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## Managing outside actors

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that all outside actors, except the super empowered individuals and groups take their involvement in Bangladesh as an opportunity to advance their own agendas or that these agendas are all made to address their own interests. Multinational corporations such as those in the energy sector are driven solely by profit, and care little about local interests, the environment, even local laws. Aid agencies, on the other hand, work from a very different perspective that of advancing development but there are also significant differences between the way outside state funded development agencies such as DANIDA or NORAD and USAID work. Even within the UN system, a particular agency might have bigger clout than another because of its high visibility, and the range and scope of its work. But not all UN agencies work at the same level of intensity or effectiveness. Although these agencies work in close contact with Bangladesh government, it is not clear how much accountability they have with the government. UNICEF, to take one example, has been performing admirably in advancing children's issues in Bangladesh and is rated highly for its recent efforts to help achieve millennium development goals. But back in the 1970s, some international agencies headed by UNICEF took up a massive tube well project to provide clean water in the rural areas. UNICEF paid for nearly a million tube wells apparently without testing the groundwater for arsenic. The result has been, according to the World Health Organization, as quoted by Fred Pierce, a UK-based science journalist writing in *The Unesco Courier* (January 2001), "the biggest outbreak of mass poisoning in history." UNICEF maintains that tests for arsenic were not conducted because arsenic has never been found in "the

kind of geological formations that exist in Bangladesh," but Pierce quotes a geochemist who scoffed at the suggestion, saying underground water cannot be equated with safe water. Mitigating measures were initiated once arsenic contamination took alarming proportions, but so far little has been done to help the victims. Even UNICEF admitted in 2000 that it would take 30 years to complete testing all tube wells for arsenic contamination: a longer time than it took to sink these tube wells! If Bangladesh government has evaded its responsibility in creating the disaster, so has UNICEF, but there hardly seems to be any accountability from any side to the victims.

If UNICEF's tube well project is an example of a well meaning project gone wrong because, among other reasons, the Bangladesh government decided to forego its proactive, leadership role, there are other examples of the government's passive role encouraging outside actors' involvement in its business, particularly in its economic and financial policies. Such involvement has been blamed for economic downturns and growing disparities between the rich and the poor. Economists have accused the World Bank and IMF for interfering in key areas of our economic policy making. The two institutions are unabashed promoters of capitalist economic models that hardly address Bangladesh's economic and social realities. The World Bank is firmly against subsidies of any kind from farm subsidies (fertilizer, seeds, pesticide) to food rations to urban poor-- although Bangladesh cannot ignore the plight of the farmers and the poorer sections of its population and its constitutional obligation to meet their basic needs. The World Bank was given legal immunity in 2004 by the government, in line with all UN agencies, and the Asian Development Bank given earlier (in 1973), exempting

it from any legal action. Even before the immunity though, the Bank conducted itself in a manner that was contrary to popular aspirations, while the government appeared to have no option but to listen to its 'advice.'

Ironically, the recent meltdown in US economy has prompted the government there to 'subsidize' (i.e., bail out) banks and automobile companies, just as it has been subsidizing its farmers on crop pricing for so long. The Bank has been silent on US farm subsidies, or to the latest exercise of 'philanthrocapitalism' (not the Bill Gates or George Soros type, but more direct involvement of the US government). If anything, let's hope that the US financial crisis will prompt reforms in the policies of both the World Bank and IMF to bring them in line with global realities.

There is another kind of interference the Bangladesh government has to contend with, and this comes from some members of the diplomatic corps stationed in Dhaka. While western diplomats in Dhaka enjoy more privileges than those enjoyed by their colleagues in other Asian countries such as India or Thailand, in recent years some have begun to interfere directly in the country's internal affairs. Because of Bangladesh's status as a low income, dependent country, western ambassadors can meet any ministers, even the Prime Minister, at a short notice, and can advise them on how to conduct a particular piece of business, often ignoring diplomatic protocol. In times of crisis, such as during October 2006 to January 2007 period, and indeed during the whole of 2007 and 2008, their 'advice' bordered on downright interference in the country's affairs. Frustrated by such conduct by a section of the diplomats, the Foreign Ministry on 20 March 2008 said: "There has been a renewed perceptible tendency on the part of some foreign dip-

lomats to make remarks in public that a section of the media has perceived to be interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs." The ministry described the interference in heavily cushioned diplomatic language as the perception of a section of the media, but the message was nonetheless clear: the diplomats were expected to mind their own business. One can understand that if the message came from a country like India or China, diplomats would certainly mend their ways. Bangladesh however, has no such clout. Ever since Henry Kissinger described it as a basket case, it has suffered from an image crisis from which it has never recovered, despite its many accomplishments in the recent years. USA finds it convenient to describe Bangladesh as a 'moderate Muslim country' although a section of its press went to the extent of describing it as a failed state. Western diplomats can do away with diplomatic niceties when dealing with Bangladesh. They have power and they have knowledge, and the Foucauldian nexus therefore works nicely for some form of hegemony to work. The ministry's notice also admits, in a manner of speaking, that diplomats may or do interfere in private; it is their making such interference public that miffed the ministry.

For managing and successfully neutralizing outside actors' interference, Bangladesh first has to have strong democratic practices that promote a bipartisan culture and by extension, solid political pluralism and an effective parliament. In a stable and tolerant democracy, scope for outside interference is minimized. Bangladesh also needs good governance and a corruption free administration. There is a positive correlation between corruption and outside interference. Rogue oil companies landed lucrative deals in Bangladesh by bribing corrupt officials. Even a reputed

firm like Siemens bribed high officials and influential people (including a son of the former Prime Minister, according to reports) to get a money-spinning job in Bangladesh. While corrupt officials are sometimes investigated, and charge sheeted (few see any conviction though), there has been no instance of corrupt multinational corporation officials ever taken to task. Commonsense tells us that if corruption is brought within a tolerable level, outside actors will find fewer palms to grease for netting lucrative deals. But before Bangladesh can really stand up to these actors, it has to attain a level of economic and social development that ensures a measure of respect from the outside world. Bad imagery that taints Bangladesh must be transformed into good imagery.

At the same time, it has to learn self respect. Why should ministers in droves flock to a party thrown by a western ambassador? Why should half of the Secretariat turn up at some country's national day reception? Why should a minister meet an ambassador when the Secretary or an Additional Secretary of his ministry can very well do it on his behalf and brief him/her if necessary? Why should two warring political parties call up an ambassador as a referee when they can very well sit across a table and cool things down? It is these practices over the years that have given the diplomats their visibility and the clout beyond their diplomatic privilege, and made them important players in our internal affairs. These practices should stop itself no self respecting country can allow itself to be dictated by others. The new government has promised a politics of change. Let us hope it changes the way the government here deals with outside actors.

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