

Passage of city corporations bill in JS

Move should lead to a strengthening of local bodies

THE passage of the local government (city corporations) bill by the Jatiyo Sangsad on Monday is cause for satisfaction. It is so because the move came after the JS rejected the recommendations made by a standing committee of the House to the effect that lawmakers be given advisory roles in the corporations. With all the recent emphasis placed on a promotion and strengthening of democracy at all tiers of politics and administration, it is only natural to expect that local bodies, both in the metropolitan areas and across the country, will wield unfettered authority and will thus be in a position to ensure economic and social development. In such circumstances, when suggestions are made that MPs should be given powers to virtually supervise the working of such elected bodies as upazila parishads and city corporations, the question of a conflictual arrangement naturally comes to the fore.

Happily for everyone, the probability of such a conflict receding is now before us. With the House unwilling to accept the recommendations of the relevant parliamentary standing committee on the city corporations, the way should now be clear for other similar obstacles in the way of the local government system to be removed. A hint of it comes through reports of the government rethinking the recent law making MPs advisors to upazila parishads in their constituencies. The move has already triggered a wave of protest from elected upazila chairmen and members, who have rightly seen in it a clear attempt to dilute their authority and make them beholden to lawmakers even though they are themselves elected representatives of the people as MPs are. Indeed, the move to give MPs an advisory role over the upazila parishads has had a wide range of people and professions in the country riled because such a move clearly threatens to leave the upazila parishads in an emasculated position. We are happy that policymakers in the government seem to be coming to terms with reality. Once the upazila parishads are made independent, the process of ensuring a smooth and productive working of the UZ parishads can truly begin.

As for members of Parliament, their role is clearly laid down in the constitution. They will ensure a proper working of the executive branch of government; they will have unfettered authority to frame laws for the country; and they will make certain that government remains accountable to the country through the working of the standing committees. Through ensuring a full, proper and transparent working of Parliament, lawmakers will be guaranteeing a full, undisturbed flowering of democracy in the country, right from the grassroots and all the way to the top.

Our position in human development index

There is no reason why we can't do still better

BANGLADESH'S bettering the past year's performance by moving two notches higher in the Human Development Index (HDI), 2009 to rank 146th among 182 countries speaks, and we believe, bodes well for the country. We should draw inspiration from having moved up since 1980, but only inched ahead, so to speak, in real terms. Thus, there is nothing to be elated about or be complacent over, or indeed, to rest on our laurels.

Instead, we must wholeheartedly strive to reach a higher standing with higher targets set in the parameters that make up the ranking. For one thing, we are at the bottom of the other South Asian nations: Maldives is 95th in the ranking chart followed by Sri Lanka (102nd), Bhutan (132nd), India (134th), Pakistan (141st) and Nepal (144th, two steps higher than us). For the other, intrinsically, as far back as in 2003, we had come out of what is termed 'the low developed country status' and made it to the medium developed country. So, the peaking has not quite been there in about last six years; there is thus a need for acceleration of the pace.

The next higher categorisation shouldn't be too difficult to reach. The three measures -- life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate and GDP per capita -- are certainly worthwhile goals to accomplish within a specific time-frame. Among the stratagems to be adopted, one option having a strategic potential to turn things around relates to offering "a new deal" to migrant workers whose skills can help spur economic development. For this to happen as the Human Development report of the UNDP suggested, governments of all countries need to effect changes in their immigration policies and see how they can integrate these in the best interests of both manpower receiving and sending countries.

Rule of law, minister ... not 'crossfire'

And a fundamental premise on which security of life bases itself is the respect the state has or should have for the rule of law. It cannot arrogate to itself the right to take away the life of a citizen, indeed to put him to shame and embarrassment and agony, without an application of the due process of law.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT was not a gaffe. It was outrage plain and simple that Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan caused the other day. In one unbelieving instant, he left us all feeling not only disappointed but low in spirits as well. We expect things of nobler note from ministers; we crave wisdom from those the gods and the people have placed on the higher perches of life.

But none of those wonderful bits of thought seem to be making their way to our doorsteps any more. Minister Shahjahan Khan tells us, with force verging on conviction, that doing away with people in so-called "crossfires" is the right thing to do. And it is right, says he, because it will put the fear of the state in these "criminals," to a point where eventually all criminality will come to an end. And he tells us something more, which is that when conventional laws fail to deal with crime, it is "crossfires" which come in to correct the situation.

Now, a word about these "crossfires," a shameful legacy we have clearly inherited from the dark era of the BNP-wallahs and the Jamaatis. It is a simple, speedy way of handling men considered criminal in nature, not by law but by the vengeful instincts that turn powerful individuals into moving machines of terror. You get hold of a man, who may or may not be a bad man, who may or may not have committed a crime. You take him out to a field in the pitch dark of night or in the light of the pale moon and you shoot him dead.

The next morning, you are informed, very politely, that as the security forces were taking him away, they came under attack from his cohorts. An exchange of fire ensued and in the process the arrested "criminal" was killed.

The stranger part of the story is that none among the security personnel is wounded or killed and none of the cohorts of the alleged criminal is killed or wounded or detained. It has been a standard way of ensuring rough justice. And it has become a predictable affair. It used to be a scandal that the Awami League decried in its days in opposition. Once in power, said its leading lights, it would move to put all "crossfire" deaths to a deserved end.

The Awami League is in power. But the "crossfire" deaths have gone on. And now that Minister Shahjahan Khan has informed the country in unequivocal terms of the necessity of "crossfires," you can be pretty sure that all those good intentions of old will rapidly be pushed aside. That, you might argue, is the way politics works. Before the elections, you pledge to bring about change. After the elections, it is a matter of how soon you can revert to the bad old ways.

That apart, there is that rather irritating question which has now arisen as a result of the shipping minister's remarks. Are we to take his comments as just his own, with no bearing on the policy of the government on the "crossfire" issue? Or should we suppose that he has spoken for the government, that indeed the administration feels that deaths by "crossfire" are a



No more "shadowy" deaths wanted.

potent and efficacious way of handling crime?

To the first question, our answer is simple: ministers are not permitted, by the very fact of their being in office, to air personal opinions. If they wish to open their hearts to the country, they must first make sure that they resign. Else they will only be embarrassing, even undermining, the government.

To the second question, we are not sure of the answer. The government has not contradicted Shahjahan Khan. Neither has it defended him. That is a parlous position for any government to take. And do not forget that this happens to be a democratically elected government whose first duty is to ensure security of life for all citizens. It cannot afford to be ambiguous or ambivalent about the positions it means to adopt on these and other issues.

And a fundamental premise on which security of life bases itself is the respect

the state has or should have for the rule of law. It cannot arrogate to itself the right to take away the life of a citizen, indeed to put him to shame and embarrassment and agony, without an application of the due process of law. Modern sensibilities cannot be made short shrift of, for they are instrumental in the promotion, strengthening and preservation of life and liberty. Where such sensibilities are ignored or trampled on, it is wild justice which takes over. It is an invitation to disaster. If the state can kill without any questions being asked, what will prevent individuals from coming together in vigilante groups and putting a whole country to the torch?

The question is futile, the inquiry is pointless. Yet we are tempted to ask: what would Bangabandhu make of the doings of his twenty-first century political heirs and followers were he yet around?

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Germany moves to the Right

The first and most obvious change of the electorate has been the swing of the Left to the Right, which was enough for Merkel to abandon her hamstrung coalition with the Social Democrats and form a right-wing coalition with Free Democrats on November 9, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE election on September 27 in Germany gave Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, a resounding victory for her dream Centre-Right coalition. She first became the Chancellor in 2005.

The first and most obvious change of the electorate has been the swing of the Left to the Right, which was enough for Merkel to abandon her hamstrung coalition with the Social Democrats and form a right-wing coalition with Free Democrats on November 9, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Merkel's party and its allies have increased their combined vote from 45% at the last election to 48.4% at this election, enough to deliver a stable majority in the national parliament. The increase was because of the increase of popular votes for Free Democrats, although Merkel's party together with its sister party lost a few percentage points of votes at the election.

The three parties of the Left, Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens saw their combined votes slip from 51% to 45.6%.

The second shift is much more significant, according to the Left Party activists. The enormous swing has been from the Social Democratic Party to its more hardline colleagues, the extreme Left Party.

The SPD (the party of Chancellors Gerhard Schroeder, Willy Brandt, and Helmut Schmidt) saw its votes dive from 34.2% at the last election to just 23% at this election, while the Left Party secured (11.9%) and the Greens (10.7%).

It was thought that during the global economic crisis the popularity of the Social Democrats might increase. However, it seems that when the chips are down, voters seem to be turning to the Right because they understand business and markets. The Social Democrats have not been able to capitalise on the economic crisis, instead it is the Centre-Right that has been effective in responding to the crisis.

Merkel has now the great opportunity to undertake reforms in the country. She pledged tax cuts and labour market deregulation. She said: "We will do all in our power to have growth push up tax revenues."

Observers believe that Germany is heading for more dynamic, but also stormier, governance. The coalition with the Free Democrats will not be easy because Free Democrats have vowed to push their agenda -- free-market stance as top priority. Although the chancellor and the leader of Free Democrats Guido Westerwelle (expected to be foreign minister) agree on a broad direction, there are many potential flashpoints.

The Free Democrats want a simplified tax system and to cut the top rate from 50% to 35% and Merkel has promised to cut taxes, but many believe Germany cannot afford to begin the process before 2012. The chancellor would prefer to begin with more moderate tax write-offs for child-care.

The Free Democrats also want to unravel health reforms by opening up the market for private medical insurers and will be arguing against Merkel's plans to expand the powers of the domestic intelligence service. There is tension also over the Free Democrats' desire to wind back anti-terrorism surveillance.

Many Germans fear that this new government will bring in a neo-conservative revolution and turn Merkel into Thatcher.

After the polls, Merkel tried to reassure the Germans: "I have not turned into a different person overnight."

Merkel, a PhD in Physics, is known to be a cautious and pragmatic person. She will not go for extreme measures because her party and its allies lack a majority in the upper house.

Furthermore, the election has split the Germans -- between Right and Left. The combined Social Democrats and its Left allies have won 46% of the popular votes while the party of the chancellor and its allies won 48% of the vote. If the left-wing parties work together there is potential to destabilise the government.

In foreign policy, the new government is likely to be more assertive in the world. It will take a tough stance with Iran, and there is no pressure on the chancellor to pull Germany out from Afghanistan. The Free Democrats want the withdrawal of the US nuclear warheads stationed in Germany as a priority.

The new Berlin government is likely to see Nicholas Sarkozy, the French president, as its main friend in Europe. The main loser could well be Turkey. While the Social Democrats supported the Turkish entry into the European Union, Ankara may face opposition from the new government as it does from conservative governments in Paris and Rome.

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Would G-7 benefit from new framework?

It seems the United States judges it to be urgent to create a new framework in which China participates since China can no longer be disregarded when discussing exchange rate issues or measures to redress global economic imbalances -- G-7 lying in shadow of G-20.

EDITORIAL DESK, The Yomiuri Shimbun

THE meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors from the Group of Seven major industrialised nations now seems to be at a major crossroads.

At the G-7 meeting in Turkey at the end of last week, the United States sounded out participating countries over a plan to make the current G-7 into a "G-4" comprising the United States, the euro zone, Japan and China.

It seems the United States judges it to be urgent to create a new framework in which China participates since China can no longer be disregarded when discussing exchange rate issues or measures to redress global economic imbalances -- G-7 lying in shadow of G-20.

At the financial summit meeting of the Group of 20 developed and emerging

nations held in Pittsburgh about a week ago, the G-20 leaders opted to hold the meetings on a specified regular basis and designated the G-20 summit meeting the "premier" economic forum for discussing the global economy.

It is likely that the United States raised the issue of transforming the G-7 from "a club of advanced nations" into a G-4 of central players in the world economy in response to these moves by the G-20. However, four G-7 members -- Britain, France, Germany and Italy -- oppose the plan for fear of losing their individual voices with just the euro zone countries bracketed together as one.

In addition, since China essentially controls the exchange rate of its currency, it will not be so easy to get China to cooperate in international exchange rate measures or assume an appropriate share of responsibility.

Meanwhile, Japan and the European nations, which are suffering from weak domestic demand, want the weak dollar to

be addressed, because a sharp appreciation of the yen and the euro could lead to a decline in the profits of their exporters. The G-7 statement's lack of freshness reflects the compromise involved in putting it together.

The next focus will be on measures to be taken to cope with increased exchange rate volatility. If the dollar sharply slides, it could deal a serious blow to the economic recovery of countries largely dependent on the US economy. Attention will therefore be paid to whether effective measures can be taken through international cooperation.

Grouping had nothing to add. In the G-7 statement in Turkey, G-7 leaders said they saw signs of a global economic recovery, but that they believed the prospects for growth remain fragile. This statement provided little more than additional confirmation of the statement already adopted at the G-20 financial summit meeting.

Clearly the functioning of the G-7 framework is in need of strengthening and reform.

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