

Saga of judges' sacking

An important lesson for future guidance

THE order of sacking of two judges last month, and rescinding it very soon after it was issued, highlights the slipshod manner that the administration had adopted in handling the matter, not to speak of its predilection for disregarding procedures and rules laid down for the purpose. It is just as well that the mistake was realised and corrective measures taken just in time which helped avoid an awkward situation and the legal embarrassment that might have followed.

We are surprised by the procedural flaws that were adopted in the matter. It is difficult for us to believe that the advisor had initiated the file, given that in their advisory role the advisors do not have any administrative jurisdiction. One fails also to rationalise how the file that, as far as we understand, should have been initiated by the ministry of law, was not seen by the law minister at all, as he avers, and was sent up the channel, right up to the president for approval.

We do not know how one can justify the flaw that has caused so much embarrassment to the government that of overlooking the role of the supreme court by not seeking its recommendation as required by the relevant rules regarding postings, transfer appointment and dismissal of judicial officers. Are we to understand that the two top bureaucrats of the law and establishment ministries were ignorant of the requirement? How is it possible, by the same token, that it missed the scrutiny of the staff at the PM's secretariat altogether? To say the least it was a very frivolous and inept manner in which a decision on an important and sensitive matter was reached.

And it is only because of the ham handed and hasty way of handling the issue that the two highest offices in the country, that of the President and the Prime Minister, have been brought into unnecessary controversy.

The matter is perhaps unique and we cannot recall another like it; certainly all the relevant government functionaries must take lessons from it to avoid embarrassment in the future.

One must take note of the fact that it has not only underlined the upshot of procedural flaws, the incident has also brought to the fore the susceptibility of the highest executive to bad advice.

We feel that while it put the PM in a vulnerable position it also has conveyed a bad impression about functioning at high levels, particularly of the way decisions are taken.

We would expect the bureaucrats, as the servant of the republic, to act in the most professional way and keep in mind that flawed advice results in flawed actions of the government.

Mayor's faux pas

A dangerous case of misuse of Bangabandhu's name

DIPAKENDRANATH Das, chairman of Rajshahi Education Board, had to leave the city under circumstances that raise a flurry of questions in the public mind. Mr. Das is reported to have exposed himself to the wrath of the city mayor by not granting an undue favour to the latter.

The most regrettable and condemnable aspect of the story is that the mayor -- apparently after failing get his daughter's grading at the HSC exam improved -- decided to go flat-out after the reportedly none-too-abiding Mr. Das. And the beleaguered man was charged with not observing August 15, the National Mourning Day, in a befitting manner! While a lot of imagination went into making the accusation against the man who had apparently stuck to a principled position, matters were made worse when the supporters of the mayor arranged a meeting to brand Mr Das as a corrupt official!

It seems that the mayor has a retaliatory streak, but what he should have been introspective before making such an unjustified request. And what is of even greater concern is the attempt to divert everybody's attention from the matter at hand by saying that Mr. Das had not done enough to observe August 15.

Indeed, using Bangabandhu's name to serve personal or group interest has become something of a pastime lately. A section of ruling party activists used August 15 to collect donations from people which actually amounted to extortion in certain cases. The prime minister and the Awami League should wary about such indiscretion and prevent AL activists from doing anything that could only tarnish his image. It is also a question of upholding the principles that Bangabandhu stood for all his life. Extortion, manipulation and coercion are things that even unwittingly allowed could damage party's image.

The hazards associated with overlooking or acquiescing in such strident political activities are too many. Obviously, if misdeeds are sought to be sanctified in the name of Bangabandhu, it is the rule of law that is a casualty. An individual may stoop low in the mistaken belief that he could do as he wills, but a political party, with all its commitment to the people and a mandate for change must lead the way by exemplifying respect for rule and law.

The scary crime index

To be candid, right at the moment, the food price index might look topsy-turvy but the crime index looks downright scary with no sign of improvement of law and order, no matter what high officials may say about it. Criminals continue to have an upper hand in controlling both "underworld" and "aboveworld."

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FOOD price and crime control are two prime indicators of good governance, as these two aspects affect the lives of the citizens squarely on a daily basis. Maintain a steady, low price and crime rate, and a beaming citizenry would shower all praises on the government. There is no scope for complacency or loosening the grip on the control mechanism because high commodity price and high crime rate together become a lethal combination.

It is common sense that first and foremost people need food and personal safety before they can engage themselves in anything else. Hence, they get annoyed and then angry when they cannot afford to buy daily food items, and when they get mugged and killed on the streets by criminals. The anger builds up when measures taken by the government fail to produce results. And these are the weak moments that the opposition waits for to strike in full force. Like it or not, this is politics.

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"underworld" and "aboveworld." They have literally "surfaced" from the gutters like pests in large numbers, and with full might, are ready to cut you down with choppers or handgun.

From 12 at night till 6 in the morning the whole city, from Baridhara to Babu Bazar, belongs to the muggers. Even those police brothers who take a cut from one group of muggers get waylaid by another if they are found on the wrong side of the fence.

That's petty crime. The bigger dons are more into extortion and they use unregistered cell phone SIMs to demand atrocious amounts from businessmen. Some of them operate the business from other side of the border, mostly from West Bengal. Even bankers or government officials have received such calls for money.

There have been some deaths in the recent past when people refused to pay the money. Frequent reports in the media and police books say that many of the criminals and dons are using the name of the student wings of Awami League, namely Chhatra League and Jubo League, to get out of the clutch of the police. A thorough investigation is needed to verify the claim. The Awami League will have to do something concrete very soon to wipe-off the stigma.



Held hostage by hoods.

Should Rab go ahead with the "way" it has been going after hardened criminals all these years? The "method" surely brought down the number of some listed and dangerous criminals who had killed people with no compunction. Human rights organisations do not approve of such methods and the laws of the land also have a different interpretation. But if you ask anyone on the street they would whisper in your ears "yes." Now, that is a big dilemma, isn't it? Actually what we need is a thorough overhauling of our police investigation and judicial system.

Want to know where all the muggers and killers live? Ask any ward commissioner or the police officials of any station. They might not agree that they know anyone having such records but they know each and every criminal living in their areas. Then why don't they go

after them and bring them to a court of law? Well, big question. This is where the nexus factor amongst criminals, policemen, politicians and administration guys come in. No government can meet success if the politicians, ward commissioners, policemen and government officials do not cleanse their own hearts of criminality and practice what they preach -- morality and religiosity.

A great number of people in this country talk too loudly about their devotion to moral and religious teachings, but then why do we see such unprecedented increase in crime at every level? How can people calling themselves "Haji Shaheb" mix brick dust with red chilli powder to make profit? Ask yourself and look for the answer.

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Expatriates and policy

Remittance constitutes the highest foreign currency earning for the country, and contributes significantly to poverty reduction. In spite of the expatriates' huge contribution to the national economy their influence in public policy in Bangladesh is almost non-existent.

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BANGLADESHI expatriates over the years have remitted billions of dollars to the country. The increase since 2002 has been almost four-fold. In fiscal year 2009-10, it is estimated that remittance would reach around \$10 billion, with a projection of \$12 billion in the near future.

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Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), as well as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, IMF UNDP have considerable influence over the way the country is run even though their contribution to the national economy is lower compared to the remittance from expatriates. Bangladesh is often referred to as "donor driven." Given the contribution to the economy, it could be called "expatriate driven." Unfortunately, this is not the case.

This is because expatriates live far apart from one another and cannot be easily to

organised and mobilised. The other important factor is the failure of the governments to pay due attention to them and respond to their needs. If one browses the website of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, which was established in 2001 to "ensure welfare of the expatriate workers and increase of overseas employment" one can see how little information it has.

However, the ministry maintains that it "has been rendering ceaseless efforts in enhancing the flow of remittance and to provide equal opportunity for the people of all areas of the country for overseas employment and ensuring overall welfare of the migrant workers." Words that promise a lot, but to what extent they are fulfilled remains a big question.

When expatriates arrive in the country their experience at the airport is often not very pleasant. When they depart, one notices fear, insecurity and uncertainty on their faces. Many of them have sold whatever little property they had in the hope of a better future. However, their first encounter with officials of the government may come as a shock. They feel very helpless and discriminated against. These officials should realise that the government and its executive agency depend largely on the

money they (expatriates) earn by toiling hard in remote places, and in harsh climates.

One may ask whether expatriates really would like to influence public policy in Bangladesh? Maybe not. Given their dispersed locations, and diverse preferences and interests, it may not be easy to orchestrate these into a single policy preference. Expatriates may never be able to influence policy, but it is the government that should come forward to represent, and work on behalf of, this group and encourage their active involvement in the nation building process.

First, they should be treated with respect, irrespective of their social status, and as equals compared to other citizens. They should not be discriminated by government officials, either in embassies abroad or at airports when they leave and arrive in the country. Trust must be built so that they gain confidence in the government and administration.

Second, the government must ensure that they are not cheated by fake manpower export agencies. A separate unit must be created within the law enforcing agencies to deal with such fraudulent cases.

Third, many expatriates are unskilled. The government must initiate opportunities for learning skills. An expatriate's income depends on his/her skills. Moreover, education in some sectors with high demand abroad must be initiated -- such as in the health sector. Trained nurses and physiotherapists are in high demand in developed countries.

Fourth, many expatriates are also highly skilled and working in professional organi-

sations. Their expertise may be sought in such areas as information and communication technology (ICT), health, education, etc. India has now become a superpower in ICT, thanks mostly to its expatriates. At present, a country can only flourish with investments in science and technology, and in this respect skilled and experienced expatriates can contribute significantly.

Fifth, some sectors that require huge investments, such as the energy and transport sectors, may be initiated with investments from expatriates. Electricity is a rare commodity in Bangladesh with frequent load-shedding causing enormous damage to the industrial, agricultural, and economic sectors. Joint stock companies could be established in this sector and expatriates may be encouraged to invest. The same could be initiated in the transport sector, with investments in projects such as shuttle/sky train, subway, or mono-rail.

Bangladesh is overpopulated and has few resources. The most important asset the country has is human resource and, properly trained, it would not only help to address challenges at the national level but would also open avenues for increasing remittance manifold. This would be a blessing for the country in reducing poverty, imparting skills, and encouraging investments in such sectors that involve huge financial undertaking.

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End of the line of daily newspapers?

Like it or hate it, the so-called quality broadsheet newspaper, whether continuing in a print format or not, will have to strive to make itself relevant to the changing times. If it fails it will go the way of the dinosaur -- and some have already fallen and at an increasingly alarming rate, not just in US but elsewhere too.

EDITORIAL DESK

MEDIA mogul Rupert Murdoch, head of News Corp and owner of many newspapers in the US, UK and Australia, recently announced he would soon start charging for news content on some of his websites. "Quality is not cheap," Murdoch was quoted as saying in mid-August.

The announcement by arguably the world's most powerful media mogul is the latest move by those in the US newspaper industry attempting to deal with print media's declining advertisement and sales revenues. Ads have melded in large numbers on to on-line and other media as advertisers try to reduce expenditure and zoom on to more specific target audiences, hurting newspapers in particular, the purveyors of general news.

The phenomena is being played out not just in the West but also in Asia, Thailand included. Younger generations tend to read free news on the Internet, raising the vital question as to whether the death of general

quality newspapers is imminent.

At about the time of Murdoch's announcement, the July/August issue of Columbia Journalism Review warned: "Today we face the prospect of, at least in term of serious journalism, going from something to nothing."

The magazine, published by Columbia University's prestigious Graduate School of Journalism defended the relevance of quality corporate newspapers by stating: "[N]one of the innovations thus far has produced the kind of public-service journalism that our newspapers, at their best, still manage to deliver [...]"

"Yes, newspapers behaved for decades like arrogant monopolists. But they also have been an increasingly lonely bastion for serious journalism [...]. We need professional journalism. It doesn't have to be delivered on paper; it need not be produced by omnibus newsrooms with twelve hundred reporters and editors; and it can surely be complemented by amateur efforts," the editorial stated, adding that it nevertheless must be done by people who

have time and commitment to painstaking work -- something that cannot be done in spare time.

Not everyone in US thinks those in the industry know how to deal with the crisis, however.

"Journalists are not wrong to think that the field of journalism has a unique social value. But as many in the corporate press are understandably focused on whether their particular jobs will be saved, these folks may be exactly the wrong people to explain what's going to happen to media business," wrote Peter Hart a director at Extra, a quality non-profit Media Watch magazine based in New York.

Like it or hate it, the so-called quality broadsheet newspaper, whether continuing in a print format or not, will have to strive to make itself relevant to the changing times. If it fails it will go the way of the dinosaur -- and some have already fallen and at an increasingly alarming rate, not just in US but elsewhere too.

Trying to make itself relevant does not mean 'tabloidising' itself. Instead it should redouble its efforts to produce quality journalism distinguishing itself from other forms of media. Quality investigative reporting requires time, commitment and brains. But together with better editorial, analysis, and commentaries, newspapers may hope to remind the public of their relevance and how they assist people to making sound political, social and economic decisions and to put things in con-

text.

These are invaluable and an essential prerequisite for any democracy to thrive. Print media must be aware that while it cannot compete in terms of speed with other news media, it has the ability to add value and depth rather than delivering knee-jerk reactions.

Greater commitment to the public for support and less reliance on advertisers is also crucial to assuring the public that newspapers are not lap dogs of advertisers and major shareholders, and are relevant in the twenty-first century.

If what they offer is in the end deemed irrelevant by the public and no better than what exists already for free on the Internet, then it's time to bow from the stage.

Some critics wonder whether Murdoch would succeed in charging for on-line news content that may not be unique. The Murdoch-owned The Wall Street Journal charges fees and is a success, due to its specialised readership and expert content.

However, if most general newspapers do become extinct, both on and off-line, society may become more fragmented and weakened as people turn to increasingly specialised news. Society without commentary and in-depth news and analysis in the general discourse, may end up decimating itself into small pockets of people hardly relating or feeling empathetic to one another.