

PM's warning against graft, abuse of power

Strikes the right chord, but would be as good as implementation

QUITE frankly, one may have perhaps lost count of the times Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has warned her party colleagues against indulging in corruption, abuse of power and impinging on law of the land. There can be two ways of looking at her exhortative flourish. First, she is probably having to repeat her directives simply to hammer home the hard truth that just as a vigilant electorate enthusiastically enthrones a party in power it can with vengeance unseat it if it delivers mis-governance. There is an element of sagacity here. Secondly, her repeated recital of warnings may have been prompted by a self-realisation that her exhortation are yet to have the desired effect. If that is true, it's all the more welcome because of an implied connotation of self-criticism.

It is our fervent belief that the underlying messages of her exhortation should not be lost on her audience, the AL MPs in particular who wear multiple hats to be in a position to use their power and influence for public good or to advance self-interest and agenda of their relatives and cronies. Hardly conscious, that in the process, governance becomes the casualty and credibility of the elected government is seriously eroded, beyond repair.

The Prime Minister's observation that after one year of AL rule the government has a cleaner image in terms of corruption may be and large sound justified. But in truth, corruption, arbitrary use of power, pushing favourites for jobs and interfering in tendering process still continue. Bribery is rife both in the lower tiers of the party and the government. And if her government could make example of exposing some of the deviants and punishing them, its credibility would have been preserved as the message of deterrence circulated into the ears of the scheming bunch waiting in the wings.

Actually, words, exhortations and good counsel however well meaning these are, would count for little when these are not followed up with action for implementation on the ground; in fact words not matched by deeds have a way of strengthening impunity culture. Therefore, in the face of directives from the highest executive of the country virtually falling on deaf ears, the overarching imperative for the AL government is this: It has to set up a potent mechanism in each ministry, division, directorate and sector corporation and task it with implementing prime ministerial directives on accountability and transparency.

UGC report on university education

Quality remains the biggest concern

THE annual report submitted to Parliament by the University Grants Commission for the year 2008 is a clear wake up call that needs to be heeded. The UGC informs us that the objectives of higher education are not being met by the nation's public and private universities, barring we would add, some notable exceptions. There is something of the ironic here. When private universities began to be set up in the early 1990s, it was expected that they would not only widen the sphere of education but would also, in a proper spirit of competition, help enhance the quality of it. While some of them may well have met the expectations, the majority have not.

The UGC has cited a whole tranche of reasons for this poor situation. Interestingly enough, these are reasons citizens by and large believe to be real owing to the experience of these past many years. The effects of political partisanship among teaching staff on education have certainly impeded intellectual growth among the young and among teachers as well. The old problem of session jams persists, with students finishing their education a good many years after they are originally supposed to. The UGC report speaks for all of us when it lambasts the unbridled consultancy which teachers have regularly engaged in, with the result that they have often failed to carry out their professional duties in the classroom. Which brings us to the pretty unsettling matter of teachers at public universities taking leave in order to have a stint or two of teaching at private universities. That such action has hampered the institutions where they are employed full time has often been ignored. At another level, in general private universities have had part time faculty drawn from other, largely public universities, teaching their students. That in turn has prevented these private universities from developing their own teaching staff, with the result that the sense of commitment which must be an essential component of teaching has been absent. In a sense, an ad hoc arrangement has often stymied intellectual growth in the private universities. It is students who have suffered.

The recent student unrest at some private universities around such issues as arbitrary fees only hints at the disorder that could set in if matters are not set right. And it is a whole range of matters that needs careful and farsighted handling. Universities dwindle into insignificance when the funds they need for research (and universities are places for constant research) are not there. Overall, the points raised in the UGC report call not only for a thorough recasting of education at the university level but also the formulation of patent policies aimed at ensuring a consistent, goals-oriented system of higher education.

Last but certainly not the least, it is time to wrest university education out of the elitism it seems to have become trapped in. For that to be done, it is important that public and private universities not be confined within the nation's capital or its radius but move outward. The UGC suggestion relating to the setting up of universities in greater Faridpur, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Bogra merits serious consideration across the spectrum. One final point: the time has perhaps come for us to revisit the 1973 University Ordinance, if for no other reason than for ensuring a greater degree of transparency about the way in which our universities work.

Beyond the state of the bonsai

Democracy has dwindled into loud expressions of illiberality; and political dynasties have seen to it that pluralism does not grow beyond the state of the bonsai.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE keep talking about democracy, about building it and strengthening it at the grassroots. That is a fine thing to do, a manifestation of sharpened political sensibilities. Every now and then we go back to the anodyne thought of how liberal we as a people have always been, of how democratic aspirations have regularly been an underpinning of our collective societal thought. And while we have been busy with all this, we have seen a whole caravan of undemocratic elements run riot over the years and come to commandeer the state in ways that have outraged the civilised and the sophisticated. Beginning with the early years of Pakistan and going up to the Ershad coup of the early 1980s, we have seen our much vaunted democratic aspirations take a bad mauling, and repeatedly, at the crossroads of time.

That has been a tragedy. The bigger tragedy has been the rise of elected governments which have swiftly made it clear that democracy is what they think it ought to be. Parties have ascended to power through the exercise of the popular ballot and have then moved towards putting in place what Irene Khan correctly describes as a kleptocracy.

In the guise of democracy, Bangladesh has been a witness to the rise of a particular class of power agents beginning to act like a neo-feudal tribe. The state has been squeezed to a point where its energy has ended up in its becoming an enervated symbol of gasping politics. Democracy has dwindled into loud expressions of illiberality; and political dynasties have seen to it that pluralism does not grow beyond the state of the bonsai.

But that is not how a state functions in these post-modern times. There must be something more, something of substance that will make Bangladesh the image of unfettered democracy its people have consistently yearned for. Minus

that substance, we are at risk of throwing up something of the kind Mobutu Sese Seko and Suharto produced in the Congo and Indonesia over three decades of corrupt rule.

With that substance, we can emulate Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Choudhry and his fellow jurists in present-day Pakistan and go on to make sure that our political classes live in patent dread of the law. If the law can make President Zardari quake in his shoes, it might well do a similar thing for grasping politicians and bureaucrats everywhere.

So here is an idea of how we can go about transforming the scene in Bangladesh.

Begin with what really matters. Go back to the constitution, to Article 70. That is one bit of it which needs to be excised if democracy is to serve as the base of parliamentary activity. If the Fifth Amendment, the Seventh Amendment and the Indemnity Ordinance have made a joke of governance, so has Article 70. You cannot expect lawmakers to forfeit their ability to think independently and simply agree to do what their leaders command them to do.

Unless you give members of parliament the right and the opportunity of crossing floors, you will not have a vibrant democracy. What you will end up with, as you have already ended up with, is democracy in the hands of control freaks. Ayub Khan had his Basic Democracy. Ayub Khan's ghost yet haunts us in these present times.

Move on. The existing provision of a lawmaker staying away from sessions of Parliament for ninety days without fear of losing his seat must be readjusted as a way of forcing parties and parliamentarians not to take the nation for granted. Have that ninety-day framework shortened drastically, to perhaps a fortnight? Boycotting MPs will then come back to work. Let them then stay out for another fortnight and then see them come back once more.



Stunted but not dead.

But then, if they seek a third fortnight of boycott, see to it that there is a provision which divests them of parliamentary membership and, accordingly, has their vacated seats up for bye-elections. Think about it: if a child at school or college can be routinely penalised for repeated absences, similar penalties can be applied in the case of MPs who have made a laughing stock of democracy by not doing what they were elected to do.

Keep moving. Bring the Election Commission, a fully and truly independent one, into the scene. It has done a good job so far of compelling parties to register with it. It has forced them to go for internal elections. It must do more, which is to have these parties make those elections meaningful. Scrap the provision for unopposed elections, especially in the case of the party president or chairperson. Lean on the parties to do away with the authority given to their leaders to

choose their deputies and nominate members to party executive committees. A party in authoritarian hands in time leads to the nightmare of a nation in arbitrary control.

The Anti-Corruption Commission and the Election Commission must be strengthened, to an optimum level, if governance is to be ensured at the level of decency. No attempt to clip the wings of these bodies and similar organisations should go unchallenged. And that is a job only civil society can do. Civil society will be shouted down or get maligned day after day by the self-serving. Pay no attention. Only remember that positive pressure groups and purposeful civil societies have across the world injected vitality into democracy. The same can be done in Bangladesh.

We rest our case.

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Realignment in Asia

With China poised to surpass Japan as Asia's largest -- and the world's second largest -- economy as early as 2010, Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has turned his attention to India for economic and strategic reasons.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE Japanese Prime Minister, Dr. Yukio Hatoyama (62), paid a three-day visit to India from December 27. He discussed the ways to expand, enhance and strengthen the India-Japan strategic and global partnership during his meeting with his counterpart Dr. Manmohan Singh. This was the 4th Annual Summit between the prime ministers of India and Japan since 2006.

India is the only country with which Japan has an institutional arrangement of an annual summit-level visit. Sources said Hatoyama insisted on honouring the letter and spirit of the agreement to hold annual summits, despite his popularity waning in the country (falling below 50% from a post-election height of 71%).

It was the first visit by a Japanese premier to Mumbai, the commercial capital, where Hatoyama reportedly met with Ratan Tata and Mukesh Ambani. His predecessor Shinzo Abe had visited Kolkata in 2007.

The Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor, which was officially launched during the visit, could prove to be a big leg-up for Indian manufacturers. The two countries are targeting some "early bird" ventures that will take off soon.

This industrial corridor will have several supporting infrastructure projects such as power facilities and rail connectivity to ports en route, and will also cover the development of ports on the west coast of India.

Along this corridor, several industrial estates, special economic zones and clusters of high quality infrastructures have been proposed for development in order to attract more investments, including those from Japan.

An MoU has also been signed for establishment of the Indian Institute of Information Technology for Design and Manufacturing in Jabalpur. Besides these, the Indian Department of Science and Technology and the Japan Science and Technology Agency have signed an MoU for a scientific cooperation program.

Over the years, Indo-Japanese relationship has grown in diverse fields. However, it is in the fields of trade, business and infrastructure that there has been substantial growth. Both sides aim to raise

the figure to \$20 billion by this year.

Furthermore, partnering in developing infrastructure and tying it up with industries in a variety of fields, such as automobiles, has prompted the Japan-India Business Leaders Forum to describe the economic relations between India and Japan as among the richest in potential,



Seeking new pastures.

both in Asia as well as the world.

As reported in the Japanese media, from 2006 to 2010, 27 projects have been brought to India Japanese FDI of around \$5.5 billion. Japanese joint ventures in India are also contributing to India's exports to other countries -- for example, Maruti Suzuki is exporting cars to various parts of the globe.

These trends indicate that there is a qualitative shift in the strategies being followed by the Japanese companies, which have started considering India as a future export hub for their products. If the same trends continue, they are

likely to facilitate more exports from India in the future.

The number of Japanese business establishments operating in India has also increased. It is estimated that there were 475 Japanese business establishments in India in February 2007, up from 231 in August 2003.

The fact that India continues to be high on the radar of the Japanese business community was brought out again as late as December 15, when the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO) released the results of their latest survey on business operations of Japanese-affiliated firms in 17 countries.

Hatoyama has reportedly proposed formation of an East Asian Community similar to the European Union. He said the vision was designed to unify the region, possibly under a single currency. He urged the Chinese president to work on promoting public support for an accord with Japan. He later said that this new political and economic architecture might include Asean, India and Australia.

China is Japan's main concern both in strategic and economic areas. With China poised to surpass Japan as Asia's largest -- and the world's second largest -- economy as early as 2010, Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has turned his

attention to India for economic and strategic reasons.

Furthermore, Hatoyama's budgeting efforts have seen a plunge in tax revenue as Japan's export-oriented economy struggles amid the fall in international trade brought on by the global economic crisis. He wants to focus on the task of rebuilding the Japanese economy and recovering from its worst recession since World War II. This visit signifies that both India and Japan have come to the conclusion that Asia cannot mean China alone.

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