



VIGLIANAWAGERSF

A day of celebration

Today, our planet needs international dedication and commitment to preserve and protect the earth's resources -- be it air, water, plant, or animal. While we take time to recognise our achievements, we should not lose sight of the challenges that remain, and continue to build upon the legacy of the modern environmental movement started forty years ago.

JAMES F. MORIARTY

THE first Earth Day, organised in 1970 in the United States, launched the modern environmental movement. Some 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to decry trends toward increased pollution and deterioration, and to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment. Rising environmental awareness during that period led the US government to establish the Environmental Protection Agency in late 1970, and to enact ground-breaking legislation, the Clean Air Act of 1970 and Clean Water Act of 1972.

Under President Obama, the US has done more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions than ever before, setting domestic policies that advance clean energy and climate security and vigorously engaging in climate change negotia-

tions. Last December in Copenhagen, world leaders agreed on the Copenhagen Accord, which requires actions by all major economies to mitigate climate change; transparency to see that those actions are taken; and financing and technology support for the poorest and most vulnerable nations. The US will join a global effort to mobilise by financing to help countries adapt to climate change, including preventing deforestation in regions with tropical forests, such as in Central and South America, Central Africa and Southeast Asia.

Similarly, the US is dedicated to improving access to clean water. In 2005, our Congress passed the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which makes access to safe water and sanitation for developing countries a specific policy objective of our foreign assistance programs. As Secretary Clinton stated on World Water Day exactly one month ago, "It's not every day you

find an issue where effective diplomacy and development will allow you to save millions of lives, feed the hungry, empower women, advance our national security interests, protect the environment, and demonstrate to billions of people that the United States cares, cares about you and your welfare. Water is that issue." To advance this goal, the United States will strengthen developing country capacity, engage diplomatically, invest in infrastructure, increase the role of science and technology, and leverage partnerships.

This year the world is commemorating the International Year of Biodiversity. The United States is no stranger to the risk of biodiversity loss. In the 1960s, our national symbol -- the American bald eagle -- was on the brink of extinction. In 2007, it was taken off the endangered species list as a result of conservation efforts mandated by the Endangered Species Act of 1973 and efforts to restrict harmful pesticides. More than 27 percent of the land area in the United States is afforded some form of federal protection, through a variety of programs, such as the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National Marine Sanctuaries Program, and the National Forest System. The Lacey Act, originally passed in 1900, stands as the oldest conservation law in the United States and is testimony to our success in conserving wild-

life resources including illegally harvested plants and trees.

The United States has a long history of working with Bangladesh to implement pioneering programs to protect the environment and conserve natural resources. Bangladesh was the first country to benefit from programs under the US Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA) of 1998 that cancelled repayment of concessional loans to generate funds for the conservation of tropical forests. Building on its long experience in natural resource management in Bangladesh, the US Government, through USAID, is currently implementing a \$13 million 5-year Integrated Protected Area Co-management (IPAC) project that is helping to promote community-based natural resource management practices. Through this project and disaster preparedness programs, we are supporting Bangladesh's efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of global climate change.

Today, our planet needs international dedication and commitment to preserve and protect the earth's resources -- be it air, water, plant, or animal. While we take time to recognise our achievements, we should not lose sight of the challenges that remain, and continue to build upon the legacy of the modern environmental movement started forty years ago.

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Unnecessary confrontation

The unease and mistrust that exist between upazila chairmen and MPs largely stem from the fact that both have been elected by the same electorate and on the basis of similar promises made to the electors.

AHMED A. AZAD

I hope the PM and her government pay heed to, and act on, The Daily Star's April 14 editorial "Upazila chairmen's desperate call for empowerment." It is not simply a question of sharing of power and responsibilities between the elected local governments and the national legislators. Functional and independent local governments are indispensable for the development of Bangladesh beyond Dhaka (and other big cities); and they are not only required to meet national priorities but also to save Dhaka from implosion.

Development strategies based on the rational use of human and natural indigenous resources in rural Bangladesh could help to meet our national priorities, such as food and energy security, health equity and environmental protection. The prerequisite for this is a functional and independent local government system.

Even though this is a constitutional requirement and was an election pledge of both the current government and the opposition, it is a matter of concern that even one year after being elected the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen do not know what their responsibilities are and where they stand with respect to upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) and local MPs.

It is of concern that the government has given a compulsory advisory role to MPs from rural areas in upazila development matters but not to MPs elected from urban areas in development activities of municipalities and pourashovas. This is discriminatory and demeaning to elected upazila chairmen who also have to defer to UNOs in upazila administrative matters.

Part of the reluctance to empower local governments in rural Bangladesh stems from the fear of the major political parties that the local government system had been used in the past by unrepresentative and unelected regimes to foist their own parties and political systems on the nation, and the fear that local politicians with administrative and financial independence may

not be as easily manipulated as MPs located in Dhaka, which could erode the traditional power base of national politicians.

There are a number of anomalies that need to be addressed to reduce conflict between different tiers of government and within the national parliament itself. The unease and mistrust that exist between upazila chairmen and MPs largely stem from the fact that both have been elected by the same electorate and on the basis of similar promises made to the electors.

The PM has promised to delineate specific and distinct roles for upazila chairmen. However, the prevailing unease is unlikely to dissipate in the future without clear definition of the role, if any, of MPs in local development activities.

The MPs in the current parliament are now playing important roles both in the house and in the standing committees. They realise that implementation of local development plans should not be their preoccupation but they still keep their finger in the development pie as they have to keep their promises to the electorate. Moreover, they rightly feel that they should not be totally divorced from development activities that impact on their constituents.

Conflict resolution between different tiers of government is not enough; it also needs to be extended to the national parliament. Major reforms are required in parliament in terms of culture and composition if it is to reflect the true wishes of the people, and if it wishes to be an instrument of social and economic justice.

A parliament where over 70 percent of the members come from the business community, and their ability to spend heavily in elections can neither be representative of the demographic distribution nor can its members easily place national interest before financial ones. An effective parliament requires a more diverse and talented representation, if necessary from outside the two major political camps. This is not likely to happen as long as election outcomes depend on money and muscle power.

The first-past-the-post system of parliamentary election, a Westminster legacy, resulted in brute majorities in the last two parliaments, which was not reflective of the actual percentage of votes won. This made the opposition insignificant and almost redundant, and resulted in rancorous and unseemly behaviour, frequent walkouts and prolonged boycott of parliament in the last two parliaments.

The system of "choosing" female MPs for reserved seats by elected MPs creates two classes of MPs in parliament, and is demeaning to women MPs who are selected by their mostly male peers. This, together with the need to be noticed by their party leaders, might have contributed to the overaggressive and unseemly behaviour exhibited by some new MPs in the last sitting of parliament.

Till such time that gender parity is achieved the reserved seats for women must continue, but the number of seats need to be increased to at least one reserved seat for each district and the candidates must be elected directly by the entire district electorate.

The foremost task for reducing or eliminating any potential conflict of interest would be to delineate the respective electorates and jurisdictions of the elected local government officials and MPs and bring about some changes in the process of election of MPs. The following suggestions could help to resolve, at least to some extent, some of the problems that stand in the way of good governance and development.

While the local government officials would continue to be elected from their respective upazilas and unions, all MPs should be elected from a zila-based electorate. This would reflect the higher jurisdiction of the MPs.

MPs (for regular parliamentary seats) from any district would be elected from a multi-seat zila-based electorate on the basis of proportional representation. The number of parliamentary seats in any zila-wide electorate would be based on the population of the district. To minimise the influence of money and muscle the election campaigning and finances could be managed by the Election Commission.

Female candidates for reserved seats should also be elected directly from zila-based electorates and not by their parliamentary colleagues, as is now the norm. They must be given status and privileges equal to their colleagues both in the parliament and in the district.

Government development funds should be allocated on the basis of need not to MPs but to the zilas, from where they should be sent to the upazilas and unions on the basis of submitted 5-year development plans. All upazila chairmen and MPs in the district should be members (or ex officio members) of the Zila Parishad. To allow MPs to remain involved in zila-level activities they should be allocated local offices within the zila administrative complex rather than in upazilas.

The 5-year development plans for each upazila and constituent unions should be prepared by the elected upazilla and union representatives and brought to the Zilla Parishad for discussion, coordination and final ratification in consultation with their counterparts from other upazilas and all MPs from the district.

The elected MPs of the district should have an advisory and moderating role in the above process, and will act as the advocates and champions of the district's overall needs and aspirations in the national parliament (instead of pleading for each individual road or culvert in their earlier, much smaller, upazila-based constituencies).

The upazila chairman will be in charge of all development activities in the upazila, and will oversee the implementation of the approved 5-year development plan through the UNO.

The female MPs and the female upazila vice-chairpersons (from reserved seats) could together form a very powerful lobby and advocacy group for women's and children's rights both at the local level and in the national parliament.

Properly defined and delineated electorates, jurisdictions and roles of MPs and local government officials could result in better functioning local governments. Election of MPs from a manageable zila list through proportional representation will prevent brute majorities in the parliament.

The lessening of the influence of money and muscle together with proportional representation could see the election of worthy MPs from outside the two major political camps. The direct election of female MPs for reserved seats will accord them respect and status equal to their parliamentary colleagues.

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Rhetoric and reality

Today, the RRC is dead. The government is yet to take measures that would not only help to streamline the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and reduce the scope for corruption but, most importantly, also to support such rhetorical claims.

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THE prime minister has claimed that during the 15-month tenure of her government, 80 percent of the decisions have been implemented and the remainder were under consideration for implementation. Furthermore, the cabinet approved 106 bills during this period, of which 90 have been passed in the Parliament. Such rhetoric only begs the question -- are you deluding yourself madam?

More pertinently, if 80 percent of the decisions have been implemented, what will be the government's agenda for the next four years, or the mechanisms to monitor the already implemented decisions?

The energy crunch and water crisis need little introduction. Many consumers and producers, who cannot afford the high maintenance cost of generators and IPSs, regularly fall prey to their dark impact. On the other hand, those with sufficient capital to run captive power plants are choking the already constrained supply of gas.

Similar to the gas crisis, the government's deficiency in terms of providing an acceptable policy framework in order to operationalise the public-private partnership (PPP) agenda can be attributed to institutional failure. The prime minister ought to ask why the process of implementing power and PPP projects has slowed down. The answer is that it is because of her fickle administration, which she is quite contented with today.

Sheikh Hasina has reverted to the blame-game days of politics, which is directly contradictory to her election manifesto's central theme of "change." If the past government is to be blamed, one is compelled to inquire on what basis the government managed to come up with the concept of "Digital Bangladesh."

Such rhetoric will prove futile in convincing the people who voted for the "Grand Alliance," hoping for a healthy and mature political landscape in Bangladesh.

What are the decisions that have been implemented, in spite of which traffic congestion, lawlessness and political disorder are still haunting us today? Though the government's attempt to manage traffic congestion is commendable, it has a long way to travel in terms of making Dhaka more mobile.

The gruesome murders of many families expose the dark law and order situation in the country. Political disorder, chaos in the Parliament and violence in Bhola-3 constituency reflect the deeply embedded problems associated with the "tyranny of the majority."

The Awami League's contention with the BNP's earlier decision to not take part in the Bhola-3 elections, along with the delay in holding the municipal elections, came as a surprise to many.

If the prime minister is fully confident that her administrative system and ministers have been working sincerely, then why delay holding of the local level elections? To ensure that the election will be free and fair, why not deploy the army -- who have a strong track record in ensuring peaceful elections in Bangladesh.

Do the 80 percent decisions that have been implemented have some implications for public welfare at large? Is the prime minister referring to the "Father of the Nation's Family Security Act," or to the "digital time" or, most importantly, is she referring to decisions that were already adopted by the preceding Caretaker Government (CTG)?

To conclude, the key indicators of a properly functioning democracy are the mechanisms which establish transparency in governance. When the CTG assumed power in January 2007, it put reducing corruption and raising quality of governance high on the agenda of its immediate tasks.

Subsequently, a Regulatory Reforms Commission (RRC) was established to suggest measures to improve the quality of regulations and, as of the end of its tenure in late 2008, the Commission had provided nearly 50 recommendations, of which some 15 were implemented by the CTG.

Today, the RRC is dead. The government is yet to take measures that would not only help to streamline the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and reduce the scope for corruption but, most importantly, also to support such rhetorical claims.

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(This is written in the writer's personal capacity.)



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