

Opinion poll

Take cue from the results

THE DS-Nielson opinion survey has brought forth results that should provide both the ruling party and the opposition with food for thought. We believe the poll results carry some important messages for the decision makers in both the camps.

Public opinion is indeed the driving force behind the activities undertaken by the decision makers. It is now a democratic norm to elicit the people's responses on issues having a great bearing on governance, economy and politics.

The AL government has completed one year and a half at the helm and public opinion on its handling of important issues is a sort of scorecard of its performance. The opinion poll shows that the government still has an edge over the opposition, as a total of 57 percent participants (49 percent satisfied and 8 percent very satisfied) people still hold a positive view of the way the country is being run. But this might not give a whole picture of what people are thinking. A section of respondents feel that the judiciary is politically biased, which is indeed a matter of grave worry. Furthermore, people's confidence in the ACC has eroded. The respondents' observation on law and order further corroborate the point, as most of them see no improvement.

The government should be particularly unhappy with the BCL's position in public eye. They have categorically stated that the AL student outfit is destroying the government's reputation. What else does the AL high command need to assess the position correctly?

While nearly half the respondents have seen nothing wrong with the government's attitude with the opposition, it is quite noteworthy that no less than 35 percent think that the government has adopted a policy of suppression. This can easily cross the 50 percent mark.

The opposition has not done much better. It is no good news for the BNP and its allies that 81 percent of the respondents have taken a clear position against parliament boycott. However, the opposition's image crisis appears to be less acute now. Their decision to call hartal just once in 18 months might have given them some rating points.

The prime minister herself has lost a bit of ground, as the number of those satisfied with her performance has gone down. The opposition leader's standing in the public eye has improved a little, but she, too, has failed to gain anything substantial.

An opinion poll is not an exact science; it may only be treated as an indicator of the mood of the people. But to those who can look beyond the results only, studying it could be a meaningful and highly beneficial exercise. The respondents have let the politicians know what they think. Now only those who will take the results seriously will be benefited.

Death due to despondency

Shun the culture of OSD

THERE must be something seriously wrong with a system which compels a public servant to take his own life. Shaidur Rahman, an employee at managerial level of the DCC, was struck off duty more than a year ago on charges of corruption but was neither given the opportunity to defend himself nor was his service terminated. And all this time, while he was paid his salary, he had nothing to do, being on virtual OSD. Being unable to endure the ignominy, he considered death a more preferable option.

The suicide of Shaidur Rahman is a grim reminder of the ill effects of a provision, an expedient that was well-intentioned, but has been abused and misused beyond recognition. One is constrained to ask whether the provision of sending an employee on OSD can be invoked by subordinate bodies of ministries - because it is the cabinet division only that has the authority to make people OSD. It is our understanding that there are a few more in the DCC, and also in other corporations, who are on so-called OSD. Do these have the approval of the government?

As of today more than 200 public servants are suffering the status of OSD. Regrettably, a provision that was meant to cater to a particular situation, this has become a form of punishment. It has become a tradition to send on OSD large number of public servants every time with the change of government, ostensibly because of their 'affiliation' with the erstwhile party-in-power.

Over the years this has become a tool of victimisation, a political weapon against those perceived to have been in the 'good books' of the erstwhile regime. It has nothing to do with competence or performance. On the contrary, competence and good performance have become the undoing of many. In fact, diligence of public servants during the tenure of one party in power has been seen in negative light by the other, and officers have been punished for being 'too closely affiliated' to the erstwhile regime.

When diligence and loyalty to the service turn out to be a bane in ones profession little wonder that there is an attitude of laissez-faire among some public servants; OSD has become a disincentive for honest workers.

We feel that the OSD culture has assumed an odious character apart from the fact that it is a drain on the exchequer. Nobody is apolitical and that includes the public servants too; but they should be judged entirely on their performance and merit. Those found wanting or have specific allegations must be dealt with according to the service rules and the law of the land. Certainly, putting officers as OSD is not an alternative.

Strong upazila: Gateway to local democracy

Decentralisation, not as a political stunt but through sustained measures and sincere efforts, is overdue since strong local governments can make democracy truly functional and meaningful. Strengthening the upazila can be the gateway to effective local democracy in the country.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THE debate centering round upazila has taken a new turn recently with the Upazila Nirbahi Officers' (UNO) public reactions against the activities of national experts.

The UNOs, who are representatives of the central government at the upazila level, have definitely been doing a superb job of coordinating the activities of various departments at the upazila level. The level of sophistication of most of the UNOs is also highly commendable. Coming out with such sweeping comments is, thus, irresponsible and unwarranted.

While their opinions on the functioning of upazila call for due considerations, they are not supposed to forget about their public servant status and associated responsibilities. Seemingly, most of the UNOs are finding it difficult to work under the elected upazila chairmen, who are not always their equals in education and expertise.

Can they, however, ignore the fact that secretaries, topmost ranking government officials of ministries, are also working under elected representatives such as prime minister and ministers, who are also not equally educated and expert in most cases. What will happen if the secretaries, too, come up with such gut reactions? Against this backdrop, thus, the magnitude of the issue should be gauged.

In a recently conducted UNDP-funded study, where 12 upazilas of the

country were selected as samples and in which I too was a researcher, it was observed that most of the upazila parishads had been running their affairs in the previous Thana Development and Coordination Committee (TDCC) manner, when there were no elected upazila parishads.

Though there are provisions for forming 14 standing committees in the upazila, it is still a far cry in most of the upazilas. Though two financial years have gone by, most of the upazilas are yet to see even a single budget. The matter of an annual plan is also hovering in uncertainty. Though the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen have many duties, most of the upazila chairmen are busy attending social programmes and local arbitrations.

Admittedly, there is no viable substitute for effective decentralised bodies for empowering, and giving a taste of governance to, the people, especially for the vast majority that have to stay away from the capital. The tendency to cry for decentralisation in public, and hamper the sincere efforts in practice, is still the order of the day.

Though the perennial bureaucratic resistance is the principal culprit in it, collusive and docile political leaders cannot deny their part. However, the World Bank very rightly suggests that decentralisation not only contributes to balanced development of various regions in a country, it also greatly contributes to integrity of a state through



Only local government can reach them.

providing power to remote regions.

In this sense, the more powerful a country's decentralised bodies the more strengthened will be its national integrity. Local governments are supposed to be the springboard for prospective and ambitious politicians. Local governments are also considered as the training grounds for national politics in many countries.

According to Article 65(1) of our constitution, MPs are vested with legislative powers of the Republic and so their utmost obligation is to formulate or amend various legislations with a view to administering country in the best possible ways, following the people's aspirations as Article 7(1) stipulates that all powers in the republic belong to the people.

Meanwhile, in accordance with Article 59(1), local government bodies in every administrative unit of the Republic are the major actors in all sorts of local development works. Admittedly, many local government bodies are not being able to meaningfully contribute to local development

despite having the wherewithal from the local resources. The parliament has, thus, a lot to do for local government and development, and this is clearly defined in our constitution.

Article 60 further states: "Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies, including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds." So the parliament is constitutionally bound to provide UZP with full and real autonomy.

If we opt for good governance, we have to carry out democratic decentralisation. We have already lost a lot of time. Thus, decentralisation, not as a political stunt but through sustained measures and sincere efforts, is overdue since strong local governments can make democracy truly functional and meaningful. Strengthening the upazila can be the gateway to effective local democracy in the country.

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Teaching the teachers

Running of coaching centres by teachers has become a lucrative business these days. The malpractice has reached an alarming level with a huge number of coaching centres being run by some serving teachers at the expense of classroom teaching.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has severely criticised admission trade in colleges and coaching business of teachers. She was also highly critical of the teachers of public universities, who prefer to take classes in private universities and do consultancy for various institutions.

While inaugurating a course and unveiling the plaque of the Naem's administrative building on August 17, the prime minister pointed out some of the malpractices in the field of education. She said that values had deteriorated so much that students were often not given pass marks if they did not go for coaching to particular teachers. She also castigated the admission trade in colleges in which some teachers were also involved.

Running of coaching centres by teachers has become a lucrative business these days. The malpractice has reached an alarming level with a huge number of coaching centres being run by some serving teachers at the expense of classroom teaching. Naturally, the students are bound to suffer, as the time allotted to teachers for conducting classes at the school is diverted to their coaching centres.

Some teachers also induce the students, saying that those who want to secure good marks should seek help from the teacher outside the school hours, preferably at the coaching centre run by the teacher. Many walls in the cities are covered with posters proclaiming that such and such "sir" is offering coaching with guaranteed A+ result in such and such subject. But these teachers never give such a guarantee in classroom teaching.

Now, the government has put a bar on private coaching by teachers with the caveat that schools can arrange extra classes for the meritorious and weaker section of the students, and that too only after school hours, for which the teachers will get remuneration. This directive has several aspects that need to be cogitated upon.

One of the aspects is that it acknowledges the harmful consequences of the lucrative business called private coaching, and also recognised the reality that some students do need extra efforts to get through in certain subjects, while some need extra coaching to secure outstanding marks.

Neither of the aspects can be ignored. But the most painful part of it is that no one had ever heard of private coaching on such a large scale, while giving little attention to classroom teaching.

It was not long ago that schools always attended to the extra needs of their students. If there was need for extra coaching, the schools would arrange it on their own accord. Neither were the students charged for it nor did the teachers asked for remuneration for the extra effort they put in. The all-pervasive private coaching was not known to anybody then.

The BNP-led four-party government did many wrong things, but its education minister did a splendid job by eliminating mass copying in the public examinations, which had engulfed the whole nation. The education minister of the incumbent government can also set another such example by eliminating private coaching.

The government should stop the MPO to those mercenary teachers. It should also withhold financial assistances to schools and colleges that are engaged in admission trade. The government may initiate legislative ban on advertisement of private coaching, the way advertisement of cigarettes has been banned. But imposition of a ban does not work without strict enforcement. Printing and selling of notebooks has also been banned but notebooks could not be banished from the market.

The 64 Deputy Commissioners (DCs), who attended a 3-day annual conference in July, brought another evil into focus. The DCs found that teachers' involvement in local politics seriously hampered education, both qualitatively and quantitatively. They have suggested that non-government teach-



Coaching centres are proliferating.

ers' job be made transferable.

The DCs suggestion deserves serious consideration. Prolonged stay at one place makes teachers enter partisan politics. This keeps them busy with matters other than their academic pursuits, which hampers their efficiency as teachers. Besides, this renders the whole purpose of government spending on non-government teachers' salary futile.

Nearly 3,81,000 teachers of 30,845 non-government schools, colleges and madrasas are now being paid by the government from the taxpayer's purse. So, these institutions should be brought under strict accountability and the spending must be on the purpose for which it is meant.

According to a newspaper report, academic activities in the public universities are being hampered as nearly 2,000 teachers of these universities are engaged in part-time teaching in private universities and consultancy in NGOs, while some 1,300 teachers are staying abroad in the name of higher studies.

In fact, out of a total of 8,068 teachers of public universities nearly 4,500 are detached from teaching. The absence of the teachers adds to the sufferings of the students because some teachers frequently miss regular classes, class

tests and other duties.

Against this backdrop, the education minister has directed the University Grants Commission (UGC) to formulate guidelines for the teachers of the public and private universities to check part time jobs and negligence in routine class teaching. The UGC has developed software to identify the public university teachers who are engaged in part time teaching in private universities.

The anger aired by the prime minister against the teachers who are playing foul with education is quite justifiable. Surely, she has given vent to a seething resentment of the people, which has been simmering for long. But only airing of anger is not enough. The government cannot shrug off its responsibility for the deteriorating quality of education.

The teachers are now being paid enough to make ends meet. Private tuition or part time teaching is now a matter of greed, not of sustenance. The mercenary teachers need some moral teaching to make them committed to the noble cause of the profession. Only then will the quality of education improve and coaching centres and part-time teaching may be stopped.

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