

Recruitment at the top



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In Bangladesh, we have heard lot of complaints about recruitments at the top. To redress the flawed system that has bred so much controversy and corruption, the system which we intend to follow for recruitment should be formally announced well in advance, and the minimum qualifications for each job be specified. If some jobs do not require any special qualifications other than the trust of the chief executive that may also be mentioned clearly without hesitation.

non-party caretaker government, and so on. Selection through a well-designed examination system never featured in the list.

The chief executive's is a management intensive job. Management expertise is, however, never considered as the prime criterion for selection of the country's chief executive. The prime criterion is the power content embodied in the person. The chief executive has to be the most powerful person, either by him/herself or through the stolid support of a sufficiently powerful group in the country.

In a democratic polity, people's mandate, manifest through acceptable elections, confers moral and physical power on the chief executive to assume his/her office and rule the country with the cabinet colleagues selected by him/her.

The cabinet colleagues who are called ministers in most countries, are selected by the chief executive, and they do not have to face any written or viva voce tests. The chief executive's preference and trust, or his/her political compulsions, are the key criteria for selection to these positions.

As the head of the ministry, the minister finds his/her job no less management oriented than politically involved. He or she is not selected on management consideration nor is he or she much concerned about this aspect of his/her job. He or she works at the pleasure of the chief executive and, therefore, his/her main job is to keep him/herself trustworthy of the chief executive.

The post down that line is that of permanent secretary. He or she works as the principal staff officer to the minister and also as the administrative head of the ministry. Tasks of the government are comprehensively distributed among the ministries, which constitute the apex executive organ of the government, short of the cabinet. The permanent secretary is usually a professional who has climbed to the peak through promotion within the structure.

There is also a provision for lateral entry to high positions of government, though such entry is widely resented by the rank and file of the bureaucracy. Top positions of the directorates and autonomous bodies are filled up through appointment by the government from among civil

servants or lateral entrants picked by the chief executive, mostly without formal reference to any committee or agency. Heads of the local bodies are either appointed by the government or elected by the constituents of the area. There is no hard and fast rule as to how these posts will be filled up.

There are certain other senior positions of the government, which are filled up by persons selected or recommended by selection or search committees. The selection/search committees follow their own procedure for selecting the preferred nominees. The government is required by law to honour the panel, however restrictive that may be. For some institutions the eligible voters constitute the panel through elections; the appointing authority has the latitude of selecting one of the elected persons from the panel -- it cannot go beyond the panel.

One can therefore catalogue the following methods for recruitment at the top:

- Elections, inheritance, constitutional provision for filling the vacuum, or application of sheer force.
- Open competitive examinations.

- Regular promotion system.
- Selection through a search committee.
- Arbitrary selection by the appointing authority.

The appointment procedure of topmost executive and his/her cabinet colleagues is more or less standardised. Though election is the most commended procedure to enter the office of the chief executive of the country, other procedures are not rare in the world.

The selection procedure for the cabinet colleagues is almost the same everywhere: exclusively the chief executive selects them, in some countries their appointment is confirmed by the senate or the parliamentary committee.

The constituents, in many cases they are also appointed by the higher authorities, including the central government, often elect heads of local bodies. The Bangladesh constitution specifically provides for elected heads of local governments at each tier of administration, though it was never fully complied with.

Local governments, including city corporations, saw executive heads appointed by the central government without referring to any selection committee or any other formal body in this respect. They were handpicked by the chief executive or by the small caucus around him/her. This is true for governors of the provinces in many federal countries of the world, including those in the sub-continent.

Permanent secretaries (called by other names in different countries)

and heads of directorates/bureaus, including the chief of the armed forces, are usually promoted from among the service holders, except in countries, which follow a "spoils system." They are supposed to be promoted on seniority-cum-merit basis in line with transparently framed and widely published rules. Same is the case for senior officers. In the "spoils system," officers in a few higher echelons are handpicked by the chief executive (and the inner caucus), though in some cases the committees of parliament or a similar institution confirm their appointments.

The argument for the "spoils system" is that party members who are trusted and committed to such programs, which will be carried out through the government machinery, can best accomplish the ruling party's programs. The commitment of neutral bureaucracy to party-originated programs is suspect in this system.

The job of the senior bureaucrats is tenurial, usually coterminous with the tenure of the party government. Countries following parliamentary democracy do not follow this system because they believe that a neutral bureaucracy is an essential component of the parliamentary system of government.

Despite this golden rule, lateral entry in government service and handpicking for some important non-ministerial positions including constitutional ones are not uncommon in a parliamentary democratic system. For selecting lateral entrants three procedures are fol-

lowed -- open competition, selection through a search committee, and discretionary selection by the appointing authority.

Open competition is theoretically sound and good for selecting consultants and not-too-important non-executive experts. It is not suitable for highly exalted positions, which call for high profile persons of outstanding calibre. Such people would not apply for a job in response to government advertisement.

If the government or any organisation intends to appoint or give any specific assignment to such people it has to find some other way to recruit them for the job. A search committee could do the job. The formation of a search committee is very important in this case. The members of the committee have to be fair, firm and conversant about their job.

The best way for the committee to go about its job is to get a list of preferred persons from each member in a sealed cover. Through intense discussion the combined list may be pared to a recommended panel with or without rank order. The appointing authority will have no option but to follow the panel, the way it is prepared. This will be a fair and effective method to recruit for strategic positions in higher echelons.

The last option, discretionary selection, is appropriate for positions which demand professionally competent people commanding absolute trust of the chief executive or the appointing authority. The

posts of security advisor, special assistants or advisors, principal secretary to the chief executive, and staff in the personal outfit fall in this category. For the sake of transparency, such positions may be announced through formal notification. That will keep the things in order.

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Once the system is in position, deviation from it should not be allowed in any case, though it may be reviewed occasionally in compelling circumstances. The amended system must also be widely publicised, and followed in letter and spirit. Whatever be the system, it must be implemented in a corruption-free environment such that the system's credibility is not comprised in any manner.

In short, there should not be any room for misunderstanding, suspicion, clandestine maneuvering, and rule bending to accommodate corrupt intention. If this can be maintained we will have competent people recruited at the top.

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Low income food insecurity

According to the WFP, Bangladesh remains a low-income, food-deficit country with annual average food grain imports of 2 million metric tons. Approximately half of the population (63 million people) live below the food poverty line, and spend 70 percent of their household income on food.

MIR MAHFUZ UR RAHMAN

RESIDENTS of Dhaka city, and others across the country, see daily lines of hundreds of people in fixed price shops in various neighbourhoods. Being lucky enough to still be insulated from food inflation, I ventured into one of the shops to obtain first hand information.

Each outlet has 1,000 kgs of rice, the product most in demand, which are sold in a maximum of 5 kg parcels. The official claimed that there are almost 2,000 such shops in the country with an additional 2,000 more to be opened.

Given 200 families per day having access to 4,000 shops, the project gives rations to 800,000

families at fixed prices. The shops are open three days a week, which may allow these families to actually obtain their substantial basic food rations from these shops.

With the average family size being 6 members, 3.2 million are being assisted daily. Being open three days a week, may actually double or triple this number given the portion of rice consumed in the daily calorie intake. This is indeed an amazing achievement and should be lauded.

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line, and spend 70 percent of their household income on food.

Among these, 28 million people, representing 20 percent of the total population are considered "ultra poor." Given the above figure of 6.4-9.6 million people being fed daily, this implies means that about 20 million of the ultra poor population do not actually have access to the fixed price shops.

They people have no assets, consume around 1,800 Kcal per day in comparison to the recommended daily allowance of 2,100 Kcal per day, and suffer from chronic food insecurity and severe malnutrition. Nearly half of all children less than five years are underweight and nearly half of non-pregnant women are mal-

nourished. Dietary intakes of both children and adults are severely deficient in vitamins and minerals in particular iron, vitamin A and zinc, according to the WFP.

Beyond that, there are another 35 million people who are considered living below the poverty line in urban slums and rural villages, who are not considered ultra poor. In this age of globalisation and push to obtain English language education and logical thinking, the food inflation has trapped almost 35 million people in an age of not having access to food at available prices.

According to different articles and reports, several factors have contributed to the rise in the price of grains and other food products. After a relatively stable period of nominal food prices on the world markets during the years 1974-2005 and a gradual decline in their real price by an astounding 75%, a combination of several factors since 2005 brought a sharp increase in food and feed prices at accelerating rates that reached

crisis proportion in mid-2007.

The demand side of the boom concentrated in particular in the emerging economies, most notably in China, India, Brazil, and the Middle East, and their unprecedented growth and vigorous industrialisation increased also their demand for oil and raw materials as an effect of the rise in the number and use of vehicles, their more capital intensive production methods, their urbanisation and higher incomes that increased also their use of electricity and their consumption of high-valued products.

The demand side was further exacerbated by the fiercely controversial rise in demand for bio-fuel. In the US, bio-fuel is produced primarily from corn and it set a target of producing 7.5 billion gallons of renewable fuel use in gasoline by 2012. In the EU total bio-fuel production is smaller and 80% is bio-diesel produced from rapeseed, soy, and increasingly also from palm oil imported from East Asia.

Production of bio-fuel is driven

by generous incentives given to farmers that grow corn for ethanol in the US and soy and rapeseeds for bio-diesel in the EU. Both the US and the EU set high targets for the production of bio-fuels in the next decade, but the worsening food shortages and the heated controversy about their environmental impact force policy makers to take another look at these goals.

As a result of all these developments, the dollar price of staple foods rose, in 2006 and 2007, by over 40 percent. The main rise was in grain prices and some of them, particularly the prices of wheat and rice, nearly tripled in the last year alone, and the prices of corn and soybeans nearly doubled. Along with all major emerging economies, these global factors have led to the 20 million still waiting for their food rations all around us.

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Villains from East and West battle for dumb criminal title

WESTERNERS reacted with outrage to my claim that Asian dumb criminals were dumber than American dumb criminals. I got a large number of reader emails, both of which insisted that US thieves were stupider. One said they were "the dumbest in the world bar none." I hadn't realised what a matter of pride this was. Ownership of this title is clearly among the most deeply held beliefs of intellectual Americans.

From a reader named John D. came news of a man named Fuller who was charged earlier this month with going into his local bank and trying to cash a forged cheque for \$360 billion. The sum on the cheque was more than the total GDPs of Brunei, the Bahamas, Nepal, East Timor, the Seychelles, the Maldives and Haiti put together.

"To his disappointment, the bank did not immediately organise a huge fleet of trucks to carry the cash home for him," said John. "He was surprised that the teller was suspicious and called the police." Mr Fuller was from Texas, which for me was not a surprise.

This was followed by a story of even more profound dumbness from a reader named Eddy Lee. Last week, a Pennsylvania pickpocket posed for photographs with a group of victims before stealing their purses. It wasn't even as if they deliberately took his picture. The women were taking photos of each other during a lunch party when he jumped in front of the camera. He then stole their bags and left the scene. Detectives had no trouble tracking him down.

These two are very good, I must admit. But the competition is tough. Asia-Pacific has some gems too. Here are some eastern hemisphere cases:

Australia, grabbed a bag and ran away with it, not realising that it contained a large, highly poisonous snake. Police immediately started looking for an open sack and a corpse.

• A thief on the run from police in Nagoya, Japan, decided to elude capture by disguising himself as a schoolgirl. He donned the sort of sailor suit school uniform familiar to manga readers. This turned out to be a seriously bad idea for a tall, stocky man with heavy five o'clock shadow.

• A Hong Kong thief named Chan, 34, pleaded innocent to a charge of theft he was facing at a court hearing, but couldn't resist taking the opportunity to steal a court official's handbag.

• Australian motorist Robert James Thompson, 59, tried to escape driving penalties by claiming that his wife committed the offences, although the weak part in his argument was the fact that she died four years earlier, and thus no longer used the car that often.

Which side of the planet has dumber criminals? Hard to say, but I think that Asia-Pacific criminals are definitely less predictable than US ones, particularly if we include Australasia.

For example, a man in New Zealand is due to stand trial this month on a charge of attack with a deadly hedgehog. The 27-year-old faces five years in prison if found guilty.

No doubt a new line will be added to the standard police manual of statements to use when dealing with armed assailants: "Drop the hedgehog and come out with your hands up."

Dumb crime, criminal or not, will feel at home at our columnist's web site: www.vittachi.com.

Designing Asia

Meanwhile, what can Asians do to strengthen their position as a region -- and to recapture constructive, high-level US attention? While waiting for the next US administration, Asian governments could launch or intensify several initiatives. Freeing up trade and investment is an obvious choice -- and specifically focusing on Asia's impressive maritime assets.

ELLEN L. FROST

ALTHOUGH the balance of power in Asia is stable, the balance of influence is shifting in favour of China. Will China's rising influence translate into political domination, forcing Asians to choose between Beijing and Washington and undermining their national autonomy? Can the United States accommodate China's legitimate interests and compete peacefully for influence? What can other Asians do to recapture lagging US attention and ensure a stable, peaceful and prosperous environment?

The major cause of China's growing influence is the giant chugging sound of China's economy. China has become the number-one or number-two trading partner of virtually every country in the region. Seeking strength in numbers, Southeast Asian governments strive not only to tap into China's new wealth, but also to embed Beijing in a thicket of organisations and dialogues in the name of "community-building" and closer integration. Japan, South Korea and, to a lesser extent, India, Australia and New Zealand also participate in this exercise.

Despite the significance of these changes in Asia's strategic landscape, for many years now US atten-

tion has fixated on the Middle East. High-ranking US officials are preoccupied with Islamist terrorists, the war in Iraq and recent developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since Asia is stable and peaceful, the president and his top aides pay little or no attention to regional diplomacy in Asia.

Only in the last year of the Bush administration, for instance, was an ambassador appointed to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), and he will remain in Washington -- serving also as a deputy assistant secretary of state -- rather than being posted to Jakarta.

The consequence of this high-level neglect is a widespread perception that the US has lost interest in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, at a time when Chinese influence is growing.

Although the US still fields a powerful military force, this trend is fueling -- some would say, restoring -- China-centered hierarchy. The question is whether this emerging regional order undermines the autonomy of Asian governments and threatens US interests.

Conscious of residual wariness, Chinese leaders go out of their way to reassure their Asian neighbours that Chinese intentions are entirely peaceful. Unlike Washington,

China has projected a sympathetic and listening attitude, offering aid and trade deals without immediately demanding anything in return. Beijing has settled virtually all of its land-based disputes and put its maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China seas on the back burner.

The subtle risk posed by the shifting balance of influence is that in the absence of constructive engagement on the part of the US, Washington's voice will gradually lose resonance compared to Beijing's. Other Asians already conform to China's wishes when it comes to the status of Taiwan, visits from the Dalai Lama and proposed Japanese membership on the UN Security Council.

None of these issues are vital to them, but all stir up core Chinese feelings and threaten -- at least symbolically -- China's perceived vital interests. On less volatile issues, China's leverage is implicit. If the US were to largely relinquish its role in Asia, China's new influence would likely tilt the outcome of negotiations on trade, investment, the treatment of Chinese firms, energy, climate change, maritime territorial disputes, security relationships, votes in the UN and other international bodies that Chinese favour.

The competition for influence is by no means zero-sum, and has many positive aspects. But Beijing's long-term behaviour, intentions and identity are unknown. If China's political system softens into more open, predictable and participatory governance based on the rule of law -- something like Singapore's "authoritarian capitalism" -- Chinese goals, values and interests are likely to be largely congruent with those of the US and its friends and allies in Asia. If not, some degree of tension will remain.

Realistically, the US president and his top appointees will not have much time for sustained regional diplomacy anywhere outside the Middle East until the next administration scales down US forces significantly in Iraq. Small steps are possible, however. They include scheduling more high-level visits, signing the Asean's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), revitalising US participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (Apec), actively supporting the Asian integration movement instead of merely tolerating it, and devoting significantly more resources to regional health and education.

Signing the TAC would be a particularly appropriate step because it would symbolise US commitment to non-interference, territorial sovereignty, the peaceful resolution of disputes and other values cherished by Southeast Asian leaders, most of whom are still seeking to consolidate post-colonial nation-building and autonomy. China was the first non-

Asean power to sign the TAC. All others in the region have since followed suit, including Australia, a key US ally.

Meanwhile, what can Asians do to strengthen their position as a region -- and to recapture constructive, high-level US attention? While waiting for the next US administration, Asian governments could launch or intensify several initiatives. Freeing up trade and investment is an obvious choice -- and specifically focusing on Asia's impressive maritime assets.

In my book, *Asia's New Regionalism*, I argue that we are witnessing the resurgence of a pre-colonial "Maritime Asia" -- the sweep of coastal communities, port cities and towns, and waterways connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia, India and now Australia. Maritime Asia is the locus of Asian wealth and power. It is where 60% to 70% of Asians live, the biggest cities are, and globalisation-driven investment is concentrated. The world's six largest ports are all Asian.

To take better advantage of this asset, Asian governments should explicitly build Maritime Asia into their vision of integration and work with local officials, business representatives and civil-society groups to remove barriers impeding its natural flow. These include border taxes, tariffs, quotas, corruption, crime, antiquated transport links, duplicative security checks and restrictions on labour mobility. For example, Asian governments should extend and develop a legal framework for Asean's "Single Window" program, which aims at

limiting the cargo clearance of container ships at any major port to one 30-minute stop and validating it for the entire region.

To protect this asset, Asian governments need to become far more active in global efforts to stem climate change. Unrestrained global warming could flood or partially submerge coastal zones and major maritime cities such as Mumbai, Singapore and Hong Kong as well as the numerous islands dotting the region. Implementation of market-oriented policies on the production and consumption of carbon-based fuels, enforcement of existing cross-border agreements on air pollution, the adoption of appropriate domestic regulatory mechanisms, and a cooperative approach to energy efficiency and alternative energy supplies would ease the threat.

As long as China's economic development remains vigorous, Chinese influence will continue to rise. This is a fact of life that other Asians have accepted; the US must accept it as well. Closer cooperation within the wider Asian community, combined with renewed US engagement, can help ensure that China's new influence is exercised in a way that conforms to regional norms, enables other Asian governments to retain their sovereignty and permits Asian companies to compete effectively in the global economy.

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