

Fighting Corruption

AM HUSSAIN

In the Awami League government's first five months in office the much-promised drive on corruption seems to have fizzled out. Even though it was constitutionally mandated to hold elections within 90 days, the last caretaker government held onto power for about two years on the pretext of cleaning the country's politics. Many known corruption suspects were nabbed, and the method in which they were arrested raised more questions than it answered. Midnight pick-ups saw the arrests of several known faces of local business and politics, their 'confessions' made before the so-called task force were leaked and hit the headlines of the national dailies. While these anomalies becoming a norm, the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) was reconstituted under the leadership of a former army chief. In the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led Four Party Alliance government's rule corruption had been ever pervasive, the Fakhruddin government was successful in instilling fear in the minds of the corrupt, corruption generally decreased.

A speedy tribunal was formed, which handed down prison sentences to people who are widely perceived to be corrupt. Problems started when the caretaker government tried to create a so-called King's Party and to do that it started to hobnob with some politicians and businessmen who have long been known as stooges of the previous military governments. On top of it all, as the state of emergency was in effect, there was no or very little freedom of expression. The situation was strange nonetheless-- people were relieved that the criminals were hiding and the police were not asking for a bribe, at the same time it distressed them that they were robbed off their fundamental rights.

The AL leadership will make a mistake if it thinks that the drive on corruption should take a backseat now that a democratically elected government has come to power. There have been signs of progress though: the AL, as a political party, has been working sensibly; some known corruption suspects and convicted MPs have been sidelined. Yet the sights of gun trotting student cadres of the AL or its youth front leaders trying to influence government tenders are disappointing. Extortionists are back, so are bribe-taking policemen. Some MPs, who 'forgot to mention' the fact that they had some 20 crore taka in some bank, have also become vocal.

As far as the AL is concerned, it has some convicted criminals as MPs. Their cases are pending with the High Court, and the people expect that the party, which has long championed the cause of democracy and rule of law, will not tamper with the course of justice. The party has to realise that it enjoys absolute majority in the parliament; and if two-thirds of its MPs lose their membership for corruption, it will hardly make an impact on its strength on the floor. On the contrary if the AL boots these leaders out, in case they are proven guilty in the court of law, it will increase the party's popularity among the masses, for such a decision is unprecedented in local politics.

The ACC is going through a period of stagnation. It has to be revived and it is necessary for the government to allocate enough manpower so that it can run smoothly. There is no denying that corruption in the country has not abated; on the other hand, changing its type and character, corruption has lived on. What is worrisome about corruption is that the ordinary people, most of whom live below the extreme poverty line, bear the brunt. The equation may look a little complicated, but its result is not difficult to decipher: the ruling party gets the blame for corruption, and at the end of the day loses popularity. The AL is going to be heavily beneficial if it launches a no-nonsense crackdown on corruption. Time is ticking away; will the AL leadership be able to rise up to the occasion?