

## Departure of an icon

Whatever he has achieved in a volatile political environment deserves due commendation. It would be almost impossible for any future ACC chief to emulate the achievements of Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, especially under a political government.

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

**I**N my sole communication with Lt. Gen. (ret'd) Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury in December 2007, I wrote: "In my personal opinion, your appointment as the chief of ACC is the best decision of this government and you have been doing a superb job of leading our collective wishes to get the nation out of the curses of corruption."

The task was monumental, because the past BNP-led government had systematically destroyed every institution of the country, including the constitutional ones, and the ACC could not escape its evil design.

A member of ACC during BNP's rule, a former VC of the nation's biggest university, refuted allegations of corruptions against one of the BNP chief's sons. This is an indication of the kind of people, devoid of any minimum ethics, who were previously given the responsibility of getting rid of corruption.

The ACC chief's job was made easy by the emergency. However, many of its actions and inactions gave rise to controversies. It was not clear to the people

why some politicians were arrested, charged and convicted summarily, though the charges against them were trivial.

A case in question was the conviction of an AL presidium member, whose apparent fault was to lead the uprising of the bureaucrats against the so-called elected government in the aftermath of the voterless February 15, 1996 election.

To make matters worse, his son, who has been away from the country for nearly two decades, was convicted for not submitting his wealth statement. It really did not add up when the ACC was headed by no other than Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury.

Many individuals whose corruption was well known were able to keep out of jail while many with minor allegations were arrested, charged, and tried. That was the case with the mayor of Dhaka, whose alleged corruption was much more than any other mayors, all of whom were arrested.

While a few hundred people were asked to submit their wealth statements, the brother of the BNP chief,

who was allegedly only second to his own nephew on the corruption scale, was even not on the list of suspected corrupt. Here again, it did not add up.

It can be only deduced that the ACC chief was under pressure from after assuming office, and that he did compromise on many occasions. The so-called task forces on corruption had their own agenda, which became moving ones as the public mood shifted with time.

The ACC chief's disclaimer that the arrest of the suspected corrupts had nothing to do with ACC failed to make any differentiation between the ACC and the "government within the government." The above instances created some dents in the credibility of the ACC, and the real culprits are now riding the bandwagon of those who were arrested, charged, and in some cases convicted, for no valid reason.

The reactions of those in the BNP camp after the ACC chief's resignation is understandable, since it was under his stewardship that the wrongdoings of many of the party stalwarts were exposed. Many of the allegedly corrupt party stalwarts might have escaped the wrath of the court of law through some loopholes, but the people's court gave its resounding verdict in the last election.

The reaction of the state minister for law was devoid of any political acumen, to say the least. His comments neither advanced his own cause nor the cause of the party he represents. By making a



Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury

blanket statement that "HMC used to harass and humiliate politicians during the tenure of the caretaker govern-

ment" he was trying to give a clean bill of health to many of his party's political rivals. It was the ACC's identification of

the corrupt that helped his party nominate relatively clean candidates.

There can be differences in opinions about the merits and demerits of the many cases that had been initiated by the ACC during HMC's tenure. However, it is hard to believe that it was guided by personal vendetta against anyone, or that he was trying to advance the agenda of any particular group. He might have yielded to pressure from some sources, which created some dents in the image of the ACC.

However, his honesty, integrity and non-partisanship in a politically polarised society should never come into question. He has travelled from city to city to instill antipathy against corruption. Whatever he has achieved in a volatile political environment deserves due commendation. It would be almost impossible for any future ACC chief to emulate the achievements of Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury, especially under a political government.

In his response to my communication, the ACC chief observed: "I humbly acknowledge your kind feelings about myself and sincerely pray that I can come up to your expectations." I strongly believe, in spite of some merited criticisms, he has lived up to the expectations of most of our citizens. His departure is indeed a departure of an icon.

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## Bangladesh corporate standards

The standard setting has to be pioneered by one and the rest should follow it. It's a process that will be replicated once started. For example, when one company (often the market leader) adopts a good practice, the industry often follows suit. As a result, the competitors and other players in that market are also affected, and it later becomes the norm.

MAMUN RASHID

**T**HE Daily Star, along with DHL, organises Bangladesh Business Award every year. For facilitating the nominations they have published a

criteria booklet, which focuses on innovations, financial performance/productivity, company management and contribution to the community, while making a nomination for enterprise of the year. They have also asked for clean

banking and tax records. They have asked companies to improve their productivity level as well.

These are very rare qualities in most of the local corporations. Maybe the sponsors want to raise them through these awards. Most Bangladeshi entrepreneurs are first generation business people, who are too busy in building up their own equity and domain.

The leadership style they follow is mostly dictatorial, or at least top-centric. Their management style is bureaucratic and financial management is mostly non-transparent, with a few exceptions of course.

Most of the enterprises are owner

driven, and "one man show" prevails. These companies are safeguarded by old-school thoughts, which still believe in company secrecy. Interestingly, the trust factor plays an important role in these organisations. There is a trust gap between owners and employees.

In major cases, owners build up their dynasty. The son or daughter of the owner suddenly becomes deputy managing director without having sufficient experience. A succession plan may be in place at times, but that is definitely not based on merit or performance.

Most of the employees don't see a long-term career in an organisation, therefore they don't have any sense of belonging. Despite the fact that the private sector has been identified as the engine for growth, people see the government sector as a safer employer than the private sector -- or better performers want to join multinationals.

Even the best business house can be taken for a ride by the senior executives in the absence of proper guidelines.

The service sector is a little better than the manufacturing sector and is considered to have shown good progress in establishing corporate standards, the credit for which goes to the financial sector reforms and regulatory supervision. Even then, senior bank officials are sometimes over-ruled by owners regarding day-to-day affairs.

In that case, are we progressing in setting up a standard in our corporate sector? The answer is yes, but very slowly, especially in setting a vision for the corporate houses, developing a proper HR management strategy and segregating the roles of the executives and the owners. Talking about strategies, in our neighbouring countries large corporate houses are now going global to explore fund raising and manufacturing facilities to save cost. For that, those organisations had to ensure

governance and transparency.

In Bangladesh, many private sector organisations do not even prepare audited financials. Even if they are available, they do not reflect the real picture of the company affairs. There is no professional approach in fund raising. In many cases they do not have business plans in place.

Most companies don't have transparent recruitment and reward policies. An employee does not know what is his/her next job, or what will happen to him or her, if s/he outperforms in his/her job -- or even what out-performance in any specific job is.

The reward policies are often not clarified at the time of employment, as a result an employee cannot decide whether it is the right place for him/her. When s/he does not get the expected rewards or fails to perform as expected by the management s/he gets demoralised. This management short-sightedness is the key barrier in creating a talent pool or establishing a second tier management.

Objective setting culture for the employees and the chief executive officer (in most cases the owner himself/herself) is also absent in most of the enterprises. However, we also don't have any option but to continuously encourage quality and transparency in day-to-day management process of our corporate bodies.

Like objectives, communication is also an area that deserves a lot of attention. Much of what people hear or talk about in the workplace is often hearsay, or "grapevine" in business communication literature. This leaves too much room for gossip-based speculation and less for truth. This culture needs to be replaced by introducing modern communication methods.

What we have seen so far is that most of our corporate bodies, though reluctant to bring in management standards in their enterprises, are keen on commu-

nity development like establishing schools or dispensaries in their own localities, and ultimately want to be associated with the local government or politics of that locality.

Most of them are seen making money from tax evasion or government subsidy, while the business on its own merit might not be profitable. Most of the balance sheets/annual reports are thought to understate company performance to facilitate tax reduction or evasion.

The standard setting has to be pioneered by one and the rest should follow it. It's a process that will be replicated once started. For example, when one company (often the market leader) adopts a good practice, the industry often follows suit. As a result, the competitors and other players in that market are also affected, and it later becomes the norm. We have seen this in few business houses in the country. This can be followed by other industry leaders/industry players to get respect from regulators and other stakeholders.

However, the situation as mentioned is changing gradually. And these kinds of awards should, of course, encourage our enterprises to follow international or acceptable management standards. I was recently on a television talk show with Shahidullah Khan Badal, a valiant freedom fighter cum entrepreneur, and he was very blunt in saying that the continuous growth of our national sector dictates that we should pursue a corporate culture and focus more on human resources development. Whether this is going to be a replica of the Japanese, American or Indian one or of our own, time will say.

We are keeping our fingers crossed.

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Awards impose responsibility.

## This song will slay you



**A**N angry amateur pop singer posted on this site a furious comment about my allegation that modern music lyrics were meaningless strings of randomly chosen words.

"I'm shocked that you should say such a thing in your column," he wrote. "This is supposed to be a secret."

No offence intended, young sir. On the contrary, if one is feeling generous, the lack of meaning can actually be interpreted as part of a song's charm.

For example, the song Kissin' Noise by the top Japanese boy band Glay goes like this: "I and love don't kiss me noisy love don't kiss me only you don't kiss me los-

my love."

It has lots of nice English poppy sort of words scattered around, but it's all actually completely random.

By the way, if anyone thinks that calling your pop group Glay is kinda strange, it's all relative. Here are five more names of actual Japanese pop groups:

1. Bump of Chicken;
2. Dog Hairdressers;
3. Elephant Kashimashi;
4. The Pees; and
5. Super Butter Dog.

And those are the sensible ones. But of course Asia's real contribution to the international music scene is karaoke, the existence of which is the only unanswerable argument for the retention of the death penalty.

I'm telling you, execution as a punishment for committing karaoke in public makes sense. Karaoke and death go together naturally. There are literally scores of deaths associated with sing-it-yourself bars in Asia.

Sometimes fights are triggered by audience comments about the amateurish quality of the singing. (What do people expect at a karaoke venue? Placido Domingo?)

Or disputes break out when one singer hogs the microphone for too long. (And believe me, if I am performing, five seconds is several hours too long.)

Then there are the technical glitches. I know of four deaths in Vietnam alone in which a karaoke performer puts an ill-wired mike to his lips, leans against the speaker and lets out an ear-splitting shriek akin to the opening notes of virtually any song by Metallica.

The really sad thing is that the victim's dying scream often gets an enthusiastic round of applause.

Karaoke deaths are also common in the Philippines, but for other reasons.

I remember one unfortunate incident in a town north of Manila, when listeners criticised a singer for being off-key.

Bad idea. The singer and his friends

turned out to be armed agents from the Philippines National Bureau of Investigation, letting out a bit of stress after a heavy day of shooting people. They drew their guns.

This was also a bad idea. The hecklers turned out to be police officers, relaxing for the same reason. They drew their guns.

Several people died in the shoot-out. That's a pretty average night at some types of karaoke club in the Philippines.

But going back to Japanese bands for a moment, I decided to pick up a CD by the strangely named Japanese group The Pees just to see what it was like. The first song was called Brain, and the lyrics went like this: "I want to throw my brain of a half, I want to throw my brain of a half, wanna throw it away, wanna throw it away, wanna throw it away."

To be honest, I just had one listen and felt compelled to throw it away.

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