

Anti-corruption drive and searching our souls



I am not defending anyone or extending my support to corrupt people. My expectation is the rooting out of all the vices from the society. And that cannot be achieved through piecemeal measures. We must not take any step that would not work ultimately. Coercion and intimidation do not work for long, especially in the case of democracy. Rather motivation and proper policy work better.

NAZRUL ISLAM

WE Bengalis are highly emotional by birth and, as part of our national characteristic, we love to swim with the tide. One of our most favourite things is daydreaming. For example, at this moment, the whole nation is probably dreaming that within a few months our country will turn into an abode of "angels," who would never do any wrong or commit a crime.

Dear readers, don't think that this is my euphoric imagination. In fact, many people are now-a-days delivering lectures, writing articles, and giving prescriptions on TV talk shows to make Bangladesh a "golden Bengal" with the touch of magic wands.

And what are the magic wands? The magic wands are punishing a handful of politicians in special courts, breaking a number of established political parties into pieces, throwing some top leaders out of politics, and forming a new political party, which might be chosen to be the party to take over when the current caretaker government decides not to continue to stay in power.

Would these ad-hoc and populist measures bring about any permanent change in our national characters? You may think so, but I don't believe it. It would be a futile exercise if anybody tries to purify the contaminated water of a pond without stopping the source of contamination.

The entire nation has been contaminated. Corruption is no doubt at the top of the list of the contaminants. But corruption is not a new phenomenon in our country; rather it is an age-old vice. What happened during the past few years is that it has taken shape, like a full-grown banyan tree.

The efforts to bring some of the big fish to book raised a hope in the minds of the people that corruption would say goodbye to our country. But is it possible to eradicate corruption or similar vices from a country which itself encourages policies that is unjust, unequal and biased?

In the media, some of the civil society members, politicians, and professionals are expressing high hopes about stamping out corruption from society through the ongoing drive. But I'm not so optimistic. In fact, in the flawed market economy

system, where only the fittest get the license to survive, corruption would be a part of life.

The system makes everything, from basic education to morality, a marketable commodity. We know that market economy is driven by profit. And for profit, a commodity can be sold, resold or transformed.

No doubt, initially the activities of the present interim government earned the people's sympathy and support. People wanted some quick steps in administrative and legal systems that would help establish rule of law. Another big expectation from the government was checking of the price hike of essentials.

But, with the passage of time, our

hopes are being shattered as the government has undertaken many tasks except the main ones, which are holding of election as early as possible and controlling the price hike of essentials.

Revered writer N C Choudhury, in his book *Atmaghati Bengali*, narrated how Bengalis destroy themselves and their own achievements. I think we are not only self-destructive but also self-deceptive.

The 1/11 aftermath caused a ray

of hope to arise in the minds of the

people. Everyone hoped that rule of law and discipline would return in the national life. At least, there would be no gap between our words and deeds.

The ruling class, who little care about their words and deeds, would take lessons from the new rulers, who have come to power in special circumstances. But alas! Double standard and hypocrisy have become the order of the day. What we are saying, we are not doing.

When you ban politics, it must be a universal move. But if politics is prohibited for one group and remains open for others, it's double standard. We may give argument in its favour, but can't legitimise it.

We are arresting some politicians for their alleged involvement in corruption, but letting others who committed the same offence remain

free. The man who headed a ministry that topped the list of corrupt ministries for consecutive four years has become the most honest person in the country. Many well-known corrupt suspects were also seen roaming around him.

The chief conservator of forests amassed crores of Taka by destroying the country's forest resources. Where were the secretary, JS, DS, and other officials of the Forest Ministry when Osman Gani carried

out the crime? What responsibility have they shown as officials of the supervising ministry? Are they clean? Some former ministers were caught, but none of officials of the ministries concerned was implicated, as if the officials of the ministries are angels.

In fact, there must be at least three parties in a corrupt deal. They are bureaucrats, politicians and businesspeople. Bureaucrats and businesspeople initiate the idea, politicians provide the necessary logistic supports (e.g. permission), and bureaucrats plan the implementation process of embezzlement.

It's a chain. When you say, the law is equal for all and two elements of the chain remain untouched, skepticism results. The whole intention, though it might be a good one, becomes questionable.

And questions are in the air, particularly after the arrest of AL president Sheikh Hasina without due process of law (without arrest warrant or court order). *The Daily Star* Editor Mahfuz Anam has raised some pertinent questions about the misinformed intent of the government.

People are also deeply scrutinising the "partisan behaviour" of the "non-party" government. Who does not know that the immediate-past 4-party government took the country to a new height of corrupt practices? But, of late, it seems that the entire wrath of the government has fallen onto the erstwhile opposition party -- AL.

Just compare the arrest list. The AL president has been arrested, BNP chairperson is still free; AL general secretary is in jail, BNP secretary general is doing politics ignoring ban on politics; at least three presidium members of AL are in jail, none of that stature except Barrister Nazmul Huda of BNP has been arrested.

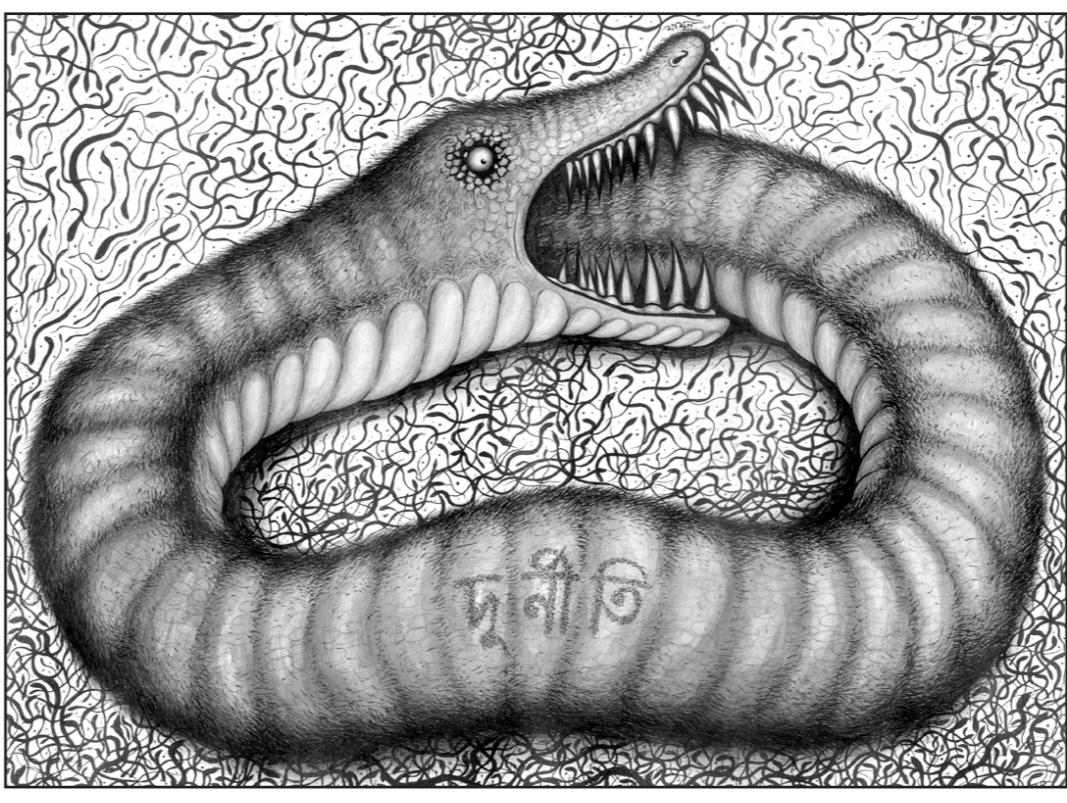
And if we aggregate the total arrests across the country, the number of AL detainees would surpass the BNP's. Initially people thought that AL leaders were being arrested to make a balance, but now they have started to think that the target of the government is the AL, and the arrest of the BNP leaders was mere eyewash.

I am not defending anyone or extending my support to corrupt people. My expectation is the rooting out of all the vices from the society. And that cannot be achieved through piecemeal measures. We must not take any step that would not work ultimately.

Coercion and intimidation do not work for long, especially in the case of democracy. Rather motivation and proper policy work better.

The caretaker government should not do anything that proves that they are partisans. In the past we have committed many mistakes. But this time, any mistake will take a heavy toll on the national life.

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MAHMUD Hossain

GOPAC in Dhaka



To have a fresh start after the next general election we must address anomalies in our Constitution and rules of procedure to make the new parliament more effective in curbing corruption and making government accountable and transparent. This would put our future parliamentarians in line with the spirit of GOPAC.

G. M. QUADER

CORRUPTION is considered a social disease, which is prevalent more or less in every country of the world today. It is defined by the World Bank and Transparency International (TI) as "abuse of public power for private benefits."

Corruption generally thrives in an environment of poverty and weak accountability structures.

Corruption drains out resources, which could otherwise be used for pro-poor programs. Corruption, thus, may be a creation of poverty, but its actual danger is that it breeds more poverty by blocking poverty alleviation programs.

Poverty and corruption are interlinked, and form a vicious cycle. But the catalyst for the formation of the cycle is the environment of weak accountability. Breaking of the vicious cycle, thus, depends on improvement of accountability structures.

Parliamentarians, especially in a

parliamentary system of government, have the responsibility of amplifying the voices of the citizens in the house of the nation, and also ensuring that the government makes decisions that best serve the interest of the people. Parliamentarians are also in a position to play a vital role in mobilising public opinion against the government, in case the government does not do enough to stop corruption.

Parliamentarians from around the world met in the Chamber of the Canadian House of Commons from October 13 to 16, 2002, and formed the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC).

In Bangladesh today there is no functional parliament. National election for formation of a parliament could not be held on schedule (by January 2007) due to political disturbance.

The same has now been deferred till end of 2008. An interim caretaker government is running the affairs under the umbrella of a state of emergency, with the ultimate objective of holding a fair election free from the influence of money and muscle power.

The reason for the political agitations was the apprehension that the last ruling coalition government would manipulate the election results. The party in power took full advantage of being in power and earned a huge amount of wealth through corruption. They also earned the loyalty of persons holding important positions and muscle power, especially in connection with election, by allowing them legal immunity and undue or illegal favour.

Using muscle power and money obtained through corruption and making the state institutions partisan were tactics planned to get a predetermined result in the election in favour of the last alliance government.

So the question of holding the election on a level playing field for all contesting parties came up before the election. To ensure the same, it is necessary to stop use of extra money and muscle power in the next general election, in addition to making the government machinery neutral.

As corruption was the vehicle for

amassing illegal money, with the ultimate intention of using at least a part of it to win the election, it became a priority for the caretaker government to wage war against corruption and the corrupt elements of the society to ensure fair election.

In the back drop of the above situation, GOPAC, in conjunction with the National Democratic Institute-Bangladesh and the World Bank Institute, hosted a "Curbing Corruption in South Asia" conference in Dhaka on July 11 and 12. It was participated by parliamentarians/delegates from most of the Saarc countries, Kuwait, and Zimbabwe.

In the inaugural session, the keynote paper was presented by General Moeen U. Ahmed, chief of army staff. He emphasised the need for curbing corruption and described the actions so far taken by Bangladesh government in this respect.

He also put forward some specific recommendations like, ensuring exemplary punishment for all those found guilty of corruption, establishing an independent judicial system, continuing the anti-corruption drive on a regular basis, enacting right to information act, creating moral high ground against corruption, boycotting the corrupt people socially, appointing a parliamentary ombudsman, reorganising the police force and considering a

pay hike for them etc.

In the same session, the former speaker of the parliament, Barrister Jamiruddin Sirkar, spoke as a chief guest. He detailed how accountability and transparency of the government is ensured in the parliament in our system.

He mentioned there is provision for bringing no confidence motion against the prime minister by the parliament. The office of the PM would become vacant if he/she ceases to retain the support of majority members of parliament.

He said, to oversee the activities of the ministers the parliament appoints standing committees.

There are about 48 standing committees, which oversee the actions of the ministries and act as watchdogs. Committees make recommendations, which the government is generally obliged to abide by.

He referred about making ministers responsible under Rule 42 (of Rules of Procedure of Parliament) by way of questions by the MPs and answer to the question by the ministers.

He said there is provision in the rules of procedure under Rule 60 for discussion (half an hour) on a matter of public importance arising out of answer to a question.

He mentioned there was provision for motion for adjournment under Rule 62 on a matter of public importance. This also ensures

accountability of the government by allowing discussion on a matter of public importance on an urgent basis by adjourning the scheduled order of the day.

He stated that there were provisions for discussion on matters of public importance for short duration under Rule 68; call attention notices to the ministers could also be served under Rule 71 on matter of public importance.

There is no denying the fact that what he said about our parliament is correct. But nobody can ignore the reality that our parliament could never ensure the slightest minimum accountability and transparency of the government. Our parliament had all along been used and misused as a rubber stamp to legalise all sorts of actions of the government, whether they had merit or not.

No PM ever had to worry about a no-confidence motion, or ministers about the scrutiny of the standing committees, accountability on the floor of the parliament on question time, during discussion on matter of public importance, on call attention notices or adjournment motion due to some provisions in our Constitution and the rules of procedure.

Article 70(1) of our Constitution bars any MP to vote against the dictate of his/her party or else face losing membership of Parliament, thus allowing the government party

with majority of MPs with them to have captive decisive votes to pass any proposal any time in the floor of the parliament in favour of government.

Parliamentary standing committees are constituted with proportional representation as per party position in parliament. Government party MPs being higher in number in parliament also constitutes majority in standing committees. Chairman of each committee are decided by majority vote in the parliament, which allows the government party to choose and they generally choose all from ruling party MPs.

With chairman and majority number from ruling party and with the provision of not allowing those to go beyond the party dictate the standing committees are more often found defending government ministers instead of making them accountable.

Article 74 (1) of our constitution stipulates election for the post of speaker and deputy speaker by simple majority vote. Rule 161 says both of these positions can be made vacant by simple majority vote in parliament. As such, speakers are elected by the ruling party from amongst them and the speakers remain in office at the mercy of the government.

So long as the speaker has party bias and is not free from constant threat of losing position if the ruling party

party is dissatisfied other provisions of accountability like question time, discussions on matter of public importance or on adjournment motion etc. becomes quite ineffective and futile. Speaker is found to side with ruling party and create scope for government to avoid accountability and transparency using his discretionary power.

One of the major causes of gradual rise in the incidents of corruption and irregularity in Bangladesh is complete failure of the parliament to make government accountable and transparent. This ultimately had created a situation where the democratic system stalled.

In the concluding part of the declaration released at the end of the Dhaka conference of GOPAC it is mentioned: "GOPAC is a global network of parliamentarians committed to reducing corruption by strengthening national parliaments as institutions of democratic oversight."

To have a fresh start after the next general election we must address anomalies in our Constitution and rules of procedure to make the new parliament more effective in curbing corruption and making government accountable and transparent. This would put our future parliamentarians in line with the spirit of GOPAC.

Déjà vu on campus?



The government spent Tk 360 crores in 2005 as the operating budget for public universities. A similar amount, at an average of Tk 36,000, has been spent by each of the families of over 100,000 public university students. Counting 200 instructional days in a year, Tk 3.6 crore is spent per day for the public universities -- which is the financial cost of one day of "shut-down" in the public university system.

MANZOOR AHMED

UNIVERSITY teachers in Dhaka and Rajshahi registered their protest against the interim government treatment of two top political leaders, both former prime ministers. A protest action by the teachers, among others, was to refrain from teaching their classes for a half day in one case and for a day in the other case.

The teachers, known for being divided into factions according to partisan political loyalty and colourfully labeled as "pink," "white," "blue" and so on, who had been arch adversaries, patched up their differences to put up a common front against government action.

Expression of views about government action and raising the voice of protest by the university community, teachers and students, in themselves are not the issue. This may cause discomfiture for the government and there may be a debate about the legality of any kind

of protest under a state of emergency. But these are challenges the interim government has to handle as a part of the big job it has taken upon itself.

What is extremely disturbing is the sense of *déjà vu* evoked by the teachers' refusal to teach their classes. The cry for political reforms and the need for change in political culture being voiced all over the country apparently have not touched the consciousness or conscience of the protesting academics.

The activist teachers, it appears, have chosen to ignore widespread public concern about the distressing situation of teaching and learning and the dismal state of governance in academia. They have also refused to see that the crisis on campus has been attributed to the pervasive invasion of partisan politics and the consequent disregard for a basic code of conduct among the academics.

Even if the students are carried away by their youthful enthusiasm, teachers have to behave responsi-

bly. On a matter of public importance, teachers can express their views in many ways -- organise a "sit-in" with students, wear black badges in symbolic protest, invite citizens to public debate and arrange seminars to enlighten the public and so on. But these should not be at the expense of their primary duty to their students.

According to the University Grants Commission, the government spent Tk 360 crores in 2005 as the operating budget for public universities. A similar amount, at an average of Tk 36,000, has been spent by each of the families of over 100,000 public university students. Counting 200 instructional days in a year, Tk 3.6 crore is spent per day for the public universities -- which is the financial cost of one day of "shut-down" in the public university system.

We must learn the lesson from the decline of higher education witnessed over the recent decades. We must not return to the turmoil under the political regimes. University teachers have to provide the leadership to reverse the decline by their own action.

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constant rant of propaganda, indoctrination and ideological discussion about how best to defeat the United States. USLIMS in America have long resisted the calls to violence preached in other parts of the world. But Al Qaeda and its spin-offs are working hard to change that, and one of their most important tools is the Internet. In a briefing for reporters last week, Edward Gistaro, the national intelligence officer for transnational threats, noted that many jihadis sites are now published in English as well as Arabic, and are "calling for attacks against the United States." The concern is that loners and small groups acting on their own will be inspired to kill, if not for Islam, then for what former federal prosecutor Mary Jo White aptly describes as "the terrorists' own self-created religion" based on rage against the West.

Using Web-based television as well as Internet chat rooms, "news" sites and what amount to virtual training camps for terrorism and guerrilla warfare, they keep up a constant rant of propaganda, indoctrination and ideological discussion about how best to defeat the United States.

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

MUSLIMS in America have long resisted the calls to violence preached in other parts of the world. But Al Qaeda and