

Doing away with Titas meter readers

This is not be enough to curb corruption

TRIMMING an overstaffed organisation is a good thing. But the primary reason cited by Titas Gas for doing so seems rather unconvincing and may be even a misplaced proposition.

The only government agency responsible for transmission and distribution of gas throughout the country has felt compelled to suggest doing away with the more than hundred meter readers, in their new organogram. The meter readers have since become well known for wanton indulgence in corruption and for amassing huge amount of illegal wealth, after the government task force unearthed their misdeeds. The scope and the filthy way a category of Titas employees had been milking the state of huge amount of money and filling up their own coffers is indeed mind boggling.

But we ask whether by simply doing away with a part of its manpower would help Titas rid itself of corruption? It is matter for thought that corruption within the organisation was unearthed by an external agency. Are we to understand that had it not been for the task force, the despicable state of affairs would have gone on, and this band of dishonest people would have continued in their merry way of brazen corruption?

We feel that the recommendation, of doing away with a part of manpower at the lower level, is a poor excuse for the utter rot that has eaten into the entire system of Titas and the utter oversight failure of the higher management. One would like to ask, where was the internal supervision that is supposed to be inherent in any public organisation, let alone one that deals with crores in public money? Was it possible for these people, posted at the lowest rung of the organisation, to indulge in reckless corruption without some of the higher-ups in the organisation either turning a blind eye or colluding in the sordid affair?

We suggest that one needs more than mere changes in the organogram and reduction of manpower to rid an organisation of corruption. For Titas Gas there is a need for a complete overhaul and cleansing of the system. Not only those that had indulged in amassing huge amount of illegal wealth, but also those that allowed this to go on, either by colluding or by failing in their duty to exercise adequate supervision, must be taken to task. Also, there must be enough systemic safeguards so that the scope to indulge in corruption is reduced.

Democracy and development



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

DESPITE the fact that the capitalist system enveloped by democratic governance has been unable to provide the essential goods to the maximum number of people in whose name democracy is preached, the world is yet to devise a system that would remove the lacuna that exists between the rich and the poor.

Because of the fact that in the last half a century only Botswana has graduated from the category of least developed country to a developing country, and only Singapore and South Korea are considered as developed from among developing countries, one has to think of the instruments responsible for the graduation of economic development of these countries to higher levels. In the case of South Korea, the command economy under the military dictatorship of Park Chung-Hee whose distribution of national wealth at low cost or no cost at all (given at interest rate that was lower than the inflation rate and a facility not given to the general public) resulted in the growth of chaebols or big business houses that

employed large numbers of people in export oriented industries that ultimately led to a sort of trickle down distribution of wealth that by any standard was not equitable and resulted in huge disparity of income between the super rich and the rest of the society.

Park Chung-Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan's administrations are being criticised now for allocation of national wealth, foreign currency and loans in projects that did not make optimum use of the resources, which were often arbitrarily used and bred corruption. When Park Chung-Hee decided to build the highway connecting Seoul with the port city of Insein he was thought to have embarked on a mad project that was not only too costly but was also too wide for the traffic that at that time used to ply between the two points.

Today, the Seoul-Insein highway is clogged with cars, trucks, and buses, and is a lifeline for the exports of South Korea. Such criticism notwithstanding, Park Chung-Hee's regime maintained hawk-eyed monitoring of the private sector that was beneficiary

GOING DEEPER

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of the munificence of the military dictator. Though such a policy would be impossible to follow in this age of transparency and democracy, it did succeed in the economic development of South Korea that left Stalinist Communist North Korea far behind in all respects.

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This "bureaucratic-authoritarian-industrialising" regime increased the per capita income of South Korea from \$103 in 1963 to \$7435 in 1993. Park formed a "developmentalist" coalition through cooption of big business, subsidy to the agricultural sector, and control of labour to give the economy the boost it needed. The policies followed confirmed the belief that post-1945 developmental policies did very little to improve the condi-

tion of the 40% poor who inhabited the earth.

But then, following Park Chung-Hee's policies was possible because of the Cold War dynamics and because decolonisation had not yet been completed totally, with the result that impoverished colonised Third World countries blamed the colonisers for the metropolitan-periphery relationship that arrested their growth while the Cold War dictates allowed the big powers to continue with their stranglehold over the dictators who ruled the impoverished population of these Third World countries. The fractious world that one sees today is partly due to the "democracy deficit" that the superpowers (before the collapse of the Soviet Empire) tolerated. The US gave aid -- both military and financial -- to contain communism in line with the suggestions made by George Keenan and the Cold War warriors (from Dulles brothers till Ronald Reagan, who called the Soviet Union an "evil empire") in conjunction with the leaders of the Western world.

The second wave of democrati-

sation, in the estimate of Samuel Huntington, that came with decolonisation brought with it the unquenchable thirst for freedom and democracy. Whether institutions to sustain democratic setups were there in these countries with new names and new flags giving them international identity as members of the United Nations was often ignored.

Consequently, many of these countries that had clad themselves with democratic systems of governance failed to measure up to the accepted standard of freedom and respect for human rights that are essential components of democracy. The deviants that wrought the carnage of 9/11 and comprised the core of al-Qaeda took full advantage of the failures of governments, in the Islamic world in particular, in providing greater economic growth and failing to institute Western political models of governance for recruiting followers who would be willing to jump into fire at the behest of their commanders.

This aberration of Islam would not have been possible had the Pan-Arabism succeeded in bringing about cohesion in the Islamic world, and its projection of oil as an effective instrument of power and Islam as a peaceful creed and not a contestant of Christianity as historian Bernard Lewis and many other Western intellectuals of impeccable credentials have tried to portray.

The roots of muslim rage, as Lewis would have us believe, is not

because Islam from its inception has regarded Christianity as an "inferior" religion nor due to its resistance to modernity defined as, echoing Jorgen Habermas, a replacement of divine providence with autonomous rational human mind effectively ending veneration of tradition, or the conviction of some Muslims that overwhelming influence of "debasement of Western culture" would destroy the purity of the Islamic faith, but because of the injustice inflicted upon the Muslim world by the West from the time the West established "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" with the Orient.

The way forward for a country like Bangladesh, being a Muslim nation, and an underdeveloped one is cooperation (presuming there are irreconcilable differences) with the West, neither being able to ignore the other because, for the foreseeable future, certainly in the twenty-first century however much it is touted as an Asian Century and China becoming the world's largest economy, the Western powers, notably the US, shall remain the preeminent global power dictating the socio-economic and political direction the world will take.

A sort of multi-polarity may exist in the world system but the uni-polarity in the sense of US having the last word will remain the order of the day.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

The essential elections



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

PRESSURE on the caretaker government (CTG) is reportedly mounting from both home and abroad for lifting of the state of emergency and announcement of election date. Political parties, civil society and also the development partners are getting concerned about the election and eager to know when it will be held.

Foreign dignitaries, including British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Donald Camp, the principal deputy assistant secretary of the US State Department, who recently visited the country, made cautious observations on these entangled issues and are eager to see Bangladesh return to democracy and elected government through credible elections as soon as possible.

Though neither Miliband nor Camp received any clear deadline for the lifting of the state of emergency, both of them made it clear that their respective governments' were banking on the CTG's assurance of holding elec-

BY THE NUMBERS

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tion by this year. The people felt encouraged by the Election Commission's (EC) proposed electoral reforms, particularly the move to register political parties with necessary reforms during the current interregnum so that democracy could be sustainable. The EC has now decided to relax its electoral reforms laws.

In the revised draft of its proposed electoral law reforms the EC has relaxed some conditions for registration of the political parties. According to the relaxed conditions, an existing political party will be eligible for registration if it had polled at least one percent of the total votes cast in any general election since independence. This had been fixed at two percent earlier.

A new political party will be eligible for registration if it has organisational committees in at least one third of the districts, and at least 200 members in each upazila.

The EC has reiterated in the revised draft that political parties willing to be registered would have to include in their constitutions that they would not have

student wings in the educational institutions, or labour wings in the industries and overseas units. It is a welcome development, and the EC must stick to this imperative electoral reform.

There is not an iota of doubt in our minds that the political parties in the country need substantive reforms for transition from totalitarian rule to democracy. They have collectively failed to uphold the secular democratic aspirations that drove the nation to fight the liberation war. Political leaders now need to reach an understanding across party lines to rid politics of the influence of black money and muscle power.

The EC has failed to complete a number of tasks relating to the electoral roadmap, which it announced on July 15, 2007. The voter registration affair is going beyond schedule. The EC has so far completed registration of only 46 percent (till February 16) of nearly eight crore voters, which is quite disappointing.

The issue of eligibility of Jamaat-e-Islami for getting registered with the EC as a parliamentary party has become conten-

tious as most of the political parties have demanded barring of war criminals and anti-liberation forces from contesting in elections.

As many as 14 out of the 16 political parties that participated in the first round of talks with the EC strongly demanded disqualification of anti-liberation forces, including Jamaat-e-Islami, from getting registered as a parliamentary party.

The EC is also searching for ways to deal with the issue, echoing a similar sentiment in this regard. Responding to demands from most political parties, the EC has incorporated provisions in the proposed electoral laws to permanently prevent the war criminals from participating in the parliamentary elections.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed had also said it would be unwarranted if war criminals contest the elections. But all such moves would go in vain if the CTG does not take appropriate steps to bring them to book.

The EC should not proceed with its proposal to re-demarcate some of the constituencies, as it has the potential of breeding

chaos, unless it is done to the satisfaction of all the political parties. This may hamper the entire election process.

The EC kicks off its second round electoral reforms talks with political parties on February 24 to complete it in five days. The second round talks will pave the way for the CTG to start its crucial dialogue with political parties next month to find a formula for holding a participatory, fair and credible parliamentary election by the end of 2008.

The agenda for the dialogue should be carefully determined, attaching highest priority to burning political issues like boycotting parliament, imposing hartal and blockade, igniting conflicts and the blame game. The political parties must agree to nominate clean candidates, and to continue anti-corruption measures if they are elected to power.

The people of this country have witnessed three fair and free elections under the CTGs since 1991. Unfortunately, these elections could not bring any qualitative change in the leadership. What leaves us all with a very disturbing feeling is that no public interest was served by those who were placed in public positions in these elections.

The demands for lifting state of emergency and announcement of election date are becoming increasingly shrill, particularly from the political parties, civil society members and the

media, as according to them, there is no other alternative for overcoming the crises that are plaguing the country.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed has been saying repeatedly that the CTG was determined to hold election as early as possible and also to reform the electoral process. Army chief Gen Moeen U Ahmed has also reiterated that he would like to see a competent, honest and committed leadership running the country in future.

Still, whisperings are going the rounds about whether the stalled parliamentary election will be held with full participation in due time, as some newspapers are carrying confusing news like formation of national government and, thus, creating suspicion in the public mind.

The people would not like to wait beyond December 2008, the self-imposed deadline of the CTG, for holding a credible and meaningful election, as they strongly believe that return of power to a democratic government is the only way for Bangladesh to tackle the economic woes.

Time is running out. Therefore, the first and foremost duty of the CTG should be to announce the date of 9th parliamentary election and lift the state of emergency, creating an environment conducive to holding the election.

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Dumb and dumber: Are Americans hostile to knowledge?

PATRICIA COHEN

A popular video on YouTube shows Kellie Pickler, the adorable platinum blonde from "American Idol," appearing on the Fox game show "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" during celebrity week. Selected from a third-grade geography curriculum, the \$25,000 question asked: "Budapest is the capital of what European country?"

Ms. Pickler threw up both hands and looked at the large blackboard, perplexed. "I thought Europe was a country," she said. Playing it safe, she chose to copy the answer offered by one of the genuine fifth graders: Hungary. "Hungry?" she said, eyes widening in disbelief. "That's a country? I've never heard of Hungary. I've never heard of it."

Such, uh, lack of global awareness is the kind of thing that drives Susan Jacoby, author of "The Age

of American Unreason," up a wall. Ms. Jacoby is one of a number of writers with new books that bemoan the state of American culture.

Joining the circle of curmudgeons this season is Eric G. Wilson, whose "Against Happiness" warns that the "American obsession with happiness" could "well lead to a sudden extinction of the creative impulse, that could result in an extermination as horrible as those foreshadowed by global warming and environmental crisis and nuclear proliferation."

Then there is Lee Siegel's "Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob," which inveighs against the Internet for encouraging solipsism, debased discourse and arrant commercialisation. Mr. Siegel, one might remember, was suspended by The New Republic for using a fake online persona in order to trash critics of his blog

("you couldn't tie Siegel's shoelaces") and to praise himself ("brave, brilliant").

Ms. Jacoby, whose book came out on Tuesday, doesn't zero in on a particular technology or emotion, but rather on what she feels is a generalized hostility to knowledge. She is well aware that some may tag her a crank. "I expect to get bashed," said Ms. Jacoby, 62, either as an older person who upbraids the young for plummeting standards and values, or as a secularist whose defense of scientific rationalism is a way to disparage religion.

Ms. Jacoby, however, is quick to point out that her indictment is not limited by age or ideology. Yes, she knows that eggheads, nerds, bookworms, longhairs, pointy heads, highbrows and know-it-alls have been mocked and dismissed throughout American history. And liberal and conservative writers, from Richard Hofstadter to Allan

Bloom, have regularly analyzed the phenomenon and offered advice.

T. J. Jackson Lears, a cultural historian who edits the quarterly review Raritan, said, "The tendency to this sort of lamentation is perennial in American history," adding that in periods "when political problems seem intractable or somehow frozen, there is a turn toward cultural issues." But now, Ms. Jacoby said, something different is happening: anti-intellectualism (the attitude that "too much learning can be a dangerous thing") and anti-rationalism ("the idea that there is no such things as evidence or fact, just opinion") have fused in a particularly insidious way.

Not only are citizens ignorant about essential scientific, civic and cultural knowledge, she said, but they also don't think it matters. She pointed to a 2006 National

Geographic poll that found nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds don't think it is necessary or important to know where countries in the news are located. So more than three years into the Iraq war, only 23 percent of those with some college could locate Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel on a map.

Ms. Jacoby, dressed in a bright red turtleneck with lipstick to match, was sitting, appropriately, in that temple of knowledge, the New York Public Library's majestic Beaux Arts building on Fifth Avenue. The author of seven other books, she was a fellow at the library when she first got the idea for this book back in 2001, on 9/11.

Walking home to her Upper East Side apartment, she said, overwhelmed and confused, she stopped at a bar. As she sipped her bloody mary, she quietly listened to two men, neatly dressed in suits. For a second she thought they were going to compare that

day's horrifying attack to the Japanese bombing in 1941 that blew America into World War II:

"This is just like Pearl Harbor," one of the men said.

The other asked, "What is Pearl Harbor?"

"That was when the Vietnamese dropped bombs in a harbor, and it started the Vietnam War," the first man replied.

At that moment, Ms. Jacoby said, "I decided to write this book." Ms. Jacoby doesn't expect to revolutionize the nation's educational system or cause millions of Americans to switch off "American Idol" and pick up Schopenhauer. But she would like to start a conversation about why the United States seems particularly vulnerable to such a virulent strain of anti-intellectualism. After all, "the empire of infotainment doesn't stop at the American border," she said, yet

students in many other countries consistently outperform American students in science, math and reading on comparative tests.

In part, she lays the blame on a failing educational system. "Although people are going to school more and more years, there's no evidence that they know more," she said.

Ms. Jacoby also blames religious fundamentalism's antipathy toward science, as she grieves over surveys that show that nearly two-thirds of Americans want creationism to be taught along with evolution.

Ms. Jacoby doesn't leave liberals out of her analysis, mentioning the New Left's attacks on universities in the 1960s, the decision to consign African-American and women's studies to an "academic ghetto" instead of integrating them into the core curriculum, ponderous musings on rock music

and pop culture courses on everything from sitcoms to fat that trivialize college-level learning.

Avoiding the liberal or conservative label in this particular argument, she prefers to call herself a "cultural conservationist."

For all her scholarly interests, though, Ms. Jacoby said she recognized just how hard it is to tune out the 24/7 entertainment culture. A few years ago she participated in the annual campaign to turn off the television for a week. "I was stunned at how difficult it was for me," she said.

The surprise at her own dependency on electronic and visual media made her realize just how pervasive the culture of distraction is and how susceptible everyone is -- even curmudgeons.

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