

Flexibility in aid conditionalities

Augurs well for better aid utilisation

AGAINST the backdrop of the on again and off again debates over Bangladesh's relationship with the development partners, framing of a concerted policy strategy has been a demand of the time. Especially, donor conditionalities about obtaining and utilising foreign aid have traditionally been something of a sore point with developing countries like Bangladesh. And as a member of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Bangladesh often expressed its legitimate concerns about conditions and the usual strings attached to development assistance.

The good news is the government has meanwhile signed a Joint Cooperation Strategy (JCS) with its development partners the salient feature of which will be reduction in the number of conditionalities imposed on the assistance to be provided by the latter. And further to it, towards an effective fund utilisation regime, the government is also learnt to have been formulating a result-based development framework.

We welcome the developments with emphasis on the government's signing of the first ever JCS with 18 development partners. With signing of the JCS, it is hoped that the donor agencies and nations, unlike in the past, will now be able to cooperate with the government in devising development programmes, harmonising their action plans better, mapping out of the areas where the different development partners would concentrate and in ensuring improved predictability of future aid flow. This will help avoid overlap of development projects and reduce the number of parallel project implementation units.

Particularly, the detailed annual action plan as envisaged in the JCS with the provision of joint activities to strengthen the government's aid management capacity, improved public financial management, and joint monitoring and evaluation activities would hopefully contribute to efficient use of aid and completion of projects in time.

While considering the above developments appreciatively, it would be worthwhile to note that as an aid recipient, hiring of consultancy has been a moot point for Bangladesh. In the past, project implementation was very much dependent on expertise contracted from overseas, which the aid givers insisted on more often than not. But Bangladesh has in the meanwhile attained a degree of capacity in terms of indigenous know-how and expertise. We are now in a position to provide better consultancy in view of the peculiarities of our circumstances and needs. We also note that the development partners are cognizant of it and even making use to some extent of indigenous our consultancy. There is still scope for further association of local expertise in the implementation of projects.

Even so, we will always stand in need of specialised technical support until such time as we have had developed our home-grown variety of appropriate technical resources for the purpose.

In this context, it would be welcome, if a more flexible approach is adopted from the donors' side on the issue of machinery and commodity purchase, which are usually tied up to specified sources, or for that matter, the strings attached to commodity aid.

On the donor conditionalities, it would, admittedly, be not quite fair to have a sweepingly negative notion of those. In fact, all conditions are not overly stringent and impinging on our freedom of action, and in fact good for us. For instance, the issues of child labour and the development partners' insistence on improving safety precautions for garment workers including their toilet facilities or about equality of gender, which are helpful in our own interest.

Finally, we look forward to an acknowledgement and recognition of the developments partners about our marked improvement in terms of management of resources, capacity for resilience and improvement of social indicators by way of expecting strings-free support from bilateral and multilateral aid agencies.

Dealing with unforeseen disasters

Capacity building is an urgent need

SOME clear lessons have emerged from the building collapse in Begunbari the other day. And these lessons centre around the capacity building, or lack of it, that has come to be associated with disaster management in Bangladesh. While it is a fact that by now we have somehow learned how to deal with such major natural disasters as floods, cyclones and the like, we are yet to come to terms with measures for handling tragedies of the kind that has befallen Begunbari. In the case of natural disasters, there is a response mechanism in place, a truth which has been proved in these past few years. Now, given the regular disasters that have been happening in other areas --- collapsed buildings, fires in shanties, even road accidents --- it becomes important that serious thought be given to devising measures of coming to the aid of those affected by unforeseen circumstances.

We are, briefly, in a situation where preparedness is conspicuous by its absence. Be it a fire in a shanty or the collapse of a billboard on a busy urban street, the outfits which are expected, indeed trained, to handle such incidents all too often fail to come up to the task. In short, we are all caught unawares when disaster of this magnitude strikes. Civil defence forces and the fire service are quite unable to grapple with the immensity of the disaster. It has been seen that when fires engulf the top floors of a high-rise building, the fire control equipment proves to be inadequate in handling the crisis. Water hoses and ladders are inadequate. All of this inevitably leads to a condition where the army must be brought in to help recovery and rehabilitation. And that is what we have again observed in the Begunbari case. Of course, the expertise of the army comes in handy. But why must there be a condition where every time it is the soldiers we go back to to help people in distress?

The time has surely come for the government to take a serious, hard look at the cause behind the kind of tragedy we have seen at Begunbari and the possible ways of handling such tragedy when it occurs. In the capital as also in other urban areas, scores upon scores of uninhabitable buildings threaten the lives of those who occupy them as well as those living in the vicinity. Besides, many of these structures are situated in such a way that they cannot be approached easily if and when disaster strikes. It is of critical importance that the government take a thorough, well-formulated decision in the form of a policy package as a clear step towards handling unforeseen crises. We must also note that with Bangladesh now in an earthquake-vulnerable zone, steps must be in place to acquaint people with safety measures should a severe quake strike. Such a policy must bring into its ambit not just up-to-date equipment but also ensure focused training of personnel in disaster handling.



How much longer will Amar Dosh employees be locked out of their office?

Putting out fire with gasoline

The question is: what's going on here? As with the Facebook ban and the closure of Channel-1, the government must have known that this would make them look bad. Don't they care?

ZAFAR SOBHAN

I can't believe this. So heavy-handed has the government's closure of Amar Dosh and arrest of the acting editor/owner been that I find myself in the decidedly uncomfortable position of being forced to advocate on his behalf.

I'll be perfectly blunt: I don't much care for Mahmudur Rahman.

As a close advisor to the last PM, his finger-prints can be found all over many of the last BNP-led government's worst abuses and nastiest machinations.

And, ironically for one who is now behind bars on questionable charges, he himself is no slouch when it comes to filing baseless and malicious law-suits to harass his perceived ideological enemies.

Nor is there much question that his newspaper is little more than a scurrilous rag with a transparently political agenda. In fact, there are currently no fewer than 31 defamation cases lodged against him and his paper by parties who feel they have been aggrieved by its slipshod reporting.

But, be that all it may, I am sorry to say that the paper's closure and Rahman's arrest just doesn't pass the

smell test.

Cancellation of the paper's declaration on flimsy technical grounds is bad enough, but the way in which it was accomplished and enforced really made the whole enterprise look like a charade.

Likewise, the publisher's case against Rahman, pursuant to which he was initially arrested, was filed only after the publisher was leaned on by security agents for 6 hours. Come on. A blind man could see through this.

In other words, it has been a pretty shabby performance, all round.

The question is: what's going on here? As with the Facebook ban and the closure of Channel-1, the government must have known that this would make them look bad. Don't they care?

It is a simple truth, everywhere and always, that censorship only makes a government look worse than whatever it was they were trying to suppress in the first place.

This is the case here. Nothing Rahman has published, written, or said could possibly make the government look worse than their actions against him are making them look right now.

If there were legitimate reasons to

cancel his declaration, why do so in such a tuggish manner? If he is guilty of defamation, then let the cases against him take their course in a court of law.

The government's actions make it seem, at least to partisan eyes, and maybe not just to them, that perhaps there is some truth to what he has been printing and that he has been shut up for telling the truth.

The Facebook ban (still in effect at the time of writing) seems similarly ill-conceived. The folly is compounded by the fact that the government remains vague as to what exactly the ban is in response to.

Is it for the Draw Muhammad Day contest or for caricatures of the PM or for sensitive classified information regarding the BDR massacre that can be found at the site? No one knows for sure.

But, whatever the reason for shutting down the second most popular web-site in Bangladesh, the point is that doing so makes the government look reactionary and intolerant.

The worst thing for the government is that these kinds of clumsy measures feed straight into the paranoia of those who would like nothing more than to paint the AL as congenitally intolerant of dissent. Like, for instance, Mahmudur Rahman.

Even before the recent spate of shutdowns, the meme was being spread by the anti-AL axis that the AL was reverting to its dictatorial and authoritarian ten-

dencies.

This was already an article of faith among those who oppose the government. Now, believe me, there is every chance for this meme to jump to the mainstream and become conventional wisdom.

The last thing that the government needs right now is for the BNP to gain traction with these kinds of arguments. BNP is in terrible shape right now. They have so far proved utterly incapable of capitalising on any of the openings that the government has given them.

But it is a mistake for the government to insist on handing them issue after issue to campaign on in this manner. It is only this kind of overreach that can derail the government at this moment.

If the opposition's rhetoric is anything to go by, they have given up trying to gain traction with the anti-India card, and they haven't even tried to tap into popular discontent over the power and water crises.

All they have left in their bag of tricks is the argument that AL is running roughshod over the nation and that we are on the path back to one-party rule again.

If that's all they've got, just about the only thing the government needs to do is to keep clear of anything that would further this narrative. Instead, it would seem, they are playing right into their enemies' hands. Nice job.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

Girls, bring it on!

Eve-teasing is a category under itself. It's definitely lack of respect for women. The way it's even worse is that it makes a public spectacle out of that disrespect. It reduces woman from an object of desire to an object of ridicule. And, there is something stupid about it. Men in their prime of youth want to attract girls by being repulsive to them.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

EVE-TEASING is perhaps the only term that implies the victim is at fault for the wrong being done. A palliative for despicable offenses, each of which amounts to a "little rape," eve-teasing refers to the temptress nature of Eve. It puts the blame on women as tease, as if it's their provocation that draws aggressive response from men.

If young girls have been taking their lives, it must be because every time men teased them, they must have teased themselves many times more. In their minds these girls must have failed to understand the contradiction in terms. They must have wondered in their bewildered minds what they had done to deserve the humiliation they suffered in inconsiderate hands.

What led those girls to their premature death must have been some kind of existential despair. There is something terribly sad about the whole thing. If we look at it, eve-teasing is a kind of courtship, a bizarre and deadly kind of it for that

matter. Lewd stares, rude remarks, winking eyes, and groping hands formulate the ecology of an obsessive impulse straying in sexual advance.

For some reason, this obsessive obsession is more common in this sub-continent than anywhere else. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the hypermarkets of histrionics where roadside Romeos mistake risqué for romance. These Romeos don't believe in winning of hearts. For them sideward dalliance is full-blown affair.

Time magazine reported in 1960 that eve-teasing was "a new kind of problem" for the post-independence India. Sampurnanand, the then chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, wailed, "The minds of today's young men are a madhouse." His words are still as good half-a-century later. In India a woman is molested every 26 minutes and a woman is raped every 34 minutes. New Delhi is now known as the "rape capital" of South Asia.

One speaker at the Indian Youth Association seminar held in 1960 described a survey he had made which

indicated 36.9% of Indian people suffered from boredom, 49.7% from blighted hopes, 26.7% from emotional depression, 6.4% from sexual frustration, and 49.9% from "a polluted and unwholesome atmosphere." The point he was trying to make is that there is a connection between social discontent and unbecoming conduct.

Whether or not it's an expression of an upset society, eve-teasing is a kind of sickness, a personality disorder that is symptomatic not only of disturbing youth but also of upbringing. Why don't young men do it in more civilised countries? Yes, there are rapes in those countries. Yes, women are abused in those countries as well. Yes, men in those countries often fail to show respect to women. Perhaps it has to do with social values and strict laws.

But eve-teasing is a category under itself. It's definitely lack of respect for women. The way it's even worse is that it makes a public spectacle out of that disrespect. It reduces woman from an object of desire to an object of ridicule. And, there is something stupid about it. Men in their prime of youth want to attract girls by being repulsive to them.

What is the reason behind this stupidity then? Is it because the young men are going through a testosterone surge? While it may be partially true, there must be a more convincing cause. The entire country is floating on a wanton tide where everybody does what he likes. Elections are rigged, and it's called

democracy. Nothing gets done, and it's called bureaucracy. They don't protect us but we call them police. So, what is wrong if young minds take the liberty of playing their own game of contradiction? They are hurting girls and calling it seduction.

Grim statistics. The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) reported couple of years back that almost 90% of girls aged 10-18 in this country underwent eve-teasing at some point of life. What does it exactly mean? When a man feels attracted to a woman, it's supposed to be healthy. It's also healthy when he feels aroused. But this country has lots of desperate men who overexert themselves under the false notion that sniffing around the kitchen is half of eating.

It appears that the problem is creating its own solution, or, should we say, its own aberration. We hear stories of young girls calling males at random, and if wives answer, these Adam-teasers hang up with a shocked cry that the men they were calling never told them they were married. What that can do to a conjugal life is anybody's guess.

Caution for the eve-teasers of today! If they aren't caught for their crimes, the crime might catch up with them. The victims may not forgive. When married, the victimisers could get the taste of their own medicine. Girls, bring it on. Please don't take your lives. Fight back.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.