

It will be a fatal mistake

ACC must not be made subservient to the executive branch

THE amendments suggested by the cabinet committee on the proposed law for the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) will lead to a hamstrung, dwarfed and dependent body which will not be able to serve the purpose that the nation needs it for to fight corruption in an effective and all encompassing manner. The Committee, which was a collection of bureaucrats, did what such groups do best, proposed that special permission be sought before ACC could proceed against fellow bureaucrats. If the cabinet approves the proposals, which it is likely to consider on the 15th, it will be making a mistake of historic proportions. Let us explain why.

First, Bangladesh needs a truly independent ACC to end the endemic corruption that now appears to be destroying all our positive achievements. Without it Bangladesh cannot provide the growth spurt that its needs to reach 8 plus per cent GDP growth.

Second, bureaucratic corruption lies at the root of much of the prevalent corruption. Keeping them out of the reach of the ACC, and making it mandatory to seek permission from the executive branch before being able to proceed against them is a sure sign of protecting the very source from which a significant amount of corruption emanates.

Normally the ACC would be obliged to report to the President who would submit the report to the parliament for review and discussion. Thus parliament would act as the oversight body of the ACC. The suggested amendment that ACC should be made accountable to the President will effectively put the ACC under the control of the executive, since according to our law the President is always to act on the advice of the PM (except to appoint the CJ and the PM).

The ACC submitted a detailed explanation of its needs with a request that their suggestions be also sent to the cabinet along with the recommendations of the cabinet committee. This is not being done. We feel that the PM and the cabinet must have access to the full statement of the ACC. This is most important.

It seems to us that the present government has not understood the real significance of an independent ACC. It is seeing it as an adversary that needs to be tamed rather than an ally that will help the government fight corruption and help to deliver its promises. A powerful ACC is a true ally of a government that wants to serve the people.

Once again, it is the BCL

Not warnings but severe action is called for

THE destructive activities of the Chhatra League go on unabated. After some very recent incidents of BCL cadres engaging in vandalism and interfering in the routine work of educational institutions, we now have news that violence resorted to by workers of the organization have forced the authorities of Rajshahi New Model Degree College to suspend admissions to first year classes. The story in this instance is similar to the ones we have come across earlier: BCL men have demanded a quota for themselves, in a clear flouting of the rules, in the matter of new admissions. As before, the rejection of such a demand aroused the wrath of these young elements, to a point where they ended up destroying desks and other property of the college. The sense of outrage we as a people feel can only be imagined.

We would like to note that the government has at every available opportunity assured the nation that whoever takes the law in his hands will be dealt with severely. The bitter truth is that such assurances have been followed by precious little action, leading citizens to conclude that beyond a mouthful of words the authorities are not willing or able to bring these elements to heel. And this failure is clearly proving costly for the ruling party. While the government has been coming down hard on violent elements that do not identify with its politics, that are indeed linked to other parties, its failure to take similar action against its own followers is giving out the bad, and quite justified, impression that when it comes to dealing with its own its professions of toughness suddenly and inexplicably go lax. Obviously, such a public impression has a corrosive side to it in that it is the credibility of the ruling party that comes into question. On a bigger scale, the wanton manner in which the Chhatra League has been conducting its activities increasingly threatens to undercut our fledgling democracy and in the ability of the political classes to bring about the change they promised the nation before the general elections of December 2008. It is giving rise to a feeling that a culture of impunity is at work and unless it is checked decisively, a dangerous precedent will be set for the country.

We would like to remind the prime minister, the home minister, indeed the government as a whole that unless tough action is taken against the violent elements of the Chhatra League, it will be the very image of the ruling party that will be damaged. The all-embracing truth in politics is that good deeds are often cancelled out by the presence of a few bad eggs in the basket. Let the government take note that if it does not put the leash on its young followers, there will be the inevitable ramifications -- and not necessarily cheering ones.

Moving forward at a faster pace

One would also have to agree with the proposal that there is need for the devolution of authority and responsibility to local governments, including urban municipal governments, to help create greater efficiency and better capacity for those intending to participate in our proposed Economic Zones.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE last few days have been significant for anyone interested in strategic economic planning. It has also re-affirmed belief that Bangladesh can move forward at a faster pace despite slowdown in our export earnings (less by 14.42 percent of the export target for the first half of the current fiscal year). Economists and policy planners have also asserted their self-confidence in the manner in which expected future courses of action have been revealed.

The official participants of the recently concluded Bangladesh Development Forum unveiled massive plans pertaining to growth in infrastructure, in reconstruction and in targets related to dredging of rivers (improving navigability in more than 300 rivers by 2018, at an estimated cost of Taka12,000 crore, involving dredging of nearly 2,400 km of waterways in 53 major river routes).

The discussion in the Forum has since been followed by a statement by the prime minister in the Jatiyo Sangshad, which stressed the government's decision with regard to a 20 year road master-plan that will include construction of bridges, roads and railway lines to create an effective and sustainable communications network.

The convening of the Forum was a constructive idea. It enabled the government to share its ideas with its development partners.

In addition, there was also serious discussion about adaptation to climate change, land reclamation, homesteads for the displaced on land raised by silt, crop varieties attuned to climate change, protection of biodiversity, etc. This was done in the context of attaining food security. Reference was also made to the Brussels Programme of Action and hope expressed that the donors would arrange for quick disbursement of funds so that the efforts already undertaken in Bangladesh could be carried forward without difficulty.

It was also stressed that the government was presently following a new energy strategy towards a low carbon path to development, which includes social forestry, green belts to create a large carbon sink, clean coal technology, nuclear power and renewable energy. It was also highlighted how 600,000 solar home systems had already

been installed; how vehicles were being converted to the using of compressed natural gas as fuel; how industries producing toxic waste were being relocated equipped with effluent treatment facilities; and how biodegradable material was being used as alternate to synthesis.

The Forum was also helpful in reasserting several other important points: that meaningful development is possible only through democracy, that there is need for effective and free flow of information, that judiciary has to be independent of the executive, that both these branches of government need to be accountable, that the Anti-Corruption Commission should be fully independent, that a strengthened Election Commission is required to hold free and fair elections in future, that there has to be a comprehensive approach in popularising ICT, e-commerce and e-governance and that there has to be equal involvement of the women in the development activities. It was pertinent for the prime minister to draw the attention of our development partners towards these aspects. We will need their help regarding capacity building in all these areas.

The discussion in the Forum should assist the government in moving forward.

One hopes that our government has also taken note of the various points raised by our development partners with regard to certain governance issues. Concern was expressed about the weakness of local government institutions and emphasis was made on the urgent need for carrying out reforms to improve governance at all levels. Participants, while endorsing the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy also suggested enhancement of the capacity of civil servants to implement projects, and the production of flawless statistics to expedite the implementation of development programmes.

We have to take the necessary corrective measures, strengthen institutions, improve urban planning and service delivery. We also have to develop institutions associated with local governance so that public sector development programs can be implemented effectively and transparently at the grassroots level. This will foster creation of an enabling environment for attracting more private investment that is required for higher growth and poverty reduction.

Bangladesh, in this Forum has stressed



Time is of the essence.

on our efforts being based on partnership. We have expressed doubts about conditionalities being attached to loans. There was reference to this both in the matter of availability of funds to fight climate change and also abolishing subsidies and complete government withdrawal from commercial markets. By doing so we have reiterated our resolve to move forward based on our own appreciation of our requirements and national priority.

However, one has to understand that management of loans or grants has a strategic component that also needs to be addressed meaningfully. I am referring here to the need for quick project implementation, simplification of the tender process and meaningful public-private partnership towards projects. This has especial relevance for the infrastructure and the energy sectors. The recent revelations of JICA, the Japanese Aid arm, about our government's dismal rate of implementation of Japanese credit, is downright embarrassing. Such an approach has to stop.

The government has informed the development partners that it would require \$9.5 billion for generating around 7,000 megawatt additional power, and transmission and distribution in the next six years. The government has also presented detailed plans on financing required for the projects, and focused on the plan for cross-border cooperation in the power sector. This has been a strategic initiative.

Grid connectivity with Nepal, Bhutan and India has been welcomed but questions have also justifiably been raised as to the present effective capacity of the Energy Regulatory Commission and the current

tariff rates applicable in Bangladesh. Both are sensitive areas of engagement that will need careful analysis. It would also be useful for the government to conduct a detailed audit to ascertain the various points through which there is presently wastage of power, energy and gas and then to take steps to remove them.

Some analysts have correctly noted that follow-up discussions will be required with our development partners for an integrated response to our needs within the PRSP Phase-II plan of action. We have to be careful as to how we intend to translate the government's 2021 vision into specific policies and institutions to secure our objectives.

We have to have consensus as to time lines, as to how we will tackle the question of export-led growth versus import substitution, as to the issue of trade liberalisation and associated challenges and improvements in the service delivery system.

To move forward at a faster pace, we will require transfer of technology, diversification of our export items, simplification of the investment process and the clearances required. In this context, one would also have to agree with the proposal that there is need for the devolution of authority and responsibility to local governments, including urban municipal governments, to help create greater efficiency and better capacity for those intending to participate in our proposed Economic Zones.

We also need bi-partisanship in the political arena. Without this very little might be achieved.

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The worrisome delinquency

The bad hats in the police must be dealt with an iron hand at the very first instance of criminality. The unholy alliance between criminal policemen and corrupt politicians must be broken and the performance of both should be under continuous vigilance and constant scrutiny.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE news of charges against a serving police super for attempting to grab other peoples' farmlands in Gopalganj district makes very disturbing reading. Such an allegation appears credible when subsequently it was found that the same official runs a business in the name of his wife and is reportedly intimidating a regular trader.

The alleged delinquency raises a number of questions relating to the conduct of the aforementioned public official. It needs to be known if the officer has submitted his property statement to the controlling authority and if the same authority is aware of the business run by his wife. This is very important because public servants are generally forbidden to engage in trade or business, and when the spouse is engaged in such transaction the authority has to be

kept informed. These are standard requirements and precautions in public service.

There are indications that the defaulting official has flouted the rules and, as the nature of the complaints suggest, acted in a very abrasive manner. The fact that the official has been withdrawn from his charge and closed to the Police Headquarters is a clear sign of the extremely unbecoming conduct of a public servant.

The question is, must we rest content with the actions taken thus far? The answer is definitely in the negative. The matter should be looked into in all its relevant details and the malevolence must be demonstratively punished. There must not be any effort to take cover behind departmental actions if criminal intent and actions are reasonably manifest. A law enforcer's offence must be met with severity.

The greater question that should engage the citizens is how and why public servants,

especially of the higher echelon, have stooped so low. Have undesirable elements entered public service and continue to work on account of the failings of individuals and institutions?

One needs to know whether there was an unhealthy motive in the recruitment of more than usual number of officials in the penultimate year of a political government. Such question arises because the recruitment process of public services in the recent past was not above board. And now it is seen that premature field exposure to a duty post without basic orientation has been dangerously unwholesome. The accusations of intake of partisan law enforcement officials have complicated the already fearfully polarised public life.

There are reports that in the tenure of two political governments, bulk recruitments of managerial level officers were effected despite the reservation of senior professionals in the department. The demands of the so-called emerging political requirements had to be met. In the process, half-baked and ill-trained officials were produced.

Disconcerting news about the unsavoury political influence on several layers of the police hierarchy attracting headlines of national newspapers was no surprise in the not-too-distant past. In fact, many senior police officers made specific mention of the pernicious political pressures being exerted on them with regard to appointments, transfer and postings of different ranks. Such officials had also complained about the entry of undesirable and unsuitable individuals, the inappropriate postings violating the usual procedure, and disregarding of the chain of command.

It is sad that many of our political executives did not realise that the police is an official organ, and is expected to be the relief-provider. They ensured the intake of undesirable persons without appreciating that irregular appointees would soon turn into bitter and insensitive cops.

The policy-makers have forgotten that, in the context of constitutionally incorporated state objectives, the need of training for desirable attitudinal development necessitates sustained training. Time is

important for the training process to be a facilitating and catalytic factor. Regular training was not considered an investment in human resources.

There are credible fears that the police image will suffer incalculable damage if alleged politicisation is not effectively halted and expeditious screening of undesirable appointees not done. At the same time, large-scale behavioural and attitudinal changes of politicians and public servants will be necessary in public interest.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately, there is no agreement among the different segments of the society as to what is expected or wanted from our police. In such a situation, our policemen indulge in doing things that they ought not to do, or in refraining from doing things they ought to do, to favour politicians in power and ask the politicians-in-power to use their influence to obtain choice postings, to avoid being transferred, to mitigate disciplinary sentences or to earn advancement in rank. Thus, a necessary basis has been provided for a mutually advantageous barter.

The bad hats in the police must be dealt with an iron hand at the very first instance of criminality. The unholy alliance between criminal policemen and corrupt politicians must be broken and the performance of both should be under continuous vigilance and constant scrutiny.

The recruitment process of police functionaries has to be sanitised to prevent the entry of undesirable elements, and drastic disciplinary actions relating to delinquent police officers must not be interfered with. These are not tall orders. We need them to bring sanity in our governance scenario.

The deviation of policemen in the form of criminal acts and other illegal activities are always deplorable as they shake the foundation of the society by eroding faith and trust in the rule of law. The most visible symbol of authority can never escape criticism for malfunctioning of any description. They cannot ignore public opinion. This needs to be constantly impressed upon the rank and file. At the same time, police modernisation should be accorded the deserved priority.

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