

Regulatory Reforms Commission

Remove bottlenecks to implementing recommendations

It is disconcerting that sixty percent of the recommendations so far put forward by the Regulatory Reforms Commission (RRC) could not be implemented because of the prevailing attitude of non-cooperation from different government organisations. In plain and simple language it is known as "redtapsism" - an affliction of being averse to change. Though it has been formed to suggest ways to generate dynamism in governance, the bottlenecks are frustrating the commission's efforts. The names of such important government bodies as the Ministry of Environment, Board of Investment (BoI) and Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms have come up in a recent exclusive interview with the RRC chief Akbar Ali Khan. He has been candid enough to point out that the delay in implementation stems not only from bureaucratic levels but also from those beyond.

The need to bring about qualitative changes, particularly in the Board of Investment, can hardly be overemphasised because of the significant role it plays in attracting foreign investors and clearing the way for smooth operation of business. In principle it is supposed to be the "One-Stop" service centre for overseas investment, but in reality it turns out to be a place where would-be investors tend to get bogged down with numerous regulations. The other major hurdle that aspiring business people have to face is during the time of registering their companies with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms. Since registration is the very basic legal formality one has to complete before starting a business, an entrepreneur often loses most of the steam when having to negotiate with a strong network of corrupt personnel.

The main objectives of the commission are to scrutinise existing laws, rules and regulations and offer recommendations to the government for reforms where necessary. Such reforms are aimed at enhancing the performance of the officials and staff members in the organisations and bringing dynamism to administration and governance. Therefore, it is advisable that the officials concerned at the government organisations extend all required help to RRC to meet its objectives. No doubt such revitalisation would ensure better governance in the days to come.

Poor gas and power supply in Chittagong

There is a need for long-term measures

POOR gas supply in Chittagong is beginning to have an adverse effect on lives. Obviously, it has had ramifications in the power sector, to a point where a couple of power plants have remained inoperational. As if that were not enough of a problem, there has been a considerable degree of fall in the water level of Kaptai Lake, which has in turn led to a decline in power generation at the Karnaphuli Hydroelectric Power plant. And that is not all. In recent times, a number of technical problems relating to gas supply have arisen at four of the five units at Raozan and Shikalbaha plants. There is too the tripping of a 40MW capacity unit at the Karnaphuli plant.

Obviously, there is cause for some very real concern here. Where the matter is one of a fall in the water level at Kaptai, especially during this season, it has always been an annual affair. The question, though, is why measures to keep the supply of power and gas flowing, knowing that such a problem is a regular happening, have not quite been in place. It has become something of a ritual for us to speak of the problem every year without seeing any concrete steps to tide over the issue being taken. What that does to as important a place as Chittagong can only be imagined. As the leading port city of the country, Chittagong is intricately involved with trade and commerce and indeed serves as the nation's economic lifeline. Given such realities, it is not quite understandable why power plants should keep tripping and why low water level in a lake should be cited as reasons to explain an annual crisis. There are certain moves we know as contingent measures. And there is such a thing as long-term planning.

We are informed that one of the two 28MW units at the Shikalbaha barge-mounted plant went out of order four years ago. And what has been done about getting it back in working order? These and other questions call for answers. What is clear, though, is that we cannot have such a vital sector working on a piecemeal basis. Systems that are always losing nuts and bolts are deeply flawed, risky ones.

The dumbing down of the Republican Party

LETTER FROM AMERICA

With George W. Bush's failure of intellect vividly on display, Americans are beginning to believe that intelligence and education are not such bad attributes in a president after all. They are now considering voting for the smartest guy, even if he is not of the same skin pigmentation as they are.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

THE Republican Party used to be the party of new ideas, and intellectuals like late William F. Buckley. In a tell tale sign of how much things have deteriorated, after Buckley's son, Christopher, endorsed Barack Obama for president last week, the subscribers to his father's publication, National Review, forced him to resign from the magazine!

When conservative columnist Kathleen Parker called Sarah Palin ignorant of foreign and economic affairs and asked her to resign from the VP position, she received over

12,000 threatening Emails!

Last month, The New York Times conservative columnist David Brooks lamented that in their disdain for the elitists, the GOP has now become an anti-intellectual and anti-education party!

The soul of the Republican Party has been taken over by racist, semi-fascists thugs like radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and Fox News Channel's fuhrer Sean Hannity. All this proved too much for the most prominent African-American Republican, General Colin Powell. On October 19, he endorsed Democrat Barack Obama for president. It was more than an endorse-

When credit is not the core concern

BENEATH THE SURFACE



ABDUL BAYES

WE drove down the road running through the hearts of villages to meet a few poor people who had graduated from the shackles of poverty. It was not through credit from NGOs or from government dole - as some would like to argue - but from technology adoption, social capital formation, and group solidarity.

On both sides of the road, fields of aman paddy reminded me of Tagore's poem: *Dhono dhanney pushpe vora, amar ai boshundhara*... On our way, we met Shamsheer (60) of Debipur village under Tanor upazilla in Rajshahi district. I was told that he has become the "talk of the area" by escaping from perilous poverty within a span of five years or so.

Not many years back, illiterate Shamsheer was working as a day labourer on other people's land at Tk.30 a day. Banks and NGOs ignored him as he was too poor to be creditworthy. His monthly income never exceeded Tk.1,500, but the number of mouths to feed

The three case studies mentioned above point to three pillars for poverty reduction and food security: modern technology in rice production, easy access to credit, and collective efforts of the poor for their own uplift. Credit is necessary but collective effort is a must. What case studies complained about is not credit but access to new knowledge and extension that raise productivity of their land and labour.

increased manifold. Thus, it is no wonder that the feeble income failed to provide food security: household members starved for half the year, with all the indignities that follow from poverty. However, while working on others' land, Shamsheer got interested in nurseries and gathered some knowledge from a private source.

Then came a project called Food Security for Sustainable Household Livelihood (FoSHoL). This project is funded by the EC and coordinated by IRRI to help the resource-poor households in rural areas. These households are trained by Care, Bangladesh, on a number of fronts: technology adoption for crops and livestock/poultry, service provisioning, savings mobilisation and establishing a network with local officials and extension offices. Shamsheer was lucky to be on board, and soon he became a resource farmer. Allow me to call him a village "public good" as he disseminates his accumulated

knowledge to a wider audience. Farmers from far and wide come to him to seek advice on crop related activities. Government agencies also value his hard work. The credit constraint that he faced is now eased with borrowing funds available from group savings. About 30 landless families of the village formed a group to save and lend money among themselves. FoSHoL project encouraged group formation. Shamsheer and others pay interest of 10% on borrowed money from collective deposits. On average, he took Tk.4,000 per season and thus saved himself from the fire of credit constraint.

He now grows seedlings and vegetables - chili, tomato, brinjal, cabbage, onion, etc. Besides, he mortgaged-in roughly one acre of land to cultivate food crops just a few years back with the profits he generated from the nursery. The household's rice security is reached through introduction of modern varieties of rice (BR 28 and

29), line sowing, and seed preservation - all that he learnt from FoSHoL project. Shamsheer's monthly income now hovers around Tk.10,000-15,000 and all the members of the household can take three satisfactory meals throughout the year. He has a mobile phone and plans to renovate his house very soon.

Going further down, we met Mamun (40) at Chuni Para village. Mamun lost his father at the age of six months. His grandparents raised him, and possibly too much love and affection made him unproductive. Married and the father of two children, Mamun groaned under extreme poverty even in 2006. His wife told us that they had to pass day after day with puffed rice taken in the morning. None would lend money to them as her husband could not be trusted because he led a bohemian life.

Against this bleak background, Mamun's wife forced him to join FoSHoL and get some knowledge

on how to eke out a living from meager resource endowments. Mamun complied this time and, after attending few learning sessions, he became a resource farmer. He specialised in rice seed production. Both husband and wife rear chicks and ducks with a hefty income coming from this. One-third of the total income is now contributed by his wife.

Villagers now know him as "Chicken Mamun," Mamun told us, because of his involvement with chicks and ducks. The knowledge he gained and the technology he adopted are now followed by villagers and outsiders. He also rears livestock. Mamun rented-in land to ensure food security through growing modern varieties, line sowing, and scientific preservation of seeds. He now gets an additional 8-10 maunds of paddy from the same amount of land, mostly due to improvement in management and technology adoption. Mamun's family now gets three satisfactory meals throughout the year - an achievement hardly dreamt of a few years back.

No less substantive is the story of Ismail (35) of Barendra village. He was a tenant and grappled hard with managing food for a family of 10. About 30 households have saved, on average, Tk.5,000 each, totaling one and a half lakhs. Each member can borrow from their "informal bank" during crop season.

For example, during the last boro season, each of the landless households borrowed Tk. 4,000-

5,000 from the group fund. They returned the money after the crop was harvested. Ismail's training on vegetables from FoSHoL paid him rich dividends; last year he sold brinjal worth Tk.165,000 and his net profit was Tk.140,000. Had there been no such knowledge from the training, the profit would go down by half. Ismail also has a nursery, and has rented-in one acre of land for growing crops. He is also the president of the bazaar committee of the newly established bazaar near the village. Ismail has got easy access to extension officers of the upazilla. Once debt-ridden, Ismail is now a surplus farmer and a village extension activist, and his household faced no food insecurity during the last food crisis.

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Is sovereignty illimitable?

GOING DEEPER



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IN 1823, US President James Monroe addressing the US Congress warned the European colonial powers not to intervene in South America "in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, and the American continents, by the free and independent conditions which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonisation by any European power... We owe it, therefore, to candour and amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

In 1904, President Teddy Roosevelt added a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine by stating that the US could intervene in any Latin American nation guilty of internal or external misconduct. Further on, in 1947, the Rio Pact forming the Organization of American States declared that an attack on any American nation would be considered as an attack on all. This was an attempt to reestablish the Monroe Doctrine through pan-Americanism to prevent the spread of communism in America. Lester Pearson and John Foster Dulles,

During the Asian crisis, Mahathir's refusal to accept the IMF prescription saved Malaysia from economic difficulties. This time around, the developing countries would do well to remain vigilant, lest their territorial and economic sovereignty (including natural resources) are threatened by the rich and the powerful, and also follow conservative yet ethically just economic policies to prevent the teeming millions from falling into the black hole of poverty.

unconvinced of the ability of the UN to contain Stalinism, forged Nato to safeguard "our cherished freedom," religious faith, and Western political and social system as a counter attraction to communism.

With these limitations put on national sovereignty, one is not reassured by Article 2 of the UN Charter that speaks of "sovereign equality" between the only superpower and the Mauritius, for example, and that all members will refrain from "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state." It is true that the threats posed to peace and security in the 21st century have changed character, and would defy the principles laid down by Professor Michael Walzer in his book *Just and Unjust War*.

These days, the advocates of the doctrine of pre-emption would like to put emphasis, if at all, on Chapter VII of the UN Charter and the principles of the Gareth Evans-chaired International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty that were unanimously adopted by the 1985 UN Summit, assuring the mighty powers that national sovereignty is

not illimitable. Though it would be difficult to take up a quarrel with the state's responsibility to prevent and protect its citizens from massive violation of human rights, genocide, famine or anarchy, the Third World is fearful of the developed countries taking advantage of this formula to effect regime change, as was done in Iraq.

Bush Jr's election as president brought with it immense power and influence for the likes of Robert Kagan, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage, John Bolton, Zalmay Khalilzad, Richard Perle, Douglas Faith, and many other conservatives who reportedly believe in the absolute and illimitable sovereignty for the US and in the subordination of international laws to the US domestic laws. Joshua Marshall has written that rarely in American history had such a cohesive and distinct group managed to exert so decisive an influence on such a crucial issue as the neo-cons did in Iraq.

Eventually, history will analyse the reasons for the re-election of President Bush, whose popularity now is at the lowest ebb and matches that of President Truman when he left office in 1952. Nobel laureate Paul Krugman believes

that inequality on average rises, particularly the top 1% under Republicans and in the bottom 80% income distribution is either stable or falling under Democrats. Krugman would like the bottom 80% of the population to get a bigger portion of the total pie through somewhat progressive taxation, as the Canadians have done, and through deliberate compression of wage differential in accordance with societal demand.

Intricate juggle will be needed, particularly in the developing countries, to bring about some sort of egalitarianism while maintaining liberal and participatory democracy. A study by Oxford Research Group in June 2006 revealed that security discourse after 9/11, betting on "hard power" to defeat the Taliban and other terrorists, ignored future determinants of global insecurity caused by climate change, competition over resources, marginalisation of the greater part of mankind, and global militarisation. Robert Kaganite neo-cons advocate re-writing of some of the rules and provisions of the UN Charter because of the fear of possible terrorist attacks killing millions of people at a stroke by using WMD

and because they feel that the UN Charter outlawing the use of force except in self-defense or used through a multi-lateral institution was written in the context of classic inter-state conflicts waged by standing armies of identifiable soldiers. Added has been the element of Islamic extremism. Historian Bernard Lewis finds several forms of Islamic extremism current at present; the Al-Qaida, the fundamentalism of the Saudi establishment, and institutional revolution of the Iranian ruling hierarchy.

Some analysts have termed sweeping accusations against Saudi Arabia as facile because Islamic revivalism has been caused by the failure of secular nationalism in achieving economic self-sufficiency, widening the gap between the rich and the poor, and almost overwhelming political and cultural hegemony of the West which often has conflicted with Islamic "purists." Many among moderate Islamists find the modern bias towards the West and dependence on Western models of development to be politically inadequate, socially corrosive, and undermining the identity and cultural fabric of Muslim societies.

The West, and more appropriately the United States, has courted the terrorism inflicted upon it despite warnings by the likes of Joseph Nye of Harvard "against the dangers of a foreign policy that combines unilateralism, arrogance and parochialism because, throughout history, coalitions of countries have arisen to balance dominant powers and the search for new state challengers is already underway." Advocacy of a proactive policy to ensure international security naturally brings in the core debate on the limitation of

state sovereignty.

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) was generally taken as a historical reference point, which gave several attributes to European states which had been contested in the past. Westphalia ensured sovereign independence of states; each state being motivated in its international behaviour by a consistent national interest; and the interstate system regulated by a balance of power among the principal powers. This was further cemented by the Peace of Utrecht (1712-1713) in which the European rulers understood each other as essentially self-determining actors, none of whom was entitled to dictate to others.

The current global construct adorned with nuclear supremacy, ignoring the rules governing inter-country relations that generally were followed in the past, and preaching that sovereignty is based on the conduct of countries, both with their citizens and with the international community (because globalisation has made all countries interdependent), has brought its woes of financial meltdown to the doorsteps of all.

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Muslim American boy or girl aspire to be the president of the US?

Gen. Powell then recounted a photograph he saw of a mother praying at the tombstone of her son at the national cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. There were Purple Hearts and other awards of bravery etched on the boy's tombstone; however instead of a cross or a Star of David, the tombstone had an Islamic crescent and star marked on it. The grave belonged to a 20-year Muslim American boy from New Jersey who enlisted after 9/11 (when he was 14) and died fighting for his country in Iraq.

Senator McCain dismissed Gen. Powell's endorsement of Obama as "expected." What he meant is: naturally a black man will endorse a black man! Powell countered that if that was the case, he would have endorsed Obama months ago.

He agonised over the decision to disappoint his friend of 25 years John McCain. But he came to the conclusion that America needed a transformational leader, who is unflappable under pressure and who understands the nuances of the

horrendous financial and security catastrophes that confront America.

Powell had served President Ronald Reagan as assistant national security advisor, Bush senior as the national security advisor and Joint Chief of Staff, and Bush Jr. as the Secretary of State. For a long time Powell was the jewel in the Republican Party. As soon as he endorsed Barack Obama, Powell became "just another black man!" Rush Limbaugh ridiculed Powell's endorsement of Obama as "racial."

Beginning in 1988, the Republican Party has adopted the policy of winning the presidency at any cost through lying and negative campaigning. They willie Horton Michael Dukakis in 1988, swift-boated John Kerry in 2004 and are attempting to William Ayers Barack Obama to defeat. They are willing to lie, to demonise and destroy the credibility of the Democratic opponent to win.

With all their energies spent on winning at all cost, very little is left for governing after winning. All the Republican candidates who had demonised their opponents to win

-- Nixon, Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. -- turned out to be catastrophic failures once in office.

Watergate scandal forced Nixon to resign. With an approval rating of 90% after Gulf War in 1991, Bush Sr. was hounded out of office a year later in 1992 as the economy sank into recession. With America mired in two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the financial tsunami threatening Americans' livelihood, a consensus is developing that Bush Jr. is the worst President in the US's history.

Interestingly, Ronald Reagan never engaged in negative campaigning, and he is the most successful Republican president of the last fifty years.

Richard Nixon had a pathological dislike for John Kennedy and the Ivy League (Harvard) education he represented. Nixon's Southern Strategy was geared towards wooing the southern whites towards the Republican Party because the Democratic Party of Lyndon Johnson had enacted the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts for the blacks.

The Republican Party has traveled that prejudicial path ever since, making the Republican Party the party of the whites. Not a single Republican US congressman or senator is black. The McCain campaign is calling Obama a "socialist," who will usher in a "welfare" society. There are racial overtones here: "lazy" blacks are supposed to be on "welfare."

Anti-elite and anti-education stance of the Republican Party was reflected in the choice of their candidates. In 2000, Al Gore was demised as an elite; Bush was marketed as someone average Americans would like to have a bear with. Although how George W. Bush of wealthy lineage, who attended Yale and Harvard (although he does not seem to have learned much) qualifies as an average Joe is hard to fathom.

This year Republicans are labeling Obama an elite, while celebrating Joe Six-packs, Joe the Plumber from Ohio, and Sarah Palin, the anti-intellectual VP candidate.

With Palin they may have gone too far. Gen. Colin Powell pro-

nounced her unfit to be president, as did Peggy Noonan, Ronald Reagan's speech-writer, among others. Americans are waking up to the fact that the Americans president should be able to do more than drink beer with the average Joe or Jane.

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The consequences of emphasis on education by the Democrats and disdain for the same by the Republicans have been highlighted by one recent event. While Sarah Palin attended six colleges before graduating and the Republican opinion makers are barely educated, a liberal, Democratic columnist for The New York Times, Paul Krugman of Princeton University, won this year's Nobel Prize for Economics!

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