

Changes in cabinet should lead to better performance

People expect so much from the government

After the restructuring of the party committees with several new faces inducted, prime minister Sheikh Hasina has brought in changes in the council of ministers, too. Here, she has taken in some new faces as well. The choice of the new faces is marked by inclusion of persons having a clean track record. Another positive feature is that six members of the new ministerial council are women. This is a welcome development from the point of view of bridging gender gap in the government.

However, it is not a reshuffle of the cabinet as such, but a redistribution of portfolios and giving ministerial berths to new aspirants. One may recall that the prime minister had promised on her assumption of office that she would make an assessment on the performance of ministers after the passage of 100 days. But then comes the assessment after six months in some form leading to some changes in the cabinet. And now the new ministers have been told that their performance will be closely watched for the next two to three months to form an opinion about them.

The question is what specific criteria are there for the prime minister to follow to judge the ministers' performance? We think, the PM needs to set specific targets for the ministers so that their performances are measurable. If truth be told, the performance of the government ministers so far has left a lot to be desired. Apart from the pressure of tadbir and rent-seeking from party workers and influential quarters that kept the ministers occupied, it's lack of coordination among various tiers and agencies of the government that has slowed down the pace of work. The need for infusion of greater dynamism in the government machinery can hardly be overemphasised.

It is practically a 50-member council of ministers including seven advisers who have been given a cabinet rank. This makes it the second largest cabinet since the four-party alliance government between 2001 and 2006. To that extent, the expectation is that much greater from the government to deliver.

There is an impression, though, that some of the advisers have somewhat undefined role in the sense that they are advising in respect of more than one ministry. They wield considerable influence on the ministries and that runs the risk of fostering confusion in the working of the ministries, if a balance is not struck.

The acid test for the government would be to deliver to meet the increasing expectations of the people and that can only be possible with a definitive change in the work culture.

Deaths in Bandarban mudslide

Repeating the old, sad story

A old story has been repeated. A mudslide in Bandarban has led to the deaths of ten individuals and the destruction of as many as fifty homes. The tragedy occurred in Harinmara, Lama, the other day as a result of incessant rain over a period of four days. Such mishaps are quite common affairs in the rainy season, but need not be. And yet there is cause for concern. The concern stems from the fact that few or no lessons have been learnt from disasters of this kind in the past. Despite all the editorial comments in the newspapers after every such tragedy about the need to undertake safety measures for people as well as preventing the hills in the area from being encroached upon, little action is taken barring an expression of the usual platitudes about corrective steps.

Around Cox's Bazar, hills are yet being razed in order for dwellings to be built. That only lengthens the danger people are exposed to in the sense that a destruction of the hills also means a clear ravaging of woodland which secures the areas. Obviously, the houses that are constructed are directly in the line of disaster as a simple mudslide can destroy them in a matter of moments. Such has been the case in the past; and it has happened once again. The question now, therefore, is whether the authorities are prepared to tackle the issue head on with the seriousness it deserves. There is too the feeling among many that those responsible for levelling the hills are doing it surreptitiously and are allegedly in collusion with dishonest elements in the administration. That is not only untenable but unacceptable as well. Such criminality must be weeded out in the greater public interest.

The chief of the Cox's Bazar Poribesh Bachao Andolon has alleged that the local administration has taken no action against those behind the destruction of the hills despite the complaints which have been lodged. That is a serious charge which throws up the image of an inept and ineffectual administration. It demonstrates the sheer inability of the authorities to keep track of things and so take preventive measures against a recurrence of such tragedy. An official of the department of environment has of course promised legal action against the guilty. The question we ask is simple: why is it that such vows are made once nature has already been put through the grinder? And why then is nothing more heard of the matter?

The cloudburst and woes of city dwellers

Things have come to such a pass that the people may not remain calm and blame only Nature and their fate for all the sufferings they have to face during such calamities in the future in this city. For they have already started to ask disturbing questions about the role of the city authorities in such times of distress.

SYED FAATHUL ALIM

THE overnight downpour of last Monday (July 27) and the limitless suffering it caused to the city dwellers should serve the authorities looking after its welfare with fresh warning as to how this mega-city is teetering as it were on the edge of a precipice.

That the city is not safe for its population has been proved on several occasions. One may cite here the deluge of 1988, which also caught the city authorities and the people by surprise. Again in 2004, we experienced a similar kind of powerlessness as the government could do little to take necessary measures to protect the people as a downpour and flood had caught the city quite unprepared.

Meanwhile, much water has flowed down the river Buriganga and at the same time the city has swollen out of proportions in terms of its population, the number of vehicles plying on the roads and the buildings and other physical infrastructures constructed on it. But all this has happened in a chaotic fashion.

Strangely though, we often try to pass

this bulging of the city for growth knowing fully well that all kinds of quantitative growth are not a sign of development. And this basic weakness in this city's physical infrastructures gets exposed every time a downpour or a flood hits it. Thank God, the city dwellers' woes have so far remained limited only to floods, downpours and occasional storms or cyclones.

One shudders to think what would have happened had the city ever been struck by an earthquake comparable in intensity to the one that jolted southwest China in the early part of last month, or the one that shook central Italy in April this year. Even these resourceful and well-managed countries were at a loss in the face of such calamities. Just think of our own state of preparedness against such eventualities. It is least said the better!

Leaving aside the issue of earthquake, let us again turn our attention to the overnight downpour that threw the city-dwellers into a state of great distress. The first thing we noticed, and which was well reported in the media, was the picture of a capital city that has a poor drainage system to get rid of the waters that accumu-

lates after a heavy rain or a flood.

The dislocation in communication, the scene of the pedestrians and different kinds of vehicles trying to reach their destinations braving waist-deep rainwater, and the commuters remaining stranded at different places, were just the tip of the iceberg. How the rain brought the city to a standstill rendering the offices and workplaces without work was only a minor part of the story.

In fact, the full picture of the havoc and the extent of the damage caused by the torrential rain became clear in the days that followed. We are now gradually coming to know how the wholesale markets had to pay dearly for establishing their business in a city that has been growing blindly. The damage done to the goods kept in the submerged warehouses in different parts of the city amounted to at least one billion taka, claimed a leader of the Bangladesh shop owners' association.

The owners of the submerged stocks of food grains at the Muhammadpur agricultural commodity market have been compelled to sell their rice stocks damaged by rainwater mixed with dirty and stinking water from the city's drains at a throwaway price in a desperate bid to recover as much of their capital as possible. If truth be told, they will be able to get back only a negligible portion of the investments they had made in the business.

Meanwhile, many traders of these submerged markets have gone broke. Who is going to compensate for the damage sustained by these traders for no fault of their

own making? Have the city authorities any satisfactory answer to this question?

The irony is that similar damage to the citizens' properties and loss to the capital of the businesspeople occurred in the past, too. But those tragedies could hardly wake up the authorities from their eternal slumber.

As a consequence, during all these years the city has been getting submerged under water in times of sudden visitations by natural calamities like cloudbursts or floods, to the utter dismay of its citizens. Are the authorities in charge of the city still thinking that they will be able to survive the next flood or torrential downpour in a similar fashion?

It is not only that the city's capacity to stand the mounting pressures on its dilapidated infrastructures have been stretched to their limits, the limits of tolerance of its population have also reached their breaking point. The latest cloudburst should be taken as a warning for the city authorities.

Things have come to such a pass that the people may not remain calm and blame only Nature and their fate for all the sufferings they have to face during such calamities in the future in this city. For they have already started to ask disturbing questions about the role of the city authorities in such times of distress. So they must start work now to develop the city's drainage system and enhance its level of preparedness to face such emergencies in the future.

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Making right to information laws effective

The RTI Act was embodied after an arduous struggle by the civil society, media, NGOs and human rights organisations. But it will bring no benefit to the people unless the RTI laws are implemented, creating wider awareness among the people regarding their right to information and sensitising them to exercise it judiciously.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE much-awaited Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 has come into full effect from July 1, aiming to ensure people's right to information and to establish good governance in government offices and NGOs, thus increasing transparency and accountability.

The president appointed M. Azizur Rahman, a retired secretary, as the chief information commissioner (CIC), while former secretary Mohammad Abu Taher and Prof. Sadeqa Halim of sociology department of Dhaka University were appointed as the two commissioners from a panel of six persons earlier nominated by a selection committee.

The RTI Ordinance was originally promulgated by the caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed on October 20, 2008, and was ratified by the new parliament on March 29 this year. The president signed it into an act on April 5, and a gazette notification to that effect was published on April 6.

Though it is mandatory for every government office and NGO to depute one official to their "information delivery unit," who will be basically responsible for providing people with the information within 20 days of receipt of application from them, no such initiative has been taken as yet.

The most frustrating part of it is that the government has neither framed any rules nor given an office and staff for the newly formed information commission, though the law was enacted on April 6 with retrospective effect from October 20, 2008.

Many people are doubtful about the sincerity of the officials who have been assigned to provide information to people, as the officials are accustomed to acting as a barrier between the government and the people because of their bureaucratic background.

Therefore, the information commission should make it clear that aggrieved members of the public can seek enforcement of their "right to know" only through it. It will also be a trial for the commission, how best it can perform in a deep-seated culture of

official secrecy.

Though the RTI started its official journey after enactment of the Act on April 6, no move is seen as yet to equip the government offices with information delivery units in line with the law, though setting-up of such units within 60 days of enactment of the Act is mandatory. It is crucial for government functionaries to be well-equipped to cater to the people's need for information if the RTI is to be effective.

According to the UK's freedom of information laws, anyone of any nationality, living anywhere in the world, may ask for information held by more than one hundred thousand public authorities and other designated non-governmental organisations in UK, and expect an answer within 20 working days, usually free of charge.

Most of the central government departments in UK are well geared up with a mass of easily accessible information already on their websites. India has also implemented its RTI laws by successfully creating an information bank.

It is a commendable development that the government has finally enacted the RTI Act-2009, which meets one of the long-standing aspirations of the people. But implementation of the RTI laws remains a big hurdle, as a change in the mindset of all the government functionaries is needed to provide people with information affecting their lives and living.

The experts recommended that the process of empowering people through the RTI Act should start at grassroots level by

providing them with all the information they need. The recommendation came from a two-day conference jointly convened by the RTI Forum and Manusher Jonno Foundation, which was attended by the experts from UK, Mexico, New Zealand, India and Pakistan.

The RTI Act was embodied after an arduous struggle by the civil society, media, NGOs and human rights organisations. But it will bring no benefit to the people unless the RTI laws are implemented, creating wider awareness among the people regarding their right to information and sensitising them to exercise it judiciously.

RTI and good governance are intertwined aspects of the same factor, i.e. a driving force in democracy. So, the RTI Act bears significance for a country like Bangladesh, where the people have been struggling to strike a balance between administrative transparency and accountability and their access to information.

A culture of seeking information must be developed in the society for effective implementation of the RTI law. In a country like ours, with a high rate of illiteracy, RTI will have a very little impact if the common people are not acquainted with the procedures of seeking information. The information commission, media, human rights organisations and other stakeholders can play this vital role by arranging campaigns to educate common people on how to exercise the right judiciously.

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Barack W. Bush

The biggest difference of all is this: Bush, in his first six months, inherited a dominant superpower, a booming economy, and a relatively peaceful world. Obama inherited the worst financial disaster since the Depression. So even if he meets W. somewhere in the middle, Obama may not be doing too badly.

MICHAEL HIRSH

IT'S the difference between politics and governing -- more a chasm than a difference, really. Often, after a vociferous campaign denouncing his predecessor's policies, a new president finds that not all of those policies are so terrible when viewed from the Oval Office.

During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower criticised Truman-style containment as meek. By six months into his presidency, Ike had embraced containment as the only practical way of dealing with the Soviets.

In 1992, Bill Clinton belittled George H.W. Bush for botching the economy. Soon after his inauguration Clinton lamented that he was becoming an "Eisenhower Republican" as he pushed through a tax increase. George W. Bush famously despised his predecessor and tried to be the un-Clinton in his first term, especially on foreign policy. By his second term Bush was practicing a very Clinton-esque brand of centrist diplomacy around the world.

Somehow people expected something different from Obama. The man was a political phenomenon, a historic presi-

dent, and Bush had left office with historically low ratings. Obama did seek to erase Bush's legacy even faster than Bush had tried to do with Clinton, repudiating W's policies even as the latter sat on the podium listening to Obama's inaugural address. But a little more than six months in, with his approval ratings now hovering around where Bush's were in late July 2001, the Obama administration is beginning to resemble the Bush team in more ways than you might think.

It's not just a question of converging poll numbers; we are starting to see converging policy positions as well.

Consider: Obama wants to close Gitmo but can't seem to get around to it. He's facing down North Korea and getting into bed with China. He's followed Bush's economic bailout plans pretty much move for move, except for the stimulus.

He's got a Supreme Court nominee who sounds unempathetically like John Roberts at her confirmation hearing. And after months of fruitlessly awaiting an answer from Tehran on engagement,

Obama is now being forced to adopt an almost neocon view of Iran's protest-

wrecked government as illegitimate. (If he doesn't, what does that say to the protesters and their liberal supporters?)

The eager young president who came into office seeking foes to engage is finding that he has almost no one to talk to except for the old stalwarts that Bush liked to meet. Oh yeah, and both Bush and Obama have dug deep fiscal deficits.

Even in areas where Obama has consistently sought to repudiate Bush, the new president seems to be retreating back into a murky Bush-like world. Obama talked a lot about becoming the green president, but his climate and energy plan is beginning to resemble the giant fish in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, chewed to the bone as it makes its way through the House and Senate. Many environmentalists are disappointed.

By sitting down with nearly every interest group known to man and making concessions to every stakeholder the final bill that passed the House was seen by critics as watered down that it might do more harm than good in some areas. Obama's climate czar, Carol Browner, once called Bush's "the worst environmental administration ever." Fair enough, and at least Obama meets with everybody while Bush spent most of his eight years catering to the energy lobby and shelving climate change.

But how much difference will Obama really make in the end, even if he's starting from the left, not the right? He's got a Supreme Court nominee who sounds unempathetically like John Roberts at her confirmation hearing. And after months of fruitlessly awaiting an answer from Tehran on engagement,

Obama is now being forced to adopt an almost neocon view of Iran's protest-

changes. Obama is so ready to compromise that it's easy to forget what a dominant majority he has in both the House and Senate.

In the health-care debate, for example, the president has signaled he's willing to give up the "public option" -- a government-run rival insurance plan -- even though some economists think that may be the only way to rein in the private insurance industry's runaway costs.

Bush, remember, also tried to do a lot at once, even before 9/11. In his first eight months he talked about rolling back what he saw as 50 years of liberal influence -- internationalism abroad, judicial activism at home, a progressive tax code. Obama may have spread himself too thin as well, even if it's on the other side of the ideological spectrum.

There are still major differences between them, of course. Bush staked out a hard-right agenda and then tried to strong-arm the country into following it; Obama headed for the pragmatic centre almost immediately upon taking office.

The biggest difference of all, of course, is this: Bush, in his first six months, inherited a dominant superpower, a booming economy, a budget surplus, and a relatively peaceful world. Obama inherited the worst financial disaster since the Depression, the worst recession since World War II, two wars, and the vast fiscal hole Bush left him. So even if he meets W. somewhere in the middle, Obama may not be doing too badly.

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