

Imported institutional reforms

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TARIQ KARIM

I have followed, with some interest, reports on a recent roundtable held in Dhaka about police reforms. *The Daily Star* also wrote a lead editorial on the subject on April 30. I fully concur that the reforms of a core institution in the state can best be addressed by a government in *interregnum* like the present one, non-partisan or removed from affiliation with any political party.

As the roundtable and the editorial correctly pointed out, reforms were not carried out by any past government, whether in the erstwhile Pakistan period or in Bangladesh since liberation, or any political party or dispensation in power simply because they could use the institutions as

tools for their own narrow and, more often than not, nefarious partisan purposes.

As I had written over a year ago, our present institutions are essentially derived from the institutional concepts that were imported and transplanted (not without some "genetic" engineering) by the British.

However, the actual manner in which the colonial masters operationalised these imported institutions was actually quite different from the original British prototype for two reasons.

One, the purpose of the institutions transplanted overseas, while replicating the original institution at home, was fundamentally different. The institutions in Britain were designed to govern and deliver services for the welfare of the Crown's sub-

jects, while their replicas on colonised soil were designed to rule over conquered people. They were designed to extract everything from colonised subjects in order to fill the coffers at home, and project their imperial power overseas.

Secondly, the local soil conditions, in their inherent composition and "pH" factors, were quite different from the "home" soil from which these institutions were transplanted. For example, our parliamentary system worked in a very presidential manner. Our leaders tended to evoke the imperial (and imperious) style of rule (as distinguished from governance) of our pre-colonial history; our keepers of law and order tended to (and still do) arouse a mixture of apprehension and fear within the

hearts of those they are supposed to protect, rather than the secure comfort that the average British citizen derives from the sight of the friendly neighbourhood Bobby walking the walk and talking the talk in his local precinct; and so on and so forth.

Tragically, when the *gora sahibs* packed up to return to their native homeland, the thrones they vacated were taken over by the *brown sahibs* whom the British had educated and groomed, very much in the mould of interlocutors as had been envisaged by Macaulay, to act as "intermediaries" between the British rulers and their Indian subjects.

The erstwhile colonies may have wrested their freedom from British shackles, but their new rulers and administrators had not been able to shake off and change for the better the mindset of ruling by coercion and extraction that they had inherited from their erstwhile white masters.

True independence from continuing tyranny and from oppressive extraction by the successor ruling elite and the bureaucracy and police they controlled eluded the hapless people.

At a seminar that discussed human rights and rule of law in Bangladesh, convened by a Washington think-tank in 2005, in which I was one of the invited panelists, the suggestion for police reforms was also raised.

One discussant, representing an international NGO asked me if I would recommend that substantial sums of money be made available to the then government of Bangladesh for modernisation of equipment and for training. My immediate response to that was a horrified "NO."

I asked in return: Why was it that the police worked very well indeed during the short three-month period when a caretaker government was in power, in 1991, 1996 and even in 2001? By all accounts, people had a sense of security, traffic flowed relatively smoothly and there were no remarkable accounts of egregious abuse of power.

The laws as they existed, though quite antiquated and in dire need of being updated and upgraded, still worked. I pointed out that the police were an instrument of the state, a tool in the hands of the rulers. It could well be likened to a kitchen knife,

which by itself was quite harmless, albeit an extremely sharp-edged and potentially dangerous, tool.

It depended entirely on the intention of the person wielding it as to what use he was going to make of it -- to slice an onion or chop some vegetables and meat for cooking a gourmet meal -- or to cut a disliked person.

The vast majority of the population perceived the police as an instrument of oppression and terror. Refurbishing them with more efficient weapons and tools of policing, and training them to use these tools with greater efficiency, might very well result in the ordinary people being "more efficiently oppressed and terrorised," not necessarily more efficiently and better policed and safeguarded.

So, in my view, the reforms had to start with untangling and setting the crossed wires straight in the head of the person wielding the knife, so to speak. I daresay, the point I made was very well taken.

The present government has, indeed, taken a number of admirable steps to reform the core institutions, and safeguard them

from future tampering by partisan politics. By all accounts, the people who have taken over these reformed bodies are all persons with impeccable and unimpeachable integrity.

One hopes that the next elected parliament will not result in a return of partisan politics with a vengeance once again. To safeguard these reforms I have earlier, on more than one occasion, suggested the formation of a council of ombudsmen with independent and enforceable authority to keep a sharp-eyed vigil on the performance of all the state institutions, particularly the bureaucracy and the police.

Simply putting laws in place, or upgrading them, is not enough. One needs to not only ensure that the laws are applied and enforced in letter and in spirit, but also that there is a body to monitor those charged with the enforcement of the laws, to ensure that they do so in fair and just manner.

Having witnessed the many broken promises of past elected governments, regardless of what party or creed they ascribed to, one is still quite cynical whether a political party elected to power will not, once again, succumb to the

temptation of renegeing on its promises, and, therefore, tends to quite empathise with the call for the present government to take the initiative on this matter as well.

Having said that, one is also conscious that a broad consensus in society is also essential to ensure that whatever reforms are being put in place will not be rolled back or negated by subsequent elected governments or partisan squabbling.

In many countries, the people put up matters of great importance as questions for a general referendum at the same time as elections are held. The same electorate that will turn out to elect their leaders to the new parliament could also voice their opinions on specific reform matters.

Most people are likely to welcome these reforms, and, therefore, may be counted upon to give their imprimatur to them. No elected leader is going to disregard the will of the people so expressed.

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Empowerment through community e-centres

The government of Bangladesh has committed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have set challenging targets to humanity to improve the living conditions of excluded people around the world. One of these goals concerns Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The Target 8 of MDGs states: "In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies."

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COMMUNITY e-centres (CeC) are the "Shared ICT Access Facilities," having computers, internet and other affiliated equipment, made available for community access free or at affordable prices, mostly in developing country rural environments. CeCs are popularly known as telecenters in Bangladesh. International and national organisations are investing in CeCs because they believe

communities benefit from having accurate information, and CeCs are an important way of getting information. They believe that information technologies are a key to providing timely and useful information on subjects ranging from market prices to health care. And because many in the community do not have individual access to these technologies, CeCs (much like telephone shops) provide shared access and a gateway to cyberspace.

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In order to use ICT as a means to reduce poverty, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has suggested setting up CeCs in every upazilla in Bangladesh. Many national and international organisations have come forward to assist the government's plan to take the benefits of ICTs to rural communities.

The government and international development partners such as UNDP and ADB have already initiated a number of projects to promote setting up CeCs in rural areas. The non-state actors such as NGOs and educational institutions have come up with innovative ideas to establish

CeCs in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Telecenter Network (BTN), an umbrella association of civil society and private sector organisations, has announced "Mission 2011," with a vision to set up 40,000 CeCs in rural Bangladesh by 2011. The private cell phone operator Grameen Phone (GP) has initiated a noble project to set up Community Information Centers (CIC) with wireless technologies, which is bringing thousands of the rural population into the domain of ICT.

The government's e-Governance focal points are also becoming interested in CeC activities to bring government closer to the people, and to build people's trust in the government mechanism. In collaboration with ADB and Unescap, the Ministry of Science and ICT (MOSICT) has initiated a project called "Empowering Rural Areas through Community e-Centers" under the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) program. The project will set up a number of CeCs in rural Bangladesh in 2008.

The MOSICT has recently signed another MOU with the ADB to implement a project called "Information Highway" under the SASEC program, and plans to set up 25 CeCs in rural Bangladesh by 2009. The CeCs set up under SASEC program will be connected through an alternative optical fiber network and a regional web portal, allowing

rural populations of all four SASEC countries (Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and India) to collaborate and share knowledge and information.

More than 1100 CeCs have been identified so far by the Bangladesh Telecenter Network (BTN). The existing CeCs are located at a variety of sites, such as Union Council premise (lowest unit of local government), educational institutions, growth centers, and community libraries. Some non-government organisations such as Relief International and Schools Online set up internet enabled CeCs at resource poor schools and madrasas, allowing both students and community members to use ICT facilities available at these centers.

The CeCs in Bangladesh offer a range of information and technology services to improve rural livelihoods. Information available at these CeCs range from agricultural information to health care for the rural population. While the number of CeCs is growing in Bangladesh, they also meet several challenges. A baseline study recently conducted by the ADB in Bangladesh observes that existing challenges include lack of locally relevant contents, technical and infrastructure constraints (such as, lack of reliable and uninterrupted power supply, hardware and software trouble shooting, reliable connectivity), and financial sustainability problem. Poverty is

still a significant barrier, which restricts community in taking the benefits of CeCs. The cost of CeC services is still too high, especially for women, students and the unemployed.

With the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector, Bangladesh has experienced a rapid growth in the mobile sector, which in turn has connected almost every corner of the country. With wireless technologies such as GPRS/EDGE introduced by the mobile phone operators, rural CeCs are now able to get connected to the internet. Bangladesh entered a new era of high-speed data transfer capacity with the establishment of the submarine cable connection in 2007. This connection has significantly lowered internet and long-distance telephone call costs, and has contributed to boosting internet browsing and data transfer speed.

Despite some infrastructure challenges, it is likely that the number of CeCs in coming years will increase. However, in order to sustain the growth in the CeC sector, the government needs to come up with a solid plan to nourish these CeC initiatives, and provide supportive regulatory environment and telecommunication infrastructure.

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AN E-CENTRE

Bangladeshis in foreign jails

The question which is being raised in different circles is whether those in jails in different countries get the necessary legal and financial support from the country's missions abroad. There are allegations, which sometimes are not without basis, that our people who remitted about \$6.57 billion last year (2007), do not always get the necessary legal aid and cooperation from Bangladesh missions abroad.

NURUL HUDA

NOBODY can give the exact number of Bangladeshis who have been languishing in foreign jails for committing crimes or traveling without valid documents. At least 12,000 Bangladeshis out of 50 lakh working in different countries (as per the record of March, 2008) are in jails in different countries.

Of those in jails, over 2,500 have been convicted while the trial of others is at different stages of progress as per the record of the Ministry of Overseas Employment and Expatriate Welfare. A total of 9,995 Bangladeshis are in Saudi Arabian jails, where over two million of our people have been working.

At least 1,000 Bangladeshis are in jails in Malaysia, which is a major source of manpower export for Bangladesh. The number of Bangladeshis in jails of

UAE, another major source of manpower export, is 627 while 225 are in jails in Singapore.

Of those in jails, 922 have been convicted in Bahrain, 31 in Oman, 26 in Hong Kong, 35 in Iran and 14 in Qatar. Some Bangladeshis are in jails in Macau, Finland and Switzerland. Nobody could give any idea whether any Bangladeshis are in jail of the United States of America or in the Maldives, where a big number of our people live.

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country's missions abroad. There are allegations, which sometimes are not without basis, that our people who remitted about \$6.57 billion last year (2007), do not always get the necessary legal aid and cooperation from Bangladesh missions abroad.

It is believed that the release of many of those who have been convicted in different countries is possible through serious diplomatic efforts. In this context, it needs to be mentioned here that diplomatic missions in Bangladesh from time to time get their nationals freed through diplomatic efforts.

We are happy that the Bangladesh president has sought clemency for eight Bangladeshis who have been awarded death sentence in Saudi Arabia for the murder of an Egyptian.

According to the secretary of the Ministry of Overseas Employment and Expatriate Welfare, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, any Bangladeshis

facing problems in a foreign land, and seeking help in writing, usually gets the necessary legal and financial help from the government. Those who are freed, having served jail terms, or who are stranded for traveling without valid travel documents, are given financial support out of the government's Wage Earners' Welfare Fund, which has a deposit of Tk. 150 crore.

The question which has been haunting us is: Why do Bangladeshis facing problems in foreign countries have to seek help in writing from Bangladesh missions abroad. Cannot the officials take initiatives on their own to extend help to those who need it? The salary and allowances which they get are the country's tax payers' money. Should it not be obligatory on their part to extend necessary help and cooperation spontaneously to those who need it?

In view of limited employment opportunities at home our people have been desperately looking for jobs abroad. A section of recruiting agencies, taking advantage of the situation, have been alluring people with lucrative job offers in different countries. The picture will become clear from the number of com-

plaints received by the relevant department of the government against the unscrupulous recruiting agencies.

The lust for money of some recruiting agencies also becomes clear from the fact that 118 people who were promised lucrative jobs abroad were brought back home with the help of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) from Libya and Iraq in 2007. This year, 91 Bangladeshis returned home with the help of IOM from Iraq and Greece. So far, there are no official arrangements for manpower export to Iraq, but racketeers have reportedly already sent some hundred Bangladeshis to that troubled-torn country.

What is wanted is that the government should initiate urgent diplomatic efforts to bring back those who have been sent to different places of Iraq by the manpower racketeers and are in helpless condition there. Those who have been cheated by the manpower racketeers in the name of lucrative employment opportunities in Iraq should get their money back with the help of the relevant agencies of the government. Meanwhile, some of those involved in the illegal manpower export to Iraq have report-

edly been taken into custody.

As many as 827 complaints against the recruiting agencies were received by the relevant department of the government from 2001 to December 2006. A total of 732 cases were settled, and more than Tk4.50 crore was recovered, and also distributed among the complainants. The government also disposed 259 out of 348 complaints received against the recruiting agencies in 2007. And about Tk1.90 crore was recovered from the recruiting agencies, which was distributed among the complainants last year (2007).

The extent of the foul game played by some of the recruiting agencies with those seeking jobs, particularly unskilled and semi-skilled people, has been partially reflected by the official figures of complaints received against them.

Let us hope that the number of Bangladeshis in different foreign jails will be reduced by obtaining their release through serious diplomatic efforts by the government. Stern action should be taken against all those responsible for sending the jobs seekers with forged documents and promises of lucrative jobs.

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A tale of two monsters, one of whom may exist

HAPPY Birthday, Loch Ness monster. Your present is a big yawn. This is the anniversary of the discovery of the strange creature who is said to live in the largest lake in Britain. Nessie fever started with a sighting on May 1, 1933. The Scottish lake now boasts that it has the most famous, best documented monster in the world.

Yeah, right. What a load of rubbish. There hasn't been a decent sighting of Nessie for years, and scientists reckon she doesn't exist.

We have way better monsters in Asia. And that's even if we exclude heads of state, premiers and army generals.

I'm talking about the region's non-human beasts, some of whom might actually exist. Best bet is Orang Pendek, a thing living in Sumatra, Indonesia. A friend from Jakarta described it as "partially human," a phrase which for some reason made me think of Michael Jackson.

Unlike the Loch Ness Monster, Orang Pendekes are seen regularly and top scientists are taking an interest.

There have been numerous sightings of creatures in Sumatra who move like humans but have unusually large amounts of hair. I admit, it does sound like it could be the contestants of *American Idol* doing a location shoot. But some of the sightings pre-date the show.

Researchers have collected dozens of witness accounts, seen more than 20 footprints, and have gathered mystery hairs that don't match other creatures in the area. An Australian scientist did a DNA test on a hair and found that it did not match any known human or other two-legged hominid (although I don't know if he tried Michael Jackson).

What our creature lacks is the

brilliant marketing that the Scottish non-monster has had. I mean, take our guy's name. Orang Pendek is Bahasa for "short person." It's not exactly a term which catches the imagination, is it? It's hard to imagine a team of Discovery Channel filmmakers saying: "We are going to spend a year living in an unexplored rainforest in the hopes of taking a photo of a real, live Short Person."

A tribe of jungle-dwellers who claim to be very familiar with the half-human creature told reporters: "We often leave offerings of tobacco to keep them happy." You probably knew that a carton of 200 Marlboro was a *de rigueur* gift for government officials in Asia, but did you know it also worked for monsters?

Orang Pendekes have also been seen in the Himalayas, where they are called Yeti, and in China, where they live in Hubei and are known as The Wild Men of Shennongjia (which could be a good name for a rock band to back Mr. Jackson).

Henry Gee, editor of top science publication *Nature*, admitted recently that sentiment was turning in favour of Asian monsters actually existing. "The discovery that *Homo floresiensis* survived until so very recently, in geological terms, makes it more likely that stories of other mythical human-like creatures such as Yetis are founded on grains of truth," he said. "Now, cryptozoology, the study of such fabulous creatures, can come in from the cold."

The first thing we have to do is all agree that the species called Orang Pendek need a new name. A tourism marketing slogan which simply isn't going to work in the west is: "Come to Asia and See a Short Person."

If you want to encounter a really bizarre beast, there's one with a website at www.vittachi.com.

