

## Public relations 101

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ZAFAR SOBHAN

I don't get it. Why is it that successive Bangladesh governments are so clueless when it comes to public relations? Perhaps it is hubris caused by winning an election in a landslide or perhaps it has something to do with our feudal society in which the powerful need not concern themselves with anything as insignificant and inconsequential as how the little people see them.

Both of those are part of the reason, but I cannot help thinking that more than either of these, it is good old-fashioned, honest-to-goodness cluelessness. They simply do not understand the importance of how things look.

It is this specific form of obtuseness that has been a key cause of the downfall of every single elected government we have ever had. I am not saying that had past governments had their PR in place that they would have survived without delivering, but there is no question that their fall from grace in the public eye had as much to do with their indifference to public opinion as it did with their poor performance in office.

Nor is this a problem that only political governments suffer from. The out-going care-taker government similarly had a poor grasp of the public relations business, though not for the want of trying.

However, trying to pack talk shows with

sycophants and cautionary phone calls to newsrooms about which stories are considered acceptable is the opposite of good public relations, and shows just how clueless the care-taker government and its backers in the cantonment were when it came to this kind of thing.

It is this inability to appreciate contemptuous indifference for how things look to the public, and the likely negative consequences for the government, that is what comes to mind when observing the first days of our new government.

The kerfuffle that has marred the first few days of parliament, first over the deputy speakership, and then over the allocation of front bench seats to the opposition, is incomprehensible to me. I cannot for the life of me understand why the AL would give the opposition such tailor-made grounds for grievance when what is at stake is so minor and petty.

I do not wish to get into the merits of the argument with respect to the deputy speakership or the allocation of front bench seats. It is perfectly possible that the arguments put forth by the AL are both correct and supportable and that it has right on its side in these matters. That is not the issue.

The issue is what would it have cost the AL to concede these two minor arguments to the opposition in terms of what it would have gained in setting a positive tone, taking the moral high-ground, and winning



Who cares who sits where?

the battle of public perception.

Instead, what the AL, in its infinite wisdom, has chosen to do is to give the opposition a tailor-made opportunity to grandstand and plenty of ammunition when they say that they are being treated poorly and that nothing has changed.

Why give them that ammunition? What could possibly be gained compared to what has been lost? How is it that no one in a position of power seems at all able to understand that the past week has been a public relations fiasco for the AL and that first impressions are crucial?

Think: how simple would it have been to have given the opposition its way, to not pick fights on petty issues. If the AL had bent over backwards to accommodate opposition demands, how much easier would it have made life in the future when it will need to dig in its heels on an issue of consequence or when the time comes for the public to make up its mind about who to blame for the dysfunctional parliament that we appear to be heading towards.

I am not even suggesting that the government do anything so bold or shocking as to act in the national interest. Perish the thought. I am merely suggesting that it might wish to act in its own self-interest, and that going above and beyond the call of duty to be conciliatory and accommodating is a politically astute and advantageous move. If the government cannot see that, we are in for a long five years.

And, of course, there is a direct line connecting caring about what the public thinks and governing responsibly. If a government doesn't care about public opinion, then that is a pretty good indicator that it will not be much concerned with the public interest.

One would have thought that the election results would have taught the government the danger of what happens when a government is indifferent to public opinion. If the BNP can lose its majority of 2001 then the AL can lose its majority of 2008.

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## Changes in the administration

A cautious approach urged

POLITICS has for a long number of years played havoc with civil administration and the careers of government officials at the senior levels. Perhaps some of the most glaring instances of a politicisation of the administration were noticed in the five years of the BNP-Jamaat alliance government, when officials were rewarded or punished, as the case may be, on the basis of their loyalties to the powers that were. One example is the mass promotion of 103 joint secretaries to the position of additional secretaries under that government. At the same time, there were an inordinately high number of OSDs (officers on special duty) under them.

We hope that such politicisation of the administration would be rolled back by the newly elected Awami League-led government. Unfortunately, the spate of changes that has been going on in different tiers of the administration belies that hope. In a rather sweeping move, the government has promoted 72 joint secretaries to the position of additional secretaries, ostensibly on the ground that these officers were deprived of promotion or were kept redundant during the BNP-Jamaat rule. It may be noted that 64 other joint secretaries have not been promoted. A number of them who are a qualified lot and against whom there were no complaints, have remained outside the purview of the promotions. In other words, it seems if the government was planning to separate the chaff from the grain, it does not appear to have done the job too well.

Now is the start-up time for the new government when the entire bureaucracy must function energetically to set the trends for good governance. As such, it would have been advisable for it to adopt a well thought-out, gradualist approach to civil service promotions and postings rather than a wholesale one which could betray a sense of reverse politicisation. Sweeping changes can only breed a sense of insecurity and result in low morale among government officials.

This government, it may be recalled, came to office on a mandate of change, indeed change for the better. That is why care must be taken that political loyalty does not work as a criterion for promotion in the administration. Let the image of the civil administration be raised to a point where officials' integrity does not come into question, despite the political changes the country may go through at regular intervals.

## It's crunch time

Judicious government spending called for

ACHIEVING government revenue targets in the current fiscal may be difficult as import duty collection figures up to December showed a definite downturn. The knock-on effect of the global recession is being felt there. A fall in the world commodity prices is adversely affecting realisation of import duty. But we had set the rate of import duty and the revenue target on the basis of what was then an upward spiralling of commodity prices in the world economy.

Concurrently, there is also a growing apprehension that collection of VAT and income tax could taper off due to recession.

In other words, some important targets for internal resource mobilisation may have to be revised downward. As a result, we could be facing difficulty in counterpart financing of the foreign-aided development projects.

The NBR in a report to the finance ministry has clearly sounded a note of apprehension to the effect that achieving the revenue target is going to be the biggest challenge in the face of the negative impact of the ongoing world economic crisis. Little wonder, the NBR report rivets on a potential source of revenue collection, estimated to be worth around Tk2,500 crore which is linked to 20,000 under-trial corruption cases. A quicker settlement of the cases requires energetic coordination among the NBR, ministry of law and the office of the attorney general.

However, when such is the overall outlook of revenue collection, it is of pivotal importance that the government exercises utmost prudence and control in expenditure, both revenue and development. There have been news reports lately that the government was contemplating to spend a huge sum of money to import luxury transports for the MPs and upazila chairmen, each reportedly priced between Tk20 and 75lac. If this is true, nothing could be more outlandish for a country like ours which it can ill afford.

As a matter of fact, we would implore the government to quickly identify the areas where wasteful expenditure can be contained and heads under which money can be saved. Our understanding is that the government is keeping vigil on corruption and procurement fronts, but it is our suggestion that along with the anti-corruption angle, the government value judicious spending and set on the roll a certain well-conceived set of austerity measures that will enhance its prestige and effectiveness.

## Is America in decline?

Kupchan reckons it will be similar to what happened in the 19th century when the reigning Great Britain fell behind the rising United States in the race for world power. This time, Kupchan says, it will be America's turn to watch as Europe takes over.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

JOHAN Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, determines that decline and fall of an empire starts when, amongst other things, it begins to anger a lot of people in the periphery, who are the ones being exploited. He also cites other factors, including lack of balance, a foundation of endless expansion and exploitation, falling apart of infrastructure, and a certain material laziness in a nonproductive elite which finds it easier to buy or steal goods than produce them. The American Empire is already showing some of these symptoms.

Is America in decline then? Is it then ready to fall? George McGovern, a former US senator and Democratic nominee for president in 1972, made an impassioned appeal to Barack Obama last week. What McGovern said fairly resonates with Galtung's hypothesis. The United States has pissed off a lot of people and it needs to turn back before things get worse.

Hence, these are his suggestions to the

newly elected president, Democrat to Democrat. Don't send troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, jumping from frying pan into fire. Don't try to put Afghanistan aright with military force. Withdraw troops from Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and elsewhere. Close the US military bases in that region. Because all of these combined with the American support for Israel have generated a lot of anger, which drives the terrorist impulse against the United States.

Then he reminded Obama of what the invasion of Afghanistan did to the British Empire and the Russians. The war in Iraq has already cost more than 3 trillion dollars, and it has weakened the US economy and its armed forces while the national debt alarmingly soared. US energy and resources could be better spent to foster education and nutrition programs for women, infants and children around the world, said McGovern.

That, of course, is a different consideration altogether. But it doesn't change the inevitable truth: sooner or later all empires come to an end and the old cedes place to

the new. The Romans ceded place to Franks and Gauls, and in the longer run, to the Carolingians. The Caliphate of Cordova was curved out in Spain after the Abbasids of Baghdad defeated the Umayyad Arab Empire of Damascus.

The Byzantine Empire yielded to the triumphant Ottomans, and Spain to the Italian city-states and to the UK. The Ottomans gave in to Russia, and to the Habsburgs and UK/France. Then, the UK and Russia's successor, the Soviet Empire, caved in to the US. In China, the Ch'ing dynasty was temporarily weakened by a cabal of European nations, but eventually yielded to the Kuomintang dynasty, which in turn yielded to the Communists.

If rise is warp and fall is weft, history is what they weave on the loom of time. So, if the US once rose, its fall is only a matter of time. But to whom is the US going to yield if it falls, when it does?

Charles A. Kupchan, a professor of international relations at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, disputes the predictions of such optimists as Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman, who believe that democracy and globalisation are great panaceas. He also refutes pessimists such as Samuel Huntington who foresees a "clash of civilisations." Instead, Kupchan reckons it will be similar to what happened in the 19th century when the reigning Great Britain fell behind the rising United States in the race for world power. This time, Kupchan says, it

will be America's turn to watch as Europe takes over.

Can Obama reverse history already set in motion? Can he rescue it from the dwindling hands of destiny? Will he be able to raise American prestige around the world to its post-World War II height, when it was looked upon as a benevolent power, friend of the oppressed and the huddled masses seeking shelter from their ruthless rulers? Will America regain its reputation of the sixties when its Peace Corps promoted goodwill in distant lands?

The biggest challenge is to restore that American position which inspired hope and freedom. Today's America looks more like a playground bully than the leader of the free world. With its unrestrained zeal to push its own brand of liberalism and democracy, America likens to Peter the Great of Russia, a typical despot who forced men to wear their clothes and shave their beards in a certain style which he preferred.

How much time has America got? Kupchan believes it could be sooner than we thought, because history is moving much more quickly than before since the world in this digital age is likely to go into fast-forward. The question isn't whether America is in decline. The question is how soon it will fall, whether things move from Washington to Brussels, or go in another direction.

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## Googling the future

Google Trends, lets anyone with a computer peer at the wealth of search data gathered by the tech giant. You can find how many people are searching for mustaches versus goatees, and you can break down the results by year, month, city, country or any other variables.

BARRETT SHERIDAN

A year from now, will chicken McNuggets be more popular than Big Macs? Will every 20-something woman in New York buy leggings again this summer? Are trucker hats poised for a comeback in 2009? The answers are worth billions of dollars to major corporations. When fast-food eaters start preferring chicken over beef, McDonald's needs to know months or even years ahead of time in order to place contracts with poultry farms, redesign menus and undertake expensive marketing campaigns.

Buyers for fashion outposts like H&M have to know a year or more in advance whether their customers will prefer leggings or skirts in summer 2009 because of the time lag involved in manufacturing clothing. Many other industries face similar problems.

The traditional fix has been to hire trend forecasters, who are paid to know what we like. Many maintain networks of informants who tell them what's currently hot, and what will be hot soon. Coupled with

polling, news articles and their own intuition, they divine that hot pink is the new black, and then sell that knowledge to companies like Gap. Companies pay handsomely for their reports and expertise. Now Google is threatening this lucrative niche.

For a clear reason why, look at Google Trends, which lets anyone with a computer peer at the wealth of search data gathered by the tech giant. You can find how many people are searching for mustaches versus goatees, and you can break down the results by year, month, city, country or any other variables. And it's not the only way to access Google's data treasure trove. Google Hot Trends displays the top 100 searches of the past hour. Google Insights for Search is a more powerful version of Google Trends, aimed at marketers and business owners.

Google Flu provides an example of why these tools are so powerful and potentially disruptive to forecasters. Building on academic research, Google.org realised that certain keywords, like those that describe a specific flu symptom or remedy, have a strong correlation with actual flu outbreaks. With that insight, Google now

analyses search data to identify cities most affected by the disease. The information is updated daily; by comparison, flu-tracking information from the Center for Disease Control, which uses doctors' office visits and similar data, has a time lag of about two weeks.

The Google strategy could render irrelevant a lot of the expensive reports that trend forecasters in the so-called intelligence industry now rely on for revenue. "That whole model needs to change," says Tina Wells, CEO of the Buzz Marketing Group. "Companies can go online and basically find out for free what people used to be able to be paid for."

Take, for example, the Q Score, compiled by Marketing Evaluations Inc., which uses the reactions of sample audiences to measure the appeal of a brand, celebrity or TV show. "Why not just Google it?" asks Wells. The company's model, she says, is now threatened. Marketing Evaluations says it recognises the need to innovate, and regularly releases new scores that capture opinions not easily found online or elsewhere.

Some online tools other than Google provide services that replicate information now offered by the intelligence industry. Technorati aggregates information on blogs. Last.fm provides metrics for music. Even simple services like Google News can steal business from a hapless trend forecaster, since it enables anyone, anywhere, to discover new trends bubbling to the surface in, say, Stockholm.

Of course, what may be a threat to some is a resource to others. "What would we do

without Google?" says Irma Zandl, president of the Zandl Group. She refers to the pre-Internet period as B.G., or "Before Google," and calls them "the bleak, dark times." Today, she finds that being able to instantly access data behind emerging trends from Istanbul to Idaho via Google is a boon to her business.

"Normally clients want new things, but they want some backing, some sense of where we are now," she says. That means that although she may already have known about the decline of hip-hop, with indie rock rising in its place, Google Trends provided aggregated search info to prove the point to clients.

There's still plenty of interpretation to be done, even when using a sophisticated program like Google Insights for Search. Typing in "R&B" instead of "hip-hop" yields entirely different results; forecasters, in other words, need to know not just what to look for, but how to look for it. And the best forecasters are looking for trends that are many years in the making, and which may still be too fringe to register as more than a drop in Google's ocean of information.

Thus, although it will cause pain for some, the trend industry will likely adapt to the new era of information overload. For eternal questions like which shade of pink will become the new black, Google will be just another weapon in the forecasters' arsenal.

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