

Combating misgovernance: Lessons from the caretaker's intervention

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THE present caretaker government is a real caretaker in the truest sense of the term. It is taking care of the nation, appearing on the scenario at the moment when the whole nation was hard hit by a vicious circle of corruption coupled the increase in criminalisation and syndication.

To quote a letter to the editor of an English daily: "When everything was falling apart, we were feeling like we were on board a ship in a stormy sea, which might sink any moment. At that critical time, the caretaker government held the helm firmly and steered us safely to the shore... One after another, guilty people were brought to book and the hunt is going on. We are stunned by the magnitude of corruption of many ministers, MPs, politicians, government employees, businessmen..."

Misgovernance took a heavy toll, with all menacing setbacks. Derailed politico-bureaucratic leadership set the tone of moral erosion and societal degeneration. Recent history shows that misgovernance had led the country towards inevitable destruction.

Democracy could not flourish in the midst of the politician-made humanitarian crisis in a corruption-ridden country.

As the years passed, the unrelenting problem of misgovernance was exacerbated to a point of no return. This was the time when disorder was the order, irregular was regular, and Machiavellism was the political culture. The question became -- whether Bangladesh was a failed or a fragile state?

The caretaker government is now going all-out to erase the sullying marks of misgovernance left by the immediate past government. It is determined to run the show with utmost sincerity, missionary zeal and unequivocal commitment. Its assumption of responsibility to rewrite the future of the country that stood on the heap of misgovernance was a historical necessity.

The citizens repose faith in the present government, and consider it benevolent and a pathfinder. The caretaker has had to combat cross-cutting explosive problems linked with the misgovernance that had bruised and battered public life. They were like the heroes in the folktales, as the golden men took

position to strike at the monster symbolised by the blatant misgovernance.

Its intervention raised a glimmer of hope among ordinary masses and was welcomed by electronic media and civil societies. There has been an advocacy campaign for the eradication of corruption, as evidenced by a discussion held in Shilpakala Academy on July 14, followed by the concert in co-operation with ATN Bangla Multimedia production Limited.

Highlights of caretaker's intervention

From our perusal of national dailies and magazines we can spell out the highlights of the caretaker's intervention led by Fakhruddin Ahmed:

- Operation cleanup throughout the country to nab corrupt suspects and criminals.
- Reconstitution of Anti-Corruption Commission with fresh organogram and enhanced manpower, and the formation of a national co-ordination committee on corruption and crime, and a task force to back up the ACC.
- Setting up of special tribunals to try the cases of corruption,

money laundering and terrorism.

- Holding meetings with businessmen to control price hike, and formation of temporary kitchen market managed by BDR.
- Managing acute power crisis by reducing shopping hours unto 8 pm.
- Execution of the six top militant (JMB kingpins) on March 29.
- Recasting of the important institutions like the Election Commission (EC) and Public Service Commission.
- Promoting reformation of politics as a social movement, freeing it from criminalisation.
- Thinking of reforming police to free it from political influence.
- On-going initiative to complete independence of judiciary and Election Commission (EC). CG approves an independent EC Secretariat on principle.
- Acceleration of voter registration process across the country with the help of the army, to prepare voter list with photograph and national ID card.
- Formation of Financial Intelligence Unit by Bangladesh Bank, with sophisticated software and techniques to identify

financial crime. This is in connection with the possible agreement with certain countries to repatriate the siphoned money transferred abroad. This is to curb financial crimes.

- Current drive of the NBR in search of ghost (suspected) accounts to free banks from black money holders.
- Action of ACC to ensure submission of wealth statement within a time frame.
- Current drive to find irregularities in the process of getting approval of design for property development.
- Demolition of illegally constructed 22 storied Rangs Bhabon.
- The approval of the script of the corrected history now a waiting printing for the 2008 academic session by the education ministry; restoring Bangabandhu as the father of the nation.
- Hearing the Bangobandhu murder case by constituting a 3-member bench of the Appellate Division of the Supreme court; mentionably the initiative to constitute full bench to do the needful was left pending for a pretty long time before the advent of the present CTG.
- Return of AKM Mohiuddin

Ahmed, one of the former army officers sentenced to death for the bloody coup on August 1975, from U.S.A. due to active initiative of CTG.

Decision taken on the formation of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

Initiative taken to form National Security Council.

It is difficult to attempt evaluation of the performance of the caretaker government (CTG). Given the size of the government, and the time taken, it has done more than enough to earn a reputation at home and abroad. The highlights of its intervention speak for the somewhat astounding success of the CTG. To cite editorial comments (The Bangladesh Observer, July 11): "Thanks are due to 11-member advisory council which is functioning better than the 60-plus cabinet of the immediate past government." However, the CTG, within the timeline, cannot be expected to perform miracles.

No regime in the past dared to take up the challenge of saving the nation from the vice generated by the political stalwarts. The crack-down thus unleashed against corruption and terrorism is undoubtedly a courageous move.

The CTG set about the task of putting things back in order. It is a reminder that with honest leadership with efficiency, things would have been different. The CTG's intervention indicates the right direction so that things do not go wayward.

Yet, there is a long way to go. However well-intentioned the agenda of the CTG might be, the challenges in the wake of its straightforward cleansing are huge. Clearing overgrown jungles that hedge the political landscape is a mammoth task. Of course, a full-blooded reformation on the political frontier, encouraged by the CTG, is the need of the hour to get rid of political bankruptcy. Complete governance reforms in public bureaucracy, of course, a stupendous task, are necessary to remove backlog and administrative rubbish piled up over time.

True, the caretaker is trying hard to create not only a level playing field for a credible election but also a fair field in public distribution system. While doing so, the CTG should make sure that all conspirators have been checkmated. There are some signs of stress and indecisions. In many government institutions and autonomous

bodies, the ghosts of the immediate past regime are there to tilt important decisions in their favour. Their very presence in key organs of policy and administration is injurious to the non-partisan caretaker's image.

Still continuing as incumbents in various power points, they are lurking to confuse things as saboteurs with evil design. The CTG should keep them in tight corner; better dislodge them altogether. The current government cannot afford to fail. In case the situation slips beyond its control for monumental blunder, the country will be reverted to the sinister days of confrontation.

Their substantive measures should not turn out to be counter-productive. The recent untoward incident in the Dhaka University campus, arising out of a trifling matter, is an eye-opener. The CTG needs to handle the situation with a good deal of circumspection so that the conspiratorial designs of vested interest are thwarted in the long run.

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Crying wolf the third time

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DURING each of the last two years, 2005 and 2006, the IMF raised the alarm of rising inflation. It advised the Bangladesh Bank (BB) to tighten monetary policy to ward off this menace. BB complied without much thought if what was being said was actually true. There were gaping holes in their arguments that BB not only missed, but also ignored even when pointed out.

But this year there was a remarkable change. Egged on by the so-called think tanks, businesspeople and media personalities, who were taking pot shots at the IMF, Bangladesh Bank bravely decided not to respond to the IMF's cry of inflation for the third time with a further tightening of the monetary policy. But was the third time "no" on the back of the first two "yes-es" the correct response? Probably not.

BB's situation seems to be similar to the villagers of an ancient fable. A young shepherd boy who grazed sheep at the edge of the village thought of sprucing up his boring life with a practical joke. He cried: "Wolf." The villagers rushed to his help only to find that the naughty boy was joking. A few days later the boy cried wolf again. The villagers again rushed to his help and were disgusted that they were fooled. Several days later the villagers heard an anguished cry of "wolf" again, but this time they decided not to respond. Unfortunately this time the wolf did attack and kill the hapless boy and many sheep. The moral of the story is that if one lies frequently (or says incorrect things), he will not be trusted even when he speaks the truth.

If this were an economic fable I would deduce another moral: if you do not verify facts before you leap into action you are likely to incur losses. In this story the villagers did not independently verify the presence of the wolf; they believed the naughty boy. Twice they responded positively when he falsely (incorrectly) cried wolf and suffered losses in terms of lost time and effort. The third time the villagers made a worse mistake by not responding to the genuine cry of wolf and suffered even greater losses.

Perhaps not many people sympathise with IMF because their previous calls for tight money were not fully justified. It was not correct to claim the mild inflation that the country was experiencing during 2004 was mainly demand driven. Actually the non-food price inflation (akin to core inflation) fell by a third between 2002-03 and 2004-05 and was much lower than the average inflation. On the other hand, food price inflation during the same period was more than doubled and was much higher than the average inflation. Hence, the moderate increase in inflation at the time was due mostly to food price inflation.

It was not difficult to establish that domestic prices of major food items were strongly tied to their international prices as one should expect to be the case in a small open economy. Hence, the inflation was mostly of the imported variety that was sustained by an accommodating monetary policy. It was unnecessary to put on monetary brakes at this stage since the inflation was still modest and business confidence was high. However, BB did obligingly tighten the money market by jacking up

the interest rate. The full impact of the contractionary policy did not become evident until after more than a year, both because of a very buoyant investment demand and the usual lag of monetary effects. The current slump in investment is due to a complex interplay of forces unleashed by BB's contractionary monetary policy, the abnormal political situation post-2006, and inappropriate market interventions that severely eroded business confidence.

The situation in the second half of 2007 is markedly different from that of early 2005. At least three changes that have occurred are of significance for monetary policy. First, the government seems to have swallowed hook, line and sinker a highly questionable theory that held syndication and hoarding as mainly responsible for the essential price inflation. The consequent drive against the business community in search of hoarders quickly turned the buoyant business mood into a pessimistic outlook, resulting in a slow-down of business activities.

Second, a large number of people lost their livelihood and employment because of an ill-conceived drive against vendors. The slow-down of economic activities has also reduced employment opportunities. As a result incomes of people at the lower end of the income spectrum have suffered a decline. Inflation will have a particularly harsh effect on them.

Third and most important, inflation has risen considerably and can be no longer said to be moderate. It has now breached the double digit mark for the first time in a long while and threatens to become embedded in the system



due to inflationary expectations. In the current situation there is little to be gained from an easy monetary policy in terms of increased investment, but a great deal to lose in the longer term if the economy ends up with runaway inflation. The IMF's cry of inflation the third time had a good deal of merit and BB should have given it a more serious consideration. Indeed, navigating the economy through the stormy seas of uncertainty would require close collaboration between BB and the Ministry of Finance on economic policy. The costs of mistakes will be high and we already have had a glimpse of that.

The full import of monetary

policy was not fully understood even in the West until recently. This changed with the publication of the monumental work of Milton Friedman with Anna Schwartz on the monetary history of the US. They demonstrated convincingly that inappropriate monetary policies of the Fed were the principal determinants of the severity and the duration of the Great Depression of the 1930s that shook the very foundations of the western economies. Since then a great deal of care and scrutiny have been accorded to monetary policy in the West. The central banks that are responsible for designing and implementing monetary policy have gained a high esteem to the

extent that some have been made autonomous to make them virtually free of political interferences.

Monetary policy-making is still in a formative stage in Bangladesh. It is not clear if BB fully appreciates the import of the responsibility it bears on behalf of the nation. Its servile policy-making does not inspire confidence in its ability to steer the economy through difficult times. It is unlikely that its demand for more autonomy will find favour in many quarters since it may translate into more influence of the IMF over the monetary policy of the country.

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Enrolling stranded Pakistanis

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IN the then East Pakistan all its Urdu-speaking residents were commonly known as Biharis. Among such people were Punjabis, Pathans and non-Bangalee Indian emigrants. The unfortunate shooting in 1952 was the first shock to the foundation of Pakistan. In the quest for making Bangla as one of the two state languages of Pakistan, the Bangla-speaking and non-Bangla speaking people started moving apart.

With the Bengalis agitating for getting due status for their language, the non-Bangalee population started feeling uncertain about their future in the then East Pakistan. Gradually, they started migrating to West Pakistan in small numbers. Some of them, however, had a feeble hope that the Bengalis' desire for establishing Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan may be repressed.

Under the able leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bengalis started gaining ground to reach their goal. At this stage, no political party (except Muslim League) in Pakistan felt strongly about the need for strengthening nationalism. Others were more concerned about their own party's interest.

In such a situation, a few hundred thousand non-Bangali people had no other option but to look toward the Pakistan government for their security. It may be pointed out that, because of the rule by military governments from 1958 to 1971, there could not be any political approach for the political problem.

The Awami League was fully aware of the fact that attaining independence of Bangladesh was an extremely difficult proposition because of lack of Bangalees in both the civilian and the military departments. Thus, it thought of organising the Bangalee population against the ruling junta. The Pakistani military government, rather foolishly, chose the path of repression of the Bangalees, with the direct support of the non-Bangalees. Thus, the Biharis (non-Bangalee) became victim of circumstances.

We feel sorry for the stranded Pakistanis who migrated from India with great hope and aspirations. In the communal riots of 1946, a large number of Bihari Muslims lost their lives in Calcutta and Bihar. Their greatest mistake was not integrating with the local Bangalees. Instead they became agents of the Pakistan government.

The Biharis have paid enough for their lack of political wisdom. The miscreant Biharis who worked for anti-liberation forces could leave Bangladesh safely, though many of them could not be re-habilitated properly in Pakistan. Some of those Biharis had to leave behind close relatives in Bangladesh. Thus, it became a human problem for both Pakistan

and Bangladesh.

Notwithstanding the concern shown by successive Bangladesh governments during the last 36 years, the problem of rehabilitation of several hundred thousand "stranded Pakistanis" could not be solved because of lack of interest of the Pakistani governments. Pakistani governments have informed us that these Biharis were not acceptable to the local Pakistanis.

We do not know the real truth. However, we have to admit that rehabilitation of these "stranded Pakistanis" should be done at the earliest, because of two considerations. First, they came to this part of Pakistan as refugees. The then central and provincial governments accepted them and gave them citizenship, and second, as Bangladesh was created through a war of liberation and not by any political settlement, the Bangladesh government cannot remain indifferent to the issue of re-habilitation of these people.

The "stranded Pakistanis" deserves no less sympathy than the displaced Palestinians. If Palestinians can be re-habilitated why not these people, whose ancestors sacrificed their hearths and homes in the hope for living in their "land of dream."

The Biharis are now living in abject misery, much worse than our rickshaw pullers. They have passed their life stranded in 80 sq. ft. (per family) for the last 36 years. The question of their re-habilitation is no more a political question. It is a human problem for both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Though successive governments of Bangladesh failed to solve the problem of the "stranded Pakistanis," it appears that the CTG is proceeding with problem properly. The decision to give voting rights to the Urdu-speaking people who were born in Bangladesh after December 16, 1971, and those who were between 10 and 18 years during the Liberation War, is a bold one. It will be a flicker of hope for the "stranded Pakistanis." If the decision is vetted by the law ministry the following points may be looked into:

- Whether the camp dwellers will be evicted or displaced.
 - Whether ID card will get access to property, education, social security and secured job.
 - What may happen to older generation who do not fit in the set categories for making them voters? Will they be evicted?
- We are certain that the CTG will not take any decision which may cause suffering to the "stranded Pakistanis." Around 116,000, out of 300,000, "stranded Pakistanis" will get ID cards. The rest 184,000 may also be indirectly benefited because they are mainly relatives of those 116,000 who may get economic, social and political benefit from the government.

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Enhance amenities for police reform

DELWAR HOSSAIN ARIFF

THE caretaker government has already allocated Taka 360 lac for the police service, and this is enormously an appreciable idea. It is a matter of satisfaction for us that the government has been earnestly working for reform in the police service, which will lastingly help to improve the overall law and order situation in the country.

It is a habit in our country to characterise the police as being ruined, politicised and negligent, and brutal to the people. The police have been used as a political bludgeon throughout the British rule, the Pakistani regime, and all the political governments in independent Bangladesh. Additionally, they have been neglected in terms of receiving their due facilities during the course of time. We have to bear in mind that they have power; they are working hard, almost 20 hours a day, but sadly

getting meager remuneration. So this fissure is making them besmirched. Let's imagine a deprived person with a revolver (muscle). If he is starving but has no cash to purchase food, he will go to a food shop and ask for it, but if that fails then he will use force to get the food. This may be applicable for the police service.

Now, someone can say that a policeman gets remuneration according to the scale. But here a question may arise; whether we should expect better service from a policeman who works 20 hours per day, or from another employee who works only, or at best, 8 hours a day? Being acquainted with several police officers, and observing personally, I have got a clear idea about their agony. They are not merely receiving poor salary and serving additional time but, sometimes, they also have to bear some operating costs of cases from their own pockets.

Since if they have to carry on with their occupation they have to run the cases assigned to them. As a result, for the sake of investigation, they have to question witnesses, go to the investigation place burning their own fuel, make arrangement for autopsy, and even buy paper for writing. There are many more expenses which come from the policemen's pockets. Now if we want accountable, caring and proper duty from them, then it would be doing injustice to them if they are not given enough facilities.

I consider the difference between the spending on a case and the meager amount against the costs as the main reason for the police becoming spoiled. It might be that they make additional money from the public. But if the government allocates enough money for these functions I believe that bribery in the police service will decrease significantly. Every year, we spend Taka

thousand million in ADP, but I would like to say let us reform the police service by allocating enough money. I bet the entire country will certainly observe the result. The amount of money that the government has already allocated for police reform is not sufficient. As we come to know from the media reports, the police authority asked for some facilities from the government, which is completely justified.

I would not like to say that a huge number of members in the police service are ruined, but would like to mention that the majority of the members of police service lead an inhuman life. Some leading dailies of our country have recently published a number of investigative reports on the anguish of the police, and I watched one of those stories on a television channel, and was dumbfounded. The food they were taking was just pitiable. A police

constable said: "We are not able to eat this rice for the bad odour, and want to give our surplus food to beggars but they even reject it." Some policemen have to sleep by rotation as there are not enough beds for them.

Now visualise a policeman, after having a harsh 20 hours duty in the streets controlling the violence, starting work the next day without having a proper sleep. How could we expect better performance from them? I would like to salute those policemen who have been serving us in spite of these pitiable inconveniences. I am confident that we are getting people to join the police service due to the high unemployment. Before passing any remarks about the police we have to think of their situation, but many of us are actually unaware of their condition. Out of my own interest, I have been monitoring the living styles of some of my friends who

are in police service. A number of them told me that they would like to quit the occupation, but they have no other alternative.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has started a project, and I as a citizen of the country respectfully urge the present government to implement the recommendations of this project completely. The government can take an experimental scheme in this regard, and if they find that the service by the police improves after the increase in amenities then they can permanently implement those recommendations. The police are intimately connected with the general people, and this step can benefit the people of our country. I can state that without increasing the facilities police reform will be limited to words and pages only.

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