

Rudderless home ministry

Its unsettled state is sapping govt's effectiveness

IT is quite mind-boggling that one of the most important ministries of the government should be without a minister for such a long time. Both the minister and state minister for home have been absent from office, the minister having suffered a broken hip, and her deputy being away on leave since 9th June. To make matters worse the PM, who had been looking after the ministry in the interregnum, was out of the country to Egypt and has just returned. We are not aware whether someone was given the charge of looking after the home ministry during her absence. Moreover, given the PM's commitment, we wonder if she can give the attention that the ministry deserves.

The minister, we understand, has undergone a hip surgery and one wonders whether she would be able to resume work in full gear quickly even if she returns soon. And as for the state minister the less said the better. This is the second time he has been away on leave, and there is no indication of his return although his leave has expired a fortnight ago. Surely this is no way to run the home ministry, which by the very nature of its work requires constant strict supervision of a minister.

The PM has been talking about cabinet reshuffle for quite sometime now. A shakeup of the cabinet is required but that will take its own time to materialise. That does not mean that pending a cabinet reshuffle such an important ministry should remain without its executive head, particularly when there is a slide in the law and order in the country. The severity of crimes being committed in the capital and elsewhere shows a lax in the performance of the law enforcing agencies. What more, the reported spread of illegal arms topped off by arrests of hardened and well-linked terror leaders call for an effective management of internal security risks. With an unsettled state in the home ministry counter-terrorism activities might suffer.

It is difficult to accept the assertion of the ministry officials that the home ministry is running its business as usual. It is also difficult to accept that the file work has not been affected in the absence of the executive head of the ministry. While the agencies of the ministry may well be able to function without the minister their performance is bound to be affected, as it has been, in the absence of higher oversight and direction that the minister is supposed to exercise and provide.

We are somewhat surprised that the PM has not yet taken any concrete step to put the situation right even after so many days. We urge the prime minister to put somebody in charge of the home ministry without any further loss of time.

Barbaric acts

The offenders must swiftly be brought to book

IT is all a reminder of medieval barbarism. In Chapainawabganj, a local influential politician took it upon himself the other day to subject a young man to unimaginable torture for altogether five hours before petrified villagers. In Faridpur, a father was asked by influential locals to hit his own son because of alleged theft of a mobile phone by the boy. In the Chapainawabganj incident, the chairman of Gomostapur Boalia Union Parishad was outraged that the young man he humiliated had earlier filed a case against his supporters regarding the stealing of some irrigation equipment. There are also reports, though, of old enmity between the chairman and the father of the young man.

A critical question arises here. It, of course, relates to rule of law. It is simply inconceivable that in these modern times and especially when a democratically elected government and parliament are functioning in the country, some elements are yet around and all too ready to defy the state through behaving in morally and legally unacceptable manner. In the recent past, as also earlier, people have been subjected to inhumane behaviour through the activities of so-called village arbitration. The plight of quite a few has been reported in the media, which was quickly followed by a chorus of protest at such barbaric behaviour by citizens. But that in no way convinces us that similar bad practices are not going on in the deep interior of the country. Where the Chapainawabganj affair is concerned, the man who perpetrated the misdeed of keeping the young man hanging from a tree for five years and even refused to give him a glass of water when he asked for it happens to be associated with the ruling Awami League. One is tempted into thinking that his proximity to power may have been a strong factor in his audacious behaviour. And that is a shame.

We strongly condemn such behaviour. More than that, we think it is an absolute necessity for the authorities to take strong, swift action by bringing the offenders in Chapainawabganj and Faridpur to book. At the same time, the authorities must move against any recurrence of such behaviour in any part of the country. A failure to act can only embolden the elements of darkness in committing further outrage.

The litigation game

Withdrawal of cases on a wide scale with the change of every government has set a bad precedent in Bangladesh. Indulgence in the litigation game should be stopped in order to establish the rule of law in every sphere of our lives.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE government's move of withdrawing political cases filed against Awami League leaders during the period of both BNP-Jamaat government and the caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed, has given raise to lot of questions regarding its legality and transparency.

The government constituted an inter-ministerial review committee headed by Quamrul Islam, the state minister for law, justice and parliamentary affairs, for considering on priority basis the recommendations of withdrawal of political cases, and thereby moved to exonerate the individuals involved in them.

Since its formation on February 17, the national review committee has so far endorsed recommendations for withdrawal of 243 cases, all filed against ruling AL leaders and activists, labeling them as politically motivated ones.

Amidst criticism from different quarters for recommending withdrawal of cases against the ruling party leaders only, the

state minister for law argued that the national review committee had not received any recommendation for withdrawal of any case filed against the opposition leaders.

According to a newspaper report, the national review committee has so far received recommendations from district committees for withdrawal of 2,584 cases filed against AL leaders and activists during the tenures of BNP-led four-party alliance government and caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed.

The first meeting of the national review committee held on June 10 reviewed 113 cases and recommended withdrawal of 62 cases, including 12 cases filed against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Of these 62 cases, 36 were filed under the penal code and 26 under the Anti-Corruption Commission Act. Of the 12 cases against Sheikh Hasina, 10 were filed by the ACC and two by others, including the Paltan killing case filed by Jamaat-e-Islami.

Shortly after assuming power through the landslide victory of December 29 election, the AL-led Grand Alliance govern-

ment invited applications from the victims of the politically-motivated cases filed to harass the political leaders and activists during the tenure of BNP-led four-party alliance government and army-backed caretaker government.

Thousands of political leaders and activists of different political parties, who had become victim of political cases, applied for withdrawal of their cases. BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia and her two sons also filed applications on April 30 seeking withdrawal of all 20 cases lodged against them during the tenure of army-backed caretaker government.

Unfortunately, the government has not yet considered a single case filed against BNP and Jamaat leaders who were also the victims of political cases during the period of emergency rule. It has been learnt that the government is now considering withdrawal of the Niko corruption case filed against Sheikh Hasina and Kaleda Zia.

The filing of false or politically motivated cases by the government designed to harass its political opponents and withdrawal of cases filed against its leaders during the previous regime is the litigation game indulged by the governments in Bangladesh. The AL-led alliance government is also not an exception to it.

The process of withdrawing the political cases has not only given rise to questions, but has also inclined many to doubt that all of these individuals against whom cases were

filed are innocent of the charges brought against them. Indeed, a significant number of these individuals have been convicted of corruption and tax evasion charges.

The whole exercise of withdrawal, starting from six-member district committee headed by DC to 10-member national committee at the apex, is politically motivated and lacks transparency. The national review committee has so far received 2,584 cases duly recommended by the district committees, which include many cases relating to serious offences like murder, rape, smuggling, and acid violence.

Anyone who has had cause to observe the consequences of withdrawal of political cases, finds its correlation with the criminalisation of politics. The people of this country have observed in the past that hundreds of criminals were let out by the government under political advisability while its opponents were implicated in false criminal cases.

The withdrawal of cases by the government, terming them as politically motivated ones, is inconsistent with the judicial process and also repugnant to the rule of law. Withdrawal of cases on a wide scale with the change of every government has set a bad precedent in Bangladesh. Indulgence in the litigation game should be stopped in order to establish the rule of law in every sphere of our lives.

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No redemption

Promises or no promises, it is a convoluted riddle as to whether the government is capable of delivering even on the basics. The redoubtable commerce minister, thought to be the government's trouble-shooter, seemed full of sound and fury on the price of the essentials, but at the end of the day it signified nothing.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IN the absence of the opposition, a friendly house obliged the finance minister and approved his proposed budget without making a fuss over its nitty-gritty with regard to the share of benefit or stimulus to various sectors of the country's interest groups, in spite of a shift of resources in favour of privileged ones.

Being no stakeholder in the whole equation, the country's common folk care most for the budget's impact on the consumer market and more specifically on the prices of the essentials that has hardly relented in the last six months of AL rule, in spite of lavish pre-election promises.

The people seldom craved for lower taxes for goods the rich are crazy for, as food alone accounts for about 50 to 70 per cent of our household budget. That's where is the rub for the poor. From that perspective, the budget is going to draw a blank for us.

Yet the real purpose of all economic planning exercises like the budget should be the welfare of the common people. And the variables that concern them directly are unemployment, poverty, and inequality.

This year's budget contains all the elements that breed them, and the issues were, if at all, inadequately addressed in the relevant parliamentary debate. Worse still, they were buried under layers of mealy-

moued mendacity and false promises of all enveloping change in the lot of society's dispossessed.

The perfunctory budget debate in the House was both preceded and followed by myriad other academic deliberations on the budget. They were more of a pattern we had been familiar with even in the past, and the words spoken in those deliberations were little more than cliches.

Even then, it appears to have satisfied the prime minister who, after her customary thanksgiving in the House and being assured by the tenor of the budget that its thrust is enough for her to keep the power base happy -- briskly left for NAM conference to lead her 50-member delegation.

Cheers for the finance minister whose political instinct paid him dividends. Look at his meteoric rise to be one of the PM's inner circle when the AL's die-hard stalwarts are kept away from it. But Mr. Muhith did his homework well. A convert at best, he knew his limitations, and cultivated his connections diligently.

All told, the only losers in the whole exercise are indeed the common people, and they are the ones for whom the bell tolls. They were led unsuspectingly as the gap between the promises and the ground reality only widens. The people certainly did not want honey and milk to flow



Most People have humble demands -- affordable price of essentials.

together. They did not want a rose garden or cherry blossom. Neither did they want to relish the stuff the power-wielders are after.

Their demands are humble -- affordable price of the essentials in the first place. Then, of course, a habitat, health care, pure drinking water, a road to walk on, education, and so one constitute their dreams. Can't there be a redeemer to deliver just these!

Understanding the limitation also of the government, the people have consciously lowered the bar and brought the goalposts nearer. They also have curbed their lyricism, upped their optimism, and washed clean their gray calls of pre-conceived notions. Despite such desperate measures, their hunt for a redeemer brought nothing but angst, bordering on

heartbreak.

Promises or no promises, it is a convoluted riddle as to whether the government is capable of delivering even on the basics. The redoubtable commerce minister, thought to be the government's trouble-shooter, seemed full of sound and fury on the price of the essentials, but at the end of the day it signified nothing.

Even the petty traders refused to be cowed by his fulmination. The much-trumpeted easing up of the prices, emanating from compliant quarters, is cosmetic at the best. The occasional ups and downs in the prices are a usual phenomenon in the market, but the market is far from stabilised.

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The values gap

From the international point of view, it is worth keeping in mind that a democratic Russia would be a much more stable, progressive, and predictable partner for the US and Europe on the world stage than the current authoritarian regime.

BORIS NEMTSOV

BARACK Obama's schedule during his visit to Moscow was symbolic: after he dedicated the first day to official talks with President Dmitry Medvedev, he spent much of the second day in meetings with representatives of civil-society organisations, the business community, and leaders of the political opposition.

With this gesture, the US president sent a clear message that he does not consider Russia to be limited to the ruling circle around Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and that he intends to "reset" relations not just with the Kremlin, but also with Russian society.

This dual-track approach involves discussing urgent practical matters (such as securing a transit route to Afghanistan or agreeing on a joint position on North Korea) with the government of the day, while simultaneously engaging in a broader dialogue on values with the Russian people.

At the meeting with opposition leaders, including myself, Obama reiterated his view that in the 21st century only democra-

cies can be truly successful at home and on the world stage. This question of values, indeed, is among the most difficult obstacles to his declared policy of "resetting" relations with Moscow. For while the United States promotes the ideas of freedom and competition, the current Russian leaders believe in censorship and monopoly in every sphere -- politics, ideology, and economy.

Politically, the year that has passed since Medvedev formally assumed the presidency has changed nothing: television coverage remains strictly controlled, elections are heavily manipulated, independent political activity is all but forbidden, judges are wholly subservient to the executive. It is clear that, contrary to our constitution, which assigns the principal power prerogatives to the president, Putin remains the real ruler of Russia.

Economically, monopolisation and bureaucratisation have led to rampant corruption (according to Transparency International, Russia under Putin has descended to a shameful 147th place in its world corruption index) and has severely crippled our economy. Despite relatively high oil prices, the principal source of

Russia's wealth, GDP contracted by 10 percent in April, while industrial production fell by 17 percent in May. Unemployment has already surpassed 10 percent. These are official government figures.

The very fact of Obama's meeting with the leaders of Russia's opposition infuriated the authorities. The signal he sent to Medvedev and Putin by meeting with us is clear: his administration will engage not only with those who are in the Kremlin today, but also with those who may be in the Kremlin tomorrow. In other words, the current rulers do not, in the view of the US, possess a monopoly on Russia. And increasingly, the voices of democratically minded Russians are being heard.

In April, I ran for mayor of Sochi, host city of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Despite heavy manipulation by the regime during the campaign and of the vote count, I came in second place. The forthcoming legislative elections in Moscow this October will be another test of what the democratic opposition can achieve even in today's repressive environment.

Obama's approach differs greatly from that of his predecessor. When George W. Bush met with representatives of the Russian opposition a few years ago, it was to give us a public lecture on democracy and then walk off the stage. This time, Obama invited us so that he could hear our views on the internal situation in Russia and US-Russia relations. I suggested to him that the necessary precondition for any

reset in relations is mutual trust, and no trust is possible while such a pronounced values gap exists between the U.S. and Russian leaders. Indeed, the virulent anti-American propaganda, a constant feature on Russian television for the past several years, ceased for only two days during Obama's stay, and resumed immediately after he left Moscow.

During the meeting we gave Obama a list of Russian political prisoners and copies of expert reports detailing the abuses that characterise Putin's rule. We also raised the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has been in prison since 2003 on politically motivated charges and whose second trial is now underway in Moscow. The impression I got is that Obama has a good understanding of the contemporary situation in Russia and holds no illusions about the nature of the current regime.

It is, of course, not the job of the US president to establish democracy in Russia. Nor would we want him to -- this is a task for us, Russia's democratic opposition. It is, from the international point of view, the worth keeping in mind that a democratic Russia would be a much more stable, progressive, and predictable partner for the US and Europe on the world stage than the current authoritarian regime.

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