

Let culture of service flourish

PM's directive to bureaucrats and diplomats should be taken to heart

WE applaud and second the prime minister's directive to civil servants that they must consider and comport themselves as servants of the people, not their masters.

She is absolutely right to suggest that the high-handed manner in which too many government servants act smacks of a colonial, bureaucratic tradition that we should have left behind long ago, and that the people of the country have every right to expect that government officials treat them with dignity and courtesy.

With this in mind, we also would like to comment on the issue of the prime minister's directive earlier this week to our foreign missions to be more watchful over our overseas workers and more helpful to them. It seems to us that it is in our foreign missions that the culture of service she hopes to develop is most urgently needed.

That said, it must be acknowledged that part of the problem in our overseas missions is a lack of manpower and resources. For instance, there are 2.2 million Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia alone: there are two labour attaches to serve their needs. In fairness, the problem is not one of attitude alone.

What is needed is a whole new approach, both on the part of the government officials and on the part of the government to push through the needed reforms.

The attitude of the staff at missions must be overhauled entirely. They need to be pro-active and hands-on, and sensitive to the needs of the Bangladeshi citizens they are charged with watching over. Let's face it: there is a bureaucratic mindset that keeps them from reaching out -- and that needs to change.

What the government can do to help instill this kind of dedication is to provide the resources necessary. Indeed, each embassy in countries with a sizable migrant worker population requires a special wing dedicated to their needs and staffed by personnel with specialised training and sufficient resources at their disposal to do the job right.

Indeed, not only is this the right thing to do morally in terms of the government's responsibility to every Bangladeshi citizen, but such an approach will pay great dividends to the economy as well, as it will undoubtedly translate into greater remittance earnings.

In short, the commitment needs to be made from both ends. Bangladesh overseas mission staff must strive to be more service-oriented, but the government also has the responsibility to give them the resources and support they need to effect the needed changes.

Price support to farmers

Reach out to them directly

THE government has fixed the price of Boro paddy at Tk 14 and rice at Tk 22 per kg for the procurement drive beginning tomorrow. The prices offered barely meet the production cost leaving very little by way of profit margin. However, these are slightly higher than the market prices.

But the issue here is that many farmers have sold out, if not substantially, at least a goodly portion of their stock, to the mill owners via middlemen. In the process, the farmer got a raw deal, more so because the falling prices of rice in the market exerted pressure on them to dispose of their rice at low prices.

Since the Boro harvest this year has been bumper one at two crore tonnes and the target for Boro paddy and rice procurements is 12 lakh tonnes, there is a potential scope for increasing the size of procurement. If the farmers are to benefit from price support it seems imperative that more rice is procured from them at incentive prices.

But obviously a mere increase in the size of procurement would only benefit the middlemen and the wholesalers with the farmers being exploited even more. What is basically needed, therefore, is to set up a mechanism whereby the middlemen are kept at bay while the government's food and agricultural agencies bought the rice directly from the farmers. There must be some way of buying rice directly from the village markets.

The government has decided to set up local monitoring committees to oversee the procurement drive by way of protecting the farmers from being exploited in any manner. While on the job, they will see at first hand the weaknesses of the current procurement drive and advise the government for its improvement.

The bumper Boro harvest this season which is going to have a huge positive impact on food security is apparently a source of worry to the farmers due to the falling rice prices. This is a situation where the government has to rush to the rescue of the producers who are actually rendering a great service to the country. The government needs to think in terms of a more effective procurement plan which will benefit the farmers, and not the middlemen.

Do away with the caretaker government

One feels that a strong and independent Election Commission should help provide free and fair elections. The EC has been delinked from the government, and it can be strengthened even more -- to start with having the EC secretariat under the Commission and not under the CEC, as it is presently.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE issue of whether or not to do away with the caretaker government has surfaced once again. This time it is some of those that were the most vociferous protagonists of the idea, the AL, and for which they had successfully launched a public campaign and boycotted the parliament to drive their point home, are thinking about the prospect of the system in Bangladesh.

In fact, on July 31, 2008, in this very column we had posed the question that in view of the various developments regarding the CTG, but most of all because of the prolonged stay of an unelected dispensation, whether or not it was time to have a rethink about the idea of a caretaker government.

Leaders from both the major parties are singing the same tune in suggesting that the CTG be done away with. Why this change of heart when so much was put at stake to implement a system that saw the two major parties locked in an intractable position.

If it is a case of the wise learning from their mistake it must be welcomed. If the realisation stems from the awareness that the system has failed to deliver what it was supposed to then there is every reason to question the rationale of the system. However, if the changed position is recognition of the inability to exploit the system to the benefit of one party or the other we must approach the issue with caution.

The present system of having an unelected body to run the affairs of the state, even for three months, as envisaged in our Constitution (or till the next election is held), is the fruit of the AL struggle. Having lost the 1991 election they felt that getting reelected in future under the ruling party, with the Election Commission secretariat an appendage of the PM's secretariat, was well nigh impossible if a "non-partisan" body was not entrusted with the task of conducting the election. AL's cue came from the first caretaker government of Justice Shabbuddin Ahmed that conducted a very successful election in 1991 following the departure of President Ershad.

However, it has to be acknowledged that the new system was a manifestation of the distrust that has guided the relationship between the two major political parties. The message was that even after so many years of independence, although we were a new nation, we nonetheless had an experienced polity, which, regrettably, failed to behave in a responsible manner.

But has the system lived up to our expectations? If one goes by the views of the two major parties none of the elections was fair and the losing party had invariably come out with the complaint of subtle manipulation that was the cause of their defeat. None had the grace or the moral courage to accept defeat. They blamed the system, even when most others, including the voters, knew what the truth was.

We have also been made aware that the party in power can distort every system, and that every well-meaning arrangement



A strong Election Commission is the solution.

can be manipulated to ensure that the opposition did not come to power. Even if the CTG system was a rank bad idea, it was made even worse by the way the 4-party alliance government manipulated it. For example there is the matter of the voter list revised by the previous Election Commission, which as it turned out eventually, had 15 million false voters. And there is the small matter of Tk. 60 crore that was spent to distort the voter list, a matter that everybody seems to have forgotten about.

The parties, thankfully, have come to realise that if getting a good and free and fair election, albeit "free and fair" would be defined subjectively by each party depending upon which party won, was the sole idea that motivated to have even an undemocratic system like the caretaker government, there is the flip side to an arrangement that lends itself to manipulation, both constitutional and otherwise.

As we had asserted before, two years is twenty-four months too long for a group of disparate individuals, albeit with impeccable

record of academic brilliance or honesty, to fill the political vacuum, or run the affairs of the state without the inevitable hiccups. The matter is compounded when somebody else and not the CTG happens to call the shots.

I am afraid I will have to disagree with the majority (59.97) who opined in a *Daily Star* online opinion poll on April 29 that a CTG was a must for a free and fair election. We can do without a system that lays itself to manipulation, although in Bangladesh anything and everything can be manipulated for partisan interest.

One feels that a strong and independent Election Commission should help provide free and fair elections. The EC has been delinked from the government, and it can be strengthened even more -- to start with having the EC secretariat under the Commission and not under the CEC, as it is presently.

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Kaun banega PM?

In theory, the bidders in this auction house cannot be faulted. The prime minister is only the first among equals in a democracy, hence there is merit in the argument of meritocracy. But there has been a caste system in the UPA, with the Congress using its Brahmin status to seize all the major offices of state.

M.J. AKBAR

SHARAD Pawar, it has been suggested, has thrown a cat among the pigeons by opening a can of prime ministers. He may have done something more worrisome than that. He may have thrown a pigeon among the cats.

Parties separated by geography, history, personality and ideology (or the lack of it) seem agreed on only one thing: that Manmohan Singh has had his moment. The NDA view is explicable; it has its own candidate in L.K. Advani. But why do politicians who have served in Singh's cabinet for the last five years believe that they should get the job for the next five?

Marxists dislike Singh with exactly the same fervour that Singh dislikes Marx. The Left has a second reason for demanding a new order, which has not been widely recognised, far less appreciated. The Congress has accepted all conditions laid

down by allies in order to forge anti-Left unity in Bengal and Kerala. But it refused to be equally accommodating to allies in key states where such unity could have hurt the BJP, whether in Jharkhand, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. The Left sees a double game behind the Congress rhetoric.

The only nationally known politician who has not cast an eye on Singh's job is Karunanidhi, possibly because he can foresee the results of Tamil Nadu. Even the Congress is ambivalent. On the record, Singh remains the once-and-future PM. In its ads, the transition has taken place from Rajiv Gandhi to Rahul Gandhi.

In theory, the bidders in this auction house cannot be faulted. The prime minister is only the first among equals in a democracy, hence there is merit in the argument of meritocracy. But there has been a caste system in the UPA, with the Congress using its Brahmin status to seize

all the major offices of state, and all the important instruments of state authority. Pawar, who made a serious bid to become Congress prime minister in 1991, was sent to the comparative wasteland of agriculture. The price of 58 months of silence is two months of questions.

Ambition is not restricted to one party. It is hardly a secret that the most vociferous defender of the government in this campaign, Pranab Mukherjee, would not mind becoming prime minister himself. If Congress numbers are fewer than its well-paid pollsters predict, Mukherjee's name will be mentioned by allies, even if it is eventually rejected by his own party. This is why he plays word-games on whether he has an alliance with Mamata Banerjee or a seat-arrangement. The implication is that an alliance is a marriage while a seat-arrangement is flirtation.

One of the many difficulties facing the next version of the UPA is that the Left will not support a government with Mamata in it, and vice versa. It was all so much easier when Mamata was such a good friend of the BJP. Her conversion to secularism is terribly inconvenient.

The path of ambition is paved with more than one theory. The simple one is the purchasing power of numbers. You have to bring MPs to the bargaining table if you want to sustain your claim. People

underestimate Sharad Pawar when they think his numbers are only restricted to Maharashtra. He has received verbal assurances from other parties, some of which may even be sincere. But each assurance is subject to post-poll reality.

Naven Patnaik may want Pawar as PM, but that will be a secondary concern if he cannot get a majority in the Orissa Assembly. He will have to worry about who, between BJP and Congress, will want him as chief minister. A quid pro quo will be attached to the answer.

The second theory is more piquant. It believes in survival of the weakest. This least-resistance model has been tried and tested on Inder Gujral and H.D. Deve Gowda in the early days of the coalition era. It is a variation of the old hare-and-tortoise fable, in which the back-runner will be the only person in the race when the frontrunners have cancelled themselves out. In this scenario, a powerful personality will be perceived as too much of a threat to one or more of the partners, leaving Mr. Humble Smiley the eventual winner.

But such tortoises are heroes of fables. Every contender has a right to dream till 8am on May 16. That is the hour at which the wake-up call will sound.

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Britain in the forefront

But the action that Britain is taking shows it is a false choice between helping the economy or the environment. In Britain, we know that the route to building our economy for the future lies in a sustainable and low carbon recovery.

ED MILIBAND

In every country these tough economic times have led some people to say that we should row back on tackling climate change, and that we should delay any moves to a low carbon economy.

The argument goes that governments must firmly focus on the economic recovery, not on our climate recovery. The move to green manufacturing and low-carbon production, not to mention getting a global agreement on climate change, must wait and be pushed to the sidelines.

But the action that Britain is taking shows it is a false choice between helping the economy or the environment. In Britain, we know that the route to building our economy for the future lies in a sustainable and low carbon recovery.

This shift is central to creating jobs and growth in new industries. During this past week we have put in place many of the

measures that will support this long term move to a low carbon and green economy.

Our chancellor, Alistair Darling, delivered not only his financial budget for the government, but also the very first carbon budgets. These place a cap on the emissions our country can release over three five-year periods up to 2022, and includes a legally binding target to reduce emissions to at least 34% below 1990 emissions by 2022. This will ensure we can help meet our target of an 80% cut in greenhouse gases on 1990 levels by 2050.

Significantly, we aim to meet the carbon budgets through a focus on domestic action, with the first five-year period to include zero limits on international credits, outside of the EU's emissions trading scheme. And we plan to tighten the budget further providing we can get the ambitious, global agreement we need at the Copenhagen summit in December.

But targets and frameworks alone will not solve climate change. One of the key

issues to our success remains how we can radically accelerate the spread of cleaner technology -- good for jobs, the economy, and the planet.

This technological breakthrough is needed perhaps most to tackle the toughest issue, namely coal. The future of coal poses the starkest dilemma we face: it is a polluting fuel, but is used across the world because it is low cost and it is flexible enough to meet fluctuations in demand for power.

To square this circle, last week I outlined to the British Parliament our plans for the biggest demonstration of carbon capture and storage technology in the world. This includes:

A major push on the technology: Up to four new projects to demonstrate carbon capture and storage, each one ten times bigger than the largest currently running in the world, and together meaning we are doing more than any other country

The end of unabated coal: I proposed a new rule that no new coal power station will get consent without demonstrating carbon capture from day one, on about 25 percent of its output. Applications that don't demonstrate carbon capture and storage will be turned down.

A clear commitment to low-carbon coal once it's proven: There will be an independ-

ent judgement about when the technology is proven, and once it is, power stations will have to fit it not just on a part of the plant but on 100 percent of their output.

Global co-operation on CCS is taking place, but must accelerate this year to ensure the whole world benefits from this technology. The benefits of such technology are not only environmental. There are clear business and job opportunities to be found in green technology, manufacturing and energy supplies.

We have all heard the messages loud and clear. President Obama has committed the US to tackling climate change and cleaning up energy. The G20 meeting of world leaders, chaired by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, agreed that the recovery of our economy must be sustainable and green.

It is for these reasons I believe the growing international consensus on the shift to low carbon points to hope, not despair. By working together across countries, we can both avoid dangerous climate change, and see our economies recover in a sustainable way. This is the right thing to do for present and future generations.

Ed Miliband is UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change.