

LGRD step on access to information

Government must move expeditiously on RTI

THE Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) ministry has taken an appreciable step towards providing citizens access to information in various local bodies operating under it. Such a move is in consonance with democratic principles and practices everywhere and we believe the LGRD has only done what we in a democratic dispensation should have had much earlier. The draft provisions in question relate to the city corporations and municipalities, providing for citizens to ask for and be given information on issues of public interest. We would like to think that it is the first, positive step in what will be an expanding field of rights citizens will eventually come to enjoy. What matters now, in these early stages, is for the government to ensure that the measure is implemented in full without any bureaucratic or political impediments coming in the way.

The measure of course comes, as such moves usually do, with a good number of provisos or caveats. For instance, it is perfectly understandable why citizens will not be provided with information of a classified nature or information contained in notified records or documents. Having said that, it is our considered view that the authorities should, while putting the new measure into practice, take a liberal rather than a literal view of things. This is because it is the principle of information which is at work here. Too much of caution or wariness contains the risk of rendering an otherwise good plan meaningless. For the LGRD, therefore, the options are clear and especially so because other government ministries and departments can emulate the steps it will take. The very basis of democratic governance is accountability; and accountability is ensured only when the citizen feels that the state is ready to respond to his queries and his concerns.

In this context, it is only logical for people to ask the necessary questions about the much talked about Right to Information Act. The draft of the proposed act is ready and by now much discussion has focused on it. Therefore, in what stage the draft RTI is a question we place before the government. We note that a broad national consensus has already developed over the RTI and what now must be done is to have it expeditiously approved by the caretaker government to be enacted as law. We expect the government to play a proactive role in this regard.

Yet another train accident

Alarm bell ringing for fixing loose ends

CLOSELY on the heels of railway accidents taking a toll of lives at railway crossings, we now have the Upoban Express headed for Sylhet hitting the stationary Noakhali Express at Ashuganj from behind. The disaster taking place at night was tragic beyond proportions.

The driver of the Upoban Express sped towards Ashuganj on information of clearly dubious authenticity that the Noakhali Express had already departed leaving the line clear for the former. But what happened actually is that the Noakhali Express, apparently to haul up basketful of chickens overshot its stoppage time, turning a blind eye to any train coming in.

Two pertinent questions arise at this point: first, how come wrong information got relayed to Upoban driver or did he act on a pure notion? Second, and very important at that, the Noakhali Express having been stationary at the time, surely the red signal was blinking to warn off the onrushing train, something that was evidently overlooked by the Upoban driver.

All these conjure up a scenario of a weakened and dilapidated infrastructure, run by equally inefficient and untrained manpower, in which accidents are only waiting to happen. The weak signalling system and unprotected railway tracks spell veritable dangers to transportation by rail. Of the 2800 kilometer railways in the country as much as 1200 kilometers are risky. The shingles, slippers, electric train clips, fish plates are regularly stolen away with little supervision in place.

It is a ringing indictment on our poor sense of priority that such an important mode of transport has been allowed to atrophy through marginalisation, mismanagement and plunder.

Occasionally, we have heard of high sounding projects to modernise the railways, but no matching actions. Unless we have gotten the basics right in terms of efficient service management and secure travelling all the tall talks will be just blowing some hot air.

Please hold



ZAFAR SOBHAN

PERHAPS the inimitable M.J. Akbar put it best in his piece "Who killed 2007?" syndicated in these pages last November 20: "The remaining weeks between mid-November and early January have been put on hold in both India and Pakistan," wrote Mr. Akbar, before adding, parenthetically but incisively, "Bangladesh is in an exceptional situation; the whole nation has been put on hold till further notice."

This is, I think, more than the state of emergency, more than the unresolved issue of whether and when elections will be held and who will contest in them, more than the on-going drama of who will be picked up in the anti-crime and anti-corruption drive -- the fundamental reality of the through-the-looking-glass world we have all resided in since January 11, 2007.

In the early days post-1/11, every day brought us a new sensational arrest. Today, every day brings us a new verdict of some one-time prominent politician or

It is for this reason, more than any other, that it is imperative that elections be held as announced. So long as we have a non-elected government, we will not be able to have the national discussion that is so long overdue on so many issues, and we will continue to live in a twilight state of suspended animation. The country has surely been on hold long enough.

businessman being sentenced to years behind bars. Every day we hear news of the trials against either Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia inching along, or not, as the case may be. Every day there is news of some new dimension in the on-again, off-again saga of the split within the BNP.

Indeed, after the chief adviser's most recent speech, we are back again to our traditional pastime of speculating as to what it all signifies: whether we will have elections after all, whether the elections will be participated in by all the big parties or not, and what this all might mean for the future of the commonwealth.

The op-ed pages of the newspapers and the comfortable armchairs of the television talk shows are filled with tea-leaf reader and soothsayers, who, cautiously and tentatively, of course, so as not to give offence or say the wrong thing, are attempting to make sense of it all. Nor can anyone doubt that when (if not whether) we hold elections, and the acceptability of any such elections held, is the most pressing, indeed, the singular, issue of the day.

STRAIGHT TALK

But lost in this will they-won't they, will she-won't she debate of the past sixteen months has been any real discussion of fundamental issues. The political discussion, such as there has been, has been a meta-discussion about politics. There has been no real discussion of economic policy, foreign policy, social policy, education policy, any policy, really. To the extent that there has been any policy discussion at all, it has revolved around the legitimacy of the current government to make policy, not so much the policies per se.

Now, in truth, this is not a whole lot different from the sixteen months prior to the declaration of emergency. The political discussion then, such as it was, revolved around the issue of the then up-coming elections and whether they would be free and fair or not. There was a lot of discussion as to the rules of the game and who would head the EC and the care-taker government, but almost entirely absent was any discussion of the policy issues at stake in the elections.

But it is also true that in the months leading up to 1/11 that at the level of the political grassroots and among the citizenry at large that there was much discussion and debate about reform. This was not discussion about economic reform or even economic policy, but, in addressing the issue of reform within the political parties and within the political system, it was nevertheless serious and substantive.

But there has been no further substantive talk of internal political party reform over the past sixteen months, except in the very generalised terms that everyone agrees that it would be a good thing. Right now the political parties are too concerned with the fate of their leaders and the intricacies of keeping themselves in one piece to be able to give much thought to issues of internal reform.

Substantive discussion of policy -- be it economic policy, energy policy, you name it -- has also stopped dead in its tracks. I seem to remember that not so very long ago, we had national

discussions on what to do with our coal and natural gas reserves. Not particularly edifying discussions, perhaps, but discussions nonetheless.

But for the last sixteen months, everything has been subsumed into the talk of whether or when we will have elections and the wrongs and the rights of the anti-crime and anti-corruption campaigns, specifically with respect to the fates of the two ex-prime ministers.

Part of the problem, obviously, is that until this week the political parties were banned from doing politics and it was unclear what level of organisational activity on their part would have been permissible (though something tells me that discussing policy issues will not be high on their agenda, even now).

The second leg of the problem lies in the ambiguous mandate of the current government to make any kind of major policy decision, and its well-founded apprehension that there would be limited public tolerance for sweeping policy changes made by a non-elected government.

The final part of the problem is that no one else is really willing to enter into any kind of policy dialogue with the current government due to the fact that, however supportive they may be of its goals in private, no one really wants to be too closely associated with it publicly.

But the upshot of all of this is that, as a nation, we have been

treading water for the past sixteen months. Certainly, one can argue that we first need to settle the outstanding issues of political and institutional dysfunction, and only then can we address our minds to matters of policy.

However, I am not sure that, as a practical matter, it is possible for a country to put the latter on hold while it muddles its way towards the former. Nor does it seem, to be perfectly frank, that we have made a great deal of headway towards resolving the former issues in any kind of sustainable way during the past sixteen months, either.

It is for this reason, more than any other, that it is imperative that elections be held as announced. So long as we have a non-elected government, we will not be able to have the national discussion that is so long overdue on so many issues, and we will continue to live in a twilight state of suspended animation.

Of course, the problem is that there is little guarantee that we will ever have these kinds of discussions even after an election. It is true that we didn't really have the kind of national conversations that we needed on issues of policy and identity before, either. But while elections alone are not a sufficient condition for addressing the issues of where we are going in the 21st century, they are most certainly a necessary one. The country has surely been on hold long enough.

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Our wobbling democracy



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

EARLY this month, after an unruly mob torched two launches on the Buriganga, police cases were filed against 30,000 people. Three days after the eruption on Dhaka University campus last August, 42,000 people were charged with disturbance of peace and vandalism across the country. Recently, the remains of a security guard have been recovered from the wreckage of Rangs Bhaban, five months after the building collapsed. Since mass indictment is the order of the day, I have been thinking about it for some time. Why not sue the 150 million people of this country and then indict this government?

Wishful thinking, I know! But the pair of legs hanging from the heap of concrete and twisted iron brews a storm of anguish inside the heart. Every time I look at

that picture, those stiff legs appear like a pair of spears frozen in their trajectory. They make me think of the rest of the body, which was buried under the rubbles, crushed under tons of weight, squeezed to discharge all its fluids. Those legs stab my conscience when I think that they were attached to a once living and breathing man who enjoyed life as much as anybody else.

So, the people of this country should be accused of insensitivity, if not complicity. There should be a strong case against them for witnessing gruesome deaths, and doing nothing. They knew that people were still trapped inside that building, yet there was no protest, no vigil, nary a noise. It can be argued that if those people were still alive, whether they would have lived if promptly rescued and taken to a hospital.

But then, it can be also argued

CROSS TALK

That explains why democracy didn't work for us. If the people are worth nothing, how can their governments be more precious? Candidates buy votes. Governments buy lives. The rich buy everything. In the incessant bargain to auction the dignity of people, democracy has become an empty word.

that some of the victims were still breathing, numb with pain they must have hoped in some lucid moment that rescue was under-way. They must have been thirsty and hungry, desperately thinking of their loved ones in that diabolical darkness between destruction and death. Who is to blame for it, if not the government?

Why not, if it happened when the building was being torn down at the behest of the government? So, the government should have organised quick rescue, and, at the same time, punished those who were guilty of gross negligence. It was the government's responsibility to explain why so many lives were lost under its watch.

Then there was the softer side. We send flowers to the sick and dying, and visit them at hospitals. We send condolences to bereaved families and attend funerals. These are essential gestures, which show that we are

at least capable of caring even though we may not be able to prevent the inevitable.

So far I remember, nobody from the caretaker cabinet went to Rangs Bhaban to show that gesture, to show that they were sorry such a catastrophe should have happened.

I know accidents happen all the time. But what happened in that building was more venal than accident, more tragic than death. It was atrocity committed by the authorities, laced with stupidity, at once an evidence of how little we know and how little we care.

In more civilised countries, when janitors mop the building floors, they put out the "Wet Floor" sign. The purpose is to caution visitors, so that if anyone trips on the slippery floor the building can't be sued.

Those who died in Rangs Bhaban weren't there for a visit. They had come to demolish that

building as labourers and guards, and they had come with certain knowledge of occupational hazard. But were they adequately warned? Did they know at which stage the stripping of that building was going to tilt its load distribution?

These are the things which should have been looked into by an investigation. Did the contractors know these things? Why did they allow those workers to spend the night inside that precarious building? At the end of the day, someone has got to be guilty of not having done his job.

I don't mind that the price of life has been settled in money and livestock. If commodities are priced according to brand names, human beings are no different. A business tycoon is said to have paid Taka 21 crore to protect his son who had killed his business partner. It may be the same colour of blood running in the veins inside, but people are discriminated on the basis of who they are outside.

That explains why democracy didn't work for us. If the people are worth nothing, how can their governments be more precious? Candidates buy votes. Governments buy lives. The rich buy everything. In the incessant bargain to auction the dignity of

people, democracy has become an empty word.

Hence, my humble submission to the enthusiasts of democracy. Nothing will happen until people are elevated to their rightful place. If we want a government of the people, which isn't always the same thing as a popular government, then people must come first. If thirteen lives were lost in a building demolition, it wasn't so much about loss of life. More people die in road accidents or boat capsizes in any given month.

It's more about accountability, which redounds to democracy's discredit. The government left the bodies of its citizens rotting in the rubbles. Maybe it didn't have the expertise or equipment to rescue people trapped inside a broken skyscraper.

At least it could have the strong will to find and punish those who were responsible for this disaster. Then compensation would have made more sense.

Democracy doesn't save lives. It doesn't heal wounds, cure diseases or resurrect the dead. It only ensures that under any circumstances, people are going to have their dignity intact.

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The rise of the rest: A new nationalism



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

Our challenge is this: Whether the problem is a trade dispute or a human rights tragedy like Darfur or climate change, the only solutions that will work are those involving many nations. But arriving at solutions when more countries and more non-governmental players are feeling empowered will be harder than ever.

-- soaring commodity prices. \$100 oil is just the tip of the barrel. Almost all commodities are at 200-year highs.

Food, only a few decades ago in danger of price collapse, is now in the midst of a scary rise. None of this is due to dramatic fall-offs in supply. It is demand, growing global demand, which is fueling these prices. The effect of more and more people eating, drinking, washing, driving, and consuming will have seismic effects on the global system. These may be high-quality problems, but they are deep problems nonetheless.

The most immediate effect of global growth is the appearance of new economic powerhouses on the scene. It is an accident of history that for the last several

centuries, the richest countries in the world have all been very small in terms of population.

Denmark has 5.5 million people, the Netherlands has 16.6 million. The United States is the biggest of the bunch and has dominated the advanced industrial world.

But the real giants -- China, India, Brazil -- have been sleeping, unable or unwilling to join the world of functioning economies. Now they are on the move and naturally, given their size, they will have a large footprint on the map of the future.

Even if people in these countries remain relatively poor, as nations their total wealth will be massive. Or to put it another way, any number, no matter how small, when multiplied by 2.5

billion becomes a very big number. (2.5 billion is the population of China plus India.)

The rise of China and India is really just the most obvious manifestation of a rising world. In dozens of big countries, one can see the same set of forces at work -- a growing economy, a resurgent society, a vibrant culture, and a rising sense of national pride. That pride can morph into something uglier.

For me, this was vividly illustrated a few years ago when I was chatting with a young Chinese executive in an Internet café in Shanghai. He wore Western clothes, spoke fluent English, and was immersed in global pop culture. He was a product of globalisation and spoke its language of bridge building and

cosmopolitan values.

At least, he did so until we began talking about Taiwan, Japan, and even the United States. (We did not discuss Tibet, but I'm sure had we done so, I could have added it to this list.) His responses were filled with passion, bellicosity, and intolerance. I felt as if I were in Germany in 1910, speaking to a young German professional, who would have been equally modern and yet also a staunch nationalist.

As economic fortunes rise, so inevitably does nationalism. Imagine that your country has been poor and marginal for centuries. Finally, things turn around and it becomes a symbol of economic progress and success. You would be proud, and anxious that your people win recognition and respect throughout the world.

In many countries such nationalism arises from a pent-up frustration over having to accept an entirely Western, or American, narrative of world history -- one in which they are

miscast or remain bit players.

Russians have long chafed over the manner in which Western countries remember World War II. The American narrative is one in which the United States and Britain heroically defeat the forces of fascism.

The Normandy landings are the climactic highpoint of the war -- the beginning of the end. The Russians point out, however, that in fact the entire Western front was a sideshow. Three quarters of all German forces were engaged on the Eastern front fighting Russian troops, and Germany suffered 70 percent of its casualties there. The Eastern front involved more land combat than all other theaters of World War II put together.

Such divergent national perspectives always existed. But today, thanks to the information revolution, they are amplified, echoed, and disseminated. Where once there were only the narratives laid out by The New York Times, Time, Newsweek, the

BBC, and CNN, there are now dozens of indigenous networks and channels -- from Al Jazeera to India's NDTV to Latin America's Telesur. The result is that the "rest" are now dissecting the assumptions and narratives of the West and providing alternative views.

A young Chinese diplomat told me in 2006: "When you tell us that we support a dictatorship in Sudan to have access to its oil, what I want to say is, 'And how is that different from your support of a medieval monarchy in Saudi Arabia?' We see the hypocrisy, we just don't say anything -- yet."

The fact that newly rising nations are more strongly asserting their ideas and interests is inevitable in a post-American world. This raises a conundrum -- how to get a world of many actors to work together. The traditional mechanisms of international cooperation are fraying.

The UN Security Council has as its permanent members the victors of a war that ended more than 60 years ago. The G8 does

not include China, India or Brazil -- the three fastest-growing large economies in the world -- and yet claims to represent the movers and shakers of the world economy.

By tradition, the IMF is always headed by a European and the World Bank by an American. This "tradition," like the segregated customs of an old country club, might be charming to an insider. But to the majority who live outside the West, it seems bigoted.

Our challenge is this: Whether the problem is a trade dispute or a human rights tragedy like Darfur or climate change, the only solutions that will work are those involving many nations. But arriving at solutions when more countries and more non-governmental players are feeling empowered will be harder than ever.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International. This piece is part three of a four-part series.

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