eight films being shown in Tokyo festival are two entries that were included in the official selection of the Cannes Festival.

Speaking at a press conference earlier this week, Kirill Konin, the director of the Refugee Film Festival, expressed hope that the festival would be able to carry the message to the world that the refugees are people who have families and children exactly like everyone else, and who unfortunately were forced to leave their homes and now in need of our attention and a little care so that they can return to the respective places where they belong to. He also said that the

purpose of the festival is not just showing films, but also to engage the audience into the issues and providing them with ideas of what they need to do to help tackling the problem. Arts and entertainments always serve as a powerful medium to create a better understanding of what is happening around us, and the Refugee Film Festival simply intends to use that medium to make our world a bit more tolerant place for each and every individual.

Konin is also hopeful that the Refugee Film Festival will become a regular annual event, provided support from sponsors, media and sympathetic audiences continue. The festival features films from diverse places, including Cambodia, Serbia, Uganda, Iraq, Israel and Kenya. The one thing common in all of them is that, all are relevant to refugee issues. The nine-day festival will run until July 26 and films will be shown at four different venues in Tokyo free of charge.

Monzurul Hua is a DSt columnist.