

PM's stern warning

Lawmakers should help governance, not harm it

THE prime minister's exhortations to her party MPs to refrain from patronising tender manipulation and extortion are certainly an expression of her deep concern over the issue. Similarly, her warning that wrongdoings would invite stern action from the government is an indication of how critical the situation has become. We believe her concern couldn't have come a day later as reports of Chhatra League activists taking control of tenders continue to pour in.

We fully share her views on the issue of MPs exerting influence on the bureaucracy to extract undue advantages for the ruling party activists. There is absolutely no doubt that the ruling party's image gets badly bruised if its supporters engage themselves in illegal activities like extortion and tender hijacking. The prime minister very rightly felt the need for doing something to rein in the errant MPs. However, mere exhortations are not really enough, as we learned many times in the past. What is needed is examples that can lend an aura of credibility to the prime ministers' stand. No wrong doers should be spared because of her/his political identity. So, identify, expose and punish the lawbreakers working in the guise of lawmakers! This is a task that would require a clear and strong commitment to weeding out the elements that bring bad name to the party and weaken governance.

The ruling party has to go beyond the routine course of condemning the criminal activities. The arguments put forward by some MPs in the AL parliamentary party's meeting to support tender manipulation appear to be bizarre. It seems some of the party leaders are convinced that they can grab tenders only because their political adversaries did so when they were in power! The lesson to be learned from the meeting is that certain MPs and political leaders still have the grab-it-all mentality, which can be disastrous for the party itself.

The ruling party should have its own version of intelligence that will let the leaders know where things are crossing the limits of acceptability and who are responsible for it. They can also instruct the police and the civil administration not to be influenced by any the MPs and their followers seeking undue favours. Such words of assurance will boost the law enforcers' morale. The prime minister's thoughts, based on a correct assessment of the situation, must now be translated into concrete action to clear her party of the grabbers and looters.

JS move to curtail MPs' advisory role

A welcome development

THE Jatiya Sangsad (JS)'s passing of the Local Government (municipality) bill on Monday has come with a welcome feature. That is about rejecting the JS committee's recommendation to make lawmakers advisers to the municipalities. Through this bill the JS has brought in sharper focus the exact responsibilities of a Member of Parliament (MP) in the legislative assembly. We commend the JS move.

The recommendation that the MPs would advise the local government bodies like the municipalities was not only one of defocusing the appropriate role of a lawmaker in parliament, but also amounted to interfering with the powers and functions of the local government bodies. In a similar fashion, the other recommendation of the same JS committee that the MPs from the metropolitan constituencies would advise the city corporations does also deserve to be voted out in parliament. Because, the very idea that a lawmaker should get involved affairs of the local government bodies was a counterproductive one. We are happy to this coming to an end.

Under the controversial Upazila Parishad Act the legislators were vested with an advisory role vis-à-vis Upazila Parishad chairmen. The Upazila Parishad chairmen have already registered their opposition against this provision. Their resistance to this provision is understandable since the advisory role of the MPs has also been made obligatory for Upazila chairmen through this Act. After the bold move of the Jatiya Sangsad in the case of the Local Government bill (municipality), we hope the same principle will apply in the case of the Upazila Parishads. This will go a long way to strengthen the local government institutions.

It is only natural that in a parliamentary form of government, lawmakers should be concerned about the well-being of their constituents. But at the same time, they cannot be forgetful of the fact that there are also various elected public representative bodies to perform their tasks within their own, well-defined jurisdictions. So, unnecessary intrusion into one another's area of work far from helping things does only complicate matters. In the circumstances, in order to avoid overlapping as well as conflicts of interests, it is advisable that a line is clearly drawn between the responsibilities of the MPs within their respective constituencies and those of other elected bodies like the local government bodies.

The lawmakers should better concentrate their roles in framing laws in parliament and overseeing the activities of the government through the parliamentary committees created for the purpose. That would serve their constituents best and also help the local self-government system discharge its responsibilities better in the greater interest of the participatory democracy.

Reforming RAJUK

Unfortunately, this is the state of affairs prevalent not just in Rajuk but across the industry, and it is this mentality that has to change if reforms are ever to have their full effect.

F. KABIR

THE 2010 Doing Business report jointly published by the World Bank and International Finance Corporation ranks Bangladesh at an unenviable 118 out of 183 economies in dealing with construction permits. However, we do not really need an indicator to tell us how poorly the Rajdhani Unnayan Katnipokkha (Rajuk), Dhaka city's building authority, operates.

Most businessmen have probably experienced Rajuk's inadequacy firsthand while trying to get a construction permit for building their factory or warehouse. Often, people go ahead and start building without going through the proper approval process, side-stepping safety and environmental requirements.

Getting a construction license in a developing economy is often the most challenging aspect of doing business because the approval process is too cumbersome or the oversight too lax. Rajuk is infamously guilty on both counts for its inefficiency and bureaucracy. The Doing Business report estimates that on average it takes eight months to get a construction permit in Bangladesh. Compare that with Singapore where it takes 25 days or Ethiopia where it takes 60 days, and you

can benchmark how inefficient we are. It is all the more ironic, given that Rajuk's Citizens Charter stipulates a 30-day time limit in issuing building permits.

Rajuk is a large organisation in terms of its capital input and activities but its administrative structure, technical capacity, planning and coordination do not support the scale at which it is working. The organisation loses efficiency often because of corruption and a lack of inter-departmental coordination. Projects take so much time to implement that feasibility studies lose their value and, as a result, many of the otherwise valuable projects are either finally discarded or embroiled into endless litigation.

What makes Rajuk the 118th "best" place to get a building license? How can this change?

Primarily, Rajuk lacks the technical capacity and skilled manpower to review building plans. It has not been able to control the development of the city as per its plans. In fact, it has failed to finalise the city's master plan in 13 years, and the Bangladesh National Building Code is still waiting for legal status. However, the Ministry of Housing & Public Works has recently passed a very comprehensive version of the Building Construction Act in 2008, although experts doubt Rajuk's

ability to implement it.

Rajuk can strengthen its planning functions through training and development activities, recruitment of skilled staff, in addition to process automation. It can also simplify its clearance process by putting up digital versions of its maps on the web and enabling online submission of drawing plans. These two measures can reduce the scope for errors and the back and forth of papers between architects and Rajuk officials. Moreover, this would eliminate the need for middlemen, while perhaps give some meaning to the highly publicised "Digital Bangladesh" initiative.

Secondly, Rajuk's organogram has not been updated since 1987. The original 5-member cell may have grown into a 30-member cell over the years with no clear demarcation of responsibilities. If you follow an organisational structure set 22 years ago with no subsequent reform there will obviously be mismanagement. That said, Rajuk should quickly draft an organisational restructuring plan and process it for approval in the relevant ministries. Unfortunately, this may not come about on its own as Rajuk's culture is not oriented to service delivery and its officers are not proactive in their approaches.

Rajuk is mismanaged as it is. Couple this with the need to coordinate with 12 other government agencies to get a single building approval and you can picture the pandemonium. To address the issue of inter-departmental coordination in 2007 Rajuk introduced a single window

approach to procedures related to obtaining a building permit.

An approving panel consisting of representatives from the relevant agencies, such as the Department of Environment, Fire Department etc, was scheduled to meet every two weeks to discuss cases. However, this did not work out. The different agency representatives simply would not show up to these meetings and applicants still had to visit each agency responsible for different parts of construction approval separately due to inconsistencies in legislation. It is imperative that Rajuk develop a viable framework for coordination with other government agencies and prioritise strengthening its legal section.

Reforms in Rajuk are essential; both to better protect the public and to create an investment climate which is conducive to business activities. The trouble is that while it has the funds and resources to carry out many of the aforementioned reforms, the need to serve specific vested interests of individuals within the organisation means that few of the changes actually take place.

Unfortunately, this is the state of affairs prevalent not just in Rajuk but across the industry, and it is this mentality that has to change if reforms are ever to have their full effect. The only way to mitigate this is through strategic interventions that ensure the engagement of appropriate stakeholders to design reforms that will actually work.

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Evaluating the 1962 education movement

Two chief characteristics of the '62 education movement are: first, the movement was initiated by the students alone without any outside influence and second, the central student leaders could not foresee that such a huge movement, based on academic problems faced by the students only, was possible.

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

THE students' movement against the Sharif Education Policy declared by the then Pakistan government ended on September 17, 1962. I am happy that I participated in that movement for a pro-people education policy as one of the organisers in the capacity of general secretary of the Dhaka College Student's Union, and that, this September, as a member of the national education policy formulation committee I, along with other members, could submit the report to the government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed that the report be placed in the website to further elicit public opinion within September 30.

Since the establishment of Pakistan, anarchy in the education sector was a common feature as the central government showed a step-motherly attitude towards East Pakistan. The number of educational institutions decreased and the dropout rate increased within a short time. Prior to partition of the subcontinent, East Pakistan was much ahead of the then western part of Pakistan. In 1947-48 the number of primary schools in East Pakistan was 29,633, which came down to 26,000 within a span of 5 years.

Martial law was promulgated on October 7, 1958 and Ayub Khan became self-appointed president of Pakistan and chief martial law administrator. On December 30, the government formed a

committee headed by the education secretary, and Ayub's one time teacher at Aligarh University, SM Sharif. In the 11-member commission, 4 were from East Pakistan.

Some of the features of the Sharif Commission report, which was published in 1962, provoked a student's agitation in East Pakistan. To mention a few among them: (1) Urdu should be made the language of the people of Pakistan, (2) English should be made compulsory from class VI, (3) To introduce a lingua franca for Pakistan, Roman script should be introduced, and for that Arabic should be given priority, (4) Education should not be available at a cheaper rate, (5) There is reason to see investment in industry and education at par, (6) The concept of free primary compulsory education is utopian, (7) We emphatically recommend that the 2 years' degree course should be upgraded to 3 years for improvement of quality at the higher education level.

Students reacted sharply to the above stated features. They pointed out that the door of education had been closed to the poor and low-income people. The very connotation of "investment in education" triggered a sharp response from the students. Action committees and sub-committees were formed in many institutions to protest against the introduction of English as compulsory subject and increase of the duration of the degree course from 2 to 3 years.

The agitation programme was started by Dhaka College students. Higher Secondary Certificate examinees who considered the new English courses as an extra burden, also participated in it. Sporadic strikes and abstention from classes continued throughout this period. Students of national medical institutions also resorted to movement, which included hunger strike. The students' movement took a new turn on August 10, when college students assembled in a meeting in Dhaka College. Quazi Faruque Ahmed, General Secretary of Dhaka College Students Union, convened and presided over the meeting.

There was no link between the central leadership of student's organisations prior to this meeting. This meeting formed the link. The meeting announced a general strike by students throughout the province on August 15. As a follow-up, a sit-down action programme in front of the Secretariat was also announced. A series of meetings were held in between August 15 and September 10 at the historic Amtola in the Dhaka University Campus.

The previously formed "Degrees Students' Forum" was renamed "East Pakistan Students' Forum." On September 10, a meeting was held at the Dhaka University Cafeteria, where almost all the colleges of the city were represented. The meeting withdrew the sit-down strike but announced a hartal on September 17. Street corner meetings, processions, and meetings with different organisations and associations were held to make the programme a success.

Students started picketing from early morning on September 17. Provincial Minister Hasan Askari's car was set on fire by the students. In the morning, a contingent of policemen chased demonstrators from Sadarghat to Nawabpur

railway crossing. By 9 a.m., Dhaka University campus was packed with students from the school and colleges of Dhaka city. News spread that the police had opened fire in Nawabpur road. A huge procession was brought out soon after that.

The procession had entered Abul Gani Road crossing near High Court when police fired at it. A student of Nobo Kumar High School was killed and many others were seriously injured. The firing infuriated the processionists, who were not only students but also workers of different mills and factories, rickshaw pullers and boatmen. It is said that the '52-language movement cultivated the spirit of nationalism and the '62-education movement inculcated and infused progressiveness.

Two chief characteristics of the '62 education movement which deserve special mention are: first, the movement was initiated by the students alone without any outside influence and second, the central student leaders could not foresee that such a huge movement, based on education and academic problems faced by the students only, was possible.

However, opposition leader Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, who came to Dhaka from Karachi during the last leg of the movement, met East Pakistan Governor Golam Faruk and persuaded him to defer implementation of the Sharif Commission Report. This resulted in the eventual end of the movement, which was an eye-opener for the vested interests in the ruling coterie of Pakistan.

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Ridiculous demarche

It also sounds quite odd for India to make a demarche about the construction of a dam in Azad (Free) Kashmir, while it has defied all protests and gone ahead with building Baglihar dam and several others in the occupied part of the state, with a large number of big and small water reservoirs in the pipeline.

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THE Indian government's protest over Pakistan's decision to give full internal autonomy to the Northern Areas, renaming them as Gilgit-Baltistan, and the construction of Bunji Dam in Azad Kashmir is simply ridiculous. And so is its contention that the Jammu and Kashmir State is an integral part of India.

Pakistan has done the right thing to call the Indian envoy to the Foreign Office and reject the protest. That Kashmir is a disputed state is not some-

thing that New Delhi can hide; the UN Security Council resolutions calling for its settlement through a UN-sponsored plebiscite are on record; and India's first Prime Minister Pundit Nehru made a commitment to the world community in unequivocal terms that the final decision whether the state acceded to Pakistan or India would rest with the people of Kashmir.

But then he began having second thoughts, finally going back on the promise and saying that Pakistan's military alliance with the US had changed the entire context and that he

was no longer bound by his word.

It ill befitted the man who had for all his life fought for the people's right to be free from alien rule to keep Kashmiris under subjugation. The Kashmiris' struggle for freedom from the Indian yoke has cost them nearly 80,000 lives and endless misery.

It also sounds quite odd for India to make a demarche about the construction of a dam in Azad (Free) Kashmir, while it has defied all protests and gone ahead with building Baglihar dam and several others in the occupied part of the state, with a large number of big and small water reservoirs in the pipeline.

In fact, these dams have created a veritable crisis for Pakistan in terms of the availability of water. Experts even see the dangerous prospect of vast tracts of fertile lands going dry unless India is stopped in its tracks.

Somehow India's economic and strategic clout comes in the way of any

power exercising pressure to settle the Kashmir dispute, just as US President Obama's declared intention of doing so has gone awry. But there seems to be no other way of creating a peaceful atmosphere in the subcontinent but to have the dispute out of the way by meeting the aspirations of the people of Kashmir.

Pakistan must use all available options to stress this point. It should use the occasion of the forthcoming meeting of the Friends of Pakistan to highlight it. Mr Obama and many other influential leaders are due to assemble there. Prime Minister Gilani has also urged Muslim countries to extend their help in this context. Friendly nations can certainly make their contribution towards peace by making serious attempts at persuading New Delhi to give up its intransigence.

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