

The minister and the media

In the absence of the parliament, there is perhaps the need for them to interact more with the media. They have, however, gone overboard with this interaction. In place of transparency and awareness of policy, the people end up utterly confused by these excessive interactions, where professional bureaucrats with media experience could have served the government and the people's needs much better, as they do in all other governments.

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

I had an interesting argument recently with a former adviser of the caretaker government on the excessive indulgence of the advisers with the media. This was at a typical Dhaka dinner party. As soon as I explained my views on the issue, he dismissed them summarily. He argued that transparency required ministers/advisers to interact with the media regularly because people have a right to know about government policy from the horse's mouth. He further argued that for the CTG, the importance of advisers talking to the media is indispensable because the parliament has been abrogated.

I held my ground that neither transparency nor policy dictated that ministers/advisers should be so excessively involved with the media. I based my arguments on practices elsewhere, suggesting that ministers/advisers nowhere interact with the media the way they do in Bangladesh. I cited Japan where ministers deal with transparency of governance in parliament while bureaucrats deal with the media, unless a national crisis requires the minister to talk to the media.

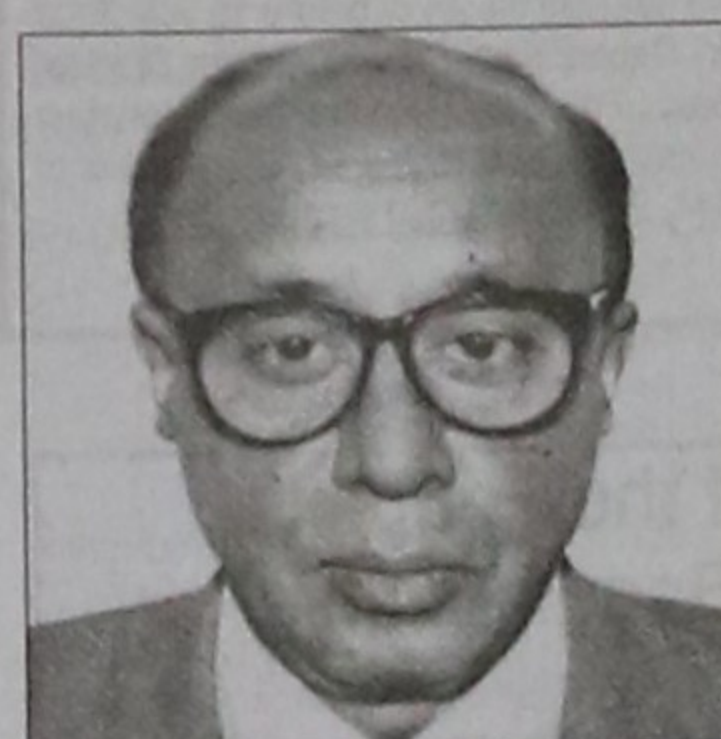
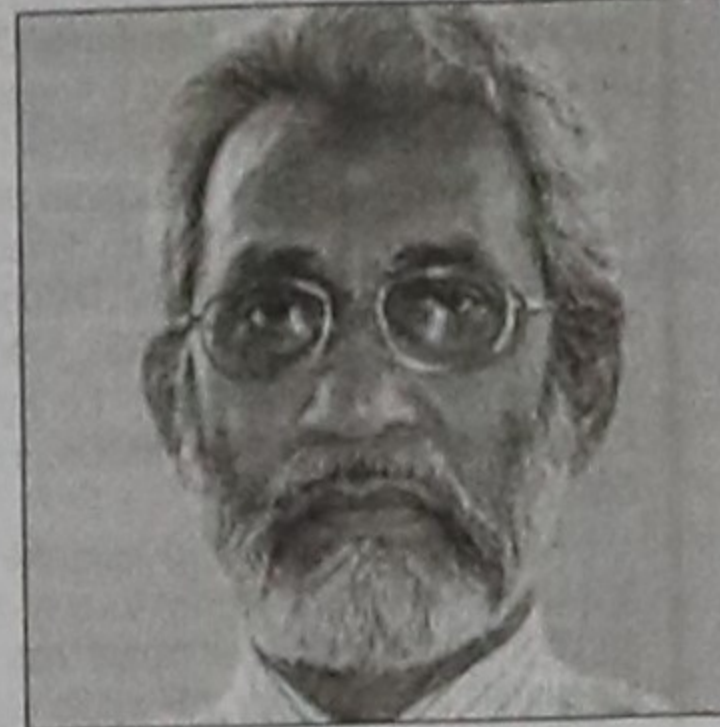
I also argued that policies were not black and white issues upon which ministers/advisers could talk to the media without creating confusion and compromising on secrecy and confidentiality. I further argued that when a minister/adviser erred before the media, he would be unable to backtrack without embarrassing the government, which was one strong reason why media specialists in bureaucracy interact with the media instead. The ex-adviser was not at all satisfied with my arguments.

He is not alone in his point of view. On any given evening, advisers or ministers have had a difficult time following their media appearances on newscasts of private TV channels. Such indulgences have not served the need of transparency or explained policy to the people, but have landed ministers and advisers in trouble. With all the advisers talking to the media constantly with no holds barred, the government appears like a hydra-headed creature, without focus or sense of direction.

Things were not like this when we became independent. A minister in 1970s used to make an urgent call to the Establishment Ministry upon assuming oath of office. The reason was to get an ex-CSP officer

as a private secretary for his pride and prestige. He would then make another important call to the Information Ministry for the best information officer (IO), the official spokesman of the ministry. The information officer acted as the link between the media and the government on all issues of media interest, with the secretary and/or the minister speaking to the media only when issues were of national importance. Today every ministry has an IO, who is still the official ministry spokesman but his job has been unofficially taken over by the minister/adviser, leaving him doing personal chores for his boss. In the process, our ministers/advisers have become the most visible in the world -- like media stars in constant media glare. That visibility has, unfortunately, not improved governance; hampering it instead. Something is amiss here.

It was during the decade-long Ershad tenure that the information officer's job was usurped gradually by the minister because of the president's interest in the media for personal reasons. As a usurper, he needed legitimacy. He knew that the media could give him great assistance there. So he interacted with the media both overtly and



Government must speak with one voice.

covertly, but not for reasons of transparency or desire to explain his government's policy. His intentions were more sinister, where the underlying belief was that the more he could motivate the media in his favour, the greater would be his legitimacy for himself and his government. The ministers followed Ershad, and turned the government into propaganda machinery, where they depended less on bureaucrats to deal with the media. Thus the minister unofficially took over the job of the information officer to a large extent, although the information officer still disseminated some informa-

tion to the media. Ershad's fall ushered in the parliamentary system. In a parliamentary system, the government remains in power as long as it has the confidence of the majority members in parliament. The parliament collectively or individually quizzes every minister, the prime minister included, on any policy matter. The committee system further allows the parliament to look into the working of all ministries in a manner where complete transparency can be achieved. Thus, very little is really left for the public that would require the media to knock at a minister's door,

apart from routine functions of governance that could and should be left to the bureaucrats to handle.

However, in the case of Bangladesh, ministers continued with their media indulgence although the change to the parliamentary system did not require it either for transparency or for bringing the public on board on policy. The ministers' interaction with the media increased a great deal with the gradual expansion of the media, climaxing in the private TV explosion during the last BNP era, which has treated the ministers as media stars. These factors notwithstanding, the ministers loved their media role for one of the major reasons that had motivated Ershad: a desire to see their names in print and their faces on TV.

The advisers of the CTG have the added excuse to indulge with the media because the parliament is not in session. The consequences, nevertheless, are the same: transparency or public needs remain mere excuses, while the government is embarrassed through such indulgence for no good reason. The excessive media appearances of the advisers give the impression that they are running this government through the media. In doing so, they do not realise that they are causing themselves and the CTG embarrassment, because they often end up contradicting themselves and one another. To complicate matters, the media often, intentionally or otherwise, covers these interactions in a subjective manner.

A lot of us former diplomats were disappointed to see the for-

eign affairs adviser appearing together with the outgoing British High Commissioner in front of the media, after the latter had met him for his farewell call that was a routine diplomatic event. By appearing together, the adviser had to watch the BHC talk on our internal affairs in direct contravention of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, something the adviser could and should have easily avoided. A simple statement by director general of external publicity or the information officer of MFA about the farewell call would have been both appropriate and professional.

Advisers often talk to the media in the corridors of the Secretariat, at the airport, in fact, where not? This is not the picture of a professional government, for governance is a more serious business, and has to be conducted behind public and media glare. In the absence of the parliament, there is perhaps the need for them to interact more with the media. They have, however, gone overboard with this interaction. In place of transparency and awareness of policy, the people end up utterly confused by these excessive interactions, where professional bureaucrats with media experience could have served the government and the people's needs much better, as they do in all other governments.

Our governance has many problems. A lot of that arises from the tendency of the people at the top acting for personal interests by breaking rules and procedures and then using catchy phrases such as transparency and people's rights to

justify some of these egotistic actions. As we look towards the next elected government, we also need to try to make our governance professional. We need to seriously make efforts that the ministers in the elected government do not follow the indulgence of the advisers with the media. Towards that objective, the next parliament should deal with concern for transparency and awareness about policy.

The ministers should concern themselves with the serious task of implementing government policies and goals. The bureaucrats should handle the media regarding the work of the ministers and the ministries. Let the elected government give the information officer his job back, with some changes. Taking into view the media explosion and increased media interest in governance, perhaps it would be wise to consider upgrading the status of the information officer, whose rank now is that of an assistant secretary, to that of a deputy or a joint-secretary.

It also does not show this government in good light to see on TV screens, for example, three or four advisers talking to the media day in and day out on the political dialogue, where they look amateurish and also end up contradicting their statements from one day to the next. A professional media spokesman from the bureaucracy could have spared the advisers embarrassment, while allowing them time to concentrate on the dialogue.

M. Serajul Islam is Former Ambassador to Japan and Director, Center for Foreign Affairs Studies.

In defence of local government

The military dictators like Ayub, Zia, and Ershad did a lot of damage to weaken the local government, a 123 year old democratic institution. Not much is expected from the major political parties to strengthen it. It is hoped that the CTG places the local government on a stronger footing.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE then British rulers introduced local government in India through the Bengal Chowkidari Act 1870. On the recommendation of the Famine Commission (1880) it was strengthened and extended. In 1882 the then governor general introduced a responsible and democratic local government system.

In 1885 the Local Self Government Act was passed. This provided for the creation of: (a) a district board for each district, (b) a local board for each division, and (c) a union committee for each union. These provisions were implemented in 1886 in all districts of Bengal (except Chittagong Hill Tracts).

The District Board became the focal point. The process of implementation of Local Self Government Act 1885 at union level was very slow. The number of union committees in Bengal was only 198 up to 1917. The Local Self Government Act 1919 provided for expansion of rural administration and freed local boards from bureaucratic controls. After the partition of India in 1947, the government of Pakistan retained the system of district and union boards

with all acts, rules and regulations.

In 1959 Pakistan introduced the Basic Democracies system which divided the country into 80,000 units or wards. Each ward elected a Basic Democrat. The Basic Democrats formed an electoral college to elect the chairman of union council and members of thana council, provincial assembly, national parliament, and the president of the country. This system was politically unpopular.

After liberation the government abolished Basic Democracies system in 1972 under President's Order No. 7. In 1976 the local government bodies were reorganised under the Local Government Ordinance. During 1979-81 of Zia regime a member of parliament was appointed District Development Coordinator. A minister from the district or division was nominated to act as chairman of the District Agricultural Development Co-ordination Committee. A Thana Development Committee with the local parliament member as chairman became a parallel administration of thana parishad. These steps brought traditional administrative system to a standstill without improving the situation.

The upazila system was introduced in 1983 and the election to the position of chairman was held in 1985. The term of the chairman was initially three years. Later, it was extended to five years.

BNP remained always against the upazila system. After it was elected to form a new government in 1991 it announced the date of election of union parishad. It also issued a notification abolishing the upazila system. This hasty abolition of an important local government without a substitute was criticised by different quarters. The Upazila Chairman Association instituted cases in the Supreme Court against the government decision. The government Review Commission came up with recommendation given below:

- Gram Sabha (ten-member).
- Union Parishad (nine wards).
- Zila Parishad.
- Thana Development and Co-ordination Committee.

On June 15, the CTG approved Upazila Ordinance giving full powers to upazila parishad and stripping members of the parliament of any role in local governance. The ordinance also re-empowers the Election Commission to hold upazila election. It will prevent legally proven war criminals, loan defaulters within a period of one year prior to nominations, full-time and part-time government employees, convicted felons, and fugitives from contesting in the elections.

As anticipated, there were mixed reaction on announcement of schedule of election by the EC. AL

called it a "joke." The Delwar group of BNP asked EC to withdraw the announcement. Jamaat supported the views of Delwar group of BNP. In reality we see both BNP and AL actively taking interest in the election of four city corporations schedule to be held on August 4.

As a political party BNP never encouraged the local government. During its regimes (1979-81, 1991-96, and 2001-06) the local government faced lots of difficulties. It ignores the fact that the most effective democracy needs support at the grass-root level.

The CTG is, in fact, implementing the directive of the Supreme Court issued long ago. This government, though an interim government, has tried hard to establish true democracy in the country. It is sad that during the democratic regimes of BNP, AL, and BNP-led alliance we saw no real democratic governance. It is an irony that it is our army with democratic spirit that is assisting the civilian government to establish real democracy.

The military dictators like Ayub, Zia, and Ershad did a lot of damage to weaken the local government, a 123 year old democratic institution. Not much is expected from the major political parties to strengthen it. It is hoped that the CTG places the local government on a stronger footing. It may be yet another addition in the list of achievements of this government, if the elections are proved to be free, fair and credible. The CTG and the EC must remember that a good beginning is half done.

The writer is a former Joint Secretary.

Voice of the private sector

Furthermore, the government should extend all out support to the apex trade body in capacity building with a view to making the organisation a much more effective mouthpiece of the country's private sector, and consider delegating some of the routine functions of the government

JAHANGIR BIN ALAM

THE role of trade organisations in a country pursuing private sector-led economic growth cannot be ignored if the government really means business. It's the bounden responsibility of the trade bodies to put forward their suggestions to the government on matters relating to formulation of various policies affecting the overall growth and development of the national economy.

In turn, the onus lies on the government to seek the advice of the business community from time to time and act accordingly. But, while putting forward their proposals and recommendations to the authorities, the trade bodies should see to it that those are made with a view to creating a better business environment in the country, thereby benefiting the national economy. Collective, and not coterie, interest should get the upper hand while doing so.

In Bangladesh, leading trade organisations in general, and their apex trade body, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) in particular, have been advising the government by way of ventilating the viewpoints of the country's private sector, and lobbying

intensely to that effect from time to time.

Sometimes, such efforts succeed in bringing positive results. But, at times, the effort ends up in failure due to lack of cohesive approach and conflicting attitudes of various interest groups within the trade bodies, and sometimes because of uncompromising attitude of the government authorities.

Although the FBCCI has so far made significant strides in playing its assigned role, certain quarters feel that it has not been able to live up to the expectations of its constituents because of above reasons.

However, some of its powerful constituents -- the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka (MCCI), Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) and the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) -- have been playing significant roles in ventilating the viewpoints of their respective members, while the less powerful ones, mostly located outside the capital city, fail to do so because they are far away from the seat of

the government and the apex trade body. The powerful trade bodies hardly need any assistance from FBCCI in interacting with the government and pursuing their respective agendas.

But the smaller and weaker members of the apex trade body always look to it for taking up their issues with the government and seeking redress to the effect. Perhaps it will not be impertinent to say that, like most other public and private sector institutions of the country, the apex trade body has also become highly politicised, particularly over the past two decades or so, thereby giving rise to inefficiency, group rivalry, intrigue and corruption of certain quarters within its constituents. A powerful coterie from within and outside the body controls the organisation, including the elections held periodically to elect its office bearers.

The character of the coterie changes with the change of the national government. This has been exacerbated through an amendment of the Trade Organisation Rules 1994 brought about by the BNP-led four party coalition government, which provided the government with an opportunity to nominate fourteen un-elected persons to the FBCCI board. This was an undemocratic move by any standard. Ironically enough, it was the same party government that framed the long needed Trade Organisation Rules 1994 when it was in power at that time.

In view of the above, it is extremely necessary to bring about essential reforms in the Trade Organisation Act and Rules 1994 in order to streamline the trade bod-

ies of the country so that they are able to serve their respective constituents purposefully, encourage ethical business practices, and help the government in taking the right economic policy decisions.

The first step to this end should be to scrap the undemocratic provision of nomination of fourteen directors to the FBCCI board by the government. The Directorate of Trade Organisations (DTO), which is the regulatory authority of the trade bodies, should be made more effective, and its capacity should be enhanced significantly to enable it to monitor compliance of existing rules governing the activities of all the trade organisations. The office of the DTO should be made independent, like all other government authorities performing regulatory functions, and to this end it should be relocated outside the national secretariat premises in order to make it more accessible to the stakeholders.

Furthermore, the government should extend all out support to the apex trade body in capacity building with a view to making the organisation a much more effective mouthpiece of the country's private sector, and consider delegating some of the routine functions of the government -- such as issuance of trade license, work permits to expatriates working in various foreign and local enterprises and the like. However, a mechanism could be devised to monitor due diligence on the part of the apex trade body. The sooner such reforms are brought about the better it would be for the nation and its economy.

Jahangir Bin Alam is a former Secretary, FICCI.

E-government readiness

Both the government and the non-government organisations, which are contributing a lot towards creating awareness among different groups, are taking initiatives. Administrative reforms and enactment of cyber-and-electronic transaction laws are a must to step into those advanced stages and derive the real benefit for the citizens.

MD. SIRAJUL ISLAM KHAN

IN this age of technological advancement, a new kind of rationalisation has been introduced in the public sector. The key role in this connection is related to the use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs). There is no doubt that governments all over the world are fully cognisant of this potential, and thereby employ it to support the activities being carried out to serve its customers.

The aim of ICT is to make service deliveries from state agencies or state bodies faster, more transparent, and customer focused, and

also to build a partnership with diverse communities, which is nowadays a key demand of citizens across the world.

Recognising the importance of ICT for the delivery of its services, the government of Bangladesh also has taken significant steps towards capitalising on the potential benefits of electronic service delivery (ESD). Initiatives are being taken to modernise the service system in different government organisations, including the Ministry of Information, using ICT. In this context, the Ministry of Information has been implementing different projects with a view to become part of the global e-

Government revolution and to remain competitive.

The aim of the projects is to contribute towards the government's efforts in building an ICT-driven and knowledge based society in the country, and to promote a transparent and citizen-centric government service system under the ministry.

It is expected that ICT based services will bring about a change in the working process to maintain and strengthen good governance in a knowledge society, with organisations capable of being faster, more open, and transparent, thus ensuring quality to citizens.

According to a United Nations

Report in 2008: "Most governments around the world started their e-government initiatives with a focus on providing information and services to the citizens, while service delivery platforms remained separate and parallel across various government agencies."

The government has also realised that country-wide ICT infrastructure is a pre-requisite for making electronic services from the government agencies a complete success. According to the Ministry of Planning: "This infrastructure will ensure access to information by every citizen to facilitate empowerment of people and enhance democratic values and norms for sustainable economic development by using the infrastructure for human resources development, governance, public utility service and all sorts of ICT enabled services."

Giving due importance, the government has already formed a

National ICT Task Force.

But, the reality till today is that Bangladesh's ICT infrastructure is still quite underdeveloped.

According to The Global Information Technology Report 2007-2008, among the South Asian countries, India is in 50th position in terms of being networked, followed by Sri Lanka (79) and Pakistan (89), while Bangladesh is in the 124th position among 127 countries surveyed.

The MoI is one of the key organs of the government, and is a bridge between the government itself and the citizens. The way MoI does it is by disseminating information services through its different organisations, including Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha and Press Information Department.

The official website of the MoI states that it is "playing a catalytic role in disseminating information

to the people through print and electronic media," and doing some other forms of publicity.

To do it the ministry uses internet and computer based technologies as well as traditional systems. But there are lots of parameters which directly affect the full implementation of ICT based services from different organs under the MoI -- some of which are: lack of sufficient infrastructure, lack of sufficient training facilities, lack of ICT related and skilled manpower, lack of sufficient funds, etc.

There are also some other problems, which are related to office culture and senior managements' interests and concentration.

The reality of Bangladesh is different from those of the developed countries in many respects. The MoI, like other ministries and government organisations, does not have proper infrastructure, training facilities, skilled man-

power, etc. due to the lack of sufficient financial resources.

However, the MoI has its own website, although it is not being able to provide effective, necessary, and interactive online services to meet the demands of the clients. And it has links with websites of other organisations under the ministry itself, but those sites do not have interactive online facilities.

As I am writing this article, the website of the MoI has an "Advertisement" link where only scanned copies of four advertisements from a daily newspaper have been posted (<http://www.moi.gov.bd/> accessed on 15/06/08). And it goes without saying that it is not due to lack of infrastructure or due to lack of funding; rather it is related to the inability to provide services the way they are needed.

However, generally, Bangladesh is making progress with respect to web measurement index, which has also been recognised by the

United Nations e-Government Survey 2008, published by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Now it is notable that various sites of government bodies, including different organisations under the MoI, have made their presence in large numbers in the last couple of years, although they need to be more interactive and also should be able to carry out more advanced transactional stages of e-government service deliveries.

Both the government and the non-government organisations, which are contributing a lot towards creating awareness among different groups, are taking initiatives. Administrative reforms and enactment of cyber-and-electronic transaction laws are a must to step into those advanced stages and derive the real benefit for the citizens.

Md. Sirajul Islam Khan writes from Leeds Metropolitan University, UK.