

Ending the stalemate at upazila

The entire tender and contracts in the upazila are politically controlled. The whole safety net program has become the first casualty of the partisan abuses. This may damage the norms already existing in our local administrative practices.

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THE Upazila (former *Thana*) is the oldest field level administrative unit in the sub-continent. The *Thana* was first created by the British as police outpost in 1793, and gradually other elements of the administration were added. The police was followed immediately by revenue, thus maintenance of law and order, and collection of revenue, remained as the main function of the *Thana*.

Later, some other services and development functionaries such as agriculture, education, sanitation, infrastructure, etc. were incorporated. By the late 19th century, the *Thana* had been made as a fully functional and vibrant governmental unit.

The *Thana* did not have corresponding tiers or levels of Local Government Institution (LGI) with the involvement of people's representatives till 1960. During 1960-2008, the LGI system were introduced at *Thana* level twice and subsequently abandoned. The first was during 1960-1970, under General Ayub's Basic Democracy system, and the second, during General Ershad's rule, from 1981-1991.

Finally, LGI at Upazila level has been reintroduced in 2009, after 18 years, by the caretaker government and later re-enacted by the AL government. The Upazila, a vital field administrative unit of government, has been functioning with a

huge number of functionaries and with huge funding from national exchequer. The Upazila Parishad Act 2009 (by AL) created the opportunity to re-establish a people's body as the highest policy making and executing agency at Upazila level. This body will be an LGI known as Upazila Parishad (UZP) and will run the upazila level administration.

The main challenges for the UZP is to generate confidence and skill among the Upazila leadership, in managing the multi-dimensional affairs of the Parishad.

Central support in appreciating the initial local problems of the newly functional Upazila is also very crucial for its healthy growth. The confusing clout prevailing at national political level needs to be removed. The MP and UZP-UP level leadership needs to learn the art of mutual accommodation, adjustment and also to appreciate role differentiation between elected leadership of a formal statutory body and party wing.

The norms, rules and consequences of use and abuse of public money and resources also need to be taught to the political activists at all levels. The Upazila Parishad Act 2009 provides detail guidelines for UZPs structure, functions, role and jurisdictions.

An UZP consists of a chairman, two vice-chairpersons (one of them woman), chairmen of all Union Parishads (UP) and mayors of all municipalities under the

UZP concerned will be ex-officio members.

In addition, women elected by the women members and councilors of Union Parishads and Pourashavas will occupy one-third membership positions. As far as the functions of UZP, the law provides a separate schedule with a list of 18 very clearly defined functions that include dealing with administrative and establishment issues, ensuring law and order and other services related to peoples' welfare, and formulation and implementation of local economic and social development planning including a five-year plan.

The issues further clarified

As stated earlier, the UZP as a body corporate and a mid-tier LGI, still could not start its function since its election. The departments are virtually functioning as they were before the formation of UZP. The reality is, very few committees at all meet. The TR, FFW, CFW and many other allocations are coming to Upazila through Deputy Commissioners (DCs) and the UNOs receive orders from DCs as usual.

Under the current situation, this is also not working. The UNOs in the Upazila has to take instructions from the local MPs in certain matters compulsorily, such as in approving any TR, FFW, CFW, etc. and also in all other matters as courtesy.

The Upazila police also take instructions from the MP, while taking action on major law and order related situations. The UPs are receiving all allocations and instructions from UNO and the decisions regarding VGD, VGF, TR are shared with the local MP. In absence of an annual development plan, the resources

are grossly misused. The recently allocated TR and VGD-VGF cards were put into rampant partisan abuse.

The entire tender and contracts in the upazila are politically controlled. The whole safety net program has become the first casualty of the partisan abuses. This may disrupt and damage the norms already existing in our local administrative practices. The increased allocation in the first national budget of the present government needs to be utilised judiciously, if real poverty reduction target is aimed at.

Issues that need immediate attention on UZP

The UZP election held in January 2009 has been post-facto legalised by the UZP Act 2009 and one circular (May 4, 2009) has also been issued by delineating the power and functions of the UZP Chairman. Similarly another order from Cabinet Division of the government is needed to network the deputation/placement /transfer to those 13 officials.

The other 11 offices and officials presently working in Upazila cannot be left without clear direction too. Out of those 11, at least 8 offices should also be transferred in the same manner as it has been done in case of 13. Only 4 offices such as Police, Land, Sub-registrar and Election may remain outside the UZP but with clear functional relations.

According to the UZP law, election of women members has to be held immediately. The UZP remains incomplete without legitimate participation of women. The newly elected Chair, Vice Chairs, members as well as deputed officials need proper training and orientation.

Relevant "Rules" have to be prepared



The upazila parishad can generate confidence and skill.

and approved to enable UZP to become functional within the first quarter of the current financial year (2009-2010).

A comprehensive planning and budgeting system need to be introduced with professional assistance and under strict rules. This may reduce the contingent and political abuse of scarce resources given for poor and poverty reduction.

One full-time secretary needs to be posted and the UNO's position needs to be integrated with the parishad or must be in complete separation. The Upazila Accounts office needs strengthening and a new position called "Budget and Finance Officer" needs to be established.

The vehicle for UZP should not be procured centrally. The UZPs should be given the authority to purchase their own transport within the government procurement rules.

The new circular issued from the Food and Disaster, Home, Health and other ministries need to be reviewed in view of the Upazila Parishad Act 2009 looking at the practices in Upazila during the period 1982-1991.

The NICAR under the leadership of a Cabinet Minister/Advisor should review the pros and cons of Upazila and unions bi-monthly and take corrective measures. If such regular monitoring is done seriously, Upazila and Union level LGIs, as well as the administration, will get to its own feet and gear to deliver the required services within a year. It will also help establish a rule of law and promote discipline in local governance.

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Silence is not an answer

Anyone with a couple of bombs has the ultimate blackmail mechanism. This leads us to the dilemma: what happens if a weapon ends up in the command of terrorists, or those who believe that such havoc will destroy their perceived enemy?

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EVERY ruling system, no matter how radical its origins, develops a vested interest in silence. The most widely used justification for secrecy is national interest, and, once in government, politicians quickly acquire the skill of extending the breadth of national interest to include their personal interests.

This personal interest does not necessarily have to be venal. It can be partisan, in the sense that a party might opt for silence in the pursuit of a hidden agenda. But the culture of suppression works wonderfully for those who need to hide the unacceptable. What happens when a politician begins to peel off the layers that have been used to hide a dramatic truth?

We do not know when the system will force Obama back into the grooves of convention, but he is still young enough in his term, and radical enough in his thinking, to challenge the established wisdom of his own turf, Washington. Perhaps the most dramatic departure he has made is in upending US policy towards Israel's nuclear program.

The fact that Israel has a nuclear arse-

nal of over 200 bombs is surely the worst kept secret over the last few decades, but till Obama became president it remained an official secret in both Israel, and in its strongest ally, America.

Israel jailed any citizen who dared to utter a word on the subject, and American presidents resolutely avoided any mention of the "n" word in reference to Israel. George Bush repeatedly threatened Iran with war on the grounds that it had transgressed its obligation to keep its nuclear program peaceful; and Bush went to war against Iraq, with appalling blowback for his own country and horrific consequences for civilians in the battle zone, in ostensible search for nuclear weapons. He never uttered a word about Israel's illegal nuclear stockpile. He was following precedence.

Obama has, bravely, ended this hypocrisy. He understands that this duplicity cannot be sustained. You cannot wink at Israel and scold Iran with the same face. It is, in essence, racist to justify Israel's nuclear status with silence and deny a neighbour like Saudi Arabia the right to defend itself, and the Arab world, with matching weapons. The implication is that one nation can be trusted with restraint in its use of nuclear

power, but another cannot.

Obama first permitted an official of the US government to speak openly about Israel's weapons, and then upped the ante with the demand that Israel sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty along with India

and Pakistan. He has now made the same point, albeit less starkly, in his Cairo speech. The credibility of his Cairo oratory was strengthened immeasurably by the previous American recognition of Israel as a nuclear weapon power.

Emerging changes in America's Pakistan policy

In the wake of the Taliban defeat and withdrawal from the Swat valley, Western "experts" have toned down their attacks on Pakistani government's and armed forces' "intransigence," "inability" and "duplicity" in tackling the Taliban.

TAJ HASHMI

THERE cannot be any doubt about the impending changes in America's Pakistan policy or, as one might put it, in its India policy. What one gets from the media and can only guess about Obama's personal letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh conveys is that the US wants to play the role of an honest broker in India-Pakistan disputes, mainly over Kashmir.

Is it due to Pakistan's smart diplomacy, clever use of the "Islam Card" to outwit the Taliban, or its skilful military manoeuvring to overwhelm the Taliban and the world at large? Can we also impute this stunning development to Obama's "historic" Cairo-speech earlier this month, widely known as his attempt to seek new beginning in ties with the "Muslim World"?

One does not have to read too much in what William Burns stated at a press conference in New Delhi on June 11: "The Kashmir issue has to be settled in line

Pakistani government and armed forces appeared like sitting ducks on the verge of unconditional surrender.

Many Western analysts and governments publicly registered their concern at the "impending fall" of Islamabad. Surprisingly enough, even the State Department bought some of the media and think-tank gibberish about the "growing threat" to Islamabad. To them, it was no longer a matter of "if" but "when" the Taliban and their allies would take over the country and its nuclear weapons, posing the biggest threat to the whole world.

However, what was most commonsense and supposed to happen has happened. The well-trained and professional Pakistani armed forces simply repulsed the threat, and are routing and chasing out the bands of ill-trained Taliban fighters who have no air, armoured and artillery support.

Most importantly, the Islamist militants had very little grassroots support in and around Swat, Fata and elsewhere in the country. Of late, the local populace has raised their own militias in support of the government and are chasing out local and foreign Taliban-al-Qaeda elements from the NWFP and Balochistan.

It is noteworthy that early April this year, to the dismay and surprise of most Pakistanis and the whole world, while the rag-tag Pakistani Taliban were in control of major cities and hamlets of Swat and only around sixty miles off Islamabad, the

"experts" have toned down their attacks on Pakistani government's and armed forces' "intransigence," "inability" and "duplicity" in tackling the Taliban. It seems the American government is no longer worried about Pakistani nuclear arsenal going to the wrong hands.

Presently, analysts seem to be convinced that Pakistan's signing the so-called "Taliban Deal" in February made with the Tahrik-e-Nisab-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM), not with the Taliban, has ultimately paid rich dividends to the government.

The NWFP government's signing the deal with Sufi Muhammad, the estranged father-in-law of Taliban leader Mullah Fazlullah, was nothing more than a hollow promise to "implement Shariah" in the Swat Valley by the government. This hitherto, widely criticised deal and often ridiculed as surrender to the extremists, may be singled out as a major step taken in the right direction.

Another successful gambit by the government, the so-called Nizam-e-Adl which "provided" Shariah through the courts in the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas in the NWFP, almost totally foiled the half-educated Islamists and Taliban.

Consequently, in the wake of the Taliban defeat and withdrawal from the Swat valley alarmist Western analysts and

guarantees to the whole nation: "All existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah [teachings of the Prophet] and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such injunctions."

The Taliban's late realisation about the triviality and in consequence of the deal, and their consequential retaliations against government forces and "non-conformist" locals, cost them dearly. By rejecting the "Shariah Deal" the Taliban, ironically, projected themselves to the people as mere bandits and terrorists; fighting for something else other than Shariah, which people thought had already been provided by the government.

This, however, does not mean that Pakistan is free from all troubles. Terrorist attacks, including suicide bombings, will continue to haunt the nation. In view of the recent extermination of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, once considered to be the most well organised terrorist outfit in the world, the marginalised Taliban-al-Qaeda have no future in Pakistan. And it seems that America is convinced about this reality. Hence, the emerging changes in its Pakistan policy.

Consequently, reposing absolute faith in Pakistan's ability and interest in weeding out Islamist militants from its terri-

tor, America has been forthcoming in congratulating Pakistan, considering it an important ally in the "war against extremism," or what until recently was known as "war against terror." Meanwhile, the US government has come forward with several billion dollars worth of civil and military aid packages to Pakistan.

One may attribute this shift in US policy towards Pakistan mainly to the latter's competent and appropriate political, military and diplomatic manoeuvring and strategy.

Pakistan's resolve to weed out Islamist militancy its way is paying off. And this is the main factor behind the impending changes one expects in America's Pakistan Policy in the coming years. Obama's Cairo-speech is an important indication as to which way America will go to win over the "Muslim World." His emphasis on the importance of resolving perennial territorial disputes in the Muslim World may be an important catalyst in this regard. Let us wait and see the short and long-term implications of the "impending pro-Muslim tilt" in Obama's foreign policy, especially towards Pakistan.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily state or reflect those of the US government or any agency or entities thereof.

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What happens when weapons end up in the hands of the wrong groups?

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regional conflict as its rationale; and Israel is Iran's implicit justification.

There is a cyclical logic in operation. North Korea also has an argument; its war for survival in the early Fifties. The rest of the world does not have any sympathy for this argument, which is why China has joined US in condemning North Korea's brazen behaviour. But the very fact that the Security Council can do very little about disarming even a nation as weak and unstable, as North Korea indicates the difficulties inherent in the very laudable concept of disarmament.

Anyone with a couple of bombs, and the capability to launch them, has the ultimate blackmail mechanism. It might be suicide for North Korea to actually launch a bomb at Japan or South Korea, but this is surely the ultimate suicide mission. Anyone who is sane has to shudder at the sheer havoc such insanity would cause. This, of course, leads us to the existential dilemma: what happens if a weapon ends up in the command of terrorists, or those who believe that such havoc will destroy their perceived enemy?

The civil war in Pakistan is tinged by the dread that if the Taliban, or its clandestine supporters in the political establishment, succeeded, the world would enter an unprecedented age of dread. This seems unlikely just now, but the future is another story.

What is the answer? I do not know. What I do know is that silence is not an answer.

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