

TIB on the state of corruption A wake-up call

THE Transparency International Bangladesh's survey report on the extent and severity of corruption during July 2006 to June 2007 portrays a more dismal picture than we had expected. The expectations, however, wouldn't seem to be that much belied if we were to take into account that only six months of the caretaker government has been covered in the report. It is the first half year of the government that saw a massive anti-corruption drive against financial misdeeds and abuse of power in high places including wealth statements procured from people thought to have been above reproach.

This is only to stress the point that graft in the institutions and petty forms of corruption that had taken deep roots in the various service sectors over time remained virtually undressed in the first six months of the government. It is only later that institutions like Chittagong port, RAJUK, WASA, DESA were brought under scrutiny leaving out an array of other institutions.

It is, therefore, not surprising that people had to pay Taka 5443 crore in bribes to receive services from public and private sectors; incidence of graft heightened in education, health, local government and NGOs; even though corruption declined a little among law enforcement agencies, its magnitude remains staggering; and land administration emerges as the worst culprit.

The TIB findings should be regarded as a wake-up call for the government, and the ACC in particular, to take stock of things and fill in the void in the anti-corruption drive where necessary. The lessons to draw are these: first, the free-for-all corruption among the leaders infected the institutions and offices with the virus of corruption. Secondly, and equally importantly, none of the institutions had any internal accountability mechanism, or whatever little was there, got swamped in the high tide of corruption.

So, institutional reforms would have to be carried out by this government, failing which during the brief remainder of its tenure, it could perhaps put this on the table in their dialogues with the political parties to have it addressed in fullness by an elected government.

Let's give due credit to the ethos of the last 18 months of the caretaker government's anti-corruption drive. The culture of impunity has taken a drubbing, fear has been struck in the minds of the pathological thugs and looters of state property and public demand for accountability has reached a new high. A sense of accountability has been instilled in the minds of the people across the board and this will have to be now given an institutional shape.

Zero tolerance on human trafficking

Bringing an end to this disgraceful practice must be high on govt agenda

THE report that 50 Bangladeshi women are trafficked to India every day, to say nothing of those who are trafficked even further afield, should send a chill down the spine of any sentient human being, and there is no question the serious measures against trafficking should be at the top of any Bangladeshi government's agenda.

The issue is simply one of human dignity. We owe it to the women (as well as the minor boys and girls) who are so trafficked and who end up in brothels or other dark corners of the sex trade. That so many thousands of our fellow countrywomen (and men) are reduced to such misery and degradation is all to shame.

The new "Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) Investigation Unit" set up by the government to address the issue is thus welcomed and applauded. We hope that it will be given every resource and assistance that it requires, so that the traffickers understand that there will be a steep price to pay for their heinous crimes.

We need to have a zero tolerance policy on trafficking. That means aggressive policing and investigation, and swift and severe punishment for the offenders. As long as they feel that they can escape detection or penalty, the traffickers will continue in their despicable trade.

Indeed, the severest of penalties, including capital punishment for the kingpins who have built up huge empires based on the misery of thousands would be in order.

Similarly, village and district level education programmes to ensure that every single Bangladeshi becomes a foot-soldier on the war against trafficking need to be introduced. Finally, we have to create a more prosperous economy and more pro-woman social environment so that young women cannot be lured away under the false pretences of a job opportunity.

Trafficking is merely the worst example of how Bangladeshis overseas are mistreated and how no government has ever done anything to safeguard the simple human dignity of Bangladeshis outside the country. It is high time that we brought these Bangladeshis and their protection to the top of the agenda, and cracking down like a thunderbolt on trafficking is a good place to start.

In defence of civil society



ZAFAR SOBHAN

THIS is a tough brief. Perhaps I would have better luck writing in defence of serial killers or kidnappers or puppy-punters. Even writing in defence of lawyers, it seems to me, would be a safer undertaking that would garner me fewer brickbats. But if a columnist cannot take an unpopular position every now and again, then what use are we (don't answer that question).

Sometimes we have to stick our necks out and defend the very people who are being pilloried, the lowest of the low, the scorned of society, the outcasts, the pariahs, those who are utterly beyond the pale.

In post-1/11 Bangladesh, or at least in the eyes of a considerable segment of the chattering classes, the *bien pensants*, the intelligentsia, there is no doubt as to the identity of the primary villains of the day. It is not corrupt politicians or crooked businessmen. To the contrary, the lion's share of anger and contempt is reserved for that ill-defined yet curiously satisfying punching-bag, civil

STRAIGHT TALK

Never has this become so apparent as it is today, in the wake of a pretty devastating report issued by Transparency International Bangladesh earlier this week, which indicated that corruption continued to rise the first half of 2007, despite the on-going anti-corruption measures. If ever an institution was a card-carrying member of "civil society," it is TIB.

society.

If you read newspapers or watch talk shows on television or go on-line, you will have observed long ago that "civil society" or "sushil" (used as a noun) has become a dirty word. No one, it seems, has a good word to say about civil society. Civil society is the cause of all our ills. There is no more villainous and infamous group of people to be found from Teknaf to Tetulia.

But in actuality, the ranting and raving one hears against "civil society" demonstrates little more than our unfortunate propensity for handy but not necessarily accurate intellectual short-cuts and simplified, conspiratorial thinking. Neither serves us well, not in this instance, or in general.

Let us start by trying to define "civil society." Wikipedia defines it thus: "Civil society is composed of the totality of voluntary civic and social organisations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning... as opposed to the force-backed structures of a (regardless of that state's political system) and commercial institutions" -- which would seem to

cover it nicely.

Prior to 1/11 there were two tropes in currency with respect to civil society. One was that civil society had failed in that it had not been a moderating force in our politics and had indeed become just as polarised and partisan as the political sphere, with professional associations and the like being divided along political lines. The second trope was that civil society had been, by and large, a positive element in the country, with many civil society organisations doing exemplary work and serving the nation well.

Note that, according to whichever trope is being put forward, civil society means two somewhat different things, and that the term is so broad and all-encompassing that any notion of it as either a unitary force or discrete entity is, not to put too fine a point on it, completely absurd.

Fast forward to 1/1. In the eyes of a not-inconsiderable segment of the population, apparently brought to us by civil society and its backers in the cantonment. Now, the dubbing of 1/11 as a "civil society revolution" or a

"sushil revolution" was always lazy, conspiratorial thinking. The notion that there is some cabal of eminent civil society personages sitting around a table somewhere, plotting the future of the republic, is pretty silly. Similarly, the extent of collusion between the caretaker government and its backers in the cantonment and various organs of civil society is little more than idle speculation and conspiracy mongering.

Certainly, there have been elements within civil society who have been supportive of the current dispensation (no names mentioned). But how supportive and how critical and what kind of support has been tendered is something that has been, almost without exception, either misunderstood or misrepresented.

But the main point I am trying to make is that there is no such thing as a unitary civil society. So when we rhetorically rain down fire and brimstone on "civil society" and condemn all "sushils" (whoever they are) as apologists for the current dispensation, this is as lazy and as unhelpful as painting all politicians or all busi-



Corruption files still piling up.

nessmen with the same brush. Saying that "civil society" supports this government is more or less meaningless.

Never has this become so apparent as it is today, in the wake of a pretty devastating report issued by Transparency International Bangladesh earlier this week, which indicated that corruption continued to rise the first half of 2007, despite the on-going anti-corruption measures.

If ever an institution was a card-carrying member of "civil society," it is TIB. So what are we to make of the fact that one of the most compelling and damaging critiques of this current government has come from TIB?

Since 1/11, I have lost count of the times I have seen TIB castigated as one of the civil society organisations apparently hand-in-glove with the caretaker government. No list of "collaborators" of the current government is

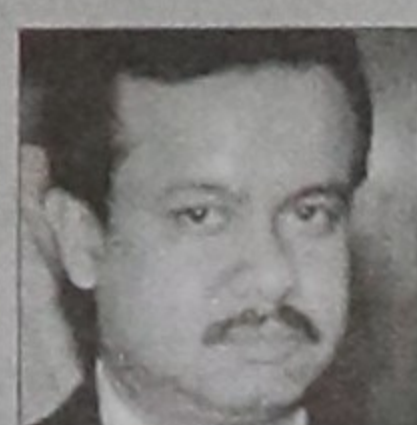
complete without mention of TIB's executive director and chairman. Perhaps an apology is in order?

Perhaps, just perhaps, TIB is not part of some grand conspiracy to rob us of our democracy. Perhaps, heaven forbid, there is no grand "civil society" conspiracy to begin with.

Perhaps, indeed, the time has come to quit bashing "civil society," whatever civil society might mean, and to understand that, in the first place, civil society includes many people and organisations who have been front and centre in holding the current government accountable, and, in the second, that, while satisfying and comforting, it is never particularly helpful to one's analysis to make such sweeping and simplistic generalisations or categorisations.

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No place for innocence



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ENGLISH jurist William Blackstone has famously said that it's better to let ten guilty persons go, than have one innocent suffer. Known as the ratio 10:1 or the "Blackstone ratio," it now appears that the investigation of the bomb attack on a political rally on August 21, 2004, stood that maxim on its ears. For over two and a half years, an innocent man rotted in jail, while 22 offenders walked free like birds.

Not a surprise in this magical land, where the police always come after the crime. But let us give some credit to them. At long last, nearly four years after the deadly attack, they have arrived to press charges against the real culprits of that heinous crime. If we were to ponder the benefits of 1/11, we should count that it has saved one innocent man, who was doing time for the sins of others.

CROSS TALK

An eye for an eye, Judge Miah has the right to torment his tormentors. Yet he can't touch them for the same reason he couldn't stop them either. That explains why the lambs always scream in the face of imminent slaughter. In their wounded sense of betrayal, they try to caution rest of us. The nature, which makes them innocent, has no place for innocence.

There is a surrealistic underpinning of the butterfly effect, albeit in the reverse order. A butterfly flaps its wings, and causes a hurricane half way across the world. Here the game turned on its head. A hurricane occurred in the nation's capital and sent shockwaves to a remote village in Noakhali to strike an innocent butterfly sitting inside a shop. The police have recently cleared the name of Judge Miah, who was picked up in connection with that remote offense. It's now evident that he hadn't flapped his wings.

John F Kennedy told us: "Life isn't fair, but government should be." The statement had the flavour of Kennedy's own experience -- his lifelong back problems made worse by war wounds and other tragedies. But the tragedy is even more tragic when it comes to governments which ruthlessly destroy millions of innocent men, women, and children for no fault of their own.

For example, more than 700,000 people have been killed in Iraq since the U.S. invasion in 2003. Hundreds of thousands of women were burned as witches during the Inquisition in medieval Europe. Sultan Mahmud killed 50,000 Hindus in just one of his 17 attacks at Somnath, and the highly cultured daughters of the noble Hindu families were auctioned to Afghan invaders. The big hits were taken in the two World Wars; some 37.5 million lives perished in the first and 61 million in the second.

Throughout history, innocent lives have been sacrificed as clever contrivance to push the agenda of unscrupulous men. The misfortune of Joj Miah came in the long tradition of that ontological despair, where the chili gets crushed between the mortar and the pestle. It's scary how the government apparatus was geared up in the case of this young man, ready to waste him so that it could score against its

opponents.

And it didn't show the slightest consideration. The man was the sole earning member of his family. His aged mother and sister were starving without his income, not to speak of the immense grief they suffered knowing that the life of their loved one was at grave risk. What about the man himself, the prisoner of fate who must have died many times before his death, not in fear but in his fumbling to reconcile what he had done with what he had deserved?

There are many instances of miscarriage of justice. In this country, a man was sentenced because he had the same name as the perpetrator of a crime. In Sweden, a man of Bangladeshi origin was convicted to life imprisonment in 1994 for the murder of an elderly lady. After almost nine years in prison, he was freed by the higher court of appeal, and later awarded \$1.7

million for wrongful conviction.

To err is human, but to make amends is justice. The Dreyfus Affair was a political scandal which divided France from the 1890s to the early 1900s. It involved the conviction for treason of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a young French artillery officer of Jewish background. French intelligence officials fabricated evidence to secure Dreyfus' conviction as a German spy.

The conspirators were eventually exposed, in large part due to a resounding public intervention by Emile Zola, then the most celebrated writer in France. The accusations against Alfred Dreyfus were proven to be entirely baseless. Dreyfus was fully vindicated and reinstated in the French army.

What will happen to Joj Miah now that the charges against him have been proven false? Will he be compensated for the slice of his life lost in prison? How will he be reinstated in normal life which was already abnormally hard? How will he remove the scars of abuse experienced in jail in the last thirty months? Will he find peace again after the turmoil of injustice done to him?

In the movie *The Silence of the Lamb*, agent Clarence Sterling

tells Hannibal Lecter that she woke up one morning to the screaming of spring lambs being slaughtered in the barn on a ranch in Montana. Hannibal responded by asking her a loaded question. He asked if the lambs had stopped screaming and whether she believed that she was never going to hear the screaming of the lambs if she could save the victim of a serial killer.

In the coming days, Joj Miah will be released, pay (hope not) his way through the paper work and step out of jailgate to face a world which has surpassed him. He will go back to his village, unite with his family and try to piece together his shattered life. But the lambs won't stop screaming inside him. They will breed and multiply in the dark recess of his mind, holding him in a perpetual slaughter.

An eye for an eye, Joj Miah has the right to torment his tormentors. Yet he can't touch them for the same reason he couldn't stop them either. That explains why the lambs always scream in the face of imminent slaughter. In their wounded sense of betrayal, they try to caution rest of us. The nature, which makes them innocent, has no place for innocence.

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The secret conversation

We won't know until long after it matters what transpired between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama when they met secretly after the last primaries. But having just seen a brilliant production of "Nixon's Nixon" at Washington's Round House Theater, elaborating on Henry Kissinger's private meeting in the White House with President Nixon on the eve of his resignation, I have a newfound appreciation for the usefulness of literary license to fill the vacuum until history fills in the facts. Kissinger never discussed what went on between the two men, leaving lots of room for conjecture.

ELEANOR CLIFT

WHAT did Hillary and Barack say to each other? And how will the veepstakes game play out?

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As the playwright imagined the unloved, self-pitying Nixon fretting about history's judgment, and the careerist Kissinger focused on getting Nixon to persuade his successor, Gerald Ford, to keep him on as secretary of state, I found myself imagining how the

conversation between Clinton and Obama might have gone.

Hillary can be blunt, sometimes to a fault, and I can picture her cutting to the chase pretty fast, saying she'd like to be on the ticket, but she won't embarrass him by forcing the issue. She's a big girl and recognises it's his decision.

Ever the gentleman, Barack would say he's open to the idea (even if he isn't), but what about Bill? Hillary assures him Bill won't be a problem, but they both know that's not true. The former president is the angriest person in

Clintonland. He blames the Obama campaign for playing the race card against him and besmirching his legacy.

As improbable as that sounds, "he absolutely truly believes it, and he's viscerally angry about it," says a Clinton friend. Those hurt feelings could be mended, but the former president would have to come clean about his business and personal relationships, and that could be messy. Barack would have to meet with Bill separately.

Clinton believes she's earned a place on the ticket after winning nearly half the delegates and almost all the big states. If she were anybody else, that might be true. But given her baggage, and that includes Bill, her audition as Obama's running mate has just begun.

Her Saturday concession speech kept her in the running,

and if Obama thinks he needs her to win, he'll pick her. He's a dreamer, but he's also a practical politician. The problem with Hillary: she's the embodiment of the 1990s. Obama helped define her that way, and it would require political jujitsu to take her as his running mate and make it a ticket of the future.

The last winning team on the Democratic side was Clinton-Gore, two Southerners reinforcing the message of generational change and regional strength. Applying the same double-down formula to Obama, three likely contenders emerge.

First, Kathleen Sebelius, the popular governor of Kansas, a state moving from Red to Blue; she'd become the woman positioned to break through the glass ceiling cracked by Hillary's 18 million voters. The

problem with Sebelius: how do you put a woman on the ticket without choosing the woman? Picking Sebelius risks a backlash from Hillary and her supporters.

Then there's Jim Webb, the Virginia senator, Vietnam War hero, acclaimed author and a former Republican. His resume is all about the new politics Obama represents. Pro-gun, popular and quirky, he could probably bring Virginia home for the Democrats, and he could court the rural vote that has so far eluded Obama.

The problem with Webb: he doesn't have the soul of a vice-president, a job that requires a degree of subservience.

Hillary's slogan was "Ready on Day One." No one doubts her capacity to be president, but lesser-known figures like Sebelius and Webb have yet to build that credibility with a

national audience. The third and easily the top contender in the 2008 version of the Clinton-Gore double-down model is former Indiana governor, and now senator, Evan Bayh, who passes the test of instantly being seen as a prospective president.

Indeed, he briefly filed the paperwork with the FEC to explore a presidential run before thinking better of challenging the Clintons, and signing on as one of Hillary's top surrogates.

Like Al Gore, Bayh grew up in a political family. Birch Bayh, his father, held the Senate seat from Indiana until 1980, when the Reagan Revolution took hold and Dan Quayle defeated him. The senior Bayh briefly ran for president in 1976. Raised in a political household, Bayh, again like Gore, is always on stage, a self-consciousness

that leads to cautiousness and makes him seem boring.

His risk-averse nature held him back from taking the presidential plunge, but for a vice-president he has the right temperament. Just as Clinton-Gore combined two young Southerners with photogenic families, an Obama-Bayh ticket would combine two young Midwesterners with beautiful families. (Bayh and his wife, Susan, have twin adolescent sons). And Bayh won't make a mistake. He's vetted and ready.

In a race that will be won or lost in the Ohio River Valley and the western part of Pennsylvania, the working-class demographic that Hillary charmed, Bayh could be the placid, turmoil-free and safely male version of what Obama needs.

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