

Corruption and the Jamaat

The adviser's comments are surprising

COMMUNICATIONS Adviser M.A. Matin's observations on the involvement or otherwise of the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami in corruption have surprised us. His comment that the law has not been applied in the case of the Jamaat because the party's leaders have perhaps not indulged in corruption flies in the face of reality. As matters stand, there are cases against as many as thirteen figures of the party, including some leading ones. Among such cases is one relating to extortion against the secretary general of the organisation. Besides, quite a few former Jamaat lawmakers are already in jail on various charges ranging from extortion to pilferage of relief goods. Against such a background, it is quite inconceivable as to how the adviser could make a sweeping statement. Of course, anyone can speak on charges or otherwise against individuals belonging to a party, but defending a party is a different proposition altogether.

There are risks involved in the kind of observations the adviser has made about the Jamaat. The risks are of two sorts. In the first place, such comments are quite likely to raise suspicions in the public mind about the government's attitude toward the Jamaat. In the second, when the adviser suggests that the Jamaat may not have any charge of corruption pending against it, his remarks may lead to a situation where any possibility of investigating the party and its leaders for corruption might be pushed under the rug. In effect, General Matin's comments will likely be construed as exonerating the Jamaat of the allegations against it. One cannot quite easily dispel the fact that the Jamaat happened to be part of a government whose record of corruption clearly surpassed the performance of all previous governments. The adviser has asked the media to provide the government with evidence of the Jamaat's involvement, assuming they have any, to the government. The request is misplaced, for the responsibility of tracking down corrupt individuals is fundamentally that of the government.

It will perhaps not be unwise to suggest that the comments of some of the caretaker government advisers on various issues confronting the country are confusing, off the cuff and uncalled for. Obviously, the implications of such comments are not always understood. We will hope that in future circumspection will be exercised where government functionaries are expected to give their responses to national issues as they develop. May we suggest that sometimes it would be nice to hear our advisers say 'no comment' to some of the sensitive questions put to them?

For an ad hoc PAC

It should be constituted with persons of merit and expertise

WITH the parliamentary oversight of government accounts through public accounts committee (PAC) missing, an alternative arrangement has to be worked out to scrutinise state sector accounts and evaluate reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)'s office. This becomes a compelling necessity, because the present interim government is not going to be short-lived; it is set to last one-and-a-half years more, going by the road map the government has for the next general election. The oversight functions of the parliament has to be taken over by some mechanism to ensure transparency and accountability of government expenditures.

It is therefore in the fitness of things that the Comptroller and Auditor General himself has submitted a proposal to the government for an immediate formation of a public accounts committee on ad hoc basis. In specific terms, objections to the accounts pertaining to government officials' dues as contained in the audit reports need to be disposed of together with the settling of a mounting number of pension cases. Decisions relating to recovery of money due to the exchequer from various individuals and agencies are also taken by the committee.

The CAG is for taking on board retired justices, former government officials, businessmen, educationists and public leaders as members of the proposed ad hoc committee. The committee needs to be constituted by neutral persons in order to function as an impartial oversight body.

The rationale for an ad hoc committee cannot be in question, but we would like to make a few specific points by way of making sure that the body, when formed, can work to its full potential. Let's not forget, that the public accounts committee, of even an elected parliament, has had backlogs in terms of pursuing the audit reports and could hardly succeed in making the executive branch of the government take actions in line with its recommendations. Its terms of reference will have to be carefully formulated to provide it with adequate power to make its recommendations heard.

Praying for rain



ZAFAR SOBHAN

It isn't only struggling cricket teams that pray for rain. The current administration must be equally happy that the weather in the week since the incarceration of AL leader and ex-prime minister Sheikh Hasina has been so inclement, as this has helped ensure that the protests against Hasina's arrest have been muted.

Many people I have talked to have expressed astonishment that the protests have been so tame. They expected, or feared, that the nation would explode. And it was, in fact, the fear of violent protest that accounted for the hesitation and equivocation of the interim government in its efforts to move against Hasina.

I was always less persuaded of this likelihood. The evidence of the past five years suggests that the AL had, in fact, extremely limited capacity to mount comprehensive street agitation, even at the best of times. From October to January, their winter offensive if you will, the AL made its most concentrated move to control the streets, but was unable to do much more than fight the combined forces of law enforcement and four-party alliance activists to what essentially amounted to a draw.

Now, with dozens of senior leaders in jail and thousands of grassroots level activists and organisers

STRAIGHT TALK

But when the skies clear, it is a different story. The government should ensure that it remains on the good side of the people and that nothing it does would incline them to take to the streets. Nothing would end the government's honeymoon quicker than a demonstration that it would have to use force to put down. So far, the interim government has been given time. It is raining. People are being patient and forgiving. But they will not be so forever. It should understand the importance of public opinion while time, and the rain, is still on its side.

also either behind bars or on the run, to say nothing of the fact that the party remains split over the issue of Hasina's leadership, it does not surprise me that there has not been more of a showing.

Let us not minimise the fact, either, that we are under emergency rule, that the army presence is much more pervasive than before January 11, and that the consequences for taking to the streets would be much more dire than during a period of non-emergency.

Nor is this a bad thing, necessarily, either for Hasina, or the party, or the country. Indeed, it would be wrong to suggest that there hasn't been a strong movement mounted for Hasina's release -- the movement merely has not principally been defined by fighting in the streets.

Instead, it has taken the form of sophisticated lobbying and different kinds of pressure, both internal and external, being placed on the government, which is surely how protest should be registered in a mature society.

This was precisely the way pressure was mounted back in April and May when Hasina was being kept out of the country. There were no demonstrations in Bangladesh (such demonstrations would have been

illegal under emergency rule) against the government at the time, but one way and another, it was made clear to the administration that its position was untenable, and the government eventually was forced to reverse its original stance due to the combined weight of national and international opinion.

It seems to me that this is healthier than the hartal and boroobor and street fighting option as a means to mount pressure on a sitting government, elected or unelected. In fact, I had always thought that prior to January 11 had the then-opposition concentrated on mobilising the public behind peaceful civil disobedience (e.g. silent marches, human chains, etc) that it would have had more effect.

There was a great deal of discontent brewing in the country at the time due to the massive malgovernance of the four-party alliance. Prices were sky high, there were widespread power and water shortages, and shortages of fertiliser and diesel fuel for farmers. In fact, considerable sections of the country were simmering against the four-party alliance government, and there were spontaneous public demonstrations against it from Demra to Kansat, leading to fatalities on several occasions.

The signal failure of the then-opposition was its inability to unite the people behind it against unarguably the most corrupt and least responsive government this country has ever seen.

Come October 2006, when the then-opposition decided to oppose the caretaker government headed by President Iajuddin Ahmed, it again decided to go for full-on violent confrontation, and, as a result, was never able to muster more than several thousand hard-core activists and street fighters to its cause.

The trouble with relying on the violent confrontation option is that this precludes the participation of the more sedate party supporters, to say nothing of those millions who do not support the party at all but are eager to register their opposition to an unpopular and ineffective government, meaning that the movement cannot, by definition, turn into a national one.

Under the emergency rules, any kind of public protest is banned and people are too intimidated to go to the streets to voice their complaints. To the extent that this keeps the streets from being taken over by brawling mobs and snuffs out violent, coercive protest, this is no bad thing.

But to the extent that the emergency rules would work to silence everyday men and women seeking to register protest in a peaceful manner, then it would be a different matter. At present the situation is moot since the general public is: a) sufficiently intimidated that no one wants to take his or her chances by taking to the streets, and b) still reasonably supportive of the current government.

But the interim government should not make the mistake of thinking that the AL's failure to put large numbers on the streets in the wake of Hasina's arrest means that they are home free.

In the first place, as noted above, there are other avenues of protest which are being explored effectively.

In the second place, right now Hasina's popularity is just beginning to make a comeback. Her incarceration (like the abortive move to keep her out of the country) has only increased her stature and popularity, and, in time, she may grow into a far more formidable opponent than she is today.

Three, if the economy goes south or the common people are sufficiently unhappy with the interim administration, then they may well at some point take to the streets in protest, and that would be a far different proposition than the AL taking to the streets.

The public taking to the streets is the last thing, surely, that anyone wants. If there is a mass mobilisation then the interim government will be put in a more or less untenable situation.

It does not want to be put in a position where it will need to order a crack-down by law enforcement. Nor is it clear that such orders would be followed or what the consequences of such an order being followed would be. Even more

worrisome would be the consequences of what might happen if orders are given and not followed.

I don't think there are too many people who would argue that these are eventualities we would rather not even contemplate. Thus it is in the government's interest as well as the interest of even those who oppose the current government that we never reach that point.

But the government needs to be more responsive to ensure that we do not. It should not take the lesson from the Hasina incarceration that it is invulnerable. It needs to take into account the genuine grievances and concerns that the public has.

Dismissing genuine grievances or pushing through unpopular or unacceptable measures would be the height of folly for an unelected government that is dependent on the people's good will.

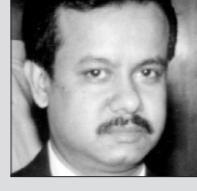
The monsoon looks like it is here for another couple of months. I don't expect to see much mass mobilisation during this time period.

But when the skies clear, it is a different story. The government should ensure that it remains on the good side of the people and that nothing it does would incline them to take to the streets. Nothing would end the government's honeymoon quicker than a demonstration that it would have to use force to put down.

So far, the interim government has been given time. It is raining. People are being patient and forgiving. But they will not be so forever. It should understand the importance of public opinion while time, and the rain, is still on its side.

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Teaching the teachers



MUHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

To say it in the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez a whirlwind is setting down roots, not in the center of the town as he writes in *Leaf Storm*, but in the heart of our politics. The teachers of one university decried harassment of two former Prime Ministers by wearing black badges. The students went on strike and the lawyers bellowed their anger as well. While politicians were busy taking cover, the bugbear of politics went on the prowl. It found new bodies and is striking back.

That is the ominous sign of a new political storm brewing on the horizon. One of the political parties has put down its foot. It will not undergo reforms unless its leader is released from jail. As it looks, they will push that agenda come what may. Doves of lawyers are coming from abroad to pitch a legal Armageddon!

The head of the other political

party has been busy on the phone, shoring up support for her leadership abroad while the party is divided at home. It looks like this party will rather break than bend. Its hope for reforms looks as remote as those phone calls going from the chairperson.

From the look of it, the reform process may not be sweet and short. But the real concern is the murmur of discontent, which is slowly rising not from professional politicians, but from professionals who have embraced politics. I don't know how others see it. To me it is an indication of the ultimate futility. We might be able to reform the politicians, but not the politics.

Compare it to an outbreak when the virus mutates and becomes airborne. That is when the virus is widely diffused and the spread is hard to contain. Last week, the university teachers have showed clear sign of infection. They are the

most enlightened amongst us, yet they staged a protest on flimsy ground.

They read newspapers and watch television. They should know that the two former prime ministers are not exactly Holy Basil. The country has terribly suffered under them, and they must be held accountable for it.

More than the students, more than the lawyers, the teachers have shocked us all. All stripes and colors of them, blue, pink and white converged on the black of badges, which they wore to sympathise with politicians whose integrity is questionable. What ideals have these teachers put forward in front of their students? Those who came to learn from them must wonder why teachers should act like partisans.

One can always argue that nobody is guilty until proven. That is true when a case is in the court.

But public figures such as these Prime Ministers are surely guilty by the verdict of people. They headed governments, which were dens of corruption.

Leaders of their caliber don't need to be caught red-handed. They are guilty if their good faith is questioned. For them it's equally bad to condone an offense as it is to commit one.

It would have been meaningful and acceptable if the teachers protested against mistreatment of politicians who were arrested for fighting against an unjust law, a despot or foreign domination. But why should they bother if former Prime Ministers, whose notorious regimes marked long years of inefficiency and deterioration, are made to face the law? Nothing comes to my mind for which one could be foaming at the mouth to defend either of them.

Now this part is a plot taken

keeping her from fighting at the polls. "It's a conspiracy to stop me from speaking for the rights of the people," she told a court that rejected her bail petition and sent her to a makeshift sub-jail last week. "I've done nothing wrong."

Hasina's arrest has sparked violent protests and brought strong condemnations from lawyers, teachers, political parties and media. Teachers at Dhaka University -- hub of the nation's political activity -- wore black badges and boycotted classes Sunday to protest Hasina's arrest and Zia's harassment. Zia, who is not on speaking term with Hasina, has also condemned the arrest and demanded her release.

Meanwhile, many analysts believe that Zia -- currently in virtual confinement at her Dhaka Cantonment house -- may be the next to be arrested. The government's anticorruption commission has given the two leaders seven days to submit wealth reports detailing their income and assets.

Zia's elder son, Tarique Rahman, an heir apparent during his mother's reign, is already in jail facing a number of corruption

charges. And the election commission is drafting laws to disqualify people from seeking votes if they are convicted on corruption charges.

The big question now is how recent developments could affect Bangladeshi politics in the longer term. One fear: that the instability might give rise to Islamic extremism. Mizanur Rahman Shelley, a social scientist and chairman of the Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB), compares the situation with the reign of Iran's Reza Shah Pahlavi, who systematically crushed liberal democrats.

"The vacancy was filled slowly but steadily by the extremist religious elements, led by mullahs," notes Shelley. "Towards the end, the Shah had some of the confined nationalist leaders to his aid, but it was too late. The extremists took over."

It is unclear just how much support there is for fundamentalists in Bangladesh. However, there are also fears that the military -- which has ruled Bangladesh directly or indirectly for 15 years since it achieved

independence from Pakistan in 1971 -- might consolidate its grip on the country.

At present, the generals are simply supporting the civilian caretaker administration, but some Bangladeshis favor setting up a security council to give the military a more formal role in government. "There should be a mechanism so that the military can play its role in policymaking," says Rahman. "There is a need for stabilization of the civil-military relationship."

The army chief, Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed, is brushing aside such speculation -- for now, at least. "We have no intention to take power," he says. "We are supporting the caretaker government. The security council is not a priority issue." Nonetheless, the general feels that the nation's constitution must be rewritten to maintain a balance of power between the figurehead president and the all-powerful prime minister.

Most Bangladeshis have applauded the government's drive against corruption, but they also have other priorities. One

example: they complain that the government has hardly taken any step to control price hikes.

"There are high prices, tight monetary measures and economic uncertainty," says Qazi Khiliquzzaman Ahmad, president of the Bangladesh Economic Association. "The government needs to address them quickly on the reality of the grounds, not on any dogma."

There's also the issue of party politics. Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Hasina's Awami League are bitterly divided. Reformists within the two parties -- encouraged by the government -- both want to loosen the vise of their leaders by introducing term limits that would end their control.

"A lot of damage has been done to our politics," says A. H. Mofazzal Karim, Zia's adviser and a leading reformist. "We should start a new chapter which will not allow repetition of the past."

Others, however, argue that such attempts can be counterproductive. "The reform will not bring positive results for the

country if it is forced on political parties," says Akbar Ali Khan, a former adviser to the caretaker government.

"Solutions will not come if only the parties are split in the name of reforms."

Zia herself believes the government wants to break up the two parties, accusing it of failing to act against those trying to oust her and Hasina. "(The government) imposed restrictions on our movements, but (it) is not touching those who are speaking about reforms, she charged during a conference call with leaders of her party's Australian branch Saturday night. "Their only agenda is to split the party."

Both Zia and Hasina still command large followings, and their opponents have neither the mass appeal nor the charisma of these dominant figures. But given the government's determination to be rid of them, that won't be enough to keep them in the center of the political stage much longer.

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Power play

Hasina's arrest was the latest step by Bangladesh's interim military-backed government to force her and Zia out of the country. The seven-month-old caretaker regime, which took charge after 30 people were killed in clashes following the end of Zia's five-year term, has cracked down on corruption and pledged to hold credible elections next year. In recent weeks it has detained more than 170 key political leaders, businessmen and public servants on charges of graft and abuse of power.

HASSAN SHAHRIAR

Mujibur Rahman.

Both were top contenders for power in Bangladesh's next election, scheduled for late 2008. But now both face a permanent exile from politics as even their own supporters accuse them of corruption, cronyism and attempts to establish political dynasties.

While both have denied the charges, matters took a new turn with last week's arrest of Hasina on extortion charges. Hasina is also accused of playing a role in four killings allegedly committed by members of her opposition Awami League during a riot last year.