

PM's significant observations

Governance is essentially a matter of taking charge

WE appreciate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's perceptive, forthright and, to an extent, introspective, remarks about bureaucrats in a cabinet meeting on Monday. She counseled her cabinet colleagues to be wary of bureaucrats who give primacy to loyalty and tend to hide their under-performance behind such obeisance. They sugarcoat their 'insincerity', sometimes bordering on the sycophantic, saying things that would only please the government as the ground under the latter's feet slipped away beneath a make-believe veneer of self-confidence and complacency.

The PM shows a sense of urgency by recognising that the time is running out insofar as implementing the development goals the AL stands committed to. We think she has hit the nail on the head. However as we see it, her asking the ministers to keep a close eye on the bureaucrats and egg them on to perform better than merely flaunt the loyalty card needs to be placed in an overall perspective for the sake of a booster to good governance.

There is however, a general point to make: some bureaucrats would deserve a flak for good reasons while there may be others who perform with integrity qualifying to be rewarded; instead, they are made into OSDs and marginalised -- on perceived political considerations.

It won't be out of place to point to a certain duality of control over ministries between the ministers and advisers. Furthermore, given the preponderance of 'tadbir' culture, claiming a good deal of time and energy of ministers and secretaries and the frequency of foreign trips of high functionaries, the slothful decision-making and development work are rooted in other self-evident factors as well. These need to be attended to, if we are to see the desired improvement in governance, project implementation and public service delivery.

On the other hand, the PM is on record having repeatedly warned ministers, party leaders and MPs against consequences of abuse of power and unwanted interference in the administration. She must keep an eye on it.

Yet, on another plane, her government has sown seeds of conflict between the MPs and the local elected body chiefs to the detriment of both the law-making function of the MPs and the legitimate autonomous functioning of the local bodies. At the same time, the UNOs have been placed atop the upazila chairmen in certain matters of utilisation of funds. This is not only a spanner in the wheels of development but also participatory democracy based on devolution of authority. These contradictions should be taken care of.

Israel's raid on aid-carrying ships

UN must ensure lift of Gaza blockade

ISRAEL'S attack on an aid flotilla trying to break its siege of Gaza is a clear outrage. And it is so because it not only flouts international law but also shows the patent defiance of the Zionist state of the global community where its treatment of Palestinians is concerned. In these past three years, for all the opprobrium it has earned over its actions, Israel has continued its blockade of Gaza and so has made it extremely hard for its residents to lead normal lives. One reason for Israel's aggressive moves has been the predominance of Hamas in the region. The unfortunate reality has been that the Tel Aviv government has successfully been able to ward off all calls for a lifting of the siege. No effort expended toward pushing Israel into a less hardline stance has succeeded. The bigger reality is that Israel's friends in the West have, save some temporary pressure from Washington, not quite been able to push it toward a settlement.

This intransigence on the part of Israel has now led to the death of as many as 19 peace activists at the hands of Israeli forces. The rash action taken by Tel Aviv on the ships carrying aid for the besieged inhabitants of Gaza can only be looked at as one more provocation by Israel in an already volatile situation. Indeed, any chances that might have been there for peace or at least for peace talks to get underway were set at naught through the rise of the present Israeli administration under the hawkish Binyamin Netanyahu. The new prime minister has, to the consternation of the world, shown little inclination towards initiating talks with the Palestinians on ways of restarting the search for peace. He has shown himself inflexible over the question of Jewish settlements in Arab areas, an issue that put him, even if momentarily, at loggerheads with the Obama administration. The problem with Netanyahu and everyone else in leading positions in Israel today is their apparent belief that looking away from the Palestine problem will make it go away. That belief has only been exacerbating the conflict.

In the peculiar circumstances arising out of the murderous raid on the aid flotilla, it is for the global community to take all measures to bring the Israeli leadership to account for the act. The UN Security Council has urged an impartial inquiry into the incident. Let that inquiry be a purposeful one. Unless it is, conditions in the Middle East can only worsen. The first step here cannot but be a lifting of the Gaza blockade without delay.



The sky, the mind, the ban culture

You can observe your religion in all its totality, but you cannot turn it into a weapon to intimidate adherents of other beliefs. In much the same way, you cannot be self-righteous about your politics and then use it to hunt down people and destroy their reputations on spurious charges of treason. If you do, you will find the guillotine waiting for you.

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THE ban on Facebook could be lifted within days. Or perhaps by the time you read this in print, it might already have been withdrawn. But that is not what exercises our minds at this point. What we are upset about is the brusqueness with which the attack on Facebook was made. Of course, if there is anything obscene that has appeared on it, if the reputations of citizens, powerful or meek, have been ridiculed, all that the authorities needed to do was to go after those who indulged in such nefarious deeds. But to assume that an entire system can be done away with or simply run out of town only rekindles in us all the old thoughts of bygone rulers trying to govern us through control mechanisms that eventually did not amount to much. Control led to chaos. The mechanisms broke down.

The trouble with the post-modern era is that you cannot have all your wishes come true. All this technology around you is really daunting. More importantly, there is

the matter of citizens' increasingly powerful sensibilities coming into play. Think back on the Tagore centenary celebrations in 1961 here in this land. Much effort was put into the job of trying to disrupt the proceedings by the Ayub Khan regime because it and its toadies believed Bengalis were actually celebrating the genius of a Hindu bard. Nothing worked for the regime, though. The presence of Justice Syed Mahub Murshed at the head of the Tagore programme warded off the sinister shadow of the regime. The wolves then lay low, until the time came a few years later when Khwaja Shahabuddin, Ayub's information minister, finally clamped a ban on Tagore music in East Pakistan. That victory proved pyrrhic, though. By the late 1960s, Tagore was back and with him, with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the forefront, Bengali nationalism was in the ascendant.

Banning has never been a solution to a problem. It has been a problem on its own. Look at the record. Military regimes in Bangladesh and Pakistan, having shot their

way into power, have gone for imposing a ban on or a suspension of the constitution. That act was speedily complemented by restrictions on the way women would move around. It is rather curious that one of the first things coup-makers do is push civilised laws under the carpet and go for an inspection of female anatomy, in the latter instance, eventually deciding what women should be wearing or not wearing. Well, as history informs us so gleefully, constitutions have always come back and women have certainly refused to have their couture chosen by soldiers propping up illegitimate governments. Usurper regimes have gone for a ban on politicians and political parties. Yahya Khan thought banning the Awami League in 1971 would resuscitate a dying Pakistan in our lives. In the event, the Awami League only made sure that Pakistan was banned in Bangladesh for all time in December 1971.

There is something about the mind that rebels, always. When you ban a book, you are not only stifling intellectual freedom but also you are, at the same time, provoking people into wanting to read it. It is then that clandestine ways are discovered for the book to be distributed to as wide a circle as possible. You can threaten a writer with beheading; you can force a writer into exile. But do not forget that such ham-fisted measures only make the writer that much more appealing and readers that much more demanding. You can come up with all the excuses you can muster about the absence of moral dimensions in a movie

and then clamp a ban on it. Once you do that, you are helping in the creation of an insular world for yourself. Insularity, you will of course remember, was what brought down apartheid South Africa and white minority-ruled Rhodesia.

There is a certain degree of arrogance which comes with banning. Turkey's generals, for all their appreciable role in upholding the country's secular traditions, made the mistake of arguing that women could not wear headscarves. The consequence was defiance. Watch the wife of President Abdullah Gul. She never lets go of her headscarf. And like her, other Turkish women have taken to ignoring the scowl of the army. Just as the state cannot decree what raiment people can get into, individuals or groups of individuals cannot and must not insist that a particular sect of believers be proscribed as a faith. You can observe your religion in all its totality, but you cannot turn it into a weapon to intimidate adherents of other beliefs. In much the same way, you cannot be self-righteous about your politics and then use it to hunt down people and destroy their reputations on spurious charges of treason. If you do, you will find the guillotine waiting for you. Do not forget America's Joe McCarthy.

The mind is certainly wider than the sky. You cannot outlaw the sky, can you? Why must you then try putting the mind in fetters? Why not ban the ban culture itself?

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The power pact

Bangladesh has the potential to be a middle-income country. International financial institutions and the reputed investment firm Goldman Sachs have assessed that it is not impossible for the country to generate a double-digit figure of economic growth annually.

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ON May 21, Bangladesh entered a new era of generating energy from nuclear plants by signing a five-year framework agreement with the Russian Federation. The agreement paves the way for cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy to meet the growing power needs of the country. The agreement can be renewed after its expiry.

The site for a nuclear plant at Rooppur was selected in the '60s, but work could not proceed because of many factors, including non-availability of adequate finance and safety concerns in a densely populated country.

Bangladesh has the potential to be a middle-income country. International financial institutions and the reputed investment firm Goldman Sachs have assessed that it is not impossible for the country to generate a double-digit figure of economic growth annually.

It is common knowledge that, among others, two primary factors -- inadequate supply of energy/electricity and poor infrastructure -- impede the growth. At present, the country's energy is 90% gas-based.

It is believed that the demand is likely to grow by almost 50% in the next 15 years,

and Bangladesh needs to increase the capacity to 8,000 MW by 2025, according to one estimate. With the increase of population to 254 million by 2050, according to a UN report, the demand for energy will naturally grow.

Several factors now favour nuclear energy, in both the developed and the developing worlds. One is that, whatever their attraction, renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and tidal waves are unlikely to meet the energy demands of Bangladesh's rapidly growing population. The renewable energy can be added to the national power grid.

The second major factor is the need to address climate change. The only realistic chance of slowing global warming is to drastically reduce carbon emissions. Nuclear energy, compared with coal and hydropower, is the safest and cleanest way of obtaining energy. And the fuel it uses, uranium, is more abundant than fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas).

A third factor is the evolution of nuclear technology itself. The technological advances and new reactor designs have reduced the likelihood of accidents. According to nuclear experts, third generation reactors, with an output of 1,000 MW, are simpler, smaller and more rugged, and reduce the possibility of a core meltdown

accident from a likelihood of 1 in 20,000 to 1 in 800,000 per reactor year. They are also standardised to reduce construction time.

Nuclear power plants are relatively expensive to build but inexpensive to operate. As of today, about 12,500 nuclear plants provide safe, clean and cheap energy in about 32 countries. France uses nuclear power to generate 77% of its electricity, and Russia generates 20% of its total energy requirements.

More than 35 nuclear power plants are currently under construction around the world, 24 of them in Asia -- including in China and in India. Russia has been involved in building nuclear reactors in India (recently signed an agreement to build four new nuclear reactors) China and Iran, among other countries.

It is reported that 30% of Bangladesh's power grid has been built by Russia, and that Russia has offered its assistance to help build Bangladesh's nuclear reactor. Bangladesh reportedly requested the Russian Federation to assist in establishing two nuclear reactors with a capacity of 1,000 MWeach.

Bangladesh's Atomic Energy Commission and Russia's Rosatom signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2009 to pave the way for setting up nuclear power plants in Bangladesh. On October 21, 2009, the Bangladesh government signed a protocol with Russia's Rosatom on cooperation in peaceful use of nuclear energy.

On May 21 2010, State Minister of Bangladesh for Science and ICT Yeafesh Osman and Sergey Kriyenko, Director General, Rosatom, signed the agreement. Both Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr. Dipu

Moni and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov witnessed the signing ceremony.

The framework agreement details future cooperation between the two countries, and includes:

- Design, construction and operation of nuclear power and research reactors.
- Nuclear fuel supply, taking back of the spent nuclear fuel, and nuclear waste management.
- Assistance in setting up of a national regulatory authority in Bangladesh.
- Personnel training and capacity building for operation and maintenance of plants.
- Research, education and training of personnel in the Russian Federation in the use of nuclear energy, development of innovative reactor technologies in accordance with IAEA safety requirements, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and environmental protection.
- Exploration and mining of uranium and thorium deposits.

The parties, according to the agreement, shall establish a joint coordination committee to monitor the implementation process of this agreement. The parties shall assure the transfer of materials, technologies, equipment and services for implementation of joint programs in the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Any energy plant has a long gestation period. There is no quick fix to the problem. It is good to note that the roadmap for nuclear energy is set for Bangladesh with Russian cooperation.

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