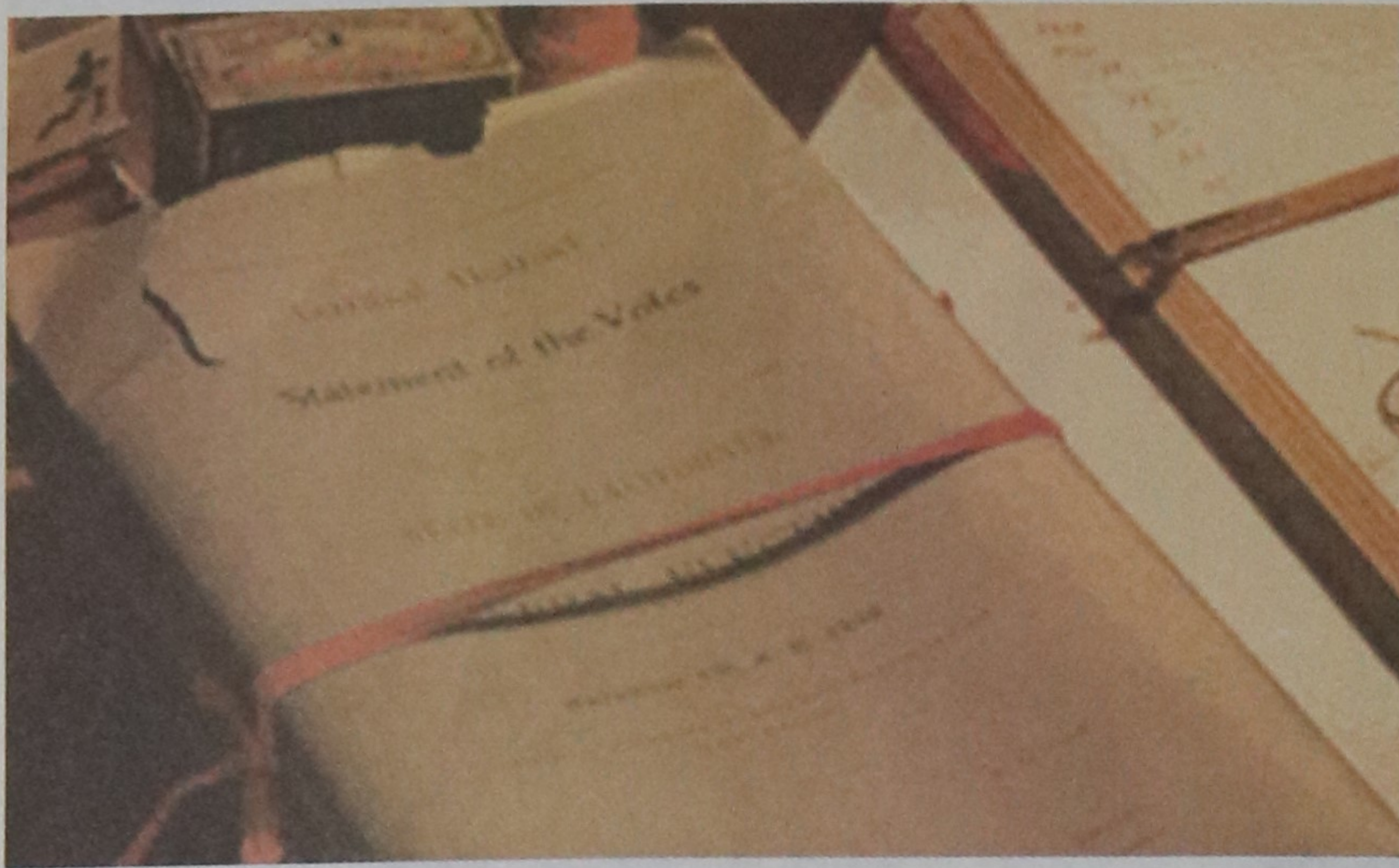


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# Policracy, bureaucracy or meritocracy



*The solution is in the hands of vigilant leadership in the executive and legislative branches, and solution is essential if our society has to attain the status of 'the good society', as defined by that eminent intellectual, John Kenneth Galbraith. We have to eliminate 'policracy,' diminish the role of 'bureaucracy' and establish the superiority of 'meritocracy.'*

MAHBUB HUSAIN KHAN

**A**S I write this column, the first session of the newly elected Jatiya Sangsad has started. With this first step taken by the newly elected government, we are moving towards a new beginning in this new millennium. The consensus of 1991 had evolved into the confrontation of 2006, which brought into power in 2007, the interim government of January 11, and which has now resigned to set the stage for the fresh beginning of the newly elected democratic government. As my readers know, Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* won the Man Booker prize for this year, which was announced just over two months ago. The novel is a shocking and furious portrait of Indian corruption and social injustice. And what is a portrait of the Indian society and its administrative system is also a reflection of our socio-political scenario as of now.

The social, political and economic realities faced by the developing nations like ours are very different from those found in the economically advanced nations. But they are in many ways similar to the conditions faced by reformers in the USA, about one hundred years ago. Corruption and influence peddling are widespread here. Patronage is often the norm: many get jobs or are promoted because of their connections, not their abilities. The civil service and the public sector, the courts and police departments as also other service organisations of the public agencies are not fully independent of political control. As such legal prosecution of corruption is difficult. We have to pick and choose our innovation strategies to rid the administration of corruption and politicisation. The core strategy is to consider here relates to the conduct of elected officials and their top appointed officials whom we may call "policrats", and how to marginalise this.

After our Liberation, a predominantly provincial administrative set-up had to be suitably transformed to take on the desired characteristics of a national administration. Within this general consideration, the specifics included the merging of the erstwhile central government offices and provincial government departments and the most important and knotty problem of merging of the central and provincial service, and the remodeling of the goals and aspirations of a young nation. While the central services inher-

ited by Bangladesh had a recognisable and operationally tractable structure, the provincial services had as many as 24 regularly constituted services classified as generalist, specialist and functional services. There were four classes of government employees, along with senior and junior classes in class I and II service.

Obviously, the integration of various services into a unified cadre was going to prove cumbersome and open to much criticism whatever the formula adhered to. The changed socio-political environment in particular the birth of the country through a sanguinary nine month war did not favour the continued dominance of an elitist Civil Service. Though other socialist countries in general tended to have monolithic bureaucracies and our neighbour India retained the bureaucratic legacy of British rule under their leader Jawaharlal Nehru, Bangladesh, the latest entrant to the socialist brotherhood of nations, did not reconcile itself to an over-emphasised role of the civil bureaucrats. One of the initial ideas revolved around recruiting and training political cadres to take over the administrative leadership and coordination roles at various tiers of field and secretariat administration. To this end, recruitment was made in 1973 to BCS administration cadres, through only a Viva Voce examination, of 408 civil servants. Another 263 were recruited in various other cadres, including 157 in the Police Service. It was only in 1979 that the first properly organised BCS examinations were held by the Public Service Commission. Over the years, though the intake was variable in quality, the general standards were higher than those recruited in 1973. Some of the 1973 entrants became secretaries to the government before retiring but not many of them were really fit to hold these posts. The malaise created by politically dominated appointment in that year has now caused many problems in the smooth running of the government, and donor countries are complaining about problems of interaction with some of these officers at the higher levels of bureaucracy.

During the BNP government, officers in the police were recruited by considering political loyalties. And then we had the makings of another debacle in recruiting officers to the highest levels of the bureaucracy, by implementing various types of quotas and through political manipula-

tions, the aftermath of which is still continuing as the adversely affected candidates are embarking on a movement including programmes of fasting unto death.

The three democratically elected governments in power during the 1990s were reluctant to undertake significant reform. With elections every five years, short run political calculations have dominated decision-making. The political leadership perceived the immediate political costs of reform to outweigh the longer run welfare benefits.

As of now, the functioning of the public service reflects a pervasive 'clientalism' operating within clearly defined hierarchies. In this Bangladesh is far from unique; these are problems that every society must struggle with at some point in its development. And, as in all societies, Bangladesh has a number of well organised interest groups that largely determine political decisions: in particular: the military; the public bureaucracy; private business; the trade unions; religious groupings, the NGOs; and the donors. Some of the activities of interest groups are legitimate, while some (bribery, extortion, harassment and use of musclemen) are not. Competition among special interest groups is the hallmark of a well functioning democracy, which always provided the special interest groups, with frequent resort to illegitimate methods.

However, these groups are by no means monolithic. On the contrary, interest groups tend to be fractious and are frequently divided and overlapping. This fragmentation results in much contention and distrust, which affect the day-to-day administration at all levels.

The political leadership and the elected legislature have to choose between an efficient and talented pool of professional civil servants and diplomats on the one hand, and a group of politically pliable yes men who would be giving misdirected advice and effecting partisan administrative strategies, on the other.

It has to be realised right away, and this brooks no delay, that only a just and efficient government under a strong political leadership and non partisan administrative machinery can deliver the fruits of socio economic development to the people in the new century. The solution is in the hands of vigilant leadership in the executive and legislative branches, and solution is essential if our society has to attain the status of 'the good society', as defined by that eminent intellectual, John Kenneth Galbraith.

We have to eliminate the 'policracy,' diminish the role of the 'bureaucracy' and establish the superiority of the 'meritocracy.'

Mahbub Husain Khan is a former civil servant and freelance journalist.

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