

Government must revisit the Upazila Parishad Act

Chairmen's behaviour unacceptable

A group of elected upazila parishad officials, calling themselves the Bangladesh Upazila Chairmen Forum, have threatened to declare Members of Parliament in their local areas *persona non grata* unless the government revokes the just-passed Upazila Parishad Act empowering MPs to exercise authority over UP chairmen and members. The grievances of the UP representatives are perfectly understandable. But that does not obscure the fact that what they have done through their action is not only objectionable but also highly outrageous. The verbal and body language they have employed to make their sentiments known points clearly to things ominous. If these chairmen and other upazila representatives have their way, one can be sure that the country is in for some troubled times, especially where local government is concerned.

The UP representatives have without question overstepped the limits of acceptable behaviour by doing what they have done. They have a point though, essentially concerning the dilution or emasculation of authority that the upazila parishads will go through once MPs begin to exercise their powers over them. The passage of the Upazila Parishad Act 2009 has now led to a situation where lawmakers cannot but be on a potentially confrontational course with elected upazila chairmen and members. That in turn will likely lead to conflicts and squabbles over dominance within the local branches of political parties, to the detriment of the people inhabiting particular local regions. A direct casualty of such a condition can only be the projected economic and social development of the regions. We are of the opinion that before moving so stubbornly on the Upazila Parishad Act, the government ought to have given serious thought to the consequences that would result from such a move. Now it has not only been seen to appease MPs by accepting their demand for supervision of upazila activities but has also conveniently moved miles away from the draft it itself made during its earlier stint in power in the late 1990s.

Citizens for the most part, it should be clear by now, do not look forward to much of the positive happening once the Upazila Parishad Act 2009 is set in motion. That is a good enough reason for the government, indeed for all Members of Parliament, to revisit the entire issue of local government and consider the ways in which the damage already done can be rolled back. By passing the Act, the government has, consciously or otherwise, created a rift between the elected representatives of the people, at the local and national levels. It has bulldozed the entire law through the Jatiya Sangsad without much of a thought to public feelings and upazila representatives' sentiments.

It can now redeem itself only by stepping back, taking stock of the situation and taking corrective measures. Let it be noted that local government, because it springs from the grassroots, cannot be treated with cavalier unconcern. But if it is, the results can be deeply disturbing.

Taking care of the unemployed and poor

A clear-cut strategy needed

WORLD Bank Dhaka office's senior economist Zahid Hossain in a report titled 'Bangladesh: State of economy and policy response to the global economic crisis' released on Monday suggested that job creation in Bangladesh would have to be at least of the order of two million in place of one million required prior to global economic crisis.

That the export industries are confronted with the challenge of a degree of job-cut due to a reduction in their sale figures, both in volume and value, is too evident a fact not to be addressed in earnest. It is also obvious that we may have more of returnee migrants from overseas to be rehabilitated, as far as practicable, until such time as the effects of global recession have died down. The severely testing period is likely to last till end-2009.

Now what is the capacity of the local economy to generate the additional jobs? The Prime Minister is known to have asked the industry minister to try and reopen some of the closed down industries. How long it will take to re-commission them into viability may be difficult to predict at this stage. But as they kick off, a space for employment will be created almost instantaneously. Furthermore, the whole range of infrastructure development projects that are planned to be taken up under the new, ambitious ADP that is in the offing will provide employment opportunities. In the services sector and maintenance areas, a new scope is likely to emerge for absorption of labour. Simultaneously, support to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and microcredit schemes devoted to self-employment, could expand the employment outreach. This is an area in which government-private-NGO partnership could yield ample dividends.

Unemployment or underemployment is only a part of the poverty phenomenon which is essentially far bigger and more endemic than mere joblessness. While over 40 percent of the people live below the poverty line, they can only subsist through the hard times if they are brought under the safety net programmes that the government, thankfully, has decided to go for.

We hate the sinner, not the sin

So, my man the confessor wants to believe that he was the victim of a scam. A fake company takes deposits from people on the promise of fabulous returns and runs away with the money. The Truth Commission did the same thing. It took his trust and ran away with it, which has left behind a more damaging reality. We hate the sinner, not the sin.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

A couple in the United States went on television and bragged about how they had engaged in shoplifting while their children gave them a hand. They claimed they had earned as much as \$3,500 in a week, totaling \$100,000 altogether, which was easy money for them. But it proved not so easy soon after the TV show, when the FBI started to investigate them. Truth doesn't always set us free. It also gets us in trouble.

I recently met with one of the four hundred and fifty-two people in this country who told the truth and got in trouble. In the most vulnerable moments of his life, he, like his cohort of corrupts, had gone to the national equivalent of a church confession box. Ho! Ho! Don't tell me you don't know what I mean. I am talking about the half-defunct, half-deluded Truth Commission. It was created so that people could unload their dirty secrets off their chests.

As it looks, once again to draw a church

analogy, my man and others like him confessed to the wrong priest, who was offering absolution without valid ordination. The Truth Commission, as we all know, is fighting for its legitimacy in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. Chances are, this baby will die in the delivery room.

If it lives, the Commission will have a hard time explaining what happened to the promises it made to those four hundred plus credulous folks. It asked them to tell the truth and not to worry, which they did. They came forward and gave confessions on the assurance of anonymity.

Then why were their names leaked to the press as if it was an honour roll of successful candidates in a board examination? After all, those men went to confess because they didn't want anybody to know what they did. They didn't want their children to know that the luxuries they lavished on them weren't bought with honest money. They had gone to the Truth Commission because they wanted

to save their faces by the skin of their teeth.

That's precisely why my man feels betrayed. He was given false hope and lured into confession under false pretense. And, he doesn't know how to reconcile the fact that the Truth Commission has lied to him. His friends and colleagues make fun of him because they had advised him not to confess. Those people thank their lucky stars because they could see that it was a hoax. They knew that in the world of moral obtuseness, nobody was guilty until proven by his own confession.

But these are not his only regrets; he has more. A businessman who has been accused of allegedly stealing billions and using some of that money to hush up a murder is not only walking free but also going around promoting sports and culture. This beleaguered confessor, however, wasn't surprised.

Because nobody thought it was improper when the same businessman had sponsored our Ekushey Book Fair, building a marble-and-steel arch in front of Bangla Academy, which is still there. Streams of people walked under that arch, common people, enlightened minds and conscience keepers, with the name of the sponsor affixed on its imposts. Yet it didn't cross our minds why the hallowed event in our national life in the hallowed month of our national pride was smeared with the questionable money of a convicted man.

Then, this man who confessed to his

crime, came up with his own formula. It wasn't an issue when the same businessman sponsored that arch of avarice, because there was no sight of him. The Football Federation thing proved an eyesore because the sinner incarnated as an anti-climax to the man he was sitting with.

Here comes the coup de grace. My man says that people of this country are lot like his children. Rip Van Winkles they are, his children never asked him where the money came from when he was paying them on demand, until they woke up one fine morning and read his name in the paper.

Likewise, we never ask where the money comes from when someone builds the largest shopping mall, drives the fleet of fancy cars, and spends money on charity, culture and sports. It's not until a caretaker government tells us that we start smelling the rat. Then it shocks us that the money should have come from a not-so-legitimate source.

So, my man the confessor wants to believe that he was the victim of a scam. A fake company takes deposits from people on the promise of fabulous returns and runs away with the money. The Truth Commission did the same thing. It took his trust and ran away with it, which has left behind a more damaging reality. We hate the sinner, not the sin.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

Hectic honeymoon

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rose to the occasion in the face of utter confusion and tackled the situation with statesmanship. On the strength of tremendous mass support the government has been facing political adversaries with a firm hand. The PM crossed over the hurdles one after another to the frustration of her formidable foes.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

THE AL-led grand alliance government has passed honeymoon period amid many challenges to fulfill the people's expectations for change. It was not difficult to surmise the shape of things to come to perplex the new establishment. Thorny days were ahead as the grand alliance government inherited a hazy political landscape as a remnant of the immediate past. The political situation was shrouded with uncertainties.

There was sky-high expectation as the government had been mandated to bring change, as stated in the party's election manifesto. A veteran British MP commented that meeting the huge expectations of the voters has become a great challenge for both Hasina and Obama.

The challenges for the new incumbent began to mushroom. The irrational elements in the students organisation put on a show of power in the campuses,

disturbing normal academic activities. The prime minister was aware of the post election campus situation, and took a serious view of it. Despite the sincerity of the government things went awry, compelling the prime minister to sever her association with her front organization.

The PM expressed her determination to deal strictly with violence and extortion in the name of student politics. Stern warning was issued against the culture of dormitory capture. At that time the role of media as a "supportive force" deserves mention.

The ruling party was caught between two fires. On the one hand the opposition was trying to fish in troubled waters. On the other, the pro-government student organisation became a thorn in the side of the ruling party.

The situation created out of the upazila elections drama was confusing -- a strange mix of positive and negative reactions and comments. The new political regime appeared with a fresh image

showing much promise at the beginning to increase the height of popular expectation.

Yet some unhappy experiences with UZ elections in the transition period bred frustration and suspicion. Staging the upazila elections in the transition period was a great blunder. The decision to hold upazila elections before the national election was shifted under the pressure of the two major political parties. The consequence was somewhat disastrous. However, in the ultimate analysis, the upazila elections were free and fair, barring some allegations about manipulation and incidences of violence.

I think the government watchfully observed the situation. It has been approaching the problems well and with a great care so that high popular expectations do not dissolve into utter frustration.

Sinister elements like war criminals, militants and their cohorts have been looking for a chance to create chaos and confusion in the country. The BDR mutiny that occurred on February 25 was a great national tragedy. It was an act committed to upset the government and cause a colossal loss to the standing army.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rose to the occasion in the face of utter confusion and tackled the situation with statesmanship. On the strength of tremendous mass support the government has been facing political adversaries with

a firm hand. The PM crossed over the hurdles one after another to the frustration of her formidable foes.

So, in tiding over the initial difficulties, the grand alliance government could not feel the taste of the honeymoon. The democratic government established after a long lay off stood on the heaps of garbage left by the previous regime. It has to operate under unprecedented circumstances. It has been a difficult task to work on the numerous ordinances left by the caretaker government. It has to address the immediate crises like price hike in the kitchen markets and load shedding.

Yet, the crux of the problem is global recession that is knocking at the door. The concern about the global crisis has been reflected in precautionary measures. The government from the very beginning has been preoccupied with pre budget thinking to find a roadmap to mitigate crisis. At times it has to ponder over the mandated agenda like the trials of the war criminals.

However there remains a rippling suspicion about sabotage and anti-state activities of the obnoxious forces opposed to their trials. I think the government is being careful in solving the numerous problems and will come out successful.

Dr. Md. Shairul Mashreque is Professor, Department of Public Administration, Chittagong University.

As if we don't have enough

The bottom line is that we have enough problems -- political, economic, administrative, and security -- calling for corrective and positive actions to keep us occupied. This is not the time to either hear opposition activists threatening to bring down a government over the issue of a leased house or see the government's adamancy in pursuing this agenda heart and soul. We have enough on our platter already.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE last day of the 1st session of the 9th Parliament ended on a positive note with both the prime minister (PM) and the leader of the opposition (LO) having a lively face-off, which is a rarity in our parliamentary democracy where boycott and absenteeism have been the norm. The journey to democracy has met some unforeseen calamities and challenges. The most significant was the BDR mutiny, which continues to haunt the nation.

Amidst many pressing national issues, an addition has been the debate over the house allotted to the LO. Without going into the debate of what "conspiracy" has been hatched or what politics of "revenge" has been unleashed by whom, many believe that, the LO

could have scored big with the public sentiment had she given up the house for the families of the martyred BDR personnel.

How? She could have gained significant political mileage by this act of generosity. It is true that she can have an emotional attachment to a house that has memories of her husband and the family. Being the widow of an army officer, her sympathy towards the families of the martyred army officials would have been perceived as genuine. She could have put an end to this debate on the appropriateness of having political meetings in the cantonment, which is supposed to be a restricted zone.

Given the allegations of corruption against her family, this act could have sent a positive signal to many who believe in the allegations. Because there

is another house in Gulshan allotted to her, it would not be a problem to find alternative accommodation.

When the opposition BJP questioned the legality of Ms. Sonia Gandhi's being head of a trust fund while she was a sitting MP, she instantly resigned from the parliament seat and the trust. She then ran for re-election. Ms. Gandhi was re-elected, outsmarting Mr. Advani and Mr. Vajpayee. This is called smart politics. Let the readers judge what kind of politics we have.

Now that it seems that the LO will not leave the house, was it that urgent to take this step when we have enough on our plate? When opposition party activists are equating this act to that of BNP's cancellation of the Gonobhaban allotted to the then PM by the then ruling AL it does seem like "tit for tat" -- doesn't it? Even if the government desired to pursue this matter, there is something called "appropriate timing."

The BDR investigation is still on, with rumours, apprehensions, and blame game in full swing. The nation is anxiously waiting for the truth to be unearthed. Then we have the functionality and credibility of the ACC facing a challenge. The government and opposition are acting unitedly to undermine, discredit, and disempower the ACC as

much as possible.

The dream of having an empowered local government system has gone down the drain as MPs have again come together for the "greater national cause" of maintaining their firm grip over the Upazilla Parishad. Then you see the godfathers and scamsters, who were absconding, resurfacing with an air of impunity.

Of course, not to mention the global recession which is hurting Bangladesh in one form or the other. From losing overseas job market to tightening financial conditions, the economy is going through difficult times inspite of the deft handling by the finance minister and the success of the agriculture minister in putting a lid on the price hikes.

The bottom line is that we have enough problems -- political, economic, administrative, and security -- calling for corrective and positive actions to keep us occupied. This is not the time to either hear opposition activists threatening to bring down a government over the issue of a leased house or see the government's adamancy in pursuing this agenda heart and soul. We have enough on our platter already. Please, let's behave responsibly.

Syed Munir Khasru is a Professor at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka.