

Towards a government with a human face

KHALID SHAMS

PUNISHING those proven to be corrupt is no doubt a necessary condition to fight corruption, but it certainly is not sufficient for its future prevention. In last month's FORUM, the monthly publication of The Daily Star, Bandicoot (a pseudonym, I trust) referring to the current debate on corruption in the country raised the sixty-four million dollar question: "What is it that needs cleaning up? The system or the individual? The party or the member? The system or the servants?"

Obviously, it is the system that needs to be urgently reformed or adjusted. The Anti-Corruption Commission has moved quickly against high ups, who were thought to be above the laws of the country, for their alleged corruption. These bold actions by the commission have been widely acclaimed. Hopefully, if punishments are meted out following a due and transparent process of law, they will deter other offenders in the future. But deterrent measures will not remedy the system that itself has become corrupt and can be deliberately manipulated again by the party, or more specifically the mafia groups within a party.

So the answer to the question raised by the intrepid Bandicoot is, of course, we have to begin with systemic changes within the government. Administrative reforms which can effectively prevent corruption in the future, are urgently needed and have to be carried out across the board, on a number of strategic fronts, as soon as possible. After all it is the failure in the administrative systems and methodical destruction of institutions by the vested interest groups, that need to be remedied in the first instance.

Conventional approach will not do

The reform challenge is enormous! How do we change the character of a fossilised government caught in a quagmire of outdated procedures,

notorious in terms of its enormous capacity to harass its own citizens.

A recent survey of secondary school children showed that an overwhelming number of students thought: "government agencies were too corrupt – you can't get anything done without paying bribes to officials," "government is oppressive," "government is too remote, difficult to reach," "a poor person cannot access services from government officials, because they serve only moneyed people," and so on.

What sort of systemic reforms are needed to turn this into a government that works, a government that will have a human face, a government that will care for its citizens? How can these reforms be planned and implemented?

Large scale all embracing institutional reforms are extremely difficult to implement – history of administrative reforms in our country as well as elsewhere, is littered with many failures. Just look at the number of administrative reforms commissions which were set up in this country in the past and the precious little that they have achieved.

Reforms that aim to bring about big systemic changes are invariably complex, involving many institutions which interact with one another and work processes that require fundamental changes in people's behaviour. Mostly, it is the bureaucracy itself which has resisted introduction of these reforms in the past, as it was the principal beneficiary of the malfunctioning system.

Therefore, simply setting up a stereotyped administrative reforms commission with very comprehensive terms of reference to bring about big changes, will not be a very practical thing to do at this stage. The commission will take years to carry out their investigations, elicit public opinion and come up with their recommendations for massive reforms across the board. Repeating the exercise of previous administrative reforms commissions like the Enam Committee during the Ershad regime, would be another exercise in futility.

Administrative reforms must not be conceived as a one shot, once for all affair, confined merely to modification in structures and routine reduction of manpower. Reforms to be meaningful, should be focused on the ways in which government agencies work, functions they perform, methods and tools that are employed in discharging those functions.

A more practical approach would be for the government, in consultation with the civic and political leaders, to identify the immediate needs for systemic changes in different sectors or agencies within the administration and prioritise in the first instance a practical reform agenda. Then we can consider what would be the most cost effective and quick time solutions to the administrative problems that will have maximum impact in terms of citizens' welfare and development.

Instead of a big commission that delivers late and very little, one can consider the option of setting up a number of high-powered inter-ministerial committees, with a co-ordinator who has the required mandate as well as resources, to plan as well as implement reform decisions. There will be standing committees in different sectors of government, which will set reform targets and continue to function until the reform action is completed.

Reforms need to be planned, implemented, and monitored on a continuing basis, since they are likely to require organisational changes, simplification of work procedures, integration and co-ordination amongst departments, contracting out public services and introduction of new technologies.

It may also involve deregulation or even framing of new regulations. It may mean privatisation, elimination of existing red tape and doing away with numerous government controls which invariably are causes for delay that create opportunities for corruption.

Concept of governance is changing

Public governance today in terms of

the various administrative functions performed, no longer means what it was even twenty years ago. Before undertaking administrative reforms we have to take a fresh look at the basic concept of government and determine what would be politically most relevant for the country, at the beginning of 21st century.

There is a broad social mandate for public governance, that is incorporated in Part II of our Constitution which lays down the "Fundamental Principles of State Policy." Then there are more specific provisions which outline the functions of the various organs of the government. In the context of current debate, a distinction should be made between guarantees of basic services to be provided by the state and the question of how and by whom will these services be provided. Would it be provided directly by the government?

For example, in case of law and order and administration of justice, government has the direct responsibility. But there are many other functions of the government, like provision of health, education, municipal services or supply of agricultural credit and electricity, which definitely can be contracted out, but would have to be supervised and regulated by government agencies.

I would like to underscore the basic changes which have taken place in the concept of public governance around the world since the 1970s. There was a time – one can trace it back to the British colonial period – when the central government was considered to be "ma-baap" – the idea being that the government takes care of every activity relating to the citizenry from the cradle to the grave.

Following independence from colonial rule, developing countries in Asia and Africa, inspired by revolutions in the Soviet Union and China, adopted the path of state socialism. We witnessed the phenomenal rise of public enterprises, since government was mandated the task of initiating socio-economic development.

It was the era of charismatic national leaders like Soekarno,

Nkrumah, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Julius Nyerere. They represented the new ideals of development based on social equity and encouraged massive public sector investments in the context of imperfect or undeveloped market conditions.

Collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union formally ended the era of state socialism for most developing countries and even for countries in the communist bloc. The agenda for administrative reforms, therefore, should firstly stress the need to redefine the scope of government, considering the reality of the society and economy of Bangladesh.

A primary objective would be to reduce the functions of government agencies according to assessed needs, eliminating inefficiency in work processes and minimising government controls. It may also involve redefining existing regulations or introducing altogether new ones where these are needed; but unlike in the past it has to be ensured so that such regulations are enforced with greater strictness.

For example, we definitely require very strict enforcement of land settlement regulations specially in urban areas, the reserve forests and the inland rivers, to protect our environment and the natural waterways. The thrust clearly should be to deregulate and diminish the scope of government interventions to the maximum extent possible, many of which have now become redundant in any case.

Priority to services provided from government counters

In the short run there is need to focus on bringing reforms in respect of all those government functions and agencies where people line up daily to receive services to which they are entitled. These are the services that are provided from public counters or offices, where ordinary citizens come face to face with a government functionary. This is the critical point where ordinary people in fact encounter the government. These are offices where people congregate daily and are subjected to harassments, they

suffer undue delays, they have to pay bribes or are altogether denied the services that they urgently need.

One reads the stories of corruption, harassments and hardships daily in the newspapers or sees the news on television. The services are provided from thousands of counters or government offices, all over the country – it could be the outdoor units of hospitals, the police thana, the civil and criminal courts, passport offices, banks where electricity as well as other utility bills are paid, sub-registrar offices, income tax offices, fertiliser factories from where fertilisers are supplied to dealers, REB offices, and so on.

I am talking about the entire range of government services which, like the health services, are either free or can be obtained on payment of prescribed fees. To obtain the services, people usually would have to come to a counter, submit a form, make a payment if required, and then wait anxiously for the service to be provided.

In the vast majority of cases the citizens direly in need of services go away after a long wait, frustrated, confused, angry and often humiliated by the arrogance of the service provider. This is the situation that needs to be reversed in the short run through urgent reforms in administration.

Contracting out municipal services

Many of the services now provided by the government could be more effectively provided by private or non-government bodies. One vital area where reforms could be introduced would be in respect of municipal services, which even in a large metropolitan city like Dhaka have been in shambles. Successive governments have beautified Dhaka by spending billions of taka, building water fountains, decorating the road islands and illuminating the roads.

But they have not provided the basic sanitation services like clean public toilets – as a consequence the floating population as well as the general public often use segments

of the foot paths as toilets. Even the broad avenues adjoining five star hotels like the Sonargaon Hotel are filled with human waste and stench.

A recent report by World Bank and Proshika showed that less than 17 percent of the metropolitan households were satisfied with sanitation services provided by the municipalities. The problem can be addressed by the city corporation in collaboration with the NGOs or communities themselves, provided necessary reforms are initiated by the concerned municipal authorities.

That the urban sanitation problem can be efficiently solved has been dramatically demonstrated through the dedicated work of Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak in our neighbouring country, India. He has spearheaded a quiet revolution in public sanitation in collaboration with the municipal government. He initiated the "Sulabh Shauchalaya" movement in 1974 which became a landmark in the history of sanitation. He introduced a system for operating and maintaining community toilets with bathing, laundry and urinal facilities (popularly known as Sulabh Shauchalaya Complex) with attendants providing service round the clock on pay-and-use basis first in Patna city and then elsewhere.

Dr. Pathak convinced administrators, planners and engineers about the successful two-pit pour-flush toilet in urban areas which would provide an affordable, safe and hygienic system for disposal of human waste in the absence of sewers and septic tanks. Before his arrival on the scene, nobody including the engineers, was ready to believe that this technology could work in big cities.

Now Sulabh is operating and maintaining more than 5,500 community complexes in 1,075 towns and metropolitan areas across India. These complexes have electricity and 24-hour water supply with separate enclosures for men and women. The users are charged nominal sums for using toilets and bath facilities. Some of the complexes are also provided with bath

and shower facility, cloak-rooms, telephones, and even primary healthcare. These complexes have been widely welcomed both by people and the authorities due to their cleanliness and good management.

Pay-and-use system ensures self-sustainability without any burden on public exchequer or local bodies. The complexes have also improved the surrounding environment considerably. It is a major reform in municipal services that can be quickly introduced by the local government authorities in our country as well – they can either visit the country next door or better still, invite Dr. Pathak to visit Bangladesh and learn from him directly how he brought about the impressive reforms in urban public sanitation.

This would be one example of how government can show that it is concerned about the welfare of its citizens and help improve their quality of life. Until the institutional reforms take place, the city corporation can at least show that it cares for ordinary citizens and do one favour to the millions of pedestrians – simply send its water trucks and wash the concerned segments of the foot paths once a day.

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Revelations, crises, and the way forward

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THE year 2007 has been a year of revelation for Bangladesh. Since "one-eleven," the country has witnessed one revelation after another, each more striking than the last. Unbelievable amounts of cash were plundered, and the exposure of the lifestyles of the rich and infamous has stunned the public.

With the activation of the Anti-Corruption Commission (which had been useless since its establishment), Bangladeshis had a glimpse into the lifestyles of the people who had amassed wealth through illegal means. This included a large number of political personalities, as well as some bureaucrats and leaders of collective bargaining agencies.

In a country considered to be one of the poorest in the world, reports of families with several houses, apartments, cars and yachts, and collections of exotic animals and birds, fascinated the public for weeks.

Many of these matters had been reported in the media for some time, although they were denied by the governments in the past. Bangladeshis have learned that there was support and sponsorship for the Islamic militants as they perpetrated a reign of terror in the northern part of the country.

Massive funds from the public exchequer were diverted for the construction and beautification of private property. Government owned land was grabbed or handed over to undeserving people, and organizations and contracts were manipulated to ensure that the benefits went to the powerful groups.

Other revelations were even more dramatic. People came to know that a minister collected huge sums of money in exchange for favourable treatment to criminals, and some literally got away with murder. Another assisted in committing a death sentence.

A former prime minister was so busy that she forgot to pay tax on her income. But the most striking revelation came from a former minister who was well-known for his regular tirades against the public who, often for good reasons, protested the imposition of taxes

that were extremely difficult to assess and collect.

Thanks to the changing circumstances, this former minister has revealed that he, too, did not pay his tax when it was due, and the people are inclined to believe that this tax would have remained uncollected had there not been the risk of detection and prosecution.

There is high expectation that all these stunning revelations will stimulate appropriate response from the government in order to contribute toward a permanent resolution of these maladies. This is of paramount importance for ensuring that the political system is rid of such undesirable people and their misdeeds for good. While the acts of the government are commendable, how does they fare in governing Bangladesh?

The country faces three imminent threats, in the form of floods, inflation, and deteriorating law and order situation. Millions of Bangladeshis are crawling up to higher grounds and moving to safe places to escape the onslaught of rising floodwater. Unable to find work or earn a livelihood, they face the dangers of starvation, disease, and pauperization.

This government's response is not much different from its predecessors'. Government officials are flying over the flood-affected areas, claiming that there was no shortage of foodstuff and those relief operations were proceeding smoothly. The public, as always, finds the government's efforts inadequate and the claims unrealistic.

In addition to the miseries of floods, the public has been hard hit with double digit inflation. According to a recent statement issued by the government, prices of essential commodities have increased considerably over the past year, by as much as 66 percent for some items.

Although one source from the government attributed the inflation to increased level of income, such an explanation was not considered acceptable by anyone due to the discrepancy between the paltry income increase and the huge jump in prices. Efforts to ensure an adequate supply of foodstuff, in cooperation with personnel from Bangladesh Rifles, have had little

impact so far. Advice from various quarters for considering alternative measures to ensure continuity of supply did not appeal to the government.

It is difficult to fathom the reasons behind the escalating crime wave under a state of emergency. Generally, the most visible impact of emergency rule is an immediate improvement in law and order. It is possible because security agencies have more leeway in dealing with crime and criminal elements, and the government is able to act swiftly. But the situation in Bangladesh seems to be different.

In searching for explanations for these three problems, which are threatening to undo all the good work done by the government so far, it may be pertinent to consider the areas in which the government has preferred to concentrate its resources and personnel. It has won popular support with its determination and efforts to eradicate corruption but, since Bangladesh has not had a government of this nature before, its mandate is not clear.

At the outset, the government's actions to improve the flow of traffic in Dhaka and resettle hawkers received public endorsement. There was overwhelming support for the government's mission to round up criminals and corrupt personalities, and, not surprisingly, the majority of those nabbed are prominent political personalities.

What has been the cost of this accomplishment? Sixty-two people have been interned so far, and some were convicted in absentia. As most of them had managed to get elected as members of Parliament and/or the cabinet, they are considered as VIP prisoners, and are accorded treatment commensurate with their status.

This entails, in some cases, designation of posh residences as "sub-jails," and arrangement of adequate security measures. Large contingents of security personnel are deployed for transporting the interns to and from courts, and most of them have made several court appearances.

At the same time, the government has to ensure that the interns are comfortable by providing them with air conditioners, television

sets, and other luxury items that the VIPs cannot live without. It has been reported that some more residences have been designated as "sub-jails," and renovations are afoot in anticipation of their occupation by more VIPs. One newspaper reported that new drapes and furniture were being prepared in anticipation of more VIP interns.

While the honest citizens are suffocating under the weight of inflation, the VIPs prisoners are protected, and their needs and comfort are ensured by the government. While the flood and inflation affected people are struggling to deal with hunger, disease, and health hazards, the VIPs are receiving the best possible medical care at public expense.

According to DIG (Prisons), 12 VIP prisoners have received treatment in BSMRM University (PG Hospital), Birdem, Dhaka Medical College and Apollo Hospital, and these are among the best facilities in the country.

While both urban and rural communities are terrorised by criminals, the VIP prisoners sleep safely under the watch of security forces. According to reports, they spend time playing, chatting, reading, and writing. This is a very comfortable position to be in, considering the stiff rate of inflation and deteriorating crime scene that have made life miserable for most Bangladeshis.

Thus, 62 VIP prisoners who had access to unlimited money and illegal arms are receiving the services that rightfully should be provided to law-abiding Bangladeshi citizens.

Bangladesh is teetering on the brink of a major breakthrough, or a return to the vicious cycle of crime and corruption. There are reasons to be optimistic about the progress made so far. The demon of corruption may be excoriated forever if the corrupt realise that they can no longer enjoy the immunity they had.

It might happen if the political parties and their leaders agree with the basic assumptions, and take a clear stand on this issue. They must agree to make a clean break from the past, although the risk involved in doing so should also be recognized. In case the govern-

ment fails to apprehend and prosecute the corrupt, the tendency to commit corruption could become stronger than ever before.

The direction in which Bangladesh is headed is still not clear. Most citizens are optimistic after witnessing the arrest and conviction of powerful people, and are waiting to see more criminals prosecuted. Alternatively, some have expressed reservations about the actual outcome of the purges, and are worried about conspiracies to send the leaders of the major parties into political exile.

The supporters of the government could lose their enthusiasm due to the pinch of inflation, which will be worsened by floods and the increasing incidence of crime. This group deserves immediate attention so that the confidence in the government remains high.

Most of the existing institutions have been discredited, and the blame has to be shared by all. The way forward needs to be mapped by setting priorities and acting according to plans with an organized approach. Fighting corruption is as important as ensuring the security of life and property, and the basic needs of the citizens.

Ignoring one while over-emphasising the other could result in squandering of the opportunity that has presented itself. This government has the potential to make a genuine contribution to the future of Bangladesh. Following the strategy of previous governments does not seem to be the best option to do so. Let us see some imagination and innovation from this government.

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Sri Lanka: Back to the future?

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WITH the capture of the last stronghold of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in the eastern province, the three-decade old ethnic war in Sri Lanka has entered into one of the most crucial phases for both sides.

The rebels from the minority Tamil community have been pushed away from the dense jungle around the lagoon town of Batticaloa they formerly controlled for over a decade. The government-sponsored public celebration of this military victory appears to be a justified and spontaneous reaction.

This is perhaps the biggest military success for the Sri Lankan security forces in this chronic conflict that has so far engulfed about 70,000 lives since 1983 when the LTTE started its bloody struggle for an independent state in the northern and eastern parts of the island.

The government forces have practically taken charge of the whole of eastern Sri Lanka and have confined the Tamil rebels to the northern part only – certainly a big feat when seen against the protracted ethnic conflict where the Sri Lankan forces had few moments to exult.

Indubitably, this is a big achievement for President Mahinda Rajapaksa's minority government, which had been desperately looking for such a military success to bolster its chances for a longer stint.

Early this year, when the government aggressively pushed for an unusual jump in the defence budget from an estimated Rs.96.21 billion in 2006 to Rs.139.55 billion in 2007, there was severe criticism from various quarters about this military extravaganza. At that time, the Rajapaksa government justified this hike on the plea that the government needed a full throttle assault on the Tamil positions to stage a military success before compelling the LTTE to revert to the negotiation table to resume the stalled peace talks.

And now, eventually, the government forces have successfully completed the first phase of the plan, that is the capture of eastern province, which had been languish-



LTTE member in action.

ing under the LTTE control for more than a decade.

Not surprisingly, the government supporters are flying high on this unusual – and relatively unexpected – success, with expectations that the LTTE leadership would now be compelled to return to the negotiation table.

There is no doubt that the loss of the eastern province has put the LTTE leadership under a psychological disadvantage versus the government, but still it is not expected to the extent of seeking the resumption of peace talks.

In fact, the coming days are likely to bring more headaches for the Rajapaksa government, as the LTTE has started hit-and-run attacks on the government forces after losing the battle in the eastern province.

This guerilla war will have a devastating effect on the Sri Lankan forces, which are still far too few in number to maintain effective control over the region where the Tamil rebels can easily disguise themselves as civilian Tamils to launch ambush attacks on the security forces.

The potential for trouble is very high. Holding the newly captured areas will obviously require more human resources, compelling the government to send more troops to establish stability in the region in the face of the LTTE's guerilla tactics.

This extra responsibility of ensuring the stability and consolidation in the just-captured areas will not only put an enormous logistic burden on the Sri Lankan military but also delay any planned offensives against the mini-state of the LTTE in the north. This is perhaps the major problem that will hamper the government strategy of goading the LTTE to seek a negotiated settlement of the issue.

The recent announcements by the LTTE leadership about adopting every possible mode, tactics, and tool to engage the Sri Lankan forces have obviously raised fears of the Tamil separatists resorting to their notorious suicide bombings, targeting civilians and state organisations.

This is a dreadful scenario that offers little hope for peace in the near future. This is also the biggest dilemma for the Rajapaksa government; how to pre-empt the resumption of terrorist activities of the LTTE? President Rajapaksa also knows that the celebrations of the military victory in the east are likely to soon fade away against the specter of the trade-mark guerilla strategy of the LTTE. But he is also clueless.

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