

Citizens' right to information

Real test will be in implementation of law

A fundamental underpinning of a democratic order is the right of citizens to come by information they need. The good news, therefore, is that such a long-felt need for information, indeed for provisions to be there to help people acquire such information, looks about to be met in Bangladesh. With the head of the caretaker government having already committed his administration to preparing and presenting a right to information act to the country, the course is now clear for us to take the matter to fruition.

A meaningful addition has been made into this whole issue of the right to information through the plan of the authorities to have every registered organisation in the country legally and morally guarantee the provision of information to citizens who seek such information. That is as it should be, for in a pluralistic system it is a given that the privileges citizens need and demand must be provided to them to their satisfaction. In other words, the right to information is now not merely a matter that enjoins upon the government a responsibility to give citizens the information they need but has at the same time taken on a wider area whereby every organisation registered under the law of the land will be bound to respond to questions from the public. And that is particularly significant, seeing that till now such laws as the Official Secrets Act have regularly come in the way of a transparent working of the administrative system and implementation of development plans in Bangladesh. Such hindrances to public inquiries have also been observed in areas like medical treatment and the working of NGOs. Citizens with genuine concerns about their welfare or that of people close to them have till now remained outside the bounds of openness where a provision of information relating to their cases is concerned.

We quite agree with the suggestion that people aggrieved by the reluctance of organisations to provide them with the information they seek can appeal to the heads of those organisations for redress. But let there be a caveat here, which is that bureaucratic complications should not come into the procedure. We do not expect piles of unanswered queries to sink the entire purpose of the right to information law; and because we do not, we think it will be worthwhile putting in place a mechanism for a citizen to be speedily supplied with the information he seeks. Even as right to information becomes part of governance, measures must be taken to ensure that such a law is not misused or abused. With provisions for stakeholders to be consulted on the law, matters look encouraging. Let all that be given more substance by the draft of the proposed right to information act being put on the website, in order for public opinion to be elicited on its various aspects, within a time-bound frame.

Artefacts need scientific preservation

Let's take stock of things and do the needful

It is a matter of concern that the National Museum which has at its disposal more than 86,000 artefacts -- of immense archaeological, cultural and aesthetic value -- doesn't yet have modern security and identification systems to preserve and protect the ancient treasures. The archaeological experts at the museum still depend on manual checks and visual inquiry to judge the genuineness of any artefact. Obviously, this is a serious limitation in a field infested with frauds and swindlers operating globally and ready to take advantage of any loophole in the security system.

The point has become all the more relevant following the return of 42 artefacts from France, after the total messing up of what was supposed to be an exhibition of our archaeological pieces in a French museum. Two priceless statues from the Gupta era were stolen from the airport, raising a barrage of questions regarding the security of the items about to be flown to France earlier as part of the deal. The exhibition had to be abandoned, which did little to brighten our image abroad and the country almost got into a diplomatic wrangle. And all this could be attributed to the sad truth that we do not have a wealth of archeological pieces but our handling of the same leaves much to be desired.

The officials concerned have complained that successive governments failed to pay due attention to the issue of protecting and publicising our rich collection of wonderful artefacts. It seems nobody has ever treated it as an area requiring the highest degree of specialisation for ensuring proper maintenance and preservation of archaeological pieces. We can ill afford to forget that these pieces take us back to the dim and distant past and are an integral part of our heritage and history. The artefacts tell us a lot about the life, religion and culture of the people who lived in this land hundreds or even thousands of years ago. They have survived the onslaught of time and our duty is to preserve them for the posterity.

The government and the authorities concerned are expected to show due sensitivity to the issue and introduce the latest methods and techniques of preserving archaeological relics.

Meet the salaryman in chief

Lee Myung-Bak was elected president of South Korea in December on promises to enhance competitiveness by ending left-leaning policies and improving ties with Washington. Before being sworn in on Monday, he met with Newsweek's Christian Caryl and B. J. Lee in his transition office -- his only interview with Western media since the election.

Newsweek: Your "Global Korea" vision has drawn keen interest at home and abroad. Why are you pursuing globalisation when it is under challenge in so many parts of the world?
Lee: Globalisation is a reality. Advanced nations benefit from it, while some developing countries are hurt by it. Korea has a small land mass, a large population and few resources. But we achieved development through globalisation, (so) Korea wants to continue active globalisation. As the world's 11th largest economy, we will also try to meet our responsibilities in the international community. But in Korea, some are worried about globalisation's

downsides. Are Koreans ready for it?
The majority of the people think globalisation is unavoidable and helps the national interest. But farmers, especially dairy farmers, resist. The government (must) persuade them that their lives will improve. During your campaign, you promised big reform. What will South Korea look like in five years?
With the looming world financial crisis and high oil and raw material prices, things are difficult. We will try to recover our national competitiveness. Deregulation will be pursued to meet global standards. After five years, our society will show the

face of an advanced first-rate country. Currently, we are advanced in some areas but not in others. But in five years, Korea will become a mature country that can work with the international community. Some draw a parallel between you and French President Nicolas Sarkozy because both of you are for globalisation and have pro-American attitudes. During the election, I looked at Sarkozy's platforms. I found a lot of similarities (to my own): (in) reforming the public sector, improving relations between business and labour and changing social customs. But I wouldn't say that he is pro-American per se. Rather, the relationship

between France and the US has not been very good in the past, and President Sarkozy is trying to improve it and bring it back to normal because he considers that to be in the interest of France. I will also work toward improving the alliance with the US. But we need a new relationship suitable for a new era. Koreans have mixed views of the United States. What would be the ideal relationship? We have a long history between our countries. During and after the Korean War, the US led the UN efforts to defend (us) against communist aggression, and we were very much affected by US liberal democracy and market economics. That is how we achieved our development. In the beginning, Korea received unilateral help from the US in both security and economic matters. But now we need a future-oriented relationship. How have Korean views toward the United States changed? Five years ago, the establishment

(felt) positively (toward) the US but young people who didn't experience the Korean War or past relations were not that favourable. But I detect changes. The young generation's view is gradually moving from negative to positive. If we can upgrade the alliance, all generations will share a common vision. You said that inter-Korean relations can't improve unless the North gives up its nuclear weapons. Will the relationship now stagnate? There shouldn't be any nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. The South and North should seek joint prosperity while maintaining peace. The North should also become independent economically. We cannot seek that kind of relationship, and (ultimately) unification, if the North keeps its nuclear weapons. Can joint economic projects continue while the nuclear talks are deadlocked? Real expansion will be difficult,

and the number of small and medium-size companies investing there will not increase significantly. Under what conditions would you meet Kim Jong Il? The leaders of the two Koreas should think about how to improve the lives of their 70 million people. If we (could) open up our minds, sit down and discuss these matters heart to heart, a summit (would be) helpful. I will not have a formal summit just for the sake of domestic politics. You won the election by a big margin. Are you burdened with high expectations? I am. But my focus is to change Korea's economic structure for its long-term advancement, not to pursue certain short-term policies based on populism. I also plan to ask people for their hard work, while explaining the difficulties of the international economic environment.



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Anti-corruption crusade and the crusader

NO NONSENSE

What is commonly talked about, both at home and abroad, is that the ACC Chairman Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury's (HMC) anti-corruption crusade is out of the ordinary. Who would visit a district headquarter to institute a corruption awareness and prevention committee, and then lead a procession protesting against corruption (Example: Moulvibazar incident)? Last week, he completed organising the committees in all 64 districts, with branches at upazila level.



ABDULLAH A DEWAN

My visit to Bangladesh at this time of the year is a deviation from the past -- all past visits were taken around Christmas and English New Year festivities.

This off-routine trip has aroused some curiosity in a few close relatives and friends. Many were whispering whether I was on a mission to land a position of special assistant to somebody. Others were wondering if I would be meeting the chief adviser, chief election commissioner, and the army chief. Their hunch is based on my opinions in my column that appear in The Daily Star week after week.

They reject the fact that columnists, either in Bangladesh or in the US, rarely become anything other than press secretaries to presidents and prime ministers. I reminded them that I was neither an assistant to the deputy assistant US secretary of state nor an assistant to an EU official or an assistant to foreign aid agencies (WB, IMF and ADB).

However, they were visibly shaken when I told them that I met

a different chief, one who would be remembered by the honest and the corrupt alike for his enthusiasm and commitment in carrying out a job that many consider "mission impossible."

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Despite the ACC's successful prosecution and arrest of many corrupt people, HMC has maintained a balance so as not to create a negative image that would threaten his safety or call for his removal.

My two and half hour long disquisition with HMC began with choices of fresh fruit juices fol-

lowed by several fish and vegetable carte du jour on the dinner table, and then several different sumptuous homemade desserts. There was no meat products in the menu as I wished for a "vegetarian" -- a word I coined years ago.

With Mrs. Chowdhury sitting opposite me at the dinner table -- I told him off-the-cuff that "all informed and fair-minded people give you the full credit for your success while no one discredits you for your failures because failures are ascribed to factors and forces beyond your purview of power."

He believes that, given time and support from the people and the government, he will not only succeed in making a dent in the culture of corruption, he will also reverse the very "mindset" that spawns corruption.

"Though corruption has taken roots in our minds, maybe it will not remain in future," he told his audience while speaking at a views exchange meeting on corruption at the local pourasava auditorium in Moulvibazar.

He reminded his audience that corruption showed no signs of decline, even though pay scale was raised twice during the previous governments. People look for opportunities to bridge the gap between affordability and desirability. "It is mainly desire that tempts people to indulge in corrupt practices," he added.

HMC believes that people must have courage to resist corruption. "So, anti-graft slogans will have to be raised from mosques, madrasahs, schools, and colleges. In the past, there was less risk and more gain in corruption. We will raise risk, reduce gain. We don't want to bear the bad reputation of corruption," he further added.

Although we delved into numerous issues, I forgot to ask him about the recent statement about going into alleged corruption in the army. I also forgot to ask him how he would proceed to combat corruption in academic institutions.

While sipping coffee at the final phase of our "get to know" meeting, Mrs. Chowdhury was telling me about an incident.

They were stuck in a traffic jam immediately behind a flagged VIP car. The siren in the VIP's security escort vehicle was blaring non-stop, even though the traffic jam was nearly a quarter mile long.

HMC got out of his car and asked the VIP's security escort to put off the siren and they complied. Minutes later, the siren started blaring again. This time he went to the VIP's car and politely addressed the occupant: "Sir, what's the purpose of setting the siren on when there is no traffic movement?"

He cannot explain why the CTG advisers don't make trips to the countryside and meet real people.

He told me that asking for advisers' asset disclosures (which is within his power) would destabilise the CTG. I wanted to (but I didn't) tell him that the ACC needs to set precedents to do the same when political governments take over.

We talked about the formation of the Truth Commission (waiting on the CA's desk for signature). He believes that the Commission will help expedite resolution of many cases and lessen the burden of court time and costs while preserving its non-discriminatory character vis-à-vis the cases already prosecuted.

He clearly sees the crusade against corruption as a continuing process involving three time frames -- prosecuting the past corrupt, netting the presently corrupt, and deterring the would-be corrupt. Therefore, whoever

heads the ACC must command unreserved cooperation of all concerned -- politicians, civil servants, businessmen, and common citizens. I assured him that future political governments, for their own reputation, will remain under pressure to keep ACC above partisan considerations.

HMC wanted to know how I changed my academic pursuit from physics to nuclear engineering and then to economics. I told him that I would spend my retired life in Bangladesh (in about 6 years) giving seminars in colleges and universities on special topics on a weekly basis, volunteering my services in local governments in some capacity and, of course, writing my column in The Daily Star unless I lose interest or run out of ideas.

I was taken aback to find Chairman Mashhud responding to anything I wanted to know, and then some. His openness and fearless disclosures of many stories has shaken me to wonder: "What if I fail to preserve the contents of my meeting with him?" He relieved me from that burden by giving me the freedom to tell my story in my way.

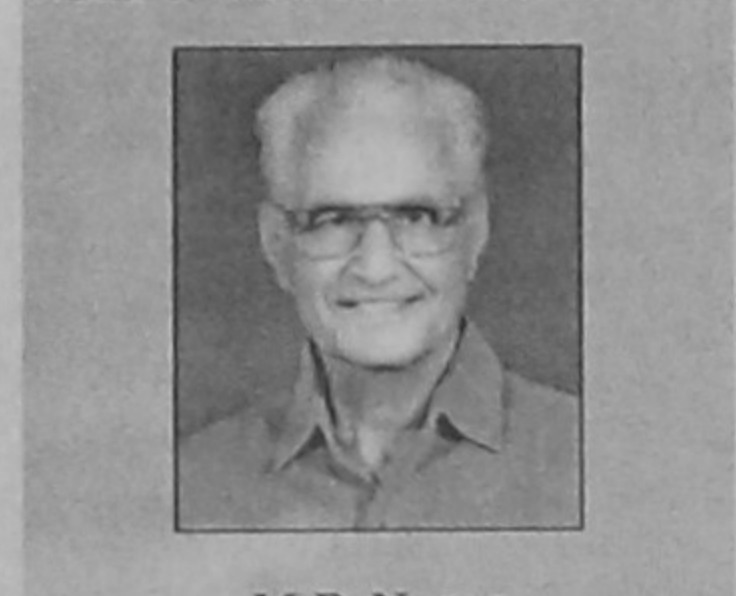
Looking back, I am wondering, if I will ever meet such a high official, so candid, so friendly, and above all a patriot -- a true patriot in the true sense of the term.

Dr Abdullah A. Dewan, Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University, is currently visiting Bangladesh.

The inescapable dilemma

PLAIN WORDS

The issue is whether the War on Terror Pakistan has to fight should be fought in the way the Americans want or should Pakistanis make their own alterations or evolve new strategies to tackle the problem of Islamic extremism inside Pakistan. If Pakistanis are to go along with American wishes, they are required to keep President Pervez Musharraf in power and the emergent government would be required to strengthen his hand so as to prosecute the war more vigorously.



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PAKISTANIS face a painful dilemma; but it has to be decided one way or another. This dilemma takes many shapes and formulations, all inter-related. But the reality remains the same.

The issue is whether the War on Terror Pakistan has to fight should be fought in the way the Americans want or should Pakistanis make their own alterations or evolve new strategies to tackle the problem of Islamic extremism inside Pakistan, and the question of Afghan Taliban finding refuge in Pakistan.

If Pakistanis are to go along with American wishes, they are required to keep President Pervez Musharraf in power and the emergent government would be required to strengthen his hand so as to prosecute the war more vigorously.

Finding a new strategy relating to Islamic extremism and the Afghan policy requires vigorous democracy at home, including the release of judges, undoing of all that ex-General Musharraf did on November 3, and sending him home. This can be reformulated, either Mr. Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry resumes his job as the Supreme Court head or President Musharraf continues to rule Pakistan and the judges remain in limbo, while democracy

has to make do with the extraordinary powers of President Musharraf.

This is zero hour, when a decision has to be made. A new government is still about two weeks away. Will it remember the reason why the voters to the Musharraf-supporting PML (Q) or to religious parties preferred the winners? This was largely due to the lawyers' movement that will become more intense and expand with more in the intelligentsia and civil society, and more parties, joining in, if the new government does not quickly accept its demand. It will not be a bed of roses for the government.

Remember the likelihood, of the raising of user charges in order to pass on the accumulated subsidies to the consumer that impends. Other necessary economic measures would create a climate of popular anger, and new opposition will grow. The coming popular political behaviour can be imagined. New men are in as a result of the vote for change. So they have to bring significant and necessary changes.

True, Americans have removed all stops; all US-loving powers, mainly Nato powers, are openly engaged in coercive diplomacy on winning parties. The objective is to

persuade PPP, PML (N) and other parties to line up with the western strategy of fighting this endless War on Terror. This is to be done militarily, the way the Americans are doing. This requirement translates into strengthening Musharraf's hand by being a government under him.

This was why the Americans had brokered the deal between Musharraf and late Ms. Benazir Bhutto. It does look as if the Americans are insisting on both sides to observe its terms. The Saudis are to persuade Mian Nawaz Sharif to be more flexible and tolerant of Musharraf. This kind of diplomacy is only seen in the case of failed states. Pakistanis can take heart from Nepalese politicians, who rejected foreign advice and made their own peace last year.

The PPP and PML (N) and others should remember a few facts; Pakistanis want to remain an independent people; they do not want their government to be at the beck and call of any foreign power. They also want to set up a democratic dispensation. They hate dictatorships. Pakistanis have shown this by keeping all the dictators politically on the defensive through denying them legitimacy.

Their desired democracy had

better make human rights actually enforceable. That translates into an independent judiciary and a sovereign parliament. It also presupposes free media -- electronic press and films. They also want their democratic government to be committed to social justice and an economic development that is oriented not so much toward GDP growth as toward creation of jobs and ending of unemployment and poverty. Without social justice no Pakistanis will be satisfied.

This is one reason why the lawyers' movement, and the judges, cannot be left to strew in their own juice. Apart from law and order problems, this would break the nation's unity and weaken the new government' despite its electoral credentials; it may not last long.

Needless to say, the lawyers' objective are what everyone shares; no one can disagree that the judiciary should be independent, and the executive should not be as powerful as it has been in Pakistan. That will strengthen the new democratic government. The legislature has to be not merely theoretically supreme but also be competent as a sovereign body.

The economy has been mismanaged during the last eight years. Far too much was spent on non-

essentials, not to say wastefully. Which is why inflation rates are high. There is no other way of defining inflation. All the major macro-economic indicators have been steadily going down during the last three years -- negating the stabilisation of macro-economic indicators of the early Musharraf years. The new government is required to change the whole economic ambience.

There has to be more stability in prices through serious thought, and initiating development of the desirable kind. All unnecessary expenditures, including the foolish arms race with India at this time, need to be cut down. The economy has to be stabilised first, and put on the path of not merely growth but also of actual development in real sectors and not merely in the services sector alone.

The new rulers ought to realise their responsibility, and see the amount of work that awaits them. That should make them alive to political imperatives.

Coming back to the current difficulties vis-à-vis Afghanistan, America, war on terror, Taliban, and Islamic extremism's various manifestations inside Pakistan. These are Pakistan's problems, and should be resolved by Pakistanis in an informed and rational way. Creative thinking is needed.

It presupposes a reappraisal of the policies that Islamabad has followed vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and of Islamabad's own contribution in the promotion of Islamic extremism, sectarianism, various jihads and the absolutely unrealistic policies of trying to dominate Afghanistan while Pakistan itself has remained a satellite state of the US. Foolish are imperial pretensions when that imperialism itself

rides piggyback on foreign aid.

The Americans have virtually no idea how to fight the Taliban or al-Qaeda, or any other extremist or terrorist group. They only rely on superior fire-power and technical intelligence in order to fight them. That merely aggravates the problem, and produces more terrorists through so-called collateral damage that goes on increasing. About a million Iraqis have perished.

How many thousands of Afghans have died cannot reliably be known; known facts are far too sketchy and far too suited to the exigencies of public relations of the Nato powers. Few see an American victory in either Afghanistan or Iraq.

Indeed, the American actions have finally destroyed the state of Afghanistan, and the current efforts to create a new state under an American nominee, Hamid Karzai, does not promise success. Iraq may either survive against the machinations of American diplomacy or divide itself into three states, and also possibly cause mayhem throughout the Middle East.

Pakistanis cannot afford to follow American policies in Afghanistan or in Pakistan's tribal areas. The Americans know too little about these places or, for that matter, Islam and its spirit.

As has been noted, Pakistanis have to find a way of reconciling the demands of Islam with the political realities of Afghanistan, and find a modus operandi through democratic means and intelligent understanding of the wishes of people in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and the tribal areas.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.