

Disciplining errant party elements

Top leadership must act fast

It is worthwhile to note that a verbal climate of crusade is in the offing within the ruling party against leaders and activists who seem incorrigibly set to bring their party to disrepute through abuse of power. New voices are being added to the PM's stern warning in the September 17 parliamentary party meeting against the lawmakers' indulging in or patronising acts of extortion, tender manipulation and the like. AL presidium member Obaidul Quader expressed the party's resolve to identify and discipline those who tainted the government's image. AL secretary general Ashraful Islam also joined in.

We are convinced that the issue has raised serious concern in their minds, but one notices too a degree of helplessness in them because these activities continue with impunity.

One of the party leaders has diagnosed the ailment in so many words: infighting within the party and lack of chain of command. With that kind of an insight and knowledge why is the party hierarchy not exercising their writ forcefully?

What we fail to understand is why the party has failed so far to take any action against these people when the leaders have enough reasons to believe that the party has been let down by the unlawful activities of some of their party members.

Obviously, in a situation like this mere exhortations without follow-up through deeds can only send weak signals; nothing short of manifestly appropriate action against the recalcitrant can be effective. This is plain to everybody.

We cannot believe that the AL is still in the process of identifying the wrong-doers, and we take little comfort in the statement of a presidium member that the grassroots level council, scheduled to be held in December 2009, will take action against these elements. It is the top leadership that will have to undertake moves decisively with adequate political will to set the house in order.

The process of self-cleansing must commence immediately. The party leadership at all levels has an important role to play though, not least of all to make examples of the bad eggs in the party, whose identity they know only too well. The law enforcing agencies must come down hard on these elements without fear and the public agencies dealing with procurement be instructed not to give in to pressures from errant elements.

Drive by law enforcers

Its sweeping nature causes concern

In a series of special drives on Friday, police and the Rapid Action Battalion took as many as 418 people into custody. It has been given out that the arrests were made as part of security measures related to the Puja celebrations. Reports of bombs hoaxes at some puja mandaps in the capital certainly prompted these law enforcement drives. One surely cannot underplay the threats that may come in relation to religious or other collective celebrations and observances, which is why one fully understands the need for the security forces to be in a state of constant alert. No citizen will ever be inclined to disregard any question about ensuring the security of people at any given time.

That said, though, one wonders on what credible ground so many individuals were held up on Friday night. Of course, police and RAB sources have made it clear that most of the arrestees are muggers, snatchers and addicts. The first question which arises here is if the law enforcers knew about the identity of these people, how is it that no action was taken against them earlier and why is it that in one sudden swoop they were hauled away to the various police stations? The second question relates to the basis on which they have drawn the inference that the arrested individuals are all lawbreakers and so deserve to be detained? A good number of those taken into custody on Friday have vigorously protested their innocence before the media. One of them has said he is a bus driver; another noted that he just happened to be on the street when he was picked up. We would not like to suggest that it is always the poor who are the first and only target of the law enforcers, but that is the impression which has emerged from these and earlier arrests. Indeed, we have seen it all before. In the days of the BNP-led government between 2001 and 2006, instances of mass arrests, especially prior to an opposition political programme, turned into a veritable scandal. It is surely no one's desire that the old story be repeated, which is why the authorities must go carefully into the background of the arrestees, investigate the cases against the really offending ones and let go of the rest. In fact, the authorities should rethink strategy here. The record shows that those detained are eventually freed, but not before they and their families have undergone indescribable suffering.

The law enforcers can act on suspicion provided they have a strong case to back up such suspicion. But taking people into custody at random and so pushing them and their families into a state of uncertainty and grave suffering is repugnant to civic sensibilities. The nation's expectation is that such aberrations would not even unwittingly surface after the elections of last December. Unfortunately, we are yet to be convinced that things have changed.

This government has ascended to power on a platform of change. People expect it to live up to that principle.

EDITORIAL

Speed-up administration

Administrative improvement needs planning and execution of effective policy suited to the Bangladesh environment. What is needed now is a short-term plan to speed up disposal of cases (relating to both policy and implementation).

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

COMPARED to a developed country the capability of an underdeveloped country is very limited. Bangladesh, being a least developed country, should never be oblivious to the fact that she will have to overcome lots of hurdles before reaching the stage of mid-income country. To attain this stage she needs good governance and good administration. It is regrettable that, despite the passage of more than nine months, the new government has not been able to make us hopeful about attaining its declared commitment. To a neutral observer, the AL-led government appears to be more concerned about consolidating its power without concentrating on promoting national interest. Admittedly, the administration has failed to speed up work to attain the national goals in time. In fact, the prime minister has already conveyed her disappointment and disapprobation to the secretaries to the government about the painfully slow disposal of

government decisions. Her admonishment could not bring any positive result as it is beyond the powers of the secretaries to gear-up administrative actions.

Bringing administrative efficiency is a time-consuming and difficult task. It is true that Bangladesh did not inherit a good administration in 1971. The war of liberation added a new challenge for the erstwhile provincial administration of the then East Pakistan. It took around 12 years to attain some semblance of efficiency. After return of democracy in 1991 the democratic governments in power failed to pay due attention to improving the capacity of the administration. Instead, the administration started losing its capability due to emergence of negative factors like politicisation and corruption.

Whatever level of efficiency was in the past, the bureaucracy had a neutral outlook because in those days politicians interfered much less in the administration. Somehow or other parties in power started using the administration, "not so infrequently," to either promote individual

benefit, or the party's benefit, since 1991. Consequently, national interest was deprived of due attention.

Mistrust and suspicion between the major political parties resulted in weakening of the administration. The present government did not inherit a reasonably good administration from the immediate past democratic government (BNP-led alliance), which was highly politicised and corrupt.

The current policy of promotion and appointment of the present government has become questionable. Depriving promotions or appointments, or posting on political consideration, amounts to depriving the legitimate candidates from their due. Promoting the cause of the party in position may not result in bringing efficiency or speed. On the contrary, it may further slow down the work.

Administrative improvement needs planning and execution of effective policy suited to the Bangladesh environment. What is needed now is a short-term plan to speed up disposal of cases (relating to both policy and implementation).

Among the major policy decisions lagging behind badly are export policy, education policy, energy policy and health policy. Formulation of an export policy is particularly important because of the impact of the global economic meltdown. Adoption of an education policy has

already been delayed by more than 34 years (1975-2009). Adoption of an energy policy will assist in increasing investment in the energy sector, boosting up industrialisation and increasing national productivity. A health policy will help improve the general health of the nation and productivity of the labour force.

Apart from formulation of various critical policies, the need for quick implementation of the Pay Commission Report brooks no delay, or any indefinite deferment, because such delay may create restlessness among government employees. Dissatisfaction among government servants may prove to be highly damaging.

For real success in activating the administration the importance of cooperation by the opposition cannot be ignored. Whether it is policy or matters relating to implementation the participation of the opposition is necessary to make them really effective. It is advisable to utilise the services of even the so-called politicised government servants for saving the administration from the doldrums. In this regard, let us remember the utilisation of pre-revolution officials after the setting up of the revolutionary government in China.

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Obama signals welcome change at the UN

Obama has once again demonstrated his desire to break away with the past and bring in a change in the international arena, but how far he can carry the Congress and his people at this difficult time of economic recession remains to be seen.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

PRESIDENT Obama, in his maiden speech to the UN General Assembly last Tuesday, pledged a new willingness to work with the global community, and urged them to set aside "an almost reflexive anti-Americanism" and collectively confront the global crises. The tone and tenor of his speech were markedly different from his predecessor Bush's policy of "acting alone" and flouting the opinion of the international community. Obama sought to clearly delineate differences between his administration and that of his predecessor.

The American president underscored that his administration had paid its past dues and had decided to "re-engage" at the United Nations. He urged the world leaders to involve themselves in an "era of engagement based on mutual interest and respect." He also cautioned them that "America alone cannot solve the world's problems" and called for "new coalitions" to bridge the "old divides."

The speech covered the usual UN issues, but he laid particular emphasis on achieving a comprehensive peace

deal in the Middle East between Israel and its Arab neighbours. He called for the re-launching of the peace negotiations "without preconditions" on the two core issues, namely security for Israelis and the Palestinian right to statehood.

His goal was to create "two states living side by side in peace and security -- a Jewish state of Israel and a viable and independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory that ends the occupation that began in 1967, and realises the potentials of the Palestinian people."

Simultaneously, he would also like to pursue peace between Israel and Lebanon, Israel and Syria and a broader peace between Israel and many of its neighbours on the basis of multilateral participation along with bilateral negotiations.

A day after convening a meeting between the Palestinian President Mahmud and the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu at the White House, Obama acknowledged that the upcoming negotiations would be difficult and challenging but assured them he would not "waver" in the pursuit of peace in the Middle East.

During the Bush administration, the Middle East Peace process had become completely stalled, especially after the cataclysmic events of 9/11.

He did single out Iran and North Korea for their pursuit of nuclear weapons, which he believed "would threaten to take us down the dangerous slope," but his tone was conciliatory. While respecting their "rights" as members of the international community, he reminded them of their obligations to respect the international agreements and treaties with a view to avoiding the escalating nuclear arms race in their respective regions and beyond. He once again mentioned his resolve to pursue diplomacy and negotiations to achieve these goals, and assured them of "greater prosperity and a more secure peace" if they "live up to their obligations." Only time will tell how far this carrot and stick policy will work.

On the issue of climate change, Obama clearly indicated a major shift from Bush's policy when he announced that the "days when America dragged its feet are over" and that America would no longer be an obstruction to global action.

At the same time, he reminded the developing countries of their responsibility to reduce their air pollution without inhibiting their economic growth. Incidentally, the Bush administration had not only refused to sign the Kyoto protocol but had also actively blocked any international negotiation on the issue.

Obama's unequivocal condemnation of the use of torture received warm applause. He announced that he had prohibited this barbaric practice "without exception or equivocation," that he had ordered closing of the prison at the Guantanamo Bay, and that he had decided to combat extremism within the rule of the law.

Citing his status as the first African-American US President, Obama issued a call for respecting human rights and democratic governments around the globe. In an apparent reference to the violent clamping down of public demonstrations after the disputed elections in Iran, he said "true leadership will not be measured by the ability to muzzle dissent or to intimidate and harass political opponents at home," and said that the people of the world wanted change and they would not tolerate those who opposed their democratic aspirations.

Obama has once again demonstrated his desire to break away with the past and bring in a change in the international arena, but how far he can carry the Congress and his people at this difficult time of economic recession remains to be seen. Surely his speech did not contain specific details but his tone and tenor were positive and forward-looking. The vast majority of UN members have welcomed Obama's speech, and they look forward to concrete action on his part.

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Year-round elections necessary price of democracy

And in between those regular polls, there are those inevitable by-elections necessitated by political and personal exigencies, such as their election to a higher legislature, or even plain disgust from, and renunciation of, elective politics, etc. In short, elections are a necessary continuum of the democratic process.

COOMI KAPOOR

GIVEN the multi-layered democratic set-up by the founding fathers of the republic bequeathed, elections are never far away from the horizon in India.

If one month people across the country, with 28 states and seven centrally administered territories, are electing a new parliament, in another time voters are engaged in battling over local bodies elections in a remote corner.

And in between those regular polls, there are those inevitable by-elections necessitated by political and personal exigencies, such as their election to a higher legislature, or even plain disgust from, and renunciation of, elective politics, etc.

In short, elections are a necessary continuum of the democratic process.

Indeed, only last week the results of a string of by-elections from several states came in, with the Congress Party suffering a setback Gujarat where it lost five of the seven Assembly seats. In the central state of Madhya Pradesh, the Congress lost one of the two seats in the Assembly.

However, the Congress did not have to

wait long for its spirits to be lifted.

A day later, it felt heartened by the thumping victory in a crucial municipal election in West Bengal. Hitherto a Communist bastion, the Siliguri Municipal Corporation was wrested by the Congress in alliance with Railway Minister Mamta Banerjee's Trinamool Congress.

But a bigger challenge for the ruling United Front Alliance is set for next month when three states are scheduled to elect new governments.

After winning a surprise victory in the May parliamentary poll, the Manmohan Singh government would face a major popularity test when voters in Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh elect new Assemblies.

Being the outgoing ruling party in all three states, the stakes are quite high for the UPA.

Of the three states going to the polls, arguably it is the Maharashtra election, which poses the biggest challenge to the ruling Congress Party-National Congress Party alliance.

All along, it has been an uneasy alliance, with leaders of both sniping at each other publicly.

However, the Congress did not have to

leadership, led by Vilasrao Deshmukh, the Heavy Industries Minister in the Manmohan Singh Government, has been pressing the party high command to do it alone.

The Congress Party is not sure of its own hold on the Maharashtra voter.

If the Congress-NCP combine won 25 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the last parliamentary election in May, it was largely due to the split in the opposition vote. Now, the Congress and the NCP are engaged in a bitter fight over apportioning seats for the next month's poll.

Of the 288 seats in the Maharashtra Assembly, the Congress is loath to give more than a hundred to NCP, though soon their self-preservation instinct would cause them to reach a settlement.

Pawar has resisted pressure to merge NCP with the Congress.

Originally a leading light of the Congress Party in Maharashtra, he broke with it to float the NCP, protesting against the foreign-born Sonia Gandhi staking claim as the Congress Party's prime ministerial candidate.

But once she nominated Manmohan Singh as PM in 2004, critics argue, Pawar had no reason to keep alive his separate political outfit.

But since then he seems to have developed a vested interest in retaining NCP as a separate entity because he is keen for his daughter Supriya Sule, elected to the Lok Sabha in May from the seat long held by Pawar, to inherit his political legacy.

Indeed, Maharashtra ought to be a test case for another valid reason.

The Congress-NCP government failed miserably on the economic front.

Some two million people had lost their jobs during the five years the Congress-NCP coalition had been in power; food production had fallen by nearly a quarter in the last five years; the state was now in the grip of a severe drought.

However, the Congress Party might be sitting pretty in Haryana, the state neighbouring the national capital. In the May parliamentary election, the party won nine of the total ten seats in the state.

Despite dissidence at the top in the Haryana Congress, the regional opposition party, Indian National Lok Dal, is in a mess.

Worse, the BJP has broken its alliance with the INLD, thus virtually making it a cakewalk for the Congress to retain power in the state which has one of the highest per capita incomes in the country on account of it being a major industrial hub and a robust farm sector.

As for Arunachal Pradesh, well, as in the case of other north-eastern states, it hardly impacts the national political scene, its elected representatives invariably choosing to hitch their wagon to whoever is in power at the centre.

The Congress, therefore, cannot have any cause for worry in Arunachal Pradesh either.

But a failure to hold on to Maharashtra can sharply swing the political mood, energise the BJP-led Opposition and take the sheen away from the ruling coalition in New Delhi.

As it is, both on domestic and foreign fronts, it has not been smooth sailing for the Manmohan Singh government.

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