

Sincerity is not enough

PM must get to the bottom of why implementation is low

TO mark the completion of the first year of her government, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed cabinet ministers and government officials to implement the plans undertaken by the government in sincere and swift manner. That, we take it, is a sign of the sense of urgency the prime minister and her cabinet colleagues have attached to the basic issue of governance a year into a renewal of democracy in Bangladesh. In addition to exhorting the cabinet and the civil administration on a quick implementation of the government's programmes, the prime minister has been speaking to the nation on the priorities and achievements of the government in the past year.

Sheikh Hasina's address to the nation, we believe, has been rather routine in nature. She has merely pointed to the successes of the government and has studiously avoided any mention of where it has stumbled or failed to deliver. She informed the nation that the Anti-Corruption Commission was working independently, a claim that does not match the reality on the ground. Indeed, the ACC has seen its wings clipped over the past year, a point the present chairman of the body has raised publicly. One other failing, which we have already pointed out in this column, is the systematic way in which local government has been kept on the sidelines, thus impeding its efficient functioning. More significantly and quite unnecessarily, the prime minister lambasted the opposition over its role in the past, a point that certainly does little to help matters. It is our belief, one we think we share with large sections of people in the country, that the prime ministerial speech should have outlined the specifics of the 'healthy, positive political trend' her government means to inaugurate instead of stating the obvious about the role played by the opposition when it was in power.

Everything said, however, one does appreciate Sheikh Hasina's providing the country with a balance sheet of the way her government has performed since taking charge last year. Her call for a speedy implementation of policies and programmes will be echoed by the nation as a whole. There is little question about her sincerity here, but sincerity and pious wishes are not enough to get the country up and running. A credible, satisfactory implementation of policies, programmes and projects will depend on a fulfilment of some vital conditions. In other words, it is on the presence or availability of procedures, processes, support mechanisms and methods on which the success of the government's plans will depend. The government must work out a clear strategy of how it means to guarantee services delivery, what degree of manpower it means to employ for the job and how it maintains law and order as necessary steps toward policy implementation.

Additionally and more crucially, a government's performance in our times is dependent on the presence of an administrative system not hostage to politicisation or subject to excessive centralisation. In this context, the prime minister and her administration must move swiftly toward initiating and implementing administrative reforms. A mere expression of intent is not enough. Over the past three decades, a raft of recommendations has been made about reforming the bureaucracy. It is time to go back to them and update them and, indeed, get things moving again. Only that will see a fulfilment of promises.

Don't pollute while you clean

That is the message to heed

THE project to clean a one-kilometre stretch of Buriganga near Sadarghat Launch Terminal Bangladesh piloted by Bangladesh Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) is a commendable move to restore as much as possible of the beautiful Buriganga that we lost to mindless dumping of wastes and occupation of its banks by encroachers.

While appreciating the move that witnessed the participation of a number ministries, a local lawmaker and civil society representatives, one cannot be but dismayed at the behaviour of the riverside fruit and vegetable sellers who have been found to dispose of their rubbish indiscriminately into the river. This defeats the whole purpose of the clean-up drive undertaken at the Sadarghat terminal. But what can the government do to prevent the garbage throwers in absence of a simultaneous move by it to prevent dumping of such wastes into the river?

So, for success, the initiators of the Buriganga clean-up drive need to involve the community in the task. That would need an enhanced awareness campaign among the people who live and work on the banks of the river about the harmful consequences of their actions on the river. At the same time, cooperation of the major sources of the pollutants like the effluent releasing plants, the hospitals and dyeing works should be sought to make the cleaning drive produce result.

While the government needs to initiate anti-dumping measures simultaneous with the clean-up drive, it should also take care to ensure that its own dumping site is non-controversial. For the one assigned in Amin Bazar has faced protest from an environment lawyers' group that say the site in question is a floodplain and hence illegal under the law as a waste disposal ground. Such controversies need to be avoided and here again the question of involving the community arises for the overall success of such clean-up drive.

In spite of the limitations, the present move to clear Buriganga, which has become a veritable garbage yard, is in itself a good move. Now the question is one of seeing that the present endeavour is not a one-off one. The tempo has to be kept alive and to that end the coordinated approach of the ministries, departments concerned and involvement of local communities should continue. The media, the government's publicity organs, the pro-environment groups and the civil society need also keep their campaigns in force.

A decade of decadence

In my opinion, the biggest zero of the decade, however, was created in the moral sphere. The American invasion of Iraq under a pack of lies and the reelection of George W. Bush undermined the world's confidence in the American system.

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ON December 27, 2009, Nobel-laureate economist Paul Krugman wrote in The New York Times that from an economic point of view his assessment of the past decade was a Big Zero. "It was a decade with basically zero job creation," he emphasised. Other zeros he listed were economic gains for the typical families, gains for the homeowners and gains for stocks. It's not difficult to guess that Krugman was talking in the American context.

Curiously, it reminds one of the famous expression once made by ancient Greek scholar Parmenides. "Nothing comes from nothing," he said. So what possibly could come out of a zero? If an entire decade of economic policies failed to produce anything of substance at home, what did the American influence produce in rest of the world?

In so much as we lived under the glare of American supremacy, its economic crisis has sent jitters through markets around the world. Its financial meltdown has disrupted other economies, albeit not completely ruined them yet. One zero has churned out

many more zeros, the world creaking under its growing burden.

One such zero came out of the American leadership at the climate conference in Copenhagen last month. The participating countries failed to achieve nothing more than a non-legally binding document full of intentions, but no targets or signatures. Dubbed as "Hopenhagen" earlier, the conference is now being jokingly touted as "Brokenhagen."

In my opinion, the biggest zero of the decade, however, was created in the moral sphere. The American invasion of Iraq under a pack of lies and the reelection of George W. Bush undermined the world's confidence in the American system. Even after it was proven that the American president had lied to his people, the world's highest democracy couldn't touch him.

Perhaps that one zero resonates across the planet more damagingly than others. It has revealed the downside of democracy, the last citadel of human ideals of equality and freedom. If the most efficient democracy couldn't protect its people from the rise of its ruler, how should it appeal as a repository of hope to the oppressed masses elsewhere?

That one zero has also emboldened forces of evil all over the world. From despots to druglords, from tyrants to terrorists, from hucksters to tricksters, from strongmen to musclemen, it has indoctrinated them in the new faith of unilateral moral disarmament. The invasion of Iraq by the United States will go down in history as a watershed in moral delusion. Never before has truth been so blatantly invented so that a self-serving nation could satisfy its unwholesome intentions.

Not because over 700,000 Iraqis have perished in this American conquest. The Mongol conquest cost 40 million lives. Another 40 million died during the reign of Mao Zhedong, mostly from famine. Throughout history, military conquest, revolution, and political persecution have brought largescale deaths.

But those deaths were caused by causes: exploration of new frontiers, ideological conflicts and annexation of new territories. What justified the invasion of Iraq? It has been amply proven that Saddam Hussein didn't have weapons of mass destruction. It has been also proven beyond doubt that Saddam didn't have al-Qaeda connections.

Why did the president of the most powerful nation resort to falsehood? Was it to find the terrorists who were responsible for 9/11? Was it to capture the second largest oil reserve in the world? Or, was it because George Bush wanted to avenge his father's humiliation by Saddam?

All said and done, it remains the most

vexing mystery of the first decade of the 21st century. Why didn't the civilised world question the American misdemeanour? Why didn't the countries raise their voice at the United Nations?

Instead, the world overlooked the most grievous scandal, and the gyre of falsehood has widened. The American example has trickled down to encourage many other forms of mischievous behaviour. It has given a shot in the arm of notoriety across the world. From hoodlums who intimidated people to politicians who exploit them, it has set a clear precedent that there is no right or wrong when it comes to furtherance of parochial interests.

Thus, the past decade has been a period of wanton prevarication. The American economy suffered setbacks because it was stuffed with lies. Banks lied to customers, rating agencies and audit firms to regulators and CFOs and CEOs to their shareholders. And, this paroxysm of lies was justified in the name of wealth creation so that everyone could consume more and live a more luxurious life.

In 4th century BC, a pirate said to Alexander the Great that he was called a robber for doing with a petty ship what Alexander did with a great fleet and was called an emperor. For the better part of a decadent decade, unscrupulous minds worldwide have looked for that parallel.

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The president's address to Parliament

The president called for a halt to the politics of confrontation and expressed hope that the opposition would join the Parliament to fulfill the aspirations of the people and help advance parliamentary democracy in the country.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IN pursuance of Article 73 (2) of the constitution of Bangladesh, President Zillur Rahman addressed the ninth Parliament's first session of 2010 on January 4. This is also the fourth session of the ninth Parliament. Pursuant to Article 73 (3) of the constitution, the Parliament will have lengthy discussion on the president's address.

The BNP, which started boycotting parliament sessions from the second session over a row over seating arrangement, and later on came up with a 10-point charter of demands, including scrapping the decision to cancel lease of the party chairperson Khaleda Zia's cantonment residence, strengthening her security, withdrawing "politically motivated cases" against Khaleda Zia, Tarique Rahman, and other leaders, giving BNP lawmakers chairmanship of two more standing committees, was not present in the house.

In his speech, the president called for a halt to the politics of confrontation and expressed hope that the opposition would join the Parliament to fulfill the aspirations of the people and help advance parliamentary democracy in the country.

The president's speech highlighted the achievements and successes of the AL-led alliance government during the last one year in different sectors, including macro-economic management, increase in agricultural output, improvement in food security,

keeping the prices of essential commodities within the purchasing power of the common people, improvement of the primary education, increasing social safety networks, improvement of law and order situation, and enhancement of the country's image internationally.

The president said that, excepting the two unexpected challenges, the BDR carnage and cyclone Aila, the last one year ended with positive happenings. In the year, the country was freed from a 34-year old stigma through the verdict on the Bangabandhu murder case. The president referred to the initiatives taken by the present government to bring the war criminals and the perpetrators of all political murders, including those of the four national leaders, and the August 21 grenade attack, under trial.

Although the president made a clarion call to the opposition to return to the house for the sake of democracy, his speech made no reference to the measures taken by the AL-led government to redress the genuine grievances of the opposition to bring them back to the house. The sky would not have fallen if one or two more front-bench seats in the house were given to the BNP lawmakers. The AL could have easily left the fate of Khaleda Zia's Dhaka cantonment residence to the court's decision.

The government has withdrawn scores of cases filed against the ruling party political leaders during the time of the last caretaker government through administrative orders. Contrarily, out of twenty or so cases filed

against Khaleda Zia and her family members during the tenure of the last caretaker government, the ruling AL-led alliance government moved to withdraw only one extortion case against Khaleda Zia's elder son Tarique Rahman on the ground that it was "politically motivated" and meant for "harassment."

In its editorial of December 31, The Daily Star wrote: "The government, by withdrawing the cases against the ruling party political leaders through an administrative edict, has apparently given the opposition a handle to make a demand of their own that cases against its leader and her son be withdrawn. Actually, the whole thing should have been left to the court to settle if the government's intention was to uphold fair play untainted by any perceived political bias. We, therefore, believe that just as the government had no moral grounds to drop the cases against ruling party leaders without subjecting these to a legal process so is the opposition's demand for withdrawal of cases against its leaders morally indefensible."

The president's speech affirmed that the present government had been able to keep the prices of essentials within the purchasing power of the common people. Does the ground reality say so? It is a fact that the prices of food and other essentials came down significantly in the first seven to eight months of the AL-led government compared to 2008, but the rising prices for more than a month have made the life of the people, particularly of low and middle-income groups, miserable.

Even the AL high-ups have expressed concern at the price hike of food and other essentials. The newspapers of January 5 reported that, at a meeting of the AL Central Working Committee held on January 4 under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leaders expressed disappointment over high prices of essentials and

asked the commerce minister to take immediate measures.

The narration of the success story of the political alliance in power by the president, who by his deeds and independence of mind must prove that he is non-partisan, does not appear to be consistent with the essence of parliamentary system of government that we have.

Some may argue that the president of India in his/her address to the joint session of Parliament, comprising the council of states and the house of the people, at the commencement of the first session of each year makes references, among others, to the policies, programs and development activities of the government.

But it has to be remembered that the president of Bangladesh, unlike his counterpart in India, is not the chief executive of the republic. Unlike the Indian president or the British monarch, he is not a part of the parliament. Unlike the president of India, the president of Bangladesh cannot use the term "my government."

The president's address to parliament should (a) act as guidance for resolving the contentious issues between the government and the opposition; (b) ask the political parties, particularly the ruling party, to do everything possible towards developing a political culture that would contribute to the successful functioning of democracy; (c) ask the government to ensure that the people enjoy the fundamental rights granted to them by the constitution; (d) encourage the lawmakers of the treasury and opposition benches to place the national interests above narrow party interests in the discharge of their responsibilities; and (e) inspire the nation to face the challenges ahead with courage and fortitude.

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Has the EU lost its global relevance?

EU failed to adjust to the global transformation that has witnessed the rise of new emerging economic and geopolitical powers, as it has also failed to refurbish the transatlantic relationship, which for the entire second half of the 20th century was the bedrock of global governance and of Europe's role and position in the world.

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THE Copenhagen Climate Change Conference marked the end of a decade of numerous global conferences with a fairly pathetic whimper. What they underlined were the profound transformations in the global balance of power that had taken place in a decade. None perhaps was more visible than the decline of the European Union, a major "victim" of Copenhagen.

Prior to WWI and the rise of US, the region had reached its apogee. In spite of the introduction of the Euro and the expansion of the EU's membership to include countries formerly under the Soviet imperialist yoke and its still considerable economic weight, 2000 to 2010 would appear to be Europe's swan song as a pre-eminent global power, with Copenhagen as the not-so-grand finale.

EU failed to adjust to the global transformation that has witnessed the rise of new emerging economic and geopolitical powers, as it has also failed to refurbish the transatlantic relationship, which for the entire second half of the 20th century was the bedrock of global governance and of

Europe's role and position in the world.

Europe's major failure has been its incapacity to get its act together. Throughout the decade, it acted as a collection of states running in different directions.

When US invaded Iraq, EU split between the supporters, led by the UK, and the opponents, led by France and Germany. It is difficult to imagine that the simple appointment of an EU trade policy supremo, as is now the case, will suffice to bridge these kinds of profound geopolitical differences.

A less dramatic example was the split between a liberal North (the Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, Germany and the UK) and a protectionist South (the Mediterranean countries) in what was known as the 2005 "bra war" between EU and China. Further trade frictions occurred between EU members in 2008 with the advent of the great recession. The EU theoretically has a common trade policy, but it lacks a common trade ideology.

Things are calmer on the EU trade front at the moment, but that is primarily because US has stalled the Doha Round. In all previous rounds, outcomes were determined by whatever arrangement was reached

between EU and US, a tactic attempted shortly before the WTO Cancun ministerial meeting in 2003 that lamentably failed.

Today, US will need other allies in trade. Europe's inability to get its economic act together was also well illustrated in the absence of a united response to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008.

EU's most egregious muddle has been the saga of the "Constitution/Lisbon Treaty." The EU leaders proposed to impose upon its citizens initially a Constitution, which, when rejected by referendums in France and The Netherlands, changed into a treaty signed in the Portuguese capital. The Lisbon Treaty was eventually ratified on November 13, 2009. This showed how much the EU establishment had lost touch with the European public.

The decade ended in December 2009 with the farcical spectacle of the appointment of an EU president and foreign policy supremo, the Belgian Herman van Rompuy and the British Lady Ashton, neither of whom have any significant global or even European experience.

The obsolescent nature of global governance in the 21st century is illustrated by many institutions, notably by G7, where the EU is over-represented. This anomaly was partly rectified with the inauguration of the first G20 Summit in November 2008 and then with the confirmation at the Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009 that, henceforth, it would serve as the body of global economic governance.

One area where EU could still claim leadership was in the climate change agenda. But even that eroded. The Copenhagen Conference has generally been seen as a failure. As the European host, Denmark

displayed an astonishing logistical and organisational ineptitude. That in itself was embarrassing. What was humiliating was the fact that the adamant position EU leaders had taken that Copenhagen should deliver a precise deal on carbon emissions was ignored. The EU had virtually no presence in Copenhagen.

From a more global perspective, a key lesson of Copenhagen is that US unilateralism is dead; multilateralism is the only option. But the new multilateralism as it has emerged this decade and was confirmed in Copenhagen places the EU more as a spectator than an actor. Copenhagen shows that the transatlantic alliance is moribund. President Obama's time was mainly spent in seeking to woo the so-called "BASIC" countries. The "accord" that was reached had no EU input. The president of the European Commission learned of the deal in a text message on his cell phone.

The next decade risks seeing an acceleration of European decline and increasing global irrelevance. This is regrettable. For all its failures and foibles, Europe has a good deal to offer. No trend is irreversible; hence these trends of European decline and irrelevance could conceivably be reversed. This would require, however, a major transformation in European mindsets that at the dawn of the second decade of the 21st century is difficult to fathom.

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