

Government claim to an impressive scorecard

Core issue is, of course, quality of governance

THE government is of the view that 80 per cent of the decisions made by the cabinet in the last 15 months have been implemented. In a little more than one year, one is to understand that the 405 decisions made by the council of ministers, a total of 325 have been carried out. It is now a mere 80 that are being worked on. We are happy that the government has decided to enlighten the nation on its achievements and has, in such an appreciable way, taken the people into its confidence. It conveys the government's sense of accountability and there should be more of it. However, even as we appreciate the move, we will hope that this self-assessment about its performance has nothing to do with being self-congratulatory.

Implementation is a very loaded term and one wonders what precisely the government means by it. Are we to suppose that an implementation of cabinet decisions has just got underway? Or should the government not be informing the nation at what exact stage such implementation happens to be at present? If policy decisions are in the process of implementation, within what time frame can we expect the goals symbolized by such decisions to be reached?

Since government is all about steering a nation toward its cherished goals, it is extremely important that quality define any implementation of policy. The authorities have given us some numbers as a way of convincing us that things are on track. We have no argument with that. At the same time, though, we cannot help feeling that the government could really be in self-congratulatory mode at present. We do not suggest that the government is wrong about itself. Here we can cite the instance of the agriculture sector, where real efforts vis-à-vis supply of inputs followed by encouraging results have impressed the nation. But despite such successes, there are the negative factors that quite undermine all the good that has been done or is being done. Consider the deprivations of the Chhatra League. Its relentless violation of the law has clearly dented the image of the government. In this context, law and order is a prime region where matters must improve. It is not enough to suggest that crimes have come down in comparison to what they used to be in the past. More than the figures for crime it is the gravity of crime that most worries citizens. The point here is that one can only feel comfortable when government action is seen to be effective and policy implementation takes place to the satisfaction of the general public.

The perspectives are clear. We firmly believe that the question of where the government stands on the issues, especially in the matter of policy implementation, is ultimately dependent on a public perception of the reality. If now the government claims 80 per cent implementation of its decisions, we ask again as to what criteria determined such a conclusion. That the government is apparently monitoring policy implementation is appreciable, of course. That should be accompanied by regular and timely intervention and corrective measures where and when necessary. Such monitoring should present before the country a picture of conditions as they really are. Transparency is of the essence. A quantitative assessment of things may be a good thing, but a qualitative observation of circumstances is infinitely better.

Ship-breaking industry in its present condition is dangerous

There is simply no half-way house

THE Department of Environment (DoE)'s suing four ship-breaking yards in Chittagong for polluting environment is a clear case of misplaced emphasis, to put it politely. With an amendment to the import order letting toxic ships in without pre-inspection certification either by the supplier or the importer, the litigation is actually an eye-wash and playing to the gallery. As far as a response to the surging genuine concerns over the state of ship-breaking yards goes, it even sounds diversionary. In fact, another ministry of the government, namely, commerce ministry, deciding 'to allow dismantling vessels built with toxic substances', the four breaking yards in question have been sued. What does this work out to?

For, if it is assumed that the environment ministry is asserting its authority over the commerce ministry for not having procured clearance from the former then it sounds untenable because the fundamental safeguard that was there against import of hazardous ships has been done away with.

It is claimed by the government that the import order amendment aims to bolster growth of a promising industry. What growth, what promising industry, may we ask? An industry that has killed 38 persons and crippled many and puts to daily hazard several thousand workers inhaling mercury and having to work with primitive unsafe tools, let alone damaging environment, is but an instrument of exploitation. It is working in conditions in Bangladesh that compare highly negatively with those in which such industries work in China and Turkey.

Thus, the imperatives are clearly before us. The first order of business is to withdraw the amendment to the import order. Secondly, until such time as the management facilities and working conditions of the ship-breaking yards are scientifically acceptable, phase out the existing ones under a time-bound framework. That is to say, prepare the industry with built-in safeguards and then go for it.

Last but not least, go in for alternative arrangements in order to meet the scrap iron needs and provide employment to those rendered jobless. If 195 countries in the world can do without ship-breaking industry which is inherently dangerous, why can't Bangladesh? Above all, it is beneath the dignity of any self-respecting nation to court the image of a dumping ground.

Re-framing the debate



A more compelling line of attack against the Jamaat is to criticise them, not for being anti-secular or communal, per se, even though they are, but for promoting a non-indigenous practice of Islam which is alien to most Bangladeshis.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

POHELA Boishakh has long been contested political ground. For most Bangladeshis it is a cherished article of authentic indigenous Bengali culture. But not for the fundamentalists, who have long made it a target, both rhetorically and in more direct and deadly ways.

I have always felt that this hostility to Bengali culture, which to them has the taint of our pre-Islamic heritage, has long been the principal stumbling block for the fundamentalists in their struggle to win the hearts and minds of ordinary Bangladeshis.

But the fundamentalists make no bones about their opposition to Pohela Boishakh. They make no bones about their hatred of the new year's celebrations

at Ramna Batamul. This hatred and hostility was why militants bombed the celebrations in 2001, killing 10 and injuring scores.

But this hostility to Bengali culture is one significant reason why fundamentalism has never gained much traction among the general population.

In the long run, the fundamentalists face a similar problem with respect to religion. It is not that Bangladeshis are not religious people. In fact, religious faith is an important part of most Bangladeshis' identity.

But Bengali Islam, which was introduced to the region by Sufi missionaries, has long been a syncretic and liberal creed, that for many includes veneration of Sufi saints and their holy shrines.

The fundamentalists have declared war on all this (they bomb the shrines, too) in

their attempt to impose a more rigid and conservative Wahhabi-infused doctrine on the nation.

Religion has always been a hot button issue in Bangladeshi politics. But here there are two things to note.

The first is that all political parties in the country recognise the centrality of faith in the Bangladeshi psyche. In other words, it is not as though there is no place for people of faith outside of the Islamist political parties.

The second point is that even among the Islamist political parties, there are those that are not hostile to our pre-Islamic and non-Islamic Bengali heritage and culture. In other words, there are many more options other than just the Jamaat-e-Islami.

This new year, the Jamaat finds itself in uncharted territory due to the government's determination to, at long last, pursue war crimes trials that will doubtless focus on many members of the Jamaat high command.

But the interesting thing is that this might in fact make the Jamaat a more popular party in the long run, once it has expunged itself of the taint of war crimes

and collaboration in 1971.

In fact, many of the younger members of the party, most of whom were not even born in 1971, reportedly want the trials and are looking forward to a future when the party's role in 1971 is not a mill-stone around its neck.

Alas for these young idealists, that is not the only problem the Jamaat faces. As long as it continues to oppose Islam as it is traditionally practiced in Bangladesh and our indigenous Bengali culture, I suspect the party will continue to have a tough time attracting adherents.

But religion remains a live issue and the AL needs to address the perception that the party is hostile to the religious, that has long been the party's Achilles' heel.

To this end, the AL is attempting to re-frame the discussion. No longer is the argument that the AL is the party of secularism, per se, that, in many people's eyes, translates into being anti-religion.

The AL's new line of argument, insofar as the debate centres on religion, is to re-brand the party as the defender of Islam as it has traditionally been practiced in Bangladesh.

It feels that a more compelling line of attack against the Jamaat is to criticise them, not for being anti-secular or communal, per se, even though they are, but for promoting a non-indigenous practice of Islam which is alien to most Bangladeshis.

This means making a big deal of promoting the nation's Sufi heritage and articles of traditional Bengali culture such as Pohela Boishakh.

This is what was behind the renaming of the airport after the great Sufi saint Hazrat Shahjalal.

Naming it after this revered figure of Bengali Islam helps shore up the government's religious credentials. There is now talk that each one of the big airports in the country will be named after a different Sufi saint.

This helps to reframe the national debate over religion, not as religious versus secular but as indigenous versus alien. This is firm ground for the AL to contest from.

I don't know about the short run, but re-framing the debate on terms more advantageous to you is what wins political battles in the long run.

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When dynasties are dinosaurs



It's an irony that a dynasty is created by the same absurd choice that is supposed to resist it. Quantity not quality drives its agenda. Popularity is more important than perspicacity.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

PROVISION is an accounting word for liability of uncertain timing and amount. Certain costs or expenses will happen but their timing of incurrence or exact sums may not be

known in definite terms. We make provisions in budget. We make provisions in business. It may sound unreal but why don't we do the same thing in this nation's future? Shall we say, give two terms of government to dynastic politics and then ask them to go away!

I say two terms because it would fairly give one term to each side. We need to provide for one scion of each political dynasty waiting in line. The aspirations are getting obvious, like images emerge in a darkroom when photos are moved from tray to tray. From the posters on the walls, speeches in the meetings and moods of party supporters, it's likely that our political future won't settle for anything less than at least two rounds of dynastic rule. We are probably going to need to give at least one round to each of the two heir-apparents.

This doesn't mean two terms are going to be sufficient. Our best hope is that more than one term for each dynasty isn't going to be necessary. Mind it we are talking about provision here, not precision. Many things are hard to predict because life is always full of surprises. Who could ever tell that Eyjafjallajökull, a funny-named volcano in Iceland, could spew so much ash so high in the sky that it forced the airports of Europe to shut down, costing the aviation industry \$200 million a day.

It's exactly for that same reason that we should make provision. We don't know what is going to happen. We don't know if and when our politics is going to come out of this dynastic loop. Democracy is about popular choice, and when people choose, it leaves no other choice. Funny that it should come to this. The right to rule the lives of many should run in the family of few.

It appears that when people choose these few amongst them, it turns into infatuation. Nothing explains why the Indians should like five generations in the Nehru lineage. Why should Pakistani politics rotate around three generations of Bhuttos? And, what explains the Camelot and three generations of Kennedys in American politics? Two Bushes became presidents. Luck is obvious, but, gosh, who should ever find them charming!

But public adoration has its obvious perils. Two Nehru descendants have been killed. Two Bhuttos have been brutally eliminated. Likewise, two Kennedys have died violent deaths. Two generations have ruled this country from either side, and one of each has been assassinated.

Still, dynastic politics remains in full force. The Times of India ran a story on state elections in April 2001 that termed India as

"a democracy of dynasties, for dynasties and by dynasties." India is supposed to be the largest democracy in the world, but it also has the oldest-running dynastic rule in the modern context. The fifth generation is warming up, while it doesn't run deeper than three generations in other countries.

Democracy has its inherent weakness. The power of choice that is invested in people renders them powerless. It's an irony that a dynasty is created by the same absurd choice that is supposed to resist it. Quantity not quality drives its agenda. Popularity is more important than perspicacity.

Here is a simple illustration. Five people are sitting in a room. Three of them are men, and two of them women. One of the men proposes a new law making it legal for a man to rape a woman. Three men vote yes. It forms the brute majority and democracy goes into action.

Unfortunately, dynasties are born out of similar fallacy, collective stupidity disguised in collective wisdom. People choose their own indignity. Dynasty is monarchy by popular mandate. And, that mandate has produced a rare phenomenon in this country. We live in perhaps the only double-dynasty country in the modern world where two families have been ruling us in their revolving-door politics.

Where does it end, and will it ever end? We don't know and that's all the more reason why we should make provision. We should give ourselves a deadline, and give them a deadline. It will build awareness. Awareness will build willingness. Willingness will build readiness.

Louis Philippe said after the July Revolution in France: "What perished in France in 1830 was not respect for a dynasty, but respect for anything." All dynasties perish sooner or later if they outlive the welcome. People become disillusioned and when that happens it explodes like volcanoes.

When that explosion happens, we would still like to respect them. Provided our dynasties don't behave like dinosaurs. They should go before a meteor hits to destroy them.

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