

## Faces of power and corruption

### Truth commission a pragmatic step

But effectiveness hinges on integrity of persons manning it

THE formation of a Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) is a promising measure with considerable beneficial potential that can be greeted with qualified approval.

The plain fact of the matter is that the existing judicial system is at present over-burdened due to the on-going anti-corruption drive, and a sensible measure that is aimed at streamlining the process and permitting a more swift dispensing of justice is something to be welcomed.

Essentially, since the initial tenure of the commission will be the remaining six months of this interim government, and there is every need to resolve outstanding cases without further delay, it certainly seems to be an innovation that is worth trying.

Of course, there are potential problems that we need to watch out for. It is imperative to guard against abuse of the system, specifically external influences of any kind. Thus, the commission must remain fully independent of executive or other outside control.

And it is critical that the commission not be used as a vehicle to shield wrong-doers from justice or to let them off the hook lightly. The most important element will still be the investigative element, to ensure that people are neither able to hide their assets nor avoid making a full accounting of their crimes.

There is no reason why, if it is staffed and headed by conscientious and capable men and women, and run with integrity and efficiency, that the commission should not operate as a useful adjunct to the administration of justice.

One caveat is the rule that newsmen face fines and jail-time for the vague crime of attempting to influence the commission. We do not understand why the commission sees itself as uniquely vulnerable to such efforts; the same laws which apply to keep newsmen from improperly attempting to influence court decisions or from printing baseless or motivated stories in general should be sufficient to protect the integrity of the commission.

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### Barbaric assault on our correspondent

The responsible must be punished

THE attack by jail guards on Mirza Shakil, our Tangail correspondent, is yet another example of the intolerance and abhorrence shown by various quarters against any conscientious journalistic pursuit to expose their ugly side. This is the hazard that journalists often face in their line of duty entailing investigative and objective journalism. The correspondent's only 'fault', we cannot work out why it exposed him to such a hostile attitude, was that he had taken a photograph of the visitors being harassed.

Anyone having an iota of idea about our prisons and how they are managed would perhaps not fail to see the point of what the DS correspondent was doing. The jail guards made a barbaric assault to silence the man who was just performing his professional duties. Regrettably, what is undermined by such boorish activities is not only press freedom or the rule of law but also human rights.

It is the audacity and the extreme highhandedness demonstrated by the jail guards that we want to condemn in unequivocal terms. The question is: could they have acted on their own without the nod of the jail authorities? The atrocity was committed to cover up a corrupt practice in an organisation that is supposed to be an epitome of law and order. That is cause for concern. The attackers are law enforcers themselves, yet it did not occur to them that it was they who should have been taken to task for harassing the visitors, or they might have been taken under the impression that assaulting a journalist was something they could get away with. This is sheer arrogance anachronistic to the cause of people's right to know that this government values as is evident by its interest in a right to information act.

Our talk of democracy and all that is decent will be reduced to naught, if the press is not allowed to function responsibly and freely; for, the justice system benefits to a large extent from free flow of information and when journalists can fulfil their obligations to society.

An enquiry committee comprising the jailer and two other officials of the jail administration has reportedly been formed to look into the matter. Going by reports, the jailer apparently did nothing even after receiving the complaint that the visitors were being harassed. Thus, there should have been some independent persons in the committee to ensure credibility of the committee and its outcome. Basically, whoever is responsible for the tyrannical assault must not be allowed to escape justice and be punished for the barbaric act.



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THIS week I am tempted, almost like a high school kid, to reproduce some quotes on corruption as said by some important people who lived in the past (Alas! Why all the good words have already been said! Since nothing is there for us to say, we tend to forget those words and merrily indulge in all sorts of forbidden things -- corruption for example!). Yes, the quotes are on corruption, both institutional and political corruption. And I know we never get tired of reading incredible tales of corruption committed by the high and mighty.

Discerning readers, please allow the following words gradually seep into your mind and then take a while to contemplate in quietude. The import of the wisdom would

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

That was a short journey through the catacomb of corruption and it should end here with the last paragraph below. A nation will surely slide to an abyss of despair if it becomes insensitive to the corruption and abuse of power of those who were part and parcel of the political parties that were in power in the past.

stir your soul, as you have been an avid thinker and analyzer by your own right and merit.

Amos Bronson Alcott, an American academic and social reformer had said the following words more than 170 years ago: "A government, for protecting business only, is but a carcass, and soon falls by its own corruption and decay." Now, dear readers, haven't we seen examples of "governments for the business, of the business and by the business" in this country? Such governments corrupt both governance and business through destroying the fundamental principles one needs to adhere to for gaining success in either business or politics.

Here are words from Decimus (Junius Juvenalis) Juvenal (c.55-c.130), the ancient Roman Satirical poet who found another dimension of corruption. He says: "The examples of vice at home

corrupt us more quickly and easily than others, since they steal into our minds under the highest authority." Hmm... it's worth a thought!

Now let us hear what someone has to say about blind support and sycophancy in politics. He is none but Friedrich Nietzsche and he said this over a century ago: "The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently." By Jove! Did he say, think differently? Heads would roll in Paltan Maidan if supporters of one political party held leaders of another in high esteem for thinking differently!

Here is one on graft or bribe and Graham Greene, the British novelist has articulated it so skillfully. He said: "I have often noticed that a bribe has that effect -- it changes a relation. The man who offers a bribe gives away a little of his own

importance; the bribe once accepted, he becomes the inferior, like a man who has paid for a woman."

Well, I wish to end this part with the last one. Karl Kraus, an Austrian satirist has to say this about corruption: "Corruption is worse than prostitution. The latter might endanger the morals of an individual, the former invariably endangers the morals of the entire country."

Well, I guess we have had a substantial dose of quotes on corruption. Now it is time to see some action at the national level. Yes, sir, it's time to go to jail and stay there for many, many years. This is the ultimate destination at the end of the road that awaits people like CBA leader BM Baqi and Dr AZM Zahid who had partaken in a senseless binge of corruption during the rule of the last government.

Each of the two has been sentenced to 13 years in jail along with fines of Tk. 10 lac each. The court has also given their wives prison terms for three years each. These two men had openly and blatantly used their position to let loose a reign of misrule in their respective arena of work with the blessing of corrupt people above them.

Dear readers, you will remember seeing the ubiquitous face of Janab Baqi behind every single senior leader of BNP in public meetings. He was there on the dais even behind the Prime Minister in such meetings looking intently at the TV camera. He began his career as a lower division clerk in a nationalised bank. But soon became a CBA leader. He began to control appointment, transfer and promotion of staff members of the bank and thus earned crores over the decade.

He began to join political meetings bringing along with him hundreds of bank employees, leaving work behind. He had donated crores to become the president of guardians' association of a local school.

Dr. Zahid grew in power beyond his own belief during the rule of the last political government. Absolute power as the DAB leader began to make him feel woolly in

the head. He began to control every recruitment, posting, promotion etc of doctors. Those not supporting his political party were given worst types of posting in far off places.

The worst possible case of corruption against him is allegation of tampering the results of a lottery ticket through which he earned Tk. 30 lac as the first prize-winner. He butted his nose in large-scale purchases of government hospitals and had the last word in selecting NGOs to work in health programs and projects.

Well that was a short journey through the catacomb of corruption and it should end here with the last paragraph below. A nation will surely slide to an abyss of despair if it becomes insensitive to the corruption and abuse of power of those who were part and parcel of the political parties that were in power in the past. Over the last fifteen years we have seen many facets of corruption, some unheard of before, to make many sensitive people take vows to leave the country. We surely do not want good people to leave. We want the bad ones to be sent to Andaman, like the good old days. Not a bad idea, eh?

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## Land use and livelihood



ABDUL BAYES

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

Bangladesh agriculture has to graduate from subsistence to commercial farming and from traditional to modern managements. And there seems to be no better alternative than to devoting more resources for crop and livestock and fishery research, developing new technologies for farm practices and reducing the yield gap between farms and farms and between farms and research stations.

longer period of time of about two decades.

It is, thus, no wonder that some of us tend to portray a precarious state of loss of cultivable land in the coming years and the ramifications to go with it. For example, the fear is that Bangladesh could exhaust all of its cultivable land within next 50-60 years. Quite obviously, a loss of cultivable land in the wake of growing population, urbanisation, and infrastructure buildings would threaten our food security since too many people would then be chasing too few lands. Accepting that at its face value, let us look at some interesting insights in land use patterns.

### Diversified use of land

A rural household has many uses of land under its possession: homestead to live, cultivation of crops to grow staple foods, garden/orchards to grow high value crops, ponds to grow fish, and keeping lands fallow, etc. In the sample 62 villages, the total amount of owned land for 2,010 households is estimated to be 967 hectares (ha) or about 0.48 ha per household. For Bangladesh at large, it translates into about 10-12 million ha. Between 2000 and 2008, total owned land decreased by about 4%. On the other hand, total cultivable area for the sample is estimated to be 731 ha or 0.56 ha per household. For Bangladesh, this translates into 9 million ha. Again -- and as said before -- cultivable land declined by 1.2% between 2000 and 2008.

Homestead area as share of owned land declined from 10% to about 7% implying that there have been attempts on the part of rural households to economise the use of homestead land. But it is not so much in the case of medium and large farms as it is for small and marginal farms. For example, roughly one-fourth of small farm owned land was used for homestead purposes in 2000. This contrasts with about one-fifth in 2008. For marginal farms, the shares are 41% and 39%, respectively. Where could we find this missing land? The decreased share of homestead area was taken over by gardens and ponds. Small farms increased the share of garden/orchards from about 15% of owned land to 17% and, for ponds, from about 7% to about 10%. For marginal farms, area under gardens/orchards went up from 11% to 14% of owned land, and, for ponds, from 4% to 7%.

For all households, the share of orchard lands almost doubled during the periods under comparison. That means that rural households, especially the small and marginal farms, have resorted to more economic use by putting land to relatively more remunerative activities. Necessity perhaps induced them to be innovative and subsistence pressures drove them to divert lands for better alternative uses. Thus, while cultivable land decreased over time, alternative uses increased to put them on an even keel. On the other hand, an increase in the proportion of fallow area from

about 2% to 3% indicates that there is further scope, albeit very marginal, for increasing cultivated areas.

**Profits to you, perils for me**  
What is the nature of land arrangements in rural areas? We can identify five forms of farming in rural Bangladesh. First, there are non-farm households who keep their hands off from lands and mostly rent out their parcels. They are rural and urban elites or "babu shaebas." This group accounts for about 44% of rural households, but commands about 27% of total owned land. Between 2000 and 2008, this group marginally increased their presence but significantly increased ownership from about 20% to 27%.

The second category is pure tenants or the poorest -- who eke out a living only by cultivating others' lands. The proportion of this group doubled from 9% in 1988 to 18% in 2004. But after that, the proportion of pure tenants declined to about 15% in 2008. If we include tenant-owner (who cultivate more than half of land under tenancy), the share of tenant households increased from 18% in 1988 to 28% in 2004 but then fell to 23% in 2008.

In other words, after a long spell of increase, the presence of pure tenants declined during the last four years with obvious implications for poor households and their livelihoods from cultivating others' land. The quite opposite, however, seems to hold for owner-farmers. The proportion of such

households decreased from 37% in 1988 to 26% in 2004 but then increased to 29% in 2008.

This group cultivated 58% of the cultivated area in 1988 and by 2004, only 43%. But in 2008, they controlled 51% of total cultivated land. This means that some of the owner-farms who rented out lands before, possibly lured by high profitability of agriculture in recent years, brought back lands and thus, put pure tenants in peril.

Another evidence of this is that, the share of rented-in land increased from 23% in 1988 to about 40% in 2004, after which the share dropped to 37% in 2008. It can also be hypothesised that crop cultivation had been relatively more equalising for a pretty long period but, of late has growingly become relatively more inequalising. By and large, the recent changes in the arrangements of cultivated lands can be seen as a sign of growing inequality among rural households. This is, perhaps, the pitfalls of high profitability of crop production that some of the earlier critics of the green revolution so vehemently propagated.

### Distained diversity

The moot issue that crops up is the question of crop diversity and land utilisation pattern. While our farmers have been rational as far as profit maximisation is concerned -- and thus switching over massively from MVs to TVs -- the loss of crop diversity might deter their dividends in future. Space here is short to dwell on this in detail, but allow me to cite a few cases.

In the 2007 amon season, 44 varieties of paddy were grown by our farmers. But two varieties, BR11/Mukta and Swarna, with a yield of roughly 3 ton/ha, claimed about half of the cultivated area at that time. Just four years back, in 2004, about 60 varieties were grown and the said two crops claimed 45% of area. In 2000, 71

varieties were grown and the two varieties claimed 32% of area.

Thus, during the amon season, higher yield and profitability promoted concentration at the cost of diversity. However, the next important variety is pajam, increasing its share from 7 to 9% over the same period of time.

Take the case of boro season. About 50 varieties were grown in 2007 season. But BR28 and BR29 claimed about three-fourths of the total area. In 2004, these two varieties claimed 52% of area. In 2000, the top two varieties (BR14 and BR28) claimed only 20% of area. So, in boro season also we observe a serious deterrence to crop diversity.

### Revolution second round

Once the first phase of the green revolution is over, the second phase should step in with the use of indigenously developed hybrid varieties, enabling environment for crop diversity, devising appropriate marketing channels for high value crops, and undertaking proper policies for agro-processing.

Bangladesh agriculture has to graduate from subsistence to commercial farming and from traditional to modern managements. And there seems to be no better alternative than to devoting more resources for crop and livestock and fishery research, developing new technologies for farm practices and reducing the yield gap between farms and farms and between farms and research stations.

Most importantly, perhaps, the tenants need to be brought under a separate and special umbrella of co-operatives, credit, and subsidy and extension networks since they are poor segment of the rural society. NGOs should come forward along with the government.

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## High Court verdict to protect human rights

The verdict of the HC of Bangladesh is bringing international attention, as the refugees now have a country, and it resolves their identity crisis. The people of Bangladesh want more reasonable and immediate steps to solve the crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

THE Bangladesh High Court (HC) has ruled that children of Urdu-speaking refugees, awaiting repatriation to Pakistan, have the right to Bangladeshi citizenship. Through the verdict by a two-member panel of Justice M.A. Rashid and Justice M. Ashfaque on Sunday, May 18, some 300,000 refugees now languishing in 70 crammed camps across Bangladesh will have the right to live as Bangladeshis.

After the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, the majority of the Urdu-speakers in the

country applied for repatriation to Pakistan through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but Pakistan stopped taking them. These people became forced migrants in Bangladesh, becoming stateless with no access to citizenship rights. Realising that the government of Pakistan was not going to repatriate them, Pakistanis in Bangladesh continued to repatriate themselves and their families by whatever means were available to them.

In addition, in March 1978, the government of Pakistan issued a presidential ordinance stripping all Pakistanis, left in Bangladesh after December 1971

of their nationality. This ordinance was illegal, and its sole purpose was to deprive a group of citizens of their basic right as citizens of Pakistan. There are around one hundred thousand Pakistanis who returned without the blessing of the government of Pakistan, but are not recognised as citizens and are denied all amenities of citizenship. This is the other group of stateless.

Since 1971, people from different parts of the society, organisations of Urdu-speaking people, and numerous non-governmental organisations that have worked with the camp residents for so many years, have been urging the authorities in

Bangladesh to give all the camp dwelling Urdu-speaking people Bangladeshi citizenship.

Though the HC verdict was awarded in favour of those who were minors in 1971, or born after the independence of Bangladesh, according to the inter-ministerial meeting held on September 5, 2007, the older refugees may also get the chance to be citizens if they wish. The refugees are the remnants of about 500,000 Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to then East Pakistan from India in 1947.

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood," article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts. During the liberation war, the Pakistani army threw to the winds all the provisions of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights to which Pakistan itself is a signatory. The Declaration very solemnly declares the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, and is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.

All the refugee camps suffer from severe overcrowding, food insecurity, lack of access to safe drinking water, and poor sanitation, and lack basic facilities of medical services. Due to their camp address and unidentified status, camp-residents often face discrimination in the job market while females face numerous problems including demands for dowry that led to early marriage, lack of privacy, sexual abuse, and abandonment.

Last February, the Nepal government issued exit permits to Bhutanese refugees who had

opted for third country resettlement. The United States has offered to resettle at least 60,000 Bhutanese refugees and Canada has indicated it will accept up to 5,000, while Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway have also shown their willingness to take in refugees. Over 100,000 Bhutanese have been living in seven camps in eastern Nepal after allegedly being driven out by the Druk government in the 1980s, when Bhutan began an assimilation drive, overriding the culture, language and dress of ethnic communities, mostly of Nepali origin. The first batch of refugees was set to fly to the United States in March, while larger numbers will be leaving Nepal starting in July.

The verdict of the HC of Bangladesh is bringing international attention, as the refugees now have a country, and it resolves their identity crisis. The people of Bangladesh want more reasonable and immediate steps to solve the crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

According to the chief adviser, in conformity with the Accord, some government steps have already been taken and the process is on to solve the problems in CHT. The CHT Accord of 1997 was signed in full accordance with the country's sovereignty and integrity and for upholding the political, social, cultural, educational and economic rights of the peoples living in the hilly region.

On the other hand, the Rohingya refugee problem in Bangladesh is a decades-long pending issue. There are still untold thousands of Rohingyas who are living in Bangladesh as undocumented refugees without any status and there are perhaps thousands of Rohingyas who are living in different countries of

the world with Bangladeshi passport. Over 250,000 Rohingya Muslims from western Burma were forced into Bangladesh by the Burmese military in 1992 in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Arakan State. Since then thousands of people have been detained in crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh and tens of thousands have been repatriated to Burma only to face repression again. On humanitarian ground, it needs immediate bi-lateral solution.

People appreciate the HC verdict, which will help the Urdu-speaking people to join with the mainstream society and expect more reasonable solution on other issues, as no human being can get a fair chance to participate in society.

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