

Operational guideline for upazila parishad

Elected vice-chairman's role seems undefined

WITH the Upazila Parishad Act giving the local MPs supervisory authority over elected chairmen a portent for conflict between two sets of elected public representatives has been built into the system. Local self-government experts and civil society leaders have already voiced their concern over the resulting weakening of the elected upazila parishad originally envisaged to be a vitally important tier of local self-government system.

On top this, we now have the freshly announced operational guideline for the upazila parishads which, for all practical purposes, goes to disempower the elected vice-chairmen. As per rules, upazila chairmen can delegate their responsibilities, both financial and administrative, to Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), but in the event that the upazila vice-chairman becomes an acting chairman, he/she cannot exercise financial authority except by approval from 'specified authorities'. Inexplicably though, where the vice-chairman would seek the approval from remains unspecified.

The upazila parishad is constituted by a chairman and two vice-chairmen, one of whom is a woman. The reason why we have 480 women as vice-chairmen is because the authors of the act wanted to empower women through the upazila parishad. The perception of tremendous potential of elected women leaders in a vital local government tier for raising the socio-economic status of disadvantaged women in their constituencies must have worked behind adopting such a concept of empowerment. Unfortunately, this seems belied now.

What is noticeable is that the duties and functions of the vice-chairmen have not been clearly spelt out. All that has seemingly been done is to define their role in terms of limitations being placed on them while working during the temporary absence of the upazila chairmen. They seem to be left with 'mediating disputes in the villages' (at other times), as one of the frustrated vice-chairmen quipped.

It defies understanding as to why in formulating the guideline those who have to follow them have not been consulted. All we would suggest now is to keep an open mind on the new rules and put them on test and when the rules of business will have been finalised, to reform them in light of experience gathered, keeping the goal of realising the full potential of elected upazila parishads uppermost in our mind.

Taliban spectre in Swat

Pakistan should be able to contain it

CONDITIONS in Pakistan's Swat valley continue to be volatile, with residents fleeing their homes as the country's army battles the Taliban. Despite all the efforts the military has been making to contain the situation, it appears that full control of the area is still some way off.

Apparently, it is a matter of Pakistan losing ground as a state to the militants in a part of the country. The number of people fleeing Swat has been as high as 40,000, which is again a sign of the sheer helplessness common people have been put into by the fighting. That is again a hint of the challenge the Taliban are posing to the authority of the government. It seems like the Taliban are an entrenched force in Swat. From one point of view, the recent willingness on the part of the Pakistani authorities to give the militants what they have been demanding has certainly boosted the stubbornness of the Taliban.

However, a strong military campaign has been launched against the Taliban. Pakistan's civil society has now come forth to demand that the military restore the situation to a state of normalcy. The political process hasn't so far proved equal to the task and it is now the military that is being depended on to help salvage everything that has so far been lost to the militants.

The dangers that Pakistan faces today are those that not only afflict its political future but also those that point to risks for the entire neighbourhood.

We as part of the international community would like to pin hope on the fact that Pakistan has an elected government and a democratic polity where, if all the political parties try and pull their full weight behind the task of combating armed extremism that seeks to capture state power, any challenge to the authority of the state can be effectively tackled.

Madrasas, militancy, and education reform

The only effective way to entice young minds away from militancy is to encourage them to interpret injunctions in the Quran and hadith in the light of circumstances and the state of human knowledge that are vastly different from those a millennium and a half ago.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

IN recent months, there has been a spate of headlines about activities of Islamist militants all over the country. A veritable redoubt has been discovered in the south of the country, complete with training facilities, explosives, arms and ammunition, and even a moat to make it impregnable. Militant women have been found with jihadi literature in their possession. There have been reports of renewed activities by militant groups that had been driven underground by police action.

As usual, these have raised an alarm. There has been talk of reforming madrasa education. One important minister has talked about bringing the traditional madrasas within the ambit of general education under government supervision. Alarmed at the prospect, madrasa leaders rushed to meet the prime minister to seek her assurance of their continued academic autonomy and, perhaps more significantly,

to assure her that they would themselves fight militancy.

And then there has been silence. This is reminiscent of the many earlier episodes of militant activity, its quick condemnation, warnings from the government that such activities would not be tolerated, and finally, a declaration that Islam was a religion of peace and therefore did not sanction violence. In retrospect, the latest noises are as meaningless as the ensuing silence is dangerous.

Look closely at two features of the latest reaction to militancy; the government's wish (as far as it can be guessed from ministerial pronouncements) to bring madrasa education in line with general education, and the pledge of the leaders of madrasa education to fight militancy. Both are seriously short on details; both obscure great obstacles.

First, there has been talk of introducing "secular" subjects of general education, such as science and mathematics, into the

curriculum of madrasa education. But, to start with, the indications are that madrasa leaders will jealously guard against any such move, except perhaps insofar as the change is only peripheral. If the proposed changes were radical, madrasas would not be madrasas. Would they? That has, in fact, been the assertion of these leaders. And they have a point.

But suppose courses in science and mathematics are introduced, will that make a difference? It is highly unlikely that it will. Teaching of elementary science at school level will do nothing to change attitudes among young minds. The only exceptions are the science of evolution, and an area of astrophysics that places man in relation to the unimaginable vastness of the universe. It is hard to imagine that these areas of science will be favourites in a madrasa curriculum.

The crux of the problem of militancy is the closing of the mind that much of madrasa education accomplishes. That brings us to the second reaction to the recent talks about reform; that leaders of madrasas will themselves fight militancy. It is not at all clear how they propose to that.

The only effective way to entice young minds away from militancy is to encourage them to interpret injunctions in the Quran and hadith in the light of circumstances and the state of human knowledge that are vastly different from those a millennium and a half ago. Madrasa leaders must take a

lead here. It is highly unlikely that they will.

The more likely scenario is that literalist Islam will dominate the curriculum. The pledge to fight militancy in that case will surely be an empty one. It will simply not be enough to tell the students that Islam is a religion of peace.

Makers of education policy must go far beyond just talking about reform. Mere tinkering will not do. To begin with, they have to enter into a serious dialogue with the leaders of madrasa education, asking them how precisely they wish to fight militancy, given the considerations briefly mentioned here.

It is also essential to see the entire question of reform of madrasa education in the context of the constitutional commitment of the country to establish a truly pluralist society, where all shades of individual preferences are free to thrive. Leaders of madrasas must explain how their thinking fits in that context.

If this looks like something that goes way beyond just education policy, it is because it does. The questions raised by talks of education reform involve far more than that. The sooner this is realised the better. The silence that has fallen after the recent noise about reform portends the danger of the real issues being shoved under the carpet -- again.

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Tortured over torture

So, why are the Americans torturing themselves over torture after all these years? Their governments, most of them, more or less, authorised torture and assassination in foreign countries. Bush was more adventurous than his predecessors.

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EVER since President Barack Obama ordered the release of the Bush torture memos, the Americans are torturing themselves over torture. They are torturing themselves with the rights and wrongs of their government's use of inhuman techniques to inflict pain on terrorism suspects. Somebody needs to tell them that torture isn't a moral dilemma. It's a moral delusion.

We aren't talking about occasional torture, not the kind applied in police custody such as beating or sleep deprivation to get confessions out of common criminals. Hardcore offenders are hard nuts to crack, and torture works like a magic potion. In the right dose, it unlocks their tongues and makes them sing like canaries. Torture yields results; it salvages truth from the wreckage of facts.

But this is about torture that has the pathology of a sadistic mind. The interrogators swooped down on their prisoners like the Visigoths destroying a civilisation. Even better, they approached their captives like the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq,

pounding fragile bodies to occupy rock-ribbed minds.

It was as though a mini Kabul or a little Baghdad was buried inside each of those prisoners. Their bodies were, therefore, ransacked so that their minds could be thoroughly searched, lane-by-lane, house-by-house, spider hole by spider hole. The interrogators must have expected an Osama bin Laden or a Saddam Hussein to pop out anytime.

Did it work? It can be argued like two sides of a coin. Maybe the information extracted from the prisoners, names, places, and dates, pieced together leads for the US government to hunt down terrorists and prevent another 9/11 from being repeated. It's possible that torture has kept America safe.

But on the flipside, it's also possible that what has kept America safe also has kept terrorism alive. Torture performed a sartorial contradiction. It cut and stitched, both at the same time when the victims opened their mouths and closed their hearts. The confession hardened their conviction, their loyalty to the cause evermore consolidated by their hatred for the tormentors. Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo Bay

detention camp will go down in history as museums of moral holocaust where the souls of oppressive minds were incinerated in the gas chambers of moral opprobrium. In these and countless other places where the United States conducted torture, something interesting happened. The moral authority of the persecutors evaporated every time the persecuted squirmed in pain.

Many of the prisoners have survived torture and returned home. Many of them proved innocent, undeserving of the cruel fate they suffered in the hands of their captors. May be they will still suffer from aching bones and muscles, internal organ failures, shame and grief of how they were subjected to unspeakable horror. The water-boarding victims might still wake up from their nightmares, having the feeling of sinking and suffocating in their beds. They will be tortured by memories of torture for the rest of their lives.

But the nation that tortured them appears to be equally, if not more, disturbed. One wonders why? A. J. Langguth claimed in an article, which appeared in Los Angeles Times on May 3, that the United States has a 45-year history of torture. As CIA toppled governments in foreign countries, it also regularly trained the police and army of those countries to torture political prisoners.

Amongst many examples, Langguth mentions the experience of Flavio Tavares Freitas. This Brazilian journalist and Christian nationalist had wires jammed into his ears, between his teeth and into his

anus. Before electricity was sent through him, he was able to recognise the small gray generator producing the shocks. It had on its side the red, white and blue shield of the USAID.

So, why are the Americans torturing themselves over torture after all these years? Their governments, most of them, more or less, authorised torture and assassination in foreign countries. Bush was more adventurous than his predecessors. For a change, he brought foreigners home and tortured them on American soil.

Is it the moral side of torture that bothers the Americans? If that's so, it has the absurdity of driving with an expired license. At least for a good half-century, the American hegemony has redrawn the moral map of the world. Right is what is in the American interest. Wrong is what fails that litmus test. Convenience not conscience is the theme of that new moral anthem.

Elaine Scarry writes in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, that when a political power resorts to torture as a show of strength it's actually weak and unstable. That defines the American delusion. Challenged or threatened, it goes any distance to show it won't take shit from others.

Torture violates human dignity. Dilemma is when one doubts that violation. Delusion is when one doubts that dignity.

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Change we can't believe in

The Pakistani military has lost the wars it has fought via traditional means. But running guerrilla operations -- against the Soviets, the Indians, and the Afghans -- has proved an extremely cost-effective way to keep its neighbours off balance.

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FINALLY, we are told, the Pakistani military has gotten serious about the threat that militants pose to its country. The army is now fighting back for real, sending troops to dislodge the jihadists who had spread out of the Swat Valley. We hear this from Pakistani commanders, of course, but also from civilian leaders as well as from US officials, including the secretary of defense, Robert Gates. In an interview with me for CNN, Gates said: "I think the movement of the Taliban so close to Islamabad was a real wake-up call for them."

Maybe. It was only a few years ago that Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani diplomat who recently became ambassador to Washington, wrote a brilliant book arguing that the Pakistani government -- despite public and private claims to the contrary -- continued "to make a distinction between 'terrorists' and 'freedom fighters' (the officially preferred label for Kashmiri militants)."

He added: "The Musharraf government also remains tolerant of remnants of Afghanistan's Taliban regime, hoping to use them in resuscitating Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan."

The Pakistani military's world view -- that it is surrounded by dangers and needs to be active in destabilising its

neighbours -- remains central to Pakistan's basic strategy.

While President Musharraf broke with the overt and large-scale support that the military provides to the militant groups, and there have continued to be some moves against some jihadists, there is no evidence of a campaign to rid Pakistan of these groups.

The leaders of the Afghan Taliban, headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar, still work actively out of Quetta. The army has never launched serious campaigns against the main Taliban-allied groups led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Jalaluddin Haqqani, both of whose networks are active in Pakistan. The group responsible for the Mumbai attacks, Lashkar-e-Taiba, has evaded any punishment, morphing in name and form but still operating in plain sight in Lahore.

Even now, after allowing the Taliban to get within 60 miles of the capital, the Pakistani military has deployed only a few thousand troops to confront them, leaving the bulk of its million-man Army in the east, presumably in case India suddenly invades. And when the army does attack the Taliban, as it did a couple of years ago in the same Swat Valley, it bombs, declares victory and withdraws -- and the jihadists return.

The rise of Islamic militants in Pakistan is not, Ambassador Haqqani

writes, "the inadvertent outcome of some governments." It is "rooted in history and [is] a consistent policy of the Pakistani state."

The author describes how, from its early years, the Pakistani military developed "a strategic commitment to jihadi ideology." It used Islam to mobilise the country and army in every conflict with India. A textbook case was the 1965 war, when Pakistan's state-controlled media "generated a frenzy of jihad," complete with stories of heroic suicide missions, martyrdom, and divine help.

Pakistan was created as an Islamic state, with a population that shared little geographically, ethnically, and linguistically. The country's rulers have maintained power using religion as an ideology. And then the region's geo-politics -- the tensions with India and the battle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan -- helped create deep links between the Pakistani military and Islamic militant groups.

The Pakistani military has lost the wars it has fought via traditional means. But running guerrilla operations -- against the Soviets, the Indians, and the Afghans -- has proved an extremely cost-effective way to keep its neighbours off balance.

Has this all changed? The ambassador's book, "Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military," marshals strong evidence that, at least until recently, the Pakistani military made the pretense of arresting militants in order to get funds from Washington. But it never shut down the networks.

From the point of view of Pakistan's Islamists and their backers in the ISI, Haqqani writes, "jihad is on hold but not yet over. Pakistan still has an unfinished agenda in Afghanistan and Kashmir."

The book concludes by telling how Pakistan's military has used the threat from these militant groups to maintain power, delegitimise the civilian government and -- most crucial of all -- keep aid flowing from the United States. And the book's author has now joined in this great game.

Last week Ambassador Haqqani wrote an op-ed claiming that Pakistan was fighting these militant groups vigorously. The only problem, he explained, was that Washington was reluctant to provide the weapons, training, and funds Pakistan needs. He has become a character out of the pages of his own book.

In truth, Haqqani is a smart and honourable man with an impossible job. In its first months, Pakistan's democratic government has been over-ruled by the generals every time it has asserted its authority.

If Washington hopes to change Pakistan's world view, it will have to take a much tougher line with the military while supporting the country's civilian leaders, whose vision of Pakistan's national interests is broader and less paranoid, and envisions more cooperation with its neighbours. The \$15 billion Biden-Lugar bill, designed to help develop Pakistan's civil society, is a big step in that direction.

Perhaps, as Haqqani's op-ed implies, the strategy of the past six decades has suddenly changed. But I recall what Warren Buffett once called the four most dangerous words in investing: "This time it's different."

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