

Corruption in administration

Ministers must have a role in curbing wrongdoing

LAW Minister Shafique Ahmed has come down hard on government officials on the issue of corruption. His considered view, one that large sections of people surely agree with, is that the inability or reluctance of senior officials to oversee the activities of officers at the lower tiers of administration is a major reason for the corruption in which government employees are mired. We at this newspaper would add somewhat to the minister's feelings on the subject. It is simply this: all too often it is corruption among the top levels of the administration that encourages those at the lower levels to indulge in similar wrongdoing. In other words, when the head begins to rot, the rest of the body soon falls prey to the resultant putrid smell.

That said, there is another point that must not escape notice or comment. In a democratic environment, it is necessarily ministers, being in charge of their particular portfolios, who must provide the political and moral leadership that will in turn promote transparency and accountability in administration. And they can do the job provided they ensure that political meddling in the discharge of administrative work in any form or shape is eschewed. The unfortunate trend in civil administration for the past many years has been the fact that political patronage has created conditions where government secretaries and other senior officials have found it convenient to create their own brand of patronage in their departments. Corruption has thus followed a systemic pattern. Obviously, it has left day-to-day administration weak and ineffectual.

Conversely, it has been observed that when secretaries attempt to undertake the task of bringing recalcitrant junior level officials to heel over the issue of corruption and the like, they find their hands tied because of the close political links many of their subordinates maintain with ministers and other influential ruling party elements. That surely acts as a damper in any effort to streamline the system. It is here that ministers must play a proactive role in the overall national interest by ensuring that politics does not worm its way into the purely administrative matter of departmental discipline. In effect, the far bigger necessity is the promotion, creation and sustenance of an administrative system that can withstand all political pressures and can truly function in the service of the republic. Modern states function on the principle of systems rather than individuals; and only systems can ensure the transparency and accountability so vital for the working of government. Ministers being the public face of the government and especially their departments can act as architects towards building a structured, dynamic and apolitical administrative system.

Finally, we note that the Right to Information Act will take effect in July. A fundamental premise behind the formulation and operation of the act is to guarantee transparency and accountability in all spheres of state and governmental activity. In light of such an imminent reality, we have all the more reason to ensure that ministers and officials will do everything that brings governance up to the level of public expectations.

The curse of dowry lives on

No place for such inhumanity in our society

THE report in yesterday's Daily Star of a young girl whose life was shattered when her parents were unable to fulfill the demand for dowry from her husband's family has left us shocked and stunned.

Not only is the demand for dowry one that is still far too prevalent in our society, but the fact that some families will inflict such cruel injury on newly-weds whose parents are unable to meet their dowry demands is something that we must have zero tolerance for.

In the present instance, the young girl who was the victim had both her hands blown off, lost an eye, and has suffered injury all over her body due to a blast. All the evidence suggests that this atrocity was inflicted on her as a result of failing to meet her husband's family's dowry demands.

The viciousness of the attack should shock the conscience of everyone. This kind of stomach-churning violence is a most serious crime and those who are responsible must be brought to book. The cold-blooded, premeditated aspect of the crime and the fact that it was an act of petty vengeance makes it all the worse.

This kind of violence against newly-wed young women must be stamped out. In the first place, the demand for dowry itself is a backward, anti-women anachronism, that we need to do a better job of eliminating. That is point one.

But that some people evidently believe that it is acceptable to commit horrific violence if their demands are not met speaks of something very sick in our society. Those who commit such crimes are no different from extortionists or armed hijackers who steal money and commit mayhem at the point of a gun. They need to be considered as such by society and the law should punish them in the same way.

Too often, as was the case here, the community does not do nearly enough to either protect young women from dowry-related oppression or to condemn those who are guilty of such a horrendous crime. We are thus all liable, and the collective responsibility for ensuring that such barbarism becomes a thing of the past falls on all of us. We cannot let such brutality continue unchecked.

From black to white

An awful amount of money is ready to change its colour from black to white, as the Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith has admittedly been forced to incorporate an unethical provision into the national budget for 2009-10, against the government's will.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE proverbial saying: "money is the root of all evil" has perhaps not been more poignantly exposed elsewhere in the world than in Bangladesh, as far as the black money is concerned. From buying political power to criminalising the society or becoming dons or godfathers, black money has a role to play.

An awful amount of money is ready to change its colour from black to white, as the Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith has admittedly been forced to incorporate an unethical provision into the national budget for 2009-10, against the government's will. This shows the extent of power of black money, though the finance minister has termed it as an art of compromise.

Critics feel that the government, voted to power by millions, lacks moral courage and is going against electoral pledges, keeping the unethical provision in force to turn black money into white.

The provision of whitening black money was first introduced in the national budget for the fiscal year 1975-76 to bring some Tk.70,000 crore of black money into the formal economy, but only Tk.7 crore was whitened. The facility was again offered for the next consecutive three fiscal years, from 1987-88 to 1989-90, and Tk.200 crore, Tk.250 crore and Tk.400 crore respectively were whitened during that period.

The Awami League government revived the facility in 2000-01 and Tk.1,000 crore

was whitened.

The BNP-led coalition government introduced the provision of whitening black money in the budgetary policy initially for two years, beginning from 2003-04, for bringing the bulk of black money into the formal economy. Black money, amounting to Tk.1,775 crore, came into the economy through this process. Some 1,077 people legalised the untaxed money they had during this period.

The record-breaking amount of Tk.10,000 crore was whitened during the tenure of the caretaker government under Fakhruddin Ahmed, as it had launched a crusade against corruption.

We do not know whether anyone carried out an extensive study to find out the actual quantity of black money we have in the country, as well as the amount of black money invested in the productive sector.

There are only a few estimates about the amount of black money, which vary widely. Given the power of the black money holders to create pressure on the government, the amount of such money surely has become enormous over the years, and could be counted in billions.

The government is obliged to inform the people of the actual amount of black money that has been recovered so far and invested in the productive sectors, as it has always said that such money is necessary for economic development of the country. People have the right to know all about it.

"Politics is the highest art of compro-



Tainted money getting cleaned.

mise" because it involves compromise with the opponents for the interests of the people. But compromising with criminality is not an art but an artifice, which cannot be accepted. Keeping the provision of whitening black money is not a compromise, but capitulation of the government to the force of black money.

The use of black money has manifested itself in many bizarre forms in our country. Obviously the economic affairs of black money holders, including criminalisation of politics, are proceeding according to a well-orchestrated plan, which is supported by persons in the corridors of power. Otherwise, the government that had pledged to stand against corruption would not allow such a facility, which breeds corruption.

Certainly, there is no denying the fact that black money has become a part of politics and has been plaguing the process of

democracy in the country. The scope for whitening black money raises ethical questions and encourages the operation of black money, not only in the economic field but also in other fields of life, including politics.

Some years back, the government of India also announced tax concessions through a Voluntary Disclosure Scheme for people with black money to declare their unaccounted wealth. Raids were conducted by the income tax people on big business houses and individuals, and several crores of black money was brought to light in this way.

Bangladesh may also consider similar action for bringing black money to light without providing more scope for whitening black money to satisfy an unscrupulous section of people.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Formulating MPO policy

Enlistment of MPO is a part of such activities. I believe that the committee members are well educated, experienced and well aware of the social problems and needs. They will surely give importance to the issues mentioned.

LUTFOR RAHMAN

IT is learnt from a national daily newspaper that the government has formed a ten-member committee headed by the prime minister's education, social development and political affairs adviser, Dr. Alauddin Ahmed, to formulate a concrete policy for MPO allocation and enlistment of new educational institutions. As a senior citizen in an independent country, as well as a teacher, I believe I have every right to comment on and make suggestions about educational resource development in the country.

My recent participation in the International Conference on Open Educational Resources (OER) held on June 7-10, at Maastricht, Netherlands, has encouraged me to criticise and make comments on education resources anywhere in the globe. It was a unique event for transformation of education from the traditional to the modern system, i.e. shifting from face-to-face education to virtual education.

Unesco and Commonwealth of Learning and the Open University Netherlands jointly organised the event where senior academ-

ics, including vice-chancellors from all over the world, were invited to make their comments on different issues. The organisers gave a handsome amount in the form of M-2009 Fellowships and hourly remuneration for criticising or finding faults or possible hazards in the new system. The comments and suggestions will be further discussed and reviewed at the Unesco headquarter in France in July.

Bangladesh is not different from other countries in respect of making mistakes. MPO (monthly payment order) is a part of development in education through educators. A real teacher has the right to enjoy the benefits.

So far, I have learnt that only a certain percentage of school and college teachers are going to be enlisted in the MPO. Who are those lucky teachers? How they will be selected is the main question. Two different groups of "have" and "have-nots" will be created. Some teachers will enjoy better life and others will not.

The schools with "have-nots" will lose students, teachers and confidence. There are instances of teachers working for more than ten years without remuneration in

schools and colleges in the remote areas. Many institutes are showing tremendous results in board examinations for general and technical education. This is possible due to the sacrifice of the young and energetic teachers. They work under guidelines of the founder, who is normally well-educated and technically qualified.

Unfortunately, these institutions are normally not enlisted in MPO. Neither any minister nor adviser has ever visited them. It is really difficult for the decision makers to realise the exact situation without visiting the institutions and the localities.

Most schools and colleges in the country were set up under political auspices in the last two decades. But there are still some institutions that were established by talented and dedicated people who sincerely want to help develop their region or community. There are people who have money as well as wisdom, education, knowledge, skills, honesty and vision.

They want to utilise their talents, skills and vision for upgrading the life style of people through proper and effective education. But to do so, a platform like a school or college is essential. A school is does not have only students, teachers, rooms, chairs, desks etc., it also needs affiliation from the government to be recognised. That means sincere cooperation from the government is very important at this stage.

Enlistment of MPO is a part of such activities. I believe that the committee members are well educated, experienced and well

aware of the social problems and needs. They will surely give importance to the issues mentioned.

As a founder of a technical institute in one of the remotest areas in Bangladesh, I have had immense scope of studying the people of remote and isolated areas and the activities of the government for the people for the last ten years. Support or cooperation from the government was very disappointing.

A school or institute is not just a platform for educating and giving certificates to students. An institute, particularly a technical or vocational institute, can bring a tremendous change in remote communities. It enables them to earn a reasonable amount through utilisation of technical knowledge, which they gain from the institute and from their guardians who are well experienced in local and traditional technologies.

There is scope for doing research on the issue, and lots to learn from such activities. The ideas are well accepted in international markets or events held in different continents. But the ideas or lessons are very rarely accepted or recognised by the policy makers in our country.

Establishing a vocational or technical institute in remote areas can be the best way of changing people, community or society as the present government wants a change at all levels.

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Starting well, ending well

General Moeen, the man in the background, does deserve commends for respecting our national aspiration, and ensuring our democratic transition, the most welcome ending.

MD. ALI AKBAR

WITH the retirement of General Moeen U. Ahmed -- the chief of army staff and much talked-about backstage hero of 1/11 -- some quarters are opening their mouths about his leading role in the 1/11 change-over and the following years -- 2007-08. His activities are now under serious scrutiny and debate.

Although some duly credit him with having done what was but inevitable in the turbulent circumstances prior to 1/11, a few others criticise him on some counts. His detractors, of course, recognise the worth of some of his works by virtue of which he had gained some extra-prominence.

However, those who admire him as a the 1/11 "saviour of the nation" argue that had not the army under the general's leadership come to the rescue of the nation -- then embroiled in political meltdown -- the BNP-Jamaat jote would have come back to power through their stage-managed election scheduled for January 22, '07, thus plunging the country into deeper turmoil and uncertainty. The 1/11 intervention frustrated the evil design.

As a matter of fact, the patriotic armed forces did save the nation from the brink

of a bloodbath that looked inevitable. At the beginning of the emergency rule, Gen Moeen commented that "the country's democracy train had derailed." Their imperative was to put back the same on the rails.

Then, in mid-2008, he claimed to have put the democracy train back on the track. What was still needed was to find competent drivers -- meaning politicians -- to steer it to the cherished destination. It may be recalled that General Moeen had all along made it clear that he had no political ambition, and the army was only helping the new CTG to create a congenial atmosphere for holding a fair and credible national election.

Now that he is off the stage, the critics are a little too aggressively blaming him for having pulled the strings from the background, and orchestrated what they term as a "depoliticising campaign in the guise of reforms." It is history that will judge General Moeen's activities all through. Be that as it may, we must not be oblivious of the fact that state institutions like the Election Commission (EC), the administration, and the highest court had turned dysfunctional allegedly due to wholesale politicisation by the immediate past BNP regime.

And the then President Iajuddin-led

CTG and much despised justice M.A. Aziz-led EC were bent upon holding the election scheduled for January 22, '07 to ensure the jote's free ride to power again. If our memory does not betray, the nation, confronted by an unprecedented crisis, waited with bated breath for the patriotic armed forces to intervene. Then, 1/11 came as a God-sent respite.

The staging of 1/11 was a welcome response to the nation's collective prayers for a way out of the dire straits we were in. The standoff between the two mainstream political camps kind of invited the armed forces' intervention.

Contrarily, the armed forces could have acted as silent bystanders at that critical juncture, but with what eventualities we can well guess. And would that not be perfidious to the nation? After all, the armed forces, being the last resort of state security, could not have remained passive onlookers at the crunch hour.

Then, despite many twists and turns under the CTG, things ultimately went in the right direction. Political parties were registered with the reformed EC under the new RPO, and the embargo on open politics was withdrawn. A near fool-proof voter list with voters' photographs was prepared, the much awaited free and fair election held, and finally, a democratic government installed.

But, things might have gone the wrong way as well had General Moeen wanted to capture power on this or that pretext as his predecessors from the army had done. Astutely, he could feel the democratic pulse

of the nation, and chose to accept the people's sovereign right to elect their government.

Undeniably, General Moeen did not arrogate to himself the responsibility of governing the country, although many reckon he could have seized power if he had really aspired to. He did not do that. Instead, he went back to his domain when the elected government took over.

Now, those who happened to suffer harassment and indignity on corruption charges are castigating the retired general. Everybody does not need to agree with their perspective. But, given the tumultuous circumstances warranting the 1/11, one has to ask why BNP-Jamaat leadership should not be held responsible for the polity slipping off the democratic track.

In fact, had not the 4-party leadership plotted to make a comeback to power by manipulating the election, 1/11 would not have come about. However, there would likely be lingering discussions on the retired general's historical part, with some commending as also some condemning it from differing angles.

But, in the ultimate analysis, it must be admitted that the army-guided CTG kept true to its promise of restoring democracy. General Moeen, the man in the background, does deserve commendation for respecting our national aspiration and ensuring our democratic transition, the most welcome ending.

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