

RTI ordinance deserves to be passed into law

That will redeem Awami League's election pledge

WE welcome the government's decision to have all the 122 ordinances, promulgated by the erstwhile CTG, scrutinised by a special committee of the parliament, notwithstanding an expert committee's recommendation in this regard to be selective about it. Not only should all these be scrutinised, they must be put up in the House for discussion before adoption or rejection, as deemed appropriate. That, we are certain, will cause the ownership of the laws passed to devolve on to the current parliament. And that is as it should be.

There are many ordinances on the list of 122 that are very important and consequential which should be passed. However, our special focus, naturally, is on the RTI (right to information act) which we strongly feel should be passed into law. There are compelling reasons why that should be so.

For one thing, RTI can be a very effective instrument in fighting the most debilitating malaise in our national life - endemic corruption. It may be mentioned that nearly 100 countries, many among them developing, have adopted this act with excellent results. For example, in the case of India, the RTI provisions have helped improve efficiency of the government agencies, particularly in terms of service delivery and in its fight against corruption, by obligating the government servants at all levels of the administration to be accountable to the people.

We, in Bangladesh, are victims of maladministration, primarily because of the fact that government servants do not have any obligation to feel answerable to the people, something that the RTI will compel them to be. Lack of accountability leads inevitably to abuse of power, inefficiency and corruption. We need hardly remind the government that, of the pledges that the AL had made to the people before election, one is their promise to address these issues urgently. This is indeed an articulation of the hopes, enthusiasm and expectation of the people and RTI is indispensable for the AL, as indeed it is to any government, for these commitments to be fulfilled.

However, we cannot rule out some degree of resistance from the bureaucracy in this regard. We submit that the fear of the public servants is grossly misplaced. On the contrary, we feel that such a law will go a long way in not only enhancing their efficiency, it will also help protect their interest, too. We ask our bureaucrats to learn from the experiences of their counterparts in other countries that have adopted this law.

We congratulate the AL for including RTI in their manifesto. We have no doubt that it will fulfil its pledge.

Demolishing reputed schools is a bad idea

Chittagong mayor should heed public sentiment

BINOD Bihari Chowdhury strikes a responsive chord when he demands a cancellation of plans to have two old and reputed schools demolished in Chittagong. More to the point, the veteran revolutionary echoes our collective belief that heritage, being a part of a nation's history, cannot be subsumed to interests of a mundane nature. That is why the plans of the Chittagong City Corporation to have the two schools, Aparna Charan City Corporation Girls' High School and Krishna Kumari City Corporation Girls High School, demolished so that a 16-storey structure can be constructed on the premises appear untenable not only to residents of the port city but also citizens all across the country. It is simply outrageous that the city corporation plans to relocate the schools in the new building and set up with it a number of commercial establishments.

The mayor of Chittagong and those who agree with him that the two schools should be done away with should heed public sentiment on the issue. ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury must remember that he simply cannot push educational institutions aside in the interest of business. An important reason why such sentiments are there is that the schools in question have been part of Bangladesh's history, with such names as Pritilata Waddedar's associated with them. Obviously, the CCC's plan has deliberately ignored such heritage. That much has been made clear by the mayor's stubborn refusal to shelve his plan and indeed he has demonstrated his indignation (when in truth the indignation should rightly be that of citizens) at what he thinks people's lack of understanding about the demolition plan. We think that the high office he holds is one whose reputation he must live up to. The two-hour token hunger strike observed to protest the plans to demolish the school should have been regarded as a potent sign of popular sensitivities on the subject. And let us not forget that when as aged and as respected an individual as Binod Bihari Chowdhury emerges in public to lend his voice to the demand for a cancellation of the mayor's plans, it is the conscience of a society that speaks out.

We believe that demolishing the two schools, both of which have been in existence for eighty years, will undercut our tradition and at the same time put the future of the present students of the schools at risk. It is morally wrong to have schools situated on top of shopping centres; and it is sheer folly to expect teen-aged girls to compete with others to find a place on lifts or elevators so that they can reach their classrooms. The CCC plan is a bad idea. And as is done with bad things, let this bad idea be dropped.

Deja vu all over again

True, the AL and its front organisations were repressed since 2001. But that was perpetrated by the BNP-Jamaat goons. How and on what grounds could the AL, the country's oldest party and one with truly democratic origin, resort to the same savagery? More so, when the AL chief has herself shunned acts of revenge and is poised to turn a new leaf in our political culture.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IN a democratic polity a political party with big electoral win is never a boon for it might develop a jaundiced outlook. Worse, it tends to take everyone and everything for granted -- a syndrome of authoritarian impulse. But many small political outfits breed instability and horse-trading of coalition politics. An ideal equation is perhaps one where political parties of comparable strength exert their weight on politics and keep the country on an even keel. We have seldom come across that scenario.

Plagued with incompetence, corruption, cronyism and arrogance, the parties squabbling ad-infinitum to keep under their thrall the country's political space. While the AL and BNP alternated power between them since the restoration of democracy in 1991, the others played second fiddle to retain their political relevance and receive the crumbs. The party holding the scepter usually ended up dismally, leaving behind failures and unresolved problems of the polity.

The disgruntled public swung in desperation to the other side, considering that to be the greener pasture. The political parties also put on different garbs, coined catchy slogans and craftily evolved spanking new approaches to trick the people into voting for them again. Thus, the musical chairs of the power game went on.

It is the AL's turn this time. After winning a landslide, Hasina is obviously riding the crest of the wave. Her benign gestures and

posturing soon after the election earned approbation both at home and abroad. She wanted to work in harmony with an opposition humbled in the election and even offered it a part in the government. But her party's role after the election did not match Sheikh Hasina's expressed magnanimity.

The first serious test came in the wake of the upazilla elections, in which the AL's excess drew flak from multiple quarters and opprobrium even from the CEC, who regretted that public opinion wasn't reflected in the election because of interference by AL ministers and MPs.

Equally despicable has been the vandalism and violence by the AL's student wing, the BCL. Supposed to be front-runners of a digital Bangladesh, the BCL hoodlums seem to be pouncing on the pie now available, i.e. capturing residential halls of the universities, selling the seats, influencing the admission, and so on. This has come as a rude shock to well-wishers, including this scribe, of the AL. Yet more shocking is the reaction of the AL high command, which is merely "annoyed." Even the UN felt concerned at the post-election violence in Bangladesh.

True, the AL and its front organisations were repressed since 2001. But that was perpetrated by the BNP-Jamaat goons. How and on what grounds could the AL, the country's oldest party and one with truly democratic origin, resort to the same savagery? More so, when the AL chief has herself shunned acts of revenge and is poised to turn a new leaf in our political culture. Something seems to have gone wrong with



History repeating itself?

the party. Or else why couldn't a lesser electoral exercise be held properly with a political government in power when the more important national election was successfully held by an interim government.

However, the new AL government is well into the business of running the country. Sheikh Hasina dispenses the ministerial berths from the perch she has ascended, makes advisers from among her favourites, and doles out plum appointments to her confidantes. The power wielders are endowed with the same characteristics in their exalted obliging positions. Cheers and it's okay.

In the meantime, sycophants seeking lucrative contracts, purchase deals and big business have been lining up ever since the present government took charge. Flunkies, hustlers and minions of bewildering varieties have already mushroomed, to make the best out of the project called "digital Bangladesh." When the government changes everything changes in government offices, seats of education, cultural institu-

tions and even the priest delivering homilies from the pulpit of the places of worship.

The only thing that dies hard is the tradition of sycophancy in the garb of public relations (PR). Look at the flowers extravaganza to welcome the new masters, the abundance of congratulatory messages and ads published in the media, and the attempts to grab photo-opportunities with the masters of the day. Also look at the spate of eulogies for hitherto neglected Bangabandhu, whose greatness has been resurrected even by Dr. Iajuddin.

According to cynics, he did so to preempt a possible impeachment move or legal proceeding against his corruption. Now jettisoned by the BNP, he will catch hold of any straw that comes his way. The nation, through its verdict, has questioned how a corrupt clique could overrun the land with a spoil system that blatantly privileged only the family, friends and favourites of the ruler. If the dreamer of a digital Bangla really wants to make it a reality, she has to corral this class altogether.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Education and Vision 2021

The education policy formulated by AL government in its previous tenure could also serve as a guide. Minor changes in earlier documents prepared by the same political party can contribute to the formulation of an educational policy in the quickest possible time.

ABDUL BAYES

THE Ministry of Education seems to have rightly (and quickly) taken on board the issue of formulating an education policy for the country. This is reflected from a recent meeting of the Hon'ble education minister with renowned educationists of the country. I would like to present a personal perception on education to invoke insights.

Any discussion on education must take into due cognisance the vision of the government. A government without any vision is like a ship without a rudder. Few governments have visions; many have short-term missions to be accomplished within the tenure of office. The visionary government visualises things to come long after; even may not be during the lifetime of the dreamer.

After a long spell of missionary governments that ruled Bangladesh over the last decades, we observe that the present government led by Sheikh Hasina came to power with a visionary zeal. In shortest possible phrase, the dream is called "digital

Bangladesh," to be reached by 2021. The slogan seemingly lured a large number of new and young voters to vote for the boat.

Basically, digital Bangladesh implies a science-based Bangladesh comprising innovations, inventions, connectivity etc. The solutions of innumerable problems that the people of this country are afflicted with must be solved through the application of scientific knowledge and tools.

But a digital Bangladesh could turn out to be discriminatory Bangladesh unless access to the inputs of digital Bangladesh is equally shared by different segments of the society. Digital Bangladesh in that sense also implies an "inclusive" Bangladesh.

Such a Bangladesh requires digital education in the first place. But it appears that the current education system in the country would militate against such mission. Take education at the primary levels -- the foundation upon which the multi-storied building called "digital education" will be built. There are many tracks at this level. Disparity develops from here that subsequently separates the society. It is high time that one track is

followed at this level.

The present education minister, as far as I know, is an ardent advocate of this system. I can only hope that his thoughts will now be translated into actions. Second, at primary level, more emphasis should be given on quality through teachers' training and provisions of logistics, mathematics and science.

Perhaps much capital investment is not needed as the number of primary school going children has been falling over time. We wonder whether higher secondary level has any utility on its own. There could be economy of resources by imparting secondary level education for 12 years.

Allow me to be a bit provocative at this stage. I hypothesise that the ongoing systems of education at university level is not friendly toward "vision 2021." Many of the private universities are working like parlours and shops, with the ulterior motive of profit maximisation. Education is bought and sold in these places.

Successive governments failed miserably to contain commercialisation of higher education. These institutions must be brought under the rules of the government. Education must be inclusive, with an eye on society and the cultural milieu of the society.

At the other extreme stand public universities, with a steep decline in their educational standard. Devouring public resources, these institutions continue to remain as a bane to societal development. Teachers are alleged to be more active in politics than in publications; more in tea-rooms than in teaching rooms.

The Bangladesh Education Act '73, where applicable, needs to be reviewed through a discussion with stakeholders to make it contributory to digital education. A system of accountability must somehow be incorporated.

Teachers should be heavily penalised for neglect of duties. Likewise, student politics should also be revisited. The present destructive politics of students should be shunned. The science and technology universities should be strengthened through rational choice of teachers and administrators. English needs to be brought back to its earlier importance as far as medium of instruction in higher education is concerned.

The Kudrat-E-Khuda Education Commission could serve as an eye-opener for any new ideas on education for digital Bangladesh. The education policy formulated by AL government in its previous tenure could also serve as a guide. Minor changes in earlier documents prepared by the same political party can contribute to the formulation of an educational policy in the quickest possible time.

By and large, the orthodox education system needs an overhauling for the creation of a digital Bangladesh. Digital Bangladesh needs a secular, scientific and social education to move ahead with the motto enshrined in AL's manifesto.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University. E-mail: abdulbayes@yahoo.com.

Digital Bangladesh and the young

The journey towards a digital Bangladesh needs the incorporation of the technologically savvy, innovative younger generation. If the leaders of our country objectively guide this generation, they can do wonders for the nation. After all, the young generation always looks forward, and they can help bring about positive changes in the society.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

THE honeymoon period for the newly installed government is yet to be over. Various analyses of the electoral results have revealed that the young generation, who were more than one-third of the voters, had indeed brought this overwhelming victory for AL. Presumably, the visionary approach of AL's manifesto might have allured the young voters, especially its "Vision 2021" which envisions a "digital Bangladesh."

What does digital Bangladesh really mean? It does not imply that the urban youth of the country will be consumers of high-tech devices and promote the d'juice culture. Instead of this superficial notion, we need to consider the term "digital Bangladesh" objectively.

Broadly speaking, a digital society ensures an ICT driven knowledge-based society where information will be readily available on line and where all possible tasks

of the government, semi-government and also private spheres will be processed using state of the art technology. In other words, we have to establish technology driven e-governance, e-commerce, e-production, e-agriculture, e-health etc.

Due to globalisation, more specifically due to the boom in ICT, Bangladesh is already connected to the outside world. Yet, our only success lies in mobile telecommunication, which has brought a huge change in telecommunication scenario of the country. However, in the other spheres of ICT, we are still far away from transforming ourselves into a knowledge-based society.

Building a strong ICT infrastructure is a pre-requisite for making Bangladesh a digital society. For this, we need to focus on the following relevant issues, assessing the harsh reality that hinders our development in this context.

Power deficit: Latest statistics reveal that Bangladesh faces a power deficit of up to 2000 MW against a demand of 5000 MW

daily. Uninterrupted power supply is a must for proper ICT development.

Network infrastructure: Outside Dhaka, only a few computer network infrastructures have been developed so far. Apart from some educational institutes, observation finds that most of the LAN setups are Dhaka-centric. This shows that there is a digital gap in the country.

Use of Internet: The number of internet users must be increased for ICT development. The latest statistics (ITU, 2007) reveal that internet penetration in our country is only 0.3%, whereas, in Pakistan and India, it is 7.3% and 5.3% respectively.

Submarine cable: Since 2006, Bangladesh has been connected with the worldwide Internet Super-Highway through a submarine cable. But this single submarine cable frequently faces disruption, resulting in slow bandwidth.

Network readiness: Networked Readiness Index (NRI), developed by the University of Harvard, measures the propensity of countries to exploit the opportunities offered by ICT. The NRI has three components: the environment for ICT offered by a country or community, the readiness of the community's key stakeholders (individuals, businesses, and governments) to use ICT, and finally the usage of ICT amongst these stakeholders. Unfortunately, the latest survey (2006-7) revealed that Bangladesh's NRI ranking is one of the lowest among Asian countries.

Use of open-source software: Many

countries have started using open-source software in ICT development projects. Unfortunately, in our ICT development domain, the culture of using open-source software has not yet been introduced.

English literacy rate: English literacy rate in Bangladesh is less than 1%, whereas, it is 60% and 20% respectively in India and Pakistan. There is a strong correlation between English literacy and ICT development because English is the lingua-franca for ICT. On the other hand, we have not localised Bengali in the domain of computing.

For achieving digital Bangladesh by 2021, the government must address the above stated issues effectively and efficiently. We need to reformulate our policies (e.g. education policy, ICT policy) in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals. In reformulating the ICT policy, we will need to take a pragmatic and visionary approach so that it can remove the prevailing digital gap in the society.

Moreover, the journey towards a digital Bangladesh needs the incorporation of the technologically savvy, innovative younger generation. If the leaders of our country objectively guide this generation, they can do wonders for the nation. After all, the young generation always looks forward, and they can help bring about positive changes in the society.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR is an educationalist and a freelance writer. E-mail: kabiranwar@yahoo.com