

The first 100 days

We hope the govt will build on strengths, listen to critics

WE accept that one hundred days is too short a time to make any definitive judgment on the performance of a government, but certainly there are preliminary observations that can legitimately be made, both positive and negative. We hope that the government will continue its good work, but also that it will take stock and make adjustments where warranted.

On the plus side of the ledger, the economy has held, in spite of a global melt-down, and the government has done a creditable job of keeping the prices of essentials down. We see serious attention given to issues such as power supply and the provision of fertiliser, diesel, and electricity for the boro harvest, that gives us confidence that in these difficult times there is a serious hand on the tiller.

The government has other achievements to boast of, beyond the economy. Parliament is functioning as it should, though we would have felt better if some acrimony and some foul language had been avoided. The parliamentary committees have already been set up. Key reforms such as the right to information have been enacted into law. It remains the opinion of this newspaper that the government handled the siege at BDR headquarters adroitly, given the gravity of the crisis, though questions remain on some issues, especially the escape of so many jawans.

But there have also been worrying signs as well during these first one hundred days of AL-led government. The fracas over the allocation of seats in parliament and the issue of the leader of the opposition's house in the cantonment, it seems to us, could both have been handled with more sensitivity and prudence.

More troublingly, we see tell-tale signs that many of the reforms which we had hoped to see made permanent look in danger of being rolled back. The government has already reneged on commitments to establish a human rights commission, separate the judiciary from the executive, and devolve power to the local government level. The resignations of some high-profile individuals has been regrettable. It is too soon to draw any conclusion as to the future of the anti-corruption drive, but there are already concerns that it is losing steam.

Other concerns are the unnecessary tensions that have been created within the administration, the unsatisfactory law and order situation, and the violence of the ruling party's student cadres. We certainly hope that meaningfully addressing all three of these concerns are top of the government's to-do list.

What the nation would like to see is an entirely different tone set by this government. The worrisome signs are those we are familiar with from the past: a tendency towards majoritarianism (we do not want to call it parliamentary authoritarianism yet), an intolerance of dissent and opposition, apparent disinclination to listen to critics. These are the same problems that plagued the last AL government, and, indeed, every government we have had in the past. The promised change from the past would be welcome.

We fully believe that the government has it within its power to make the necessary adjustments, which will be a good thing, not just for the people, but for the government itself.

When development work is bane

The authorities should be more careful while executing such work

THAT not all development work is beneficial for the people or nature or the flora and fauna of the land, we have long understood. This has been starkly revealed in a report appearing in this newspaper regarding the immense damage done to the environment and wild life as a result of a one-mile road constructed by the LGED through a forest tract in Rajnagar upazilla. We feel that this is an instance where the authorities were totally oblivious of the laws regarding use of forest land and the environment or they couldn't care less about it.

In the process of constructing the said road through hillocks and forest land in Rajnagar of Maulvibazaar, for the purpose of linking up with Fenchuganj - Maulvibazaar road, immense and irreparable damage has been done to the forest land in and around the newly constructed road. And one is not certain whether the road was in the top most priority list of works or even a requirement of the locals.

By their own admission, the locals would rather not have anything to do with 'development' works that harm the environment. Therefore one may well ask for whose benefit was the road constructed in the first place, if not for the local inhabitants? For all we can understand, this had very little to do with 'development' and more with facilitating the movement of a privileged and influential class of the locality and at what cost?

The example of Rajnagar is a problem that is only the tip of the iceberg. The wanton cutting down of hillocks in Sylhet as well as in many other places in the country disregarding laws that clearly prohibit hill cutting and deforestation, has not only threatened the wildlife with extinction, it is also posing severe risk to local ecology and bio-diversity. The worrisome aspect is that the relevant laws are being violated by state agencies. If that be the case who will bring the other perpetrators to book?

It is essential that not only should the authorities show more concern for the ecology and environment when undertaking any development work, there also is a strong rationale for local administration oversight in such undertaking which is not so at the moment.

Mysterious goings-on or mischief afoot?

Mysterious are the ways of the Lord. Or put it another way. Mischief may be afoot in the land. Why else would perfectly unqualified men be looking forward to coming by places at the Public Service Commission?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

STRANGE goings-on are afoot in the land. Things we thought would not come to pass in this country after everything that happened in the two years of the caretaker government are now truly beginning to happen. Think of the predicament Hasan Mashshud Chowdhury finds himself in. A thoroughly decent man, one noted for his moral integrity, the former chief of the Anti-Corruption Commission is today the target, together with the organisation he has just left, of lawmakers' ire. That is a pity. Where once we thought the ACC would come to be recognised as an intellectually credible watchdog over men and women not much given to morality, today we are within sight of conditions where men pursuing the corrupt are themselves on the run. Or could be on the run.

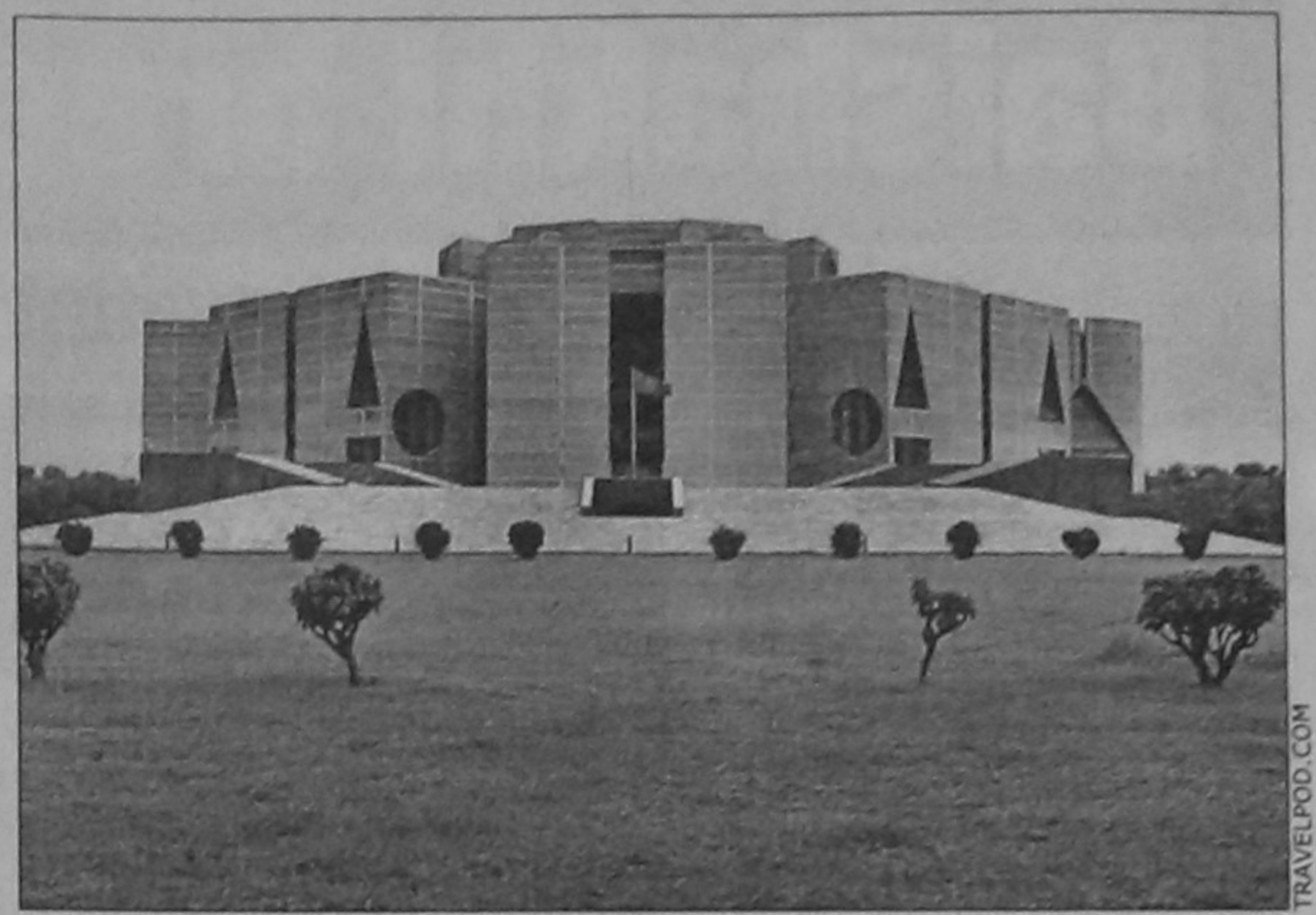
You see the makings of a serious constitutional issue here. To what extent Parliament, or a parliamentary committee, has jurisdiction over individuals and organisations in the sense that it can summon them before it is a question that needs resolving. The acting chairman of the ACC, his colleague and the former secretary of the body have argued that they are answerable to the president of the Republic. They may have a point here, on the strength of the argument that the ACC is an independent organisation.

But consider this: in a parliamentary form of government, how much does it matter that the ACC, or for that matter any other organisation, is responsible to a head of state whose functions are fundamentally titular?

That is again a serious question, one that the members of the parliamentary Public Undertakings Committee (PUC) will certainly have fallen back on in their attempt to haul the ACC before them. But then comes this other question: the chairman of the committee being an aggrieved individual, one who feels he was hounded by the ACC in the past two years, to what extent can the anti-corruption body expect fair play, or call it justice, from the PUC?

You move on then to other questions. Parliamentary sovereignty being a given, it is acknowledged that the Jatiyo Sangsad will be the focus of all political, economic and social activities in the country. Even so, if the precedent of Parliament or one of its bodies summoning a statutory body before it is set into motion, to what degree will it cause scratches on Bangladesh's democratic body politic? Let us not even try to think about it. But, then again, will a parliamentary committee in future confer upon itself the power to serve a summons on the Election Commission? Can judges be required to depose before Parliament? These are intriguing questions and may never have to be answered. And yet, who knows what may yet be?

Move away from this squabble between the PUC and the ACC. And move on to other and certainly undignified images of society today. When the chief of staff of the army, surely the most potent symbol of all this drive against corruption in the recently concluded caretaker times, is spotted sharing the dais and therefore the spotlight with



Extending its authority?

a man who has been on the run from the law on charges of grave misdemeanour, you ask if a terminal malaise has not set in, has not been worming its way into our governance as a whole.

Fugitives from justice are to be pursued, relentlessly. And when they sneak back into the country, it is the job of the law enforcers to take them to where they belong, in this case prison. So what was this individual doing in the company of the army chief and a once-reputed football player? Questions like these haunt us today, in these times we thought would take us to a high moral ground of justice and decency.

And then comes the tale of other men not particularly noted for their probity and yet creeping back to respectability. You know, we all know, how these men have played truant with the economy through defaulting on bank loans and the like. And yet these are the very

men who are today spotted strutting all across the corridors of power or of the powerful, as the case may be.

At a seminar on the nation's foreign policy, where you have a respectable former diplomat presiding, where none other than Foreign Minister Dipu Moni graces the occasion with her presence, the sight of men we had thought would be images of our unsavoury past is dispiriting. And so we ask if the spirit of democracy has not been given a rude shake at a time when change is the principle on which this elected government has promised to conduct its business.

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The 100 days of the AL-led government

The performance of the government in the 100 days is like the question "is the glass half-empty or half-full." The answer varies according to the political persuasion of the person. The common perception is that the record of government so far is mixed.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE 100 days benchmark seems to have been established to evaluate the performance of democratically elected governments across the world. The Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will reach its 100-day milestone on April 19. Is the public pleased with the performance of the government so far?

The AL-led government raised high expectations in the people as it was elected with a landslide majority. When the expectations are so high, naturally many cannot meet them in 100 days.

What people expect in the 100 days is a direction for the country, and to see that the election manifesto under the title of *Din Badalar Sanad* (charter for change) of the Awami League is being translated into actions. Given the above background, let us assess the successes and failures of the 100 days of the government.

A dramatic change was demonstrated by the prime minister in constituting her cabinet

with a mixture of experienced and young ministers. It is refreshing to see women in key ministries of the government, such as home, foreign affairs and agriculture.

The most obvious success appears to be lowering of the prices of rice and edible oil in the market. Some of the seasonal vegetables are reasonably priced, although the prices of fish, meat and chicken have gone up. Although the prices fluctuate in accordance with the supply and demand, there is some relief for the people.

Some major development projects, including the construction of Padma Bridge, are afoot. The deep-sea port project has been revived. All these demonstrate dynamism in the actions of the government.

The holding of cabinet meetings in the Secretariat is commendable because almost all the ministries are located in the Secretariat and the secretaries are not required to go to the Prime Minister's Office in Tejgaon amidst traffic jam, wasting time and petrol.

It is noted that the process of the trial of the war criminals has commenced in accordance with the resolution of the Parliament adopted on January 29. The decision has been acclaimed as the right step.

Although there are different views on the way the government resolved the BDR crisis, the important point to note is the supremacy of the civilian administration. The prime minister's decision has underscored the fact that the armed forces stay under the command of the civilian administration and that the crisis was resolved by the government on a political level. This has not gone unnoticed in the international community.

Some of the decisions of the government have led again to confrontational politics. Accordingly the political climate has been rocked. Destabilisation in the political environment impedes economic growth and development and, above all, shakes the people's confidence in good governance.

The AL student fronts have not accepted the "Charter of Change" and have created unrest in the academic campuses. The infighting among them has tarnished the image of the AL government. It appears that AL central leaders cannot control or discipline them, although the prime minister has resigned as the head of the student-front.

There are allegations that the bureaucracy and officials of the government, including doctors, are being reshuffled for politically motivated reasons. There is a perception that past practices are being

followed in the transfer of officials and, as a result, senior officers hesitate to take decisions lest they are transferred, which has led to some kind of weariness in the working of the government.

The energy sector (electricity) has not improved, therefore the industrial sector will continue to suffer. Although many people in the urban areas understand that more energy cannot be provided immediately, people in the countryside are receiving electricity for the irrigation for the Boro crop.

The water crisis, especially in Dhaka, has deepened, and the affected people are frustrated at not getting adequate supply of safe water for their domestic use. They want their MPs do something concrete to alleviate their suffering, particularly during the hot season.

The performance of the government in the 100 days is like the question "is the glass half-empty or half-full." The answer varies according to the political persuasion of the person. The common perception is that the record of government so far is mixed.

"Public sentiment," as Abraham Lincoln said, "is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Pay scale revision and expectations

The impact of the pay commission report should bring utmost integrity, honesty and efficiency at all levels in the administration. This is the expectation of the people in general and a democratic government in particular.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE 7th Pay Commission might present the report to the government formally in the month of Boishakh, with a lot of recommendations and packages of incentives for the employees in government and autonomous bodies.

Every pay commission so far constituted recommended revision of the pay structure with different packages to reduce resentment among employees and provide incentives to ensure better output.

The recommendations of the pay commission of 1984, implemented in 1985, had almost doubled the pay and allowances, and received appreciation from officers and staff in general. There was strong resentment in 1997, when many employees lost their jobs due to tussle with law enforcing agencies while expressing dissatisfaction with the implementation of the recommendations.

In fact, the vision behind the revision of the pay scale -- Tk.45,000 per month for a secretary and Tk. 4,000 per month for an

MLSS -- is to make the livelihood of servants of the Republic comfortable so that they can perform their duties with concentration and without anxiety of financial crisis; and without getting involved in any illegal gratification.

The philosophy of any pay scale revision is to make the standard of life consistent with the existing price level so that employees do not find difficulties in their livelihood as dignified citizens of the nation.

Discussions and calculations are already taking place in government offices about the possible recommendation of the increase of pay, allowances, pension benefits, housing and transport benefits, medical allowances etc., and the benefit one can get in coming days.

On the other hand, economists and businessmen are afraid of the impact on the market price and the economy as a whole. But social scientists are of the view that this increase in the salary structure, with huge expenditure from the exchequer, could be a catalyst in restoring discipline, ensuring

good governance, reducing corruption, starting e-governance and generating an information and knowledge based transparent and accountable bureaucracy. If it fails to contribute in these areas, the mission should be treated as failure.

A school of thought views that the government should consider enhancement of medical benefits, rationing facilities, better education scope for dependents, improved transport facilities, maternity benefits, rest and recreation allowances, job risk allowances, overtime and festival bonuses etc., in lieu of cash benefits to prevent inflation and direct impact on the market prices.

Besides, the question of income tax payment by the public servants might be a new sensation of the 7th pay commission report.

There could be innumerable suggestions, but implementation of packages might not be an easy task where 12 lakh employees are directly concerned. If an employee gets a benefit of Tk. 2,000 monthly on average from this package, the financial cost comes to an additional Tk. 2,800 crores. The finance minister has, therefore, said that he would examine and implement the recommendations of the pay commission in phases.

The question is whether such benefits will have a positive impact on establishment of good governance and rejection of corruption. It might be difficult to make changes in attitude in service delivery and communica-

tion with the public, which might require some measures beyond pay scale revision.

There must be drastic changes in the Public Servant (Conduct) Rules of 1979. There should also be major changes in the Public Servant (Discipline and Appeal) Rules 1985, especially in the definition of misconduct and awarding of punishment. These are outdated rules with little efficacy to deal with the present situation, where hire and fire has become the order of the day.

Public servants must get ready to adjust with the changes in information technology. They must be computer literate to retain their jobs; whatever might be their age or education level. Digital Bangladesh should not be taken as a slogan, but as an imperative in the coming days of revolutionary changes in responding to the public and disposing of cases as per their expectations.

The days of "red tape" are gone now. The people now want the reply by e-mail or SMS from the prime minister down to the assistant secretary. This is Vision 2021, for which nation must get ready from now on.

The impact of the pay commission report should bring utmost integrity, honesty and efficiency at all levels in the administration. This is the expectation of the people in general and a democratic government in particular.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Secretary and former Adviser to the caretaker government.