

Subsidy riddled with corruption

Take legal action against the culprits

IT is amazing how a well-intentioned monetary relief programme for marginal farmers initiated with the good of the economy in mind has had a tailspin through the machinations of vested quarters. With insatiable hunger for money the opportunists scavenge on anything smelling of monetary gains.

The Tk250 crore subsidy distribution programme launched in April this year to benefit 67 lakh poor farmers by way of recovering part of their cost of diesel used for irrigation has been plagued with misappropriation and different forms of corruption. Major portion of the undertaking has already been completed; but some districts are yet to be covered, even though less than a week is left of the current financial year.

The instances of corruption revealed through our investigative report make a sad commentary on how opaquely the exercise has been conducted. As for the specifics, some farmers who went to collect money were told that their allocation had already been withdrawn; a local influential forced an unsuspecting farmer to accompany him to the distribution point only to grab the money with a peanut given to the genuine claimant. Aside from the usual run of opportunists, UP members and even agriculture officials allegedly misappropriated a portion of the subsidies.

The criteria of entitlement in terms of the amount per acre as well as the acreage ceiling were flouted. The rule prohibiting subsidy to farmers possessing more than 2.5 acres of land and the one requiring Tk545 to be paid per one acre of cultivable land were violated to line the pockets of the colluding elements. Even some people with no cultivable land were shown to have been subsidised. Such was the extent of the scandal that farmers of a certain area submitted a list and video interviews of the victims to the authorities. True, some UNOs with members of the joint forces visited the spots from which complaints rang out, but that doesn't detract from the fact that the overall scale of corruption was substantial.

While legal action should be taken against those accused of corruption, this phase of the subsidy operation must be regarded as an eye-opener to the incorrigible ways some people remain corrupt even under an emergency and when corruption is tainted in the public mind. The lessons should hold good for the next subsidy exercise.

Drug users falling prey to HIV/Aids

The problem must be handled on a priority basis

A survey has highlighted the dangers that are before us unless strong, purposeful measures are taken to handle HIV/Aids. It has been found in a particular area of the nation's capital that about 10.5 per cent of injectable drug users (IDU) have been afflicted with the HIV/Aids virus. With about 2,000 individuals in the area habitually taking drugs, that would mean about 200 of them now being exposed to the Aids danger. Of course, it might, at least for some, be easy to argue that the figures are from an area studied in isolation and may not reflect the countrywide situation.

But that is precisely the point. In strictly medical terms, once a disease has afflicted 5 per cent of the population in a given area, it is understood that an epidemic has either occurred or is about to occur. While we do not imply that HIV/Aids has now taken the shape of a crisis, we certainly agree with health experts when they suggest that existing conditions warrant a careful look at what is going on. A worrying number of individuals already into drug abuse are getting infected by the HIV/Aids virus because of syringes used by a number of people one after the other. With 40,000 people addicted to drugs in the country (and that figure comes from the government), the chances of more and more individuals falling prey to Aids cannot be dismissed easily.

And that brings us to the matter of what action, if any, has been taken to handle the issue. It is shocking to know that a National Aids Committee, comprising 61 members and set up as far back as 1985 when no cases of HIV/Aids were reported in Bangladesh, has not met since May 2006. It just goes to show how appallingly low Aids happens to be on a list of health priorities among official circles. With as many as 7,500 people officially afflicted by HIV/Aids (the figures were tallied in December 2007), there is no denying that the ailment calls for an energetic response. There are instances of countries, particularly in Africa, where a refusal to acknowledge the existence of the problem only led to bigger problems. A similar situation must be avoided at all costs in Bangladesh. Happily for us, there are individuals and organisations engaged in dealing with the issue. The government can complement their efforts, in such areas as counseling and treatment, through a well-defined action plan on HIV/Aids in our villages and towns.

Crimes and misdemeanours



ZAFAR SOBHAN

EVER since it began, I have often wondered about the wisdom of the anti-corruption campaign as a means to an end. It seems to me pretty clear that the entire point of the anti-corruption drive was twofold. The primary goal was to fix a broken system. It was to this end that the institutional reforms were undertaken, and institutions such as the ACC, PSC, and the Election Commission were cleaned up and given the manpower, resources, and direction to operate effectively beyond the reach of partisan political interests.

The system is far from fixed, but certainly these institutions and the other organs of the state are today operating far more effectively and efficiently than in the past. There is little doubt that the reforms that have been put in place and the attitudes that have been inculcated have set the stage for government offices to henceforth be able to run in a more accountable, transparent, and effective manner. Whether they will be, and whether the

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reforms will continue to be implemented, of course, remains an open question.

But there has been second element to the anti-corruption campaign, and, indeed, in terms of resources allocated to it and public attention given to it, it is fair to say that it is this second element that is actually the primary feature of the drive.

This second element is the prosecution and incarceration of senior political figures for corruption engaged in when they held government posts or were otherwise in positions of official or unofficial authority.

Let us call a spade a spade. The purpose of this second element was to attempt to clean up politics and to somehow remove the criminal and corrupt from public life.

Would the anti-corruption drive have worked had it focused merely on the first element and not the second, as others have argued. There is a good argument to be made that institutional reform was actually more crucial than the prosecution of corrupt politicians, and that far more resources and energy should have been expended on

the former rather than the latter. And it is also true that in order to effect institutional reform, it is not necessary to go after those who are no longer sitting public officials.

The anti-corruption prosecutions were motivated by a number of factors. The first of these was simple justice: those who have wronged the nation by abusing their power and position deserve to be brought to justice and be held accountable for their crimes. And who can argue with such a sentiment?

However, we all know, that simple justice was never the primary motivating factor here. This was made obvious by the selective nature of the prosecutions and the fact that bureaucrats who were equally culpable escaped the anti-corruption dragnet.

The primary reason for the prosecutions was to remove the corrupt and the criminal permanently from politics. And this is a worthy goal. As long as the criminal and the corrupt have a stranglehold over our politics, things will never be fixed. If they were permitted to return to power, to

continue to subvert the democratic process with their muscle-power and intimidation, then all the institutional reforms and clean ups of the system would be for naught. After all, a system is only as clean and effective as the men and women who operate it.

So I don't think there is any reason to make any bones about what the anti-corruption campaign has really been about, nor have I ever understood the need for reticence or mendacity as to the true purpose of the campaign. The goal was always to use it as a means to clean up politics.

But what I have always questioned was whether the anti-corruption campaign was the best means to this end.

From the beginning, the anti-corruption drive has been problematic. In the first place, given the extent of corruption, the campaign was always going to be a gargantuan, if not impossible, undertaking. This meant that from the start the prosecutors were forced to selective and discriminatory. In the second place, corruption cases are tough to make, and the ones that the prosecution has been able to make do not necessarily look so serious to

the public.

Perhaps it would have been better to have worked a different angle.

In the first place, as debilitating as it has been to the nation, by no means can we blame politicians for all corruption. If meter readers become millionaires, it is hardly the fault of the sitting government. In the second place, there are far worse crimes than corruption, such as the culture of gangsterism that had infected our politics from the national to the local level. It seems to me that the violence that was perpetrated by armed cadres and their sponsors is a far worse offence than corruption and abuse of office.

Certainly tens of thousands of people have been picked up, ostensibly for offences of political gangsterism, extortion, intimidation, and the like. But it does not seem as though any great attempt is being made to systematically prosecute them, and certainly no attempt seems to be being made to hold senior political leaders accountable, through the legal theory of agency, for the crimes of their henchmen.

Instead of corruption, it would have been better to see prosecutions for human rights violations, political killings, beatings, and other forms of naked gangsterism, of which there has been no shortage over the years.

The beating, maiming, and even killing of rival political activists has long been prevalent in this country. Responsibility for these crimes surely resides at the top, in the hands of the MP or

senior leader whose cadres beat to death a rival party worker or who extort local businessmen or who grab land or who kidnap young women or otherwise establish a reign of terror in their localities under the sponsorship of their political benefactors.

I don't believe such cases would have been harder to make than corruption cases. And I think that they would have resonated far more with the general public. After all, it is a bit much when you have someone against whom there are credible accusations of murder (if your cadres kill someone at your behest, you are guilty of murder) or mayhem (ditto for fire-bombing rivals' houses and businesses) end up getting a seven year sentence for receiving a couple of crores here or falsifying his wealth statement there. Not all of those who are currently being prosecuted for corruption are guilty of the more serious offences mentioned here, but enough of them are that it would have made a lot of sense to explore this angle.

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Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Boycotting local government election



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE June 23 editorial of the Daily Star says: "New controversies appear to be coming to the fore as the country prepares for the long awaited general elections by the end of the year. The major political parties have raised questions about the polls schedule for four city corporations and nine municipalities. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party has rejected the schedule while the Awami League has described the move by the Election Commission as conspiratorial and farcical." These objections are threatening to drag the country into the pyre of partisan flames.

Thomas 'Tip' O'Neill -- a consummate politician and a legendary longtime speaker of the US House of Representatives -- once said: "All politics is local." He was elucidating how the issues and concerns of citizens in towns and cities around the country influence the policies and actions of their lawmakers in Washington. He was telling his audience that the electoral races for public offices at the local level are where real democracy is rooted and at work.

NO NONSENSE
Despite the threats of boycotting the local elections by both BNP and AL central party leaders, the grassroots level leaders have already started campaigns for the local polls. They vowed to participate in the elections, even if under a different banner. Hopefully, this may be the beginning of the end of the culture of embroiled political impasses often created by the national leaders for their self-serving and self-aggrandising benefit.

The phrase "all politics is local" may sound like oversimplification to politicians in Bangladesh -- but is a truism often ignored by our ill-educated and over-ambitious politicians.

In all politics, local affairs must form the political articulation of a party. In advanced democracies, participation in the local elected government (LEG) is a stepping-stone to federal and state politics.

For example, in the USA over the last 100 years or so, state governors -- not federal senators or congressmen -- were elected presidents nearly 95% of the time. Don't forget, Barack Obama was a South Chicago community activist, then a state senator, prior to getting elected to the US Senate, and is now the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

Participation in LEG allows one to formulate policies, and influence local issues and their executions. LEG is where politicians master the art of interacting with real people -- knowing their concerns and finding possible solutions through political participation.

Local elections are, and should be, about local affairs. Election issues at the local level should remain independent of national issues, although there could be overlapping or cross-over penetrations of national political issues.

In all advanced democracies, LEG delivers public services and plays a central role in the discharge of "good governance." With the realisation that LEG is responsive to the needs of the people, South Africa, in 1997, restructured its LEGs and made them the epicenter of developmental activities. This restructuring brought a discernible U-turn of postcolonial models of state-led development in South Africa, which Bangladesh must also emulate this time around.

As I wrote in another piece: How many of our politicians elected to the national assembly have any prior experience of working in LEG? Not too many -- probably none.

However, once elected to the parliament, their link with the political offices at the local level is maintained primarily for "carving a cut" from development and infrastructure related

projects. The objections of the two parties against the scheduling of elections in selected cities and municipalities may be summarised from what all of us already know:

- Constitutional provisions allow the CTG to hold only parliamentary election;
- Holding local government elections (LGE) in selected cities and municipalities is discriminatory, given that the entire country's local body polls are long past due;
- Holding LGE will undercut parliamentary election;
- BNP and AL think that the CTG may have an insidious blueprint for implanting an administrative or political power base around the country at the local level to perpetuate power.

These arguments may be portrayed as attempts simply to create a miasma of doubt about the intentions of the CTG, as if it has some arcane plan to move away from the roadmap to national election.

The constitutional argument may have some validity, but only under normal circumstances. If the argument of

constitutionality is to be strictly adhered to then the existence of the CTG itself is unconstitutional, and the national election it will hold should also be deemed unconstitutional exercise of power. The tenure of this CTG is long over -- 13 months ago. So why keep beating the broken drum?

If the conspiracy theory has any kernel of validity then the CTG would have asked the EC to schedule countrywide local elections. About holding the upazila elections, communications adviser Ghulam Quader asserted that the High Court had laid down strong and clear instructions in this regard.

Now let's analyse what is at stake for the politicians. The CTG's proposal to extricate parliament members' influence and piracy over the LEG is the primary objection of the political parties. The implementation of the proposal will be a breakthrough for the people and a lose-lose deal for local MPs. It will undoubtedly make LEG officials much more effective, and attentive to local needs.

BNP's and AL's demand to hold national election ahead of the local is a trap -- one that would perpetuate local MPs influence on local affairs. It is through the local elected officials that political parties maintain their power base -- one they use to buy votes and flex muscles for reelections. Who wants to lose such a power base?

A rough estimate would show that nearly 80% of the MPs represent each upazila as their constituency. Each MP acts like

a de-facto governor/adviser of his/her constituency. He/she becomes the chairperson of managing committees of all local colleges and schools (example Choudhagram upazila under Comilla district), controls hiring of principals, head masters and other staffs. That may be the reason why the quality of education follows the quality of the lawmakers. The LEG without the acquiescence of local MPs can do nothing important.

Neither AL nor BNP has any convincing explanation as to why each dilly-dallied in holding local elections over the last 15 years. Neither party has any compelling reasons to boycott, or attempt to foil, the local elections -- they can only cry out "don't make our MPs powerless."

The people would greatly benefit from decentralisation of power from the national government -- the gainers here are the local people and losers are the corrupt politicians. Despite the threats of boycotting the local elections by both BNP and AL central party leaders, the grassroots level leaders have already started campaigns for the local polls. They vowed to participate in the elections, even if under a different banner. Hopefully, this may be the beginning of the end of the culture of embroiled political impasses often created by the national leaders for their self-serving and self-aggrandising benefit.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.

China searches for a new Asean paradigm

China hopes the new fund can be used to develop infrastructure and public works projects in the Asean and sub-Mekong region. Beijing is ready to set up the Asean-China Centre in Beijing and name its first Asean envoy with a fully-fledged bureau in the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN

SINCE 1995, they have worked in tandem on almost every issue, much to the chagrin, or perhaps wonder, of non-Asean members. Now, with new strategic environments emerging, both sides are groping for a new paradigm that they hope will sustain their relations and mutual interests. It is a tall order as they increasingly are realising that cooperation these days is becoming increasingly difficult.

At the moment China is focusing on hosting the Olympics and managing a series of natural disasters, which have beset the

country in the past months. Deep down, the world's largest country is quite worried about its relations with Southeast Asia.

The Chinese leaders have continuously contemplated what course their country should take over the next decade or two to gain further confidence and trust in this part of the world. They need assurances that a rising China will not ignite new tensions or stir up old fears.

The whole world over, including Asean, has recognised and addressed myriad strategic issues related to a stronger China and subsequently has come out with various scenarios and policy

recommendations. Strange as it may seem, Beijing has not yet pondered its appropriate role in the region as a responsible international player.

Earlier attempts in 2005 to draw up a comprehensive strategic blueprint towards Asia as a whole by China's Foreign Affairs Ministry have been shelved. Since then, China has been struggling to initiate policies that would maintain its diplomatic foothold in the region.

China-Asean ties, while still cordial, lack the kind of enthusiasm that used to fire up their friendship and cooperation. For the past three years, little or no

progress has been made in the disputed South China Sea.

In 1992, Asean agreed on the land-marked Declaration on Code of Conduct on the South China Sea to avoid further conflicts and to call for self-restraint in the mineral-rich region. In 2002, China signed the amended declaration, which was called the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. But Asean wants more from China.

Continued attempts by Asean to get China on board for the proposed legally binding Code of Conduct on South China Sea remain elusive. Obviously, Beijing prefers to deal with the Asean claimant countries (Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia) separately, rather than the groupings as a whole.

This difference has already become a real albatross hampering future discussions and plans

for joint development of the disputed areas. Of late, negotiations on a China-Asean free-trade agreement have been slow due to Beijing's toughening positions on goods and services. Earlier they expected the historical free-trade deal to be completed before the scheduled 2010.

Strange as it may seem, from 1995-2005, China used to follow the Asean consensus whether it was under the Asean Regional Forum framework or Asean Plus Three process.

It was part of China's rhetoric and diplomacy to win the grouping's trust. Before the September crackdown on the monks in Burma by the Rangoon junta last year, China continued to back the grouping's handling of its pariah member, considering it a family matter. Despite Beijing's influence over the junta, it carefully choreographed diplomatic

moves in support of Asean.

However, China's patience ran out when Singapore suggested Ibrahim Gambari, the UN special envoy for Burma, brief the leaders of Asean Plus Three on the situation inside Burma last November.

Beijing, which strongly opposed the idea, literally forged a new consensus for Asean on Burma by cancelling the briefing. Fortunately, none of the Asean nations made a scandal of the chair's diplomatic faux pas.

From Beijing's viewpoint, future engagement with Asean is becoming increasingly delicate and more complex. Without well thought out future strategic thinking, China-Asean ties could be tied up with other issues, especially those related to the role of the US and its ally Japan.

Asean continues to view the US presence as a much-needed stabilising force underwriting

continued regional development and progress. Interestingly, while China also shares a similar assessment by Asean, Beijing is quite worried about the long-term impact of the US presence in the region.

After all, this will be the first time in history that rising major powers in the region occur almost at the same time. For instance, how can a stronger China cope with the US and Japan?

Japan, as a close ally of the US, remains a big challenge for China. Even though Japan-China relations have improved dramatically in the past two years, they need further consolidation. Their joint cooperation agreement over the disputed area in the East China Sea last week could serve as model in the troubled South China Sea disputes.

The Asean summit in Bangkok

in December will allow China to spell out new strategies towards Asean that are more comprehensive with long-term objectives. Beijing is planning to announce a huge multi-billion dollar development fund for Asean.

China hopes the new fund can be used to develop infrastructure and public works projects in the Asean and sub-Mekong region. Beijing is ready to set up the Asean-China Centre in Beijing and name its first Asean envoy with a fully-fledged bureau in the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Another key strategy is to strengthen defence and security ties with Asean that would envisage joint military exercises and regular training. To fulfil this objective, China has recently proposed a defence ministerial meeting with the grouping.

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