

Corruption a serious roadblock in eradicating poverty

In a country with a stark asymmetry of opportunities and ability, political power enables bending and twisting of policy, helping politicians to use political tools to grab the pot of gold. Corruption has invaded every sphere of our national life. In the lower rung of the government offices, the story of some labour leaders of the rank of class four employees turning into millionaires is really amazing.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WHILE speaking at an anti-poverty rally at the Bangabandhu International Convention Centre Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cautioned that none would be spared for graft practices and wrongdoings, regardless of party affiliation. Speaker of the Parliament, Advocate Abdul Hamid, who presided over the rally, stressed that curbing corruption and ensuring good governance were preconditions for having a poverty free society.

Paradoxically, we have too much government but too little governance. Good governance means setting targets, achieving goals and delivering results while working with checks and balances. The big talk in the country is endemic corruption in the corridors of power and business.

One reason why we are no longer shocked at the unspeakable corruption of our officials and politicians is because we are forced to talk about corruption mostly in generic terms. Businessmen who understand the nuances of corruption better than most people are forced into a conspiracy of silence that make it impossible for them to admit publicly how much they pay to build a road or bridge, set up a factory, construct a hotel or to get a loan from a bank.

Corruption has invaded the very fabric of our society, with the education sector becoming the latest victim. Knowledge today is an international commodity. As the world becomes frenetically competitive, nations realise the value of good quality higher education. Bangladesh can only stand on a par with the rest of the

world if its education system is strong.

Shockingly, most of the colleges and private universities that have sprung up in the lanes and by lanes of the capital city are supplying the type a education that is anything but quality education. Most of the high profile colleges, even in Dhaka city, are shedding their images as prime suppliers of national talents in different activities in the country.

The reason is that neither are the students being admitted into these institutions on consideration of merit nor can one find qualified teachers who are committed to teaching in these institutions. The rot starts from the early stages of schooling and teaching.

Disgust, or more correctly speaking hatred, was probably the overwhelming feeling in the past two weeks. The cause for this was the sickening spectacle of scam being unearthed with each passing day. Shocking lapses of the agencies concerned and unforgivable bad governance now see Bangladesh sliding into a distress zone, resulting in deaths, diseases and lost images.

The report published in the Prothom Alo on October 19 that 40 Bangladeshi workers, who left for Libya for work with fake Libyan visa and without the mandatory approval of Bangladesh Manpower and Employment Training Bureau (BMETB), are now in Libyan jail is highly alarming. The report added that after detection of the scam as they landed in Tripoli airport, they were deported to Dubai to make their way back home. It was revealed that these migrant workers had to pay Tk.2 lakh each to some fraudulent manpower agencies.

People really wonder if any investiga-

tion was ever conducted to watch the activities of these corrupt manpower agencies and bring the culprits to book. Because none of these human monsters was ever sent to jail for the crimes they committed, they could play with the lives, and loot the hard-earned savings, of gullible rural people trying to better their life after selling their land or borrowing money.

Another report published in the Prothom Alo on October 17 indicated that some unscrupulous employment agencies in the country are sending workers to Saudi Arabia with fake employment vouchers and visas. Despite the fact that the Saudi Arabian government has not been recruiting any Bangladeshi workers at the moment, some 12,000 Bangladeshi workers have gone there, as the report reveals, with such fake vouchers and visas.

It was most shocking to learn that the employment agency (Maha International) extracted Tk.4 lakh from each one of them by giving them false promises of employment. In the effort to eradicate poverty and curb graft the government has to stop these corrupt practices that not only exploit the poor Bangladeshi people but also tarnish the image of the government and damage the labour market abroad.

The world outside Bangladesh has changed so much with economic liberalisation jumpstarting the economies of many countries. But there is a disturbing corollary here in Bangladesh; scam, stunning apathy towards calamities on part of the administration, corruption of all sorts, rapidly deteriorating national infrastructure of schools, colleges, universities, healthcare, roads, power, railways and civic amenities, with consequent shrinking of investment climate.

One might suspect that there are men in the policy making cell of the government who are aping the distinguished scientist Sir Isaac Newton. Newton found that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. People at the helm of the administration and the politicians running state craft from the days of the previous regime seem to believe that "if you do nothing, nothing will happen to you."

That's the reason that the law enforcement agency deployed in Nagar Bhaban

on October 19 didn't move into action even when they saw the tender dropping process being foiled by clashes resorted to by the activists of AL and Jubo League -- its youth wing. True, the past years have seen a pathetic lack of leadership and clumsy attempts to plug the breaches with whatever one can lay one's hands upon -- bricks, wood, cloth or, more correctly, with high promises.

But rhetoric cannot fill the stomach. What the average person does care about is governance, the sort of governance that that would make a real difference to his life. Successive governments were unable to provide this and the trend, unfortunately, still continues, with ominous consequences for the nation and the ruling party. The prime minister spoke about curbing graft in all affairs of the state but administrative action to that end, even after passage of ten months, is appallingly missing.

There is reason to feel dismayed when people hear the ACC chief saying: "We have been made toothless and our claws are being clipped from our paws in the name of reforming laws." Echoing the ACC chief, the people also say that the slow judicial process is the main reason why corrupt officials, businessmen and some greedy politicians simply disappear instead of being publicly brought to justice.

A report published in The Daily Star on October 18 revealed that 42 out of 345 lawmakers never paid income tax on the plea that they do not have taxable income. Election Commission sources said that each of these MPs spent about Tk.15 to 20 lakh in the last parliamentary election, and the limit for tax free income is Tk.1,65,000.

With stunned disbelief people went through a report appearing on the same day in most of the national dailies that a lawmaker from Rajshahi, who had declared that he has less than Tk.1 lakh as annual income and is a farmer by profession, has bought a luxury mini-van costing Tk.22 lakh just ten months after the election.

While analysing the unhappy developments in the country, one feels that the worst part is that there is no institutional mechanism to cross-check facts, nor is there a requirement for candidates to



declare the source of wealth, or the increase in wealth, in subsequent declarations. The adulterous cohabitation of power and pelf is conspicuous across the political spectrum. Contrast the wealth reported and wealthy lifestyles of those elected to high office. Clearly the tip of the "benami" iceberg has not even been touched.

In a country with a stark asymmetry of opportunities and ability, political power enables bending and twisting of policy, helping politicians to use political tools to grab the pot of gold. As one looks into the new trend, the corporate concept of "sleeping partner" has a whole new connotation in the political world. As long as the real incomes, wealth and funding of politicians and high-ups in the administration remain opaque, governance will continue to suffer and democracy will remain a liability in the whole spectrum of development.

Corruption has invaded every sphere of our national life. In the lower rung of the government offices, the story of some labour leaders of the rank of class four employees turning into millionaires is really amazing. A report published in the

Daily Jugantor on October 18 indicated that Salahuddin Selim, president of the Bangladesh Class Four Employees Association and M.A. Hannan, general secretary of the said Association, have amassed huge wealth and property by dubious means. Hannan uses a car costing about Tk.30 lakh, the report said, and Salahuddin has a five storey house at Goran and a Chinese restaurant at Gajipur Board Bazaar as the report revealed. Indeed we have reached a level of cohabitation where money, corruption and unethical deal-making occupy the same bed.

Increasingly, people are joining politics to make money or stay out of jail. The point is not that we can't have wealthy politicians but the question of how they earned their wealth. Politics these days resembles a profitable business rather than a public service. With the stakes getting higher, people in the country look to the present AL-led government for strength and decisiveness.

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Kashmir without soul

The re-meshing of Muslims and the Pandits, destroyed during the insurgency, looks difficult. The Islamic identity has taken shape, reportedly more in the countryside, and the Kashmiriyat, a secular ethos, is beyond repair. The animosity among the three regions Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, may dilute but will not go. It may still remain a state of Jammu and Kashmir, but the soul will be missing.

KULDIP NAYAR

IT is unbelievable, but true. Srinagar has changed beyond recognition these past four years since I was last there. From the new swanky airport to the hotel, about 10 kilometres, there is modern construction. It looks as if another Noida, near Delhi, is coming up. Trees, however, have been cut mercilessly and familiar pavements dug out to accommodate fancy thoroughfares. Walls running along the road have been demolished and the rubble is still there for all to see. Probably something new and modern will replace what once aroused feelings of nostalgia. As I covered the journey to my hotel, I missed the old Kashmiri houses from where women with long trinkets

would peer to see the incoming tourists.

Shops are well stocked and full of customers. Too much money is flowing and the guess is that it is from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India, in that order. The number of cars on the road is many times more than before. There are traffic jams and one has to keep the snarls in mind when one plans a trip. People move freely and I saw many women on the road without burqa or headwear.

The militancy is, by and large, over. Some terrorists strike once a while. They attacked the police at the Lal Chowk a few days ago, but I get the feeling that the media magnifies stray incidents to sensationalised ones. When attacks were a regular feature, there was a curfew after sunset. Now, people are on the road at

even 11 p.m.

I did not see a single policeman on the road from the airport. Bunkers are mostly gone. I found one at Lal Chowk where some policemen stand with their fingers at the trigger of automatic weapons. Papa one or Papa two, the interrogation centres, have been closed. But the capricious detentions still take place. The biggest worry is the occasional disappearance of the youth. Incidents like the rape of two women at Shopian are rare. But whenever they take place, they infuriate the people to the extent that they come out on the streets.

The mode of search, whether of a vehicle or a person, has changed. Policemen are more polite than before and less intrusive. Still, a member of a very respectful family told me how he and his wife were stopped on the road until the helicopter of a top brass had flown over the place. A policeman wanted to search his wife but on his insistence, a woman police did so.

The anti-India feeling is there beneath the surface, and people are not afraid of saying so. However, the pro-Pakistan sentiments have practically disappeared, more so because of Kashmiris' perception of the "mess" in which the country is. Even Azadi is mentioned less and less because of increasing realisation that a

landlocked area could not think of being independent.

I found the Hurriyat leaders sober. One leader told me that they had "vibes from Delhi" that something positive would emerge. They are looking forward to the talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who is expected to visit Srinagar at the end of the month. There is an effort to have a consensus among the different parties, including the Hurriyat, before the prime minister's arrival. Mirwaiz, the Hurriyat chief, is reportedly in favour of it. State Chief Minister Omar Abdullah also wants New Delhi to talk to all political parties, including the Hurriyat. But he has also emphasised that India should have a dialogue with Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir problem.

I heard an interesting talk when sitting with the Hurriyat leaders. A young American-Pakistani told them that what had surprised him, after the span of three years since his last visit, was that Kashmir was "being assimilated by India quickly." They were embarrassed but did not want to reply to him in my presence. Mirwaiz said that they would "talk to him at some other place over a cup of tea." Born in Kashmir, this young man is a member of a think-tank at Washington. He told them that free state elections, watched by a large number of Americans on televi-

sions, had made a great impression on them. They, he said, were beginning to believe that the problem was "more or less over."

Former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah is more candid than his son, Omar, who is losing his popularity fast. Farooq says there are "paid lobbies" in the state to keep the problem alive. He accuses security forces, politicians and bureaucrats of having "a vested interest in the Kashmir crisis." He has a point when he says that New Delhi has failed to make headway in resolving the problem. Not many solutions are hawked about now.

There is a suggestion that both Kashmiris should be demilitarised, India withdrawing its forces from the valley and stationing them on its border, and Pakistan doing likewise and pulling out its forces from Azad Kashmir. This, however, is dependent on India and Pakistan reaching a settlement, supported by the Kashmiris. New Delhi will not agree to a unilateral demilitarisation, definitely not until the question has been resolved.

The problem of Jammu and Laddakh has become, indeed, ticklish. They do not want to stay with the valley. Jammu wants to join India and Laddakh wants a 'Union Territory' status. True, the Hurriyat has never tried to woo Jammu and has seldom cared for the Kashmiri Pandits languish-

ing there. Still, both Jammu and Laddakh can be brought around if they were to be given autonomous status by the valley within the state.

I have no doubt that the Kashmir problem will be solved sooner or later. Yet, too much has happened in the state in the past that makes it difficult for the old Kashmir to come back to life. Familiar symbols are dying. Sufism has been replaced by assertive Islamic teachings. Kashmiri music is on its last legs because most of the society has been forced to acquire an Islamic edge. Old crafts attract fewer artisans because there is a race to earn a quick buck. The wazwan, a string of Kashmiri dishes served at one sitting, is still there but new cooks are hard to get.

The re-meshing of Muslims and the Pandits, destroyed during the insurgency, looks difficult. The Islamic identity has taken shape, reportedly more in the countryside, and the Kashmiriyat, a secular ethos, is beyond repair. The animosity among the three regions Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh, may dilute but will not go. It may still remain a state of Jammu and Kashmir, but the soul will be missing. Hindus believe that the soul is indestructible. I pray that Kashmir gets its soul back.

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Protecting rights

Other than putting someone's rights or life under threat, can we just not ban or put tight restrictions on a political party when there is significant amount of public in favour of that. Banning or putting restrictions on an ideology that is seen as a threat to civil norms is totally acceptable.

ARAFAT HOSEN KHAN

IT has been almost 19 years that our country has been under a democracy, and I would like to point out a few rights which must be protected under this system. It is essential for every democratic country to maintain its democracy and to protect fundamental rights such as freedom of association and freedom of expression, which includes freedom of thought and speech for every individual.

Freedom of association is the individual's right to come together with other individuals and collectively express, promote, pursue and defend common interests. The right to freedom of association has been included in a number of national constitutions and human rights instruments, including the US Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as in our Constitution by Article 38. Article 38 secures the freedom of association of citizens, upon which the very existence of democracy is dependent. The right to form associations or unions is guaranteed, subject to any reasonable restric-

tions imposed by law in the interests of morality or public order.

Many social scientists argue that respect for the freedom of association by all public authorities and the exercising of this freedom by all sections of society are essential both to establish a "genuine democracy" and to ensure that, once achieved, it remains "healthy and flourishing." In this regard, they see the formation of political parties as a significant manifestation of the freedom of association. I add in this respect, not only just formation of political parties but also having the choice of supporting the political parties without any fear.

Another very important fundamental right is freedom of expression, which includes freedom of thought and speech. Freedom of thought is the freedom of an individual to hold or consider a fact or a viewpoint. To deny a person's freedom of thought is to deny what can be considered one's most basic freedom; to think for one's self. Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without censorship or limitation. In practice, the right to freedom of speech is not absolute in any



country and is commonly subject to limitations, such as on "hate speech."

The right to freedom of speech is recognised as a human right under Article

19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international human rights law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Furthermore, freedom of speech is recognised in European, inter-American and African regional human rights laws. These rights are protected in our Constitution as well.

Freedom of expression is secured in Article 39, which provides guarantee for freedom of thought, conscience, speech and press. Restrictions on the exercise of freedom of speech and expression can be imposed by law on a number of grounds: security of the state, relations with foreign states, public order, decency, morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation, or intention to commit an offence.

How are these rights protected in our country in practice? Does this concept of rights exist at all in our everyday life?

Before giving the answer of these questions let me tell you an incident which I witnessed recently. Prior to relating the incident, it would be a good idea to introduce myself in order to clear any confusion. I am a young Barrister. I finished bar in England and came back to Bangladesh with lots of energy and dreams. I was brought up in a very pro-Liberation War family as my father is a freedom fighter. I hate the war criminals and am in favour of banning the political parties that were directly involved in war crimes during the Liberation War.

On October 7, I went to Dhaka University to meet my old friends. I was having a great time with them in front of Central Library, the most happening place at Dhaka University. All of a sudden I heard a sound. I turned around and saw

that six students were beating up one student. There was blood all over the place. Everyone was shocked by the incident. There was not a single person to stop them. Later on I found out that the reason for beating up the boy was that he was a supporter of fundamentalist party. And just because he was a supporter of such a party, no one went to help him. Most of the people, except a few girls, felt it was right to beat him up.

Was that right? As we are living in a democratic country where everyone has the protected rights of freedom of association and freedom of expression through Articles 38 and 39 of our Constitution.

I am not a fan of any fundamentalist party. At the same time, I don't support the violation of someone's fundamental human rights. In the same way, I disagree with the concept of extra-judicial killing without a fair trial, no matter how dangerous the person is.

Other than putting someone's rights or life under threat, can we just not ban or put tight restrictions on the political party when there is significant amount of public in favour of that. Banning or putting restrictions on an ideology that is seen as a threat to civil norms is totally acceptable.

We don't want to see any human rights violation in our country. Instead of that we want to see a ban or restrictions on a certain so called "political party" that is having a negative effect on our society and democracy.

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