

## Dissociating MPs from upazila parishad

*The proposed law should be rethought*

A number of upazila parishad chairmen have voiced their resentment against the proposed Upazila Parishad Act, 2009, which seeks to give the local MPs an advisory role with a binding nature. A self-participatory status for the local government system, as envisioned in the country's Constitution, is a prized objective that must be fulfilled if we are to strengthen the foundations of democracy.

The seemingly distraught upazila chairmen, faced with the prospect of losing their functional autonomy, have even spoken of launching a movement to get the proposed act scrapped.

The upazila parishad is an important tier of the local government system and its smooth functioning without interference from the lawmakers as well as officers would surely help achieve the much-cherished goal of decentralisation of powers and devolution of authority. But if the upazila chairman has to consult the local MP, a provision incorporated in the proposed act, it might actually mean that the chairman will assume a subservient role, with his powers to make decisions independently curtailed to a great extent.

The people at the helm need to ask themselves the question as to what precisely they want to achieve through the local government bodies and whether such a control or supervision mechanism, as envisaged in the proposed act, will strengthen the upazila parishad. If the whole idea behind formation of local government bodies is to ensure participation of the local people, then independence of such bodies has to be guaranteed. The local people are expected to identify and resolve their problems with their own resources. And no intervention from any quarter is desirable.

Regrettably, the scheme of giving the MPs a role in the upazila parishad smacks of political expediency to retain control over the local government bodies. This is bound to be counter-productive, as it will completely negate the very concept of local self-government. It is like moving backwards at a time when moving forward with the decentralisation plan should be the prime objective.

The government has to place the issue in the right perspective and refrain from passing a law that will debilitate the local government system while at the same time distracting MPs' attention from legislating and a whole range of oversight functions they are required to carry out as members of parliamentary standing committees.

## BCL leaders' pressure on PM

*They are accountable for their cadres' behaviour*

THERE is an element of disingenuousness in the 'threat' of the Chattrra League (BCL) leaders to quit their posts if the PM did not rescind her decision to disassociate herself with the AL's students' wing. The demand has been made in the wake of the PM's decision not to continue as the head of the AL's student wing after what can best be described as the most unruly behaviour of some of the BCL cadres ever since the AL led Grand Alliance assumed the reins of the government. Although she ought to have done more, we feel that the PM's decision has had some effect on the BCL leadership.

And that leads us to ask why the BCL central leaders did not react so long and rein in the thugs and the gangster in their cadres? Their failure, or inability to do so, we consider, is an abdication of their primary responsibility, which is to ensure peaceful atmosphere in the campus. The only logical surmise is that some of them may well have acquiesced in what was perpetrated by some of their party men.

What the BCL leaders have perhaps overlooked is the fact that they are answerable for the behaviour of their party cadres, and if the AL wants to see an orderly conduct of the students' wing in future, and restoration of peaceful atmosphere in the universities and colleges then it must hold the BCL leadership to account for all that has happened in the many educational institutions in the country in the last few months.

The BCL central leaders must also appreciate that the general students in particular, and the people in general, have had enough of their antics; their demand is seemingly an attempt to exploit emotions, and their promise to restore the Chattrra League to previous glory sounds less than credible until proven otherwise.

The relinquishment of the PM responsibility as the head of BCL has not come a day too soon. We feel that it should have been done long ago, at least when she assumed the responsibility of the prime minister. The idea of the head of the government being head of one of the appendages of the party she happens to head, does not go down well with most people.

## Legislators and local government

Many of the potential conflicts will disappear if the MPs are elected from multi-seat district constituencies on the basis of proportional representation. The MPs will represent a district rather than an upazila.

AHMED A. AZAD

THE Upazilla Parishad (UP) 2009 bill is now before the parliament. If passed in its current form it has the potential to tie up the courts and slow down regional development for a long time to come, as many people believe that it violates article 59 of the constitution, is anti-democratic and could possibly be proven in court to be also illegal.

The PM and her parliamentary colleagues will be well advised to consult widely both within and outside parliament and listen to the views of major stakeholders before legislating, as this could avoid a lot of trouble and headache in the future.

On this page on April 5, Md. Anwarul Kabir explained the genesis and provisions of the proposed new bill and how this would negate those measures in the RPO that were meant to strengthen the role and independence of local governments.

The new bill, which ensures oversight powers of MPs over elected representatives of local government, has the support of most parliamentarians. UP chairpersons and co-chairpersons elected earlier this year under the RPO provisions in the meantime remain inactive, and live without any certainty about their future role and status.

The UP elections were the first to be held since the restoration of democracy in 1991. National governments till now have enjoyed undivided power and control over resources, and have driven the regional development agenda and expenditure through parliamentarians belonging to their own parties.

Decentralisation and strong local governments, especially those controlled by political rivals, would seriously erode their power base.

The entrenched senior bureaucracy in Dhaka also does not want its authority over regional government functionaries to be undermined. The passing of this bill can only delay, but not stop, the process of decentralisation as the people overwhelmingly support strong, independent and effective local governments.

The genuine concerns of MPs need to be considered. It is not enough to simply say that their role is to legislate only and they should stay clear of local development issues. Currently, MPs are elected on the basis of promises made to their constituents and they feel that unless they fulfil these commitments they will lose electoral support.

Their position is made worse under existing conditions as they have very limited responsibilities in parliament unless they hold ministerial or parliamentary committee positions. The perceived problems between the MP and the UP chairperson lie in the fact that they share the same constituency.

Here are a few suggestions that could hopefully overcome the problem arising from shared constituencies, make local governments more independent and effective, allow MPs to have a role in regional development, and also make the electoral process fairer.

Union Councils have been around for a very long time and have worked quite well. Recently, elected chairpersons and vice-chairpersons are also likely to run the UPs effectively if there is no political interference from the local MPs and the entrenched bureaucracy, and if a fixed proportion of the national budget (ca. 33%) is allocated for local governance and regional development



Voting for self government.

to District Councils on the basis of district population.

Allocation of block grants to legislators to be used at their discretion for development work in their own constituencies will accentuate corruption and create further rift between MPs and local governments.

Many of the potential conflicts will disappear if the MPs are elected from multi-seat district constituencies on the basis of proportional representation. In this case the MPs will represent a district rather than an upazila, and could have a broader role in highlighting regional problems and requesting development funds in parliament.

It would be best if MPs and UP chairpersons were included as members of the District Council, where they could be jointly involved in preparing funding requests and allocating funds for need-based development in upazillas and unions. Potential conflicts could be further minimised if MPs had constituency offices in the district HQ rather than in any upazila.

The 300 parliamentary seats, and the 100 reserved seats for women, could be allo-

cated to districts on the basis of their populations. This would eliminate the need for demarcating each one of the 300 constituencies on the basis of population without overlapping and straddling of upazilas and unions.

Proportional representation in parliament based on multi-seat district constituencies would remove the anomaly between the percentage of votes received and the number of seats won, and reduce the brute majorities we have seen in the last two national elections. Proportional representation could also make possible the election of highly qualified and competent people who are not aligned to one of the two political camps in Bangladesh.

In the spirit of the constitution and her own election promise of a strong and effective local government system I hope the PM will use the moral authority of her huge mandate to suitably modify the bill before parliament.

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## Truth about the Truth Commission

According to Bangladeshi expatriate engineers, this target will not be difficult to achieve if the corrupt practices can be stopped by the ACC, with full support from the government. The nation simply does not want to see any more clemency offered to the public servants in any shape or form. Leave ACC alone to fix the age-old problem of systems loss.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

CORRUPTION issues have once again come to the spotlight in national politics. The ACC chairman has resigned, and a list of offenders who sought clemency from the Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) has been published in the media. Neither incident will disappear from the radar of the government or the parliament.

The parliamentary committee on government institutions has asked the former ACC chairman about the activities of the Commission over the last two years. Law Minister Barrister Shafique Ahmed said that the government planned to dismiss public servants who confessed their offences to the TAC.

Both steps will help in, first, unearthing the truth in the corruption cases which are currently being pursued and second, the law minister has the right to investigate the

public servants who confessed their wrongdoings.

Allegations have been made that the ACC deliberately implicated some politicians in corruption cases. Of these, some are now members of the 9th parliament. Dr. M. K. Alamgir is an AL nominated MP, and is the chair of the parliamentary committee on government institutions. BNP has only one or two MPs who have corruption cases against them.

Barristers Moudud Ahmed and Jamirudding Sircar won by-elections in Bogra. Moudud has cases against him. When the trials are completed, it will be clear who was right, the ACC or the alleged corrupt politicians.

Publishing of the Truth Commission's list is unprecedented, and is certainly an achievement of the now defunct TAC. 452 corrupt people including 351 public servants sought clemency by surrendering illegal money to the tune of Tk.36 crore, and

so far Tk.34 crore have been realised.

Among the offenders, 351 were public servants, 54 were wives of public servants, 25 were businessmen, 2 politicians and 22 were from rest of the community. It is extraordinary that more than 400 people were public servants and their wives. Out of sheer curiosity, this author analysed the TAC's list from several angles in order to make some observations, taking the list as a rare source for corruption data out of self-confession.

Among the public servants, close to one-third belong to the engineering profession. There are also significant number from government colleges (principals and lecturers) and the department of lands (sub-registrars). This suggests that almost half of the government servants in question had at least one tertiary degree.

In the sub-continent, corruption in police force and customs department is taken for granted because of their low paid and little education. It appears from the TAC list that corruption in police and customs is a myth. The people with tertiary education appear to be the major offenders.

Each clemency seeker surrendered about Tk 8 lac. This is peanuts compared with the hundreds and thousands of crores allegedly siphoned out by some ministers and businessmen of the former BNP-Jamat government. One wonders why they com-

mitted such petty thefts.

The resignation of the chairman of the ACC at this point has certainly provided the honourable minister for law a big challenge. This government cannot appoint a chairman the way the BNP-Jamat regime did in the past. The former law minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed politicised the ACC by appointing at least two commissioners from the folds of the BNP. The challenge for President Zillur Rahman is to put the nation before politics by appointing a person with integrity.

Achieving the PM's vision 2021 depends on the selection of an appropriate chairman for the ACC. At this stage, full control over corrupt public servants is needed. The nation does not want to see, for example, 40% systems loss in power generation and distribution at the time of scarcity. The power engineers must be brought to account to bring down the losses to 10% before this government's term expires.

According to Bangladeshi expatriate engineers, this target will not be difficult to achieve if the corrupt practices can be stopped by the ACC, with full support from the government. The nation simply does not want to see any more clemency offered to the public servants in any shape or form. Leave ACC alone to fix the age-old problem of systems loss.

Dr. Moazzem Hossain writes from Brisbane, Australia.

## Islamic extremism -- myth or reality?

The dirty political washing of the Indonesian Islamic parties should have been discussed nicely between them and the mass Muslim organisations first, rather than being hung out to dry during a general election campaign.

TERRY LACEY

A report compiled by three reputable Indonesian foundations says that the moderate form of Islam in Indonesia is being undermined by extremists who are infiltrating moderate Muslim groups and institutions in order to gain support for an Islamic state or an international caliphate (Jakarta Post 03.04.09).

The report, entitled "The illusion of an Islamic state: the expansion of transnational Islamist movements to Indonesia," has just been published jointly by the Wahid Institute, the Maarif Institute and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity).

The Wahid Institute is led by Abdurrahman Wahid, previously president of Indonesia and past leader of the National Awakening Party (PKB), closely linked to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) the largest Muslim mass organisation in Indonesia. Past leaders of the NU and the Muhammadiyah, which claim 70 million members between them, have both contributed to this report, which represents the work of 30 researchers from Islamic universities covering 17 provinces in

the country.

The report, published during the run-up to a general election on April 9, alleges that members of one of the leading Islamic parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), are engaged in infiltration; and so is Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). The accusations against HTI are in line with comments on it globally, that it is an extremist organisation sheltering within a legal framework of activities. In Europe, it attracts Western radicals using anti-capitalist arguments and neo-Marxist language.

HTI is, therefore, not a mainstream Islamist fundamentalist group, although it claims to support sharia law and the creation of a caliphate through peaceful means. HTI appears to be a hybrid between neo-Marxist and political Islamic traditions, and very Westernised compared to fundamentalist groups. Its ideology appears to be fundamentally inconsistent. The two traditions generally exist in mutual contradiction.

The accusations against the more mainstream PKS, part of the current ruling coalition, are more serious, needing assessment

in a wider domestic and international context. PKS's use of publicity, including pictures of supporters without hijabs, may have offended some traditional supporters, but the party is attracting wider secular reformist support.

Many Indonesian Muslims believe that one hijab in your heart is worth ten on your head, and routinely do not wear one. There has been a reaction against basing perceptions of loyalty to Muslim ideas or strong belief in Islam simply on formal public ritual or dress in a country with large-scale corruption and a wide range of modern social behaviour problems.

The PKS is probably a more modern, professional and committed political structure than more traditional Muslim or Islamic parties. It is likely to be the leading representative of modern political Islam in Indonesia after the April 9 general election, and to join a winning coalition for the July presidential elections.

It has campaigned on Palestine and against the Gaza war, but has also put on its own web-site articles on innovative options for Middle East peace, including the twin state solution -- confederation between Palestine and Israel and a wider Middle Eastern economic union including Israel, based on the 2002 Arab regional offer.

PKS's preparedness to encourage wider dialogue on these issues is consistent with its modernity and internationalism. Its

commitment to secular reformism, to address economic and social issues, and to take on civic responsibilities may also inspire parties like Hamas to go down the same road.

Both parties may have been inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, which has also inspired a parliamentary opposition in Egypt. Internationally, the new wave of political Islam cannot simply be boxed into an extremist corner, and does represent a significant political force in the Arab and Muslim world, which will have to be moderated and accommodated.

The PKS can't be put on the same level as Hizbut Tahrir. It should be judged on what its leadership says and does, rather than allegations about some of its members, which might be sometimes applicable to other Islamic parties and institutions.

Perhaps the dirty political washing of the Indonesian Islamic parties, which may well affect all of them, should have been discussed nicely between them and the mass Muslim organisations first, rather than being hung out to dry during a general election campaign. International influences, which undoubtedly exist, should not be exaggerated at election times for domestic political effect.

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