

Effective local government still a far cry?

Not the change the country needs

It has long been accepted that one of the key reforms necessary for ensuring effective governance would be to vest greater authority for development work in the hands of the elected local government representatives.

Not only was this an election pledge by the AL, but it is one that the Prime Minister has personally made on numerous occasions long before the last campaign season.

It is thus with disappointment that we note that the early indications are that the new government appears set to renege on its solemn commitment to strengthening local government system. Once again, we see that efforts are underway to ensure that control over local development will be in the hands of the MPs and that the elected local government functionaries will be side-lined.

In the first place, we would urge the government to ratify the local government ordinance relating to upazila parishads that was passed by the caretaker government. Failure to do so will send a strong signal that the government is not serious either about its commitments or about reforming local government.

Secondly, an advisory role for MPs in local development is a bad idea, as it will interfere with the upazila chairman's functions, create confusion as to who has ultimate authority, and perpetuate the MPs' hold over development. The exact opposite of the desired outcome.

MPs obviously want to be in charge of local development as they can thus dispense patronage, but it is equally obvious that such an arrangement is hardly in the best interest of the public.

In this regard, attention need also be paid to the role of the bureaucracy and to ensure that there is no confusion as to what their role is and to whom they are answerable. Civil servants operating at the local level need to work in close co-operation with and under the control of the upazila chairman.

We strongly favour the continuation of a local government commission to study the problem on an ongoing basis and urge the government to live up to its commitment to deliver effective local governance. Not only was doing so a key election pledge, but it will lead to tangible development benefits for the people and is a key component of the reform that is so overdue.

If the government is not able to deliver meaningful change when it comes to control over local development, then it does not augur well for the other major reforms that are needed for effective governance.

Level crossing deaths

Nothing was done to eliminate risk factors

At least 13 people are reported to have been killed, and dozens of others injured, when a train knocked off a truck at an unguarded level crossing near Joypurhat on Tuesday. The ill-fated truck, stuck on the railway track, could not move away before the train rammed it.

This is a type of accident that we are familiar with, and it is known that all such accidents occur due to gross human errors. In this case also the truck driver thought that he would be able to get past the crossing but an engine failure left the truck stranded. This might sound like something going terribly wrong at the last moment, but a closer look into the matter will reveal that the risk factors are very much present in the way these level crossings are set up and operated. Reports say that there are about 400 level crossings in the country and almost 50 percent of them remain unmanned or were set up without authorisation. The dangers associated with unguarded or illegal level crossings need little elaboration.

Despite loss of lives in such accidents, the task of ensuring properly guarded level crossings could not be accomplished by the railway authorities in the last 38 years. The loopholes and flaws are exposed only when fatal accidents occur. It is not clear when the authorities concerned will feel the need for eliminating the grave risk that unguarded level crossings pose to both trains and vehicles.

And what about the illegal crossings set up by influential people? One wonders how such crossings exist and why the railway authorities cannot do anything to remove them. Does safety of passengers have any place in the railway authorities' list of priorities? Is it enough to form a probe committee every time a grisly accident takes place and do virtually nothing to prevent such accidents in future?

A similar accident took place at another level crossing in Joypurhat in July 2006 which left at least 35 people dead. But the accident is being referred to only after another accident, which proves that precious little has been done to eliminate the risk factors in the last 30 months.

The issue needs to be addressed to eliminate or at least reduce the number of such accidents. The railway's job is plain and simple. They have to ensure that level crossings are properly manned and no illegal crossings exist. Moreover, the railway authority should stop the extremely unsafe practice of allowing people to occupy empty spaces available on the engines and roofs of bogies. Finally, the victims of Tuesday's accident must get adequate compensation.

A dangerous precedent

This has set a very dangerous precedent. The UN is in no position to dictate the politics of a sovereign member state through threats and intimidation, more so when the USGPA's message amounts to provoking the armed forces to go against the government of the day.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

BOOKS authored by retired Bangladeshi military officers have been few and far between. However, in a departure from past practice, we have the benefit of the army chief's insight through the two books that he published in the last two years, the latest appearing last month. It is a departure in the sense that although we have had books on strategic issues written by serving generals in the last few years, the two by the CAS deal not only with contemporaneous issues, the latest one particularly deals with very sensitive political matters, and I hasten to add that the CAS must be prepared for the flak and riposte from those that may have also witnessed the developments, and may perhaps have a different account to narrate.

It is not my intention to critique the book, or indeed the actions of the CAS leading to 1/11. Many will question the discretion of a service chief indulging in exposé of political events that are likely to have a long-term effect on our politics, while still being in harness, particularly when he himself had influenced the unfolding of some of those. He has done the people and the country a great favour by letting us in on many unknown facts, particularly on the manner in which threats and intimidation were brought to bear on a national institution like the armed forces by outside agencies.

We are not new to the agony of external pressures in our internal politics. Most of them have come in the form of veiled

threats and coercion. These have been applied to force the government to modify policies ranging from withdrawal of subsidy on agriculture to modifying the plan of a strategic bridge. Sometimes the government had to wilt in the face of such pressures. And those that had the audacity to stand up to these pressures suffered the inevitable consequences.

One account in the book that cannot escape our notice is the way in which 1/11 came about. The manner in which external pressure was brought to bear on internal politics, and on the government of the day in Jan 2007, has brought in a new dimension to international relations. While in the past it was internal compulsions that shaped external policies, one now has to shape internal events to meet the dictates of our friends and also of international institutions, as revealed by the army chief, even of the UN.

To quote from the excerpts of the book appearing in various newspapers: "At one time representatives of several powerful countries met me and conveyed to me that if the army supported an election that was not participated by all the political parties they would request the UN to withdraw Bangladesh from UN peace missions."

If that is not a threat then what is. If that is not a violation of the relevant provisions of the convention that guide the behaviour of diplomats then what is.

The threat was eventually carried out when, on the morning of January 11, 2007, the UN Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping Affairs (USGPA) conveyed to the CAS directly that an election that was



Bargaining chips?

not participatory was not acceptable to them, and that the UN would seriously consider withdrawing Bangladesh army from UN peace missions should the army support such an election.

This has set a very dangerous precedent. The UN has been created by sovereign states and must run as per the dictates of its members. The UN is in no position to dictate the politics of a sovereign member state through threats and intimidation, more so when the USGPA's message amounts to provoking the armed forces to go against the government of the day.

I ask whether Mr. Guhino, the USGPA, has not violated his charter of duty by making the threat, and did he not violate the norms by talking directly to a service chief, and whether he, as in-charge of UN peacekeeping, was the right man to talk on political matters? In a civilised world this is called blackmail!

If the UN had any reservations about the election was there not the established channel of communications to convey their position? When one hears so much about keeping the armed forces away from politics, here we have the most important international organisation provoking the army of a member state to get involved in it.

Let there be no doubt that the postponement of the 2007 election was a good thing for the country, and one that had been welcomed by most. However, what is a matter of anxiety is the way that was brought about. It is a dangerous precedent because, given the political wisdom of our politicians, there is no guarantee that a similar political impasse will not occur in future, and who knows that pressure will not be brought once again on the army to act under coercion.

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The dwindling fate of the fourth estate

The decline of the newspaper industry is caused by the modern information age, the advent of internet, and the disinclination of younger generation to subscribe to printed editions of newspapers which are redundant in a globalised world.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE 19-century Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, famously described newspapers as the "fourth estate," the others being the Crown and the two Houses of Parliament. This power was recognised earlier also by Jefferson, the third president of the United States, who is reported to have once remarked: "Were it left to us to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter." But that was before he became the president and himself a target of much media criticism.

Some two centuries after Jefferson's pronouncements, the newspapers in his own country, one of the world's most vibrant democracies, are in deep crisis. So much so that the Christian Science Monitor, a highly respected newspaper that has just celebrated 100 years in print,

will cease to be a daily newspaper and will only be published as a web-based edition from now onwards.

Other venerable US newspapers, like Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle and the Boston Globe, have suffered a loss of 30% to 40% of their readership during recent years and are likely to follow suit.

The decline of the newspaper industry is, ironically, caused not by any restrictions imposed by the authorities, but by the modern information age, the advent of internet, and the disinclination of younger generation to subscribe to printed editions of newspapers which are redundant in a globalised world connected by e-mail, fax machines, computer technology and television channels bringing news instantly to anyone's doorstep.

As a result, the newspapers, shrunken in size and volume, are experiencing sharply declining circulation and, most significantly, a reduction in their income from ads. The circulation of daily newspapers

has declined newly 3% during the past six months alone. The Newspaper Association of America (NAA) recently estimated that in 2007, concordant with the general decrease in readership, the revenue from ads was reduced by more than nine percent -- one of the sharpest losses recorded in half a century.

It is well known that only a small fraction of the cost of running a newspaper is covered by subscriptions. Over 80% of it is borne by advertisers who constitute the main source of income, if any, of the newspapers. A significant number of businesses are now promoting their products -- automobiles, appliances, real estate -- on the internet. Both the reduced readership and the progressive decline in income from ads have been exacerbated by the current economic slump in the US.

The NAA reckons that the newspaper industry suffered a loss of 11.5% in its advertisement income in 2008, which would translate into a loss of more than \$40 billion.

Obviously, to overcome some of their difficulties, the newspapers have adopted a variety of measures, which would have their own adverse effect on the related field. For example, many have reduced their staff and closed down foreign news bureaus. This will certainly affect the quality of the publication and its versatility. To save

money and attract readers some newspapers have turned parochial, highlighting local news on crimes and scandals. This has been made possible only at the cost of de-emphasising important international and national news stories.

Worse still, in the unavoidable process of cutting costs, some of the most experienced and respected journalists will have to be laid off, and the interested readers will be deprived of their intellectual inputs. Even today, newspaper editors and correspondents continue to hold great power over public opinion, which serves to hold governments accountable for their policies and actions. Many critics, however, believe that the news media failed in its duty by not aggressively questioning the Bush administration about its bogus rationale for leading the country into the disastrous Iraq war.

If the predictions come true and the print editions of newspapers become extinct in future, it is difficult to imagine how the world will be like without that great source of pleasure. Men of letters may never feel at ease with the disembodied internet version, however convenient and inexpensive it might be. That is apart from throwing millions out of their great intellectual pursuit.

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Environmental diplomacy

Bangladesh needs to align itself with countries which are also facing similar problems due to global warming, so that their voices are heard loud and clear at all preparatory meetings leading to the UN conference in December this year.

HARUN UR RASHID

ON February 3, the Danish minister of climate and energy visited Bangladesh. Her visit was important because Denmark will host the UN Conference on Climate Change in December to replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Bangladesh is one of the top listed vulnerable countries that will be seriously affected by climate change. The minister, Ms. Connie Hedegaard, said: "Bangladesh is truly a very important party in the coming negotiations. I feel convinced that Bangladesh is well on its way to Copenhagen."

On January 12, Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu Moni rightly termed climate change a major issue as Bangladesh was going to be the worst victim of its adverse impacts.

On bad days, airborne pollution lies like a thick veil over Bangladesh's cities and blocks out the sunlight. It is estimated that only 1% of the country's 40 million city dwellers breathe air that would be considered safe. In addition, large areas of the coastline are so polluted that they no longer sustain marine life.

In Bangladesh, increased temperature

will add more problems for the country. While a torrent of melt-water from the Himalayan glaciers flow to the rivers, causing soil erosion, coastal zones, including the Sunderbans mangrove forests, are being threatened by rising sea-levels.

Furthermore, saline water will creep into agricultural lands from the coastal belt, leading to reduction of crops, and rising temperature may bring new infectious and bacterial diseases in the country.

A report of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) of 2007 presents a bleak picture of Bangladesh by 2030. The report said an additional 6-8% of Bangladesh will be permanently under water and flood-prone areas will increase (from 25% to 40% by 2050.)

Bangladesh's rivers are snow-fed during winter, and if there is no snow in the Himalayas our major 56 rivers will die during the winter months. Around 100 rivers are already dead for various environmental reasons.

The global warming threat was felt in 2007, when the country was affected by a series of devastating weather events. Two unusually severe floods and category five Cyclone Sidr occurred in the country, killing 3,300 people and leaving about two

million people homeless in the coastal zones.

The two-week UN meeting in December 2008 at Poznan (Poland) was the halfway mark in the negotiations on an ambitious and effective international climate change deal to be clinched in Copenhagen in 2009. The parties have less than a year to agree on strengthened action on mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology.

It is reported that Bangladesh presented the following proposals at the Poznan conference:

- Separate climate change funding must be provided to developing countries apart from the existing official development assistance of 0.7% target of gross national product.
- Current arrangement of responsibility-based mechanism must be revised to make contributions of industrialised countries (polluters) mandatory.
- To develop a mechanism with the help of UNIPCC to create an index on the vulnerability of people to climate change.
- Setting up a long-term global goal on the basis of undertakings of industrialised countries on emission cuts, technology transfer, finance and capacity building.
- Creation of an effective environment for climate change adaptation, nationally, regionally and internationally with the support of appropriate institutions.
- Establish the Head office of International Adaptation Centre in Dhaka.

Bangladesh has to vigorously pursue the above proposals in the coming international conferences, and needs to make out a sound case for assistance and support to help adapt to the adverse effects of global warming in such a way that reduction of poverty is addressed without degrading environment.

Bangladesh needs to align itself with countries which are also facing similar problems due to global warming, so that their voices are heard loud and clear at all preparatory meetings leading to the UN conference in Copenhagen in December this year.

This gives us cause for urgent and critical planning of strategies for negotiations at the international or regional meetings through creative environmental diplomacy.

It is good to note that the government has approved a policy in principle for formation of a trust on climate change. The government earlier had set up a secretariat on climate change under the environment and forest ministry to monitor the activities for combating climate change and deal with the climate change fund.

The government may consider appointing a permanent envoy on environment for sake of continuity to attend to the series of international meetings on environment this year, leading to the next UN Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009.

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