

## Make draft media policy public

Seek wide ranging public and professional reaction before finalizing

EVERY government, even those with the most democratic of credentials, loves to formulate media policy, or at least dreams of doing so. That is because they want to control the media. Some directly but the more sophisticated ones, indirectly. The fact that they do not succeed is because they are prevented from doing so by the collective force of universal public opinion. It is in the nature of governments, fighting for the hearts and minds of the voters, that they abhor criticism. Those who have the maturity of seeking criticism prefers that it be done in private or through friendly counseling. They seldom, if ever, like public criticism of their actions and a thorough revelation of their failures and misdeeds.

Our government is no exception. In response to a question in the parliament last Sunday our affable information minister, who never tires of saying how media friendly he is, revealed that a draft policy is ready and is being scrutinized, obviously by some bureaucrat whose life long training is to maintain secrecy, and not promote openness which is the life long mission of the media.

From the tenor of the questions in the parliament last Sunday is it clear that our honourable MPs are in a vengeful mood against the media. We saw a regrettable spectacle of media bashing in the House the other day in which Speaker himself participated to the surprise of the public in general. Reportedly last Sunday some MPs suggested that a code of conduct be formulated for the media so that our honourable members are spared what has been called "baseless, politically motivated reporting". They demanded that policy be formulated to prevent "yellow journalism". While we appreciate their eagerness to prevent yellow journalism, may we point out that there is an even greater need to prevent "yellow politics". We think before venturing on a code of conduct for journalists there should be a code of conduct for MPs. In fact there is one already in existence as a private members bill. The House might just as well consider that urgently.

As we can surmise what the MPs have in mind is to tie the hands of the media so that we cannot hold any MP responsible even if he or she indulges in corruption, abuse of power and nepotism. We would like to categorically state that we will oppose tooth and nail such moves.

Let us remind our honourable MPs that one of Bangladesh's biggest success, and one for which our country's image soars sky high, is free media. There are no comparable country at our level of development that has such free media. We have earned it, we are proud of it and we intend to keep it that way. We freely admit that we have many flaws and we are willing to work through some independent body to rectify them. We have, on numerous occasions, suggested that the best body to undertake such a task is the Press Council. Government should strengthen it, fund it, equip it and let it function independently. We promise to co-operate.

For the present, the government should immediately make public the draft media policy so that a wider public discussion can take place. Do not unnecessarily tamper with things that are working well. There are far more pressing issues to occupy government's attention and energy.

## Industrial police

It must work professionally and impartially

THE idea of an exclusive police force for the industrial zones is a good one. The home minister has said that the force will be employed to make the industrial areas of Dhaka, Ghazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong free from violence perpetrated by 'outsiders'. What we understand is that its focus will be primarily on the safety and security of the garment units by protecting them from destructive activities.

Certainly, the spate of violence that one had noticed over the last several years in the RMG sector, and one that had brought it almost to the precipice was totally unacceptable. It was disconcerting to see the rather inexplicable manner in which trouble in one factory very quickly infected adjacent ones and even ones that were very far off. The incitement phenomenon is incomprehensible, and one finds it hard to believe that notwithstanding the grievances of the workers they would be involved in wanton destruction of the very industrial units that provide them with their livelihood.

However, protection of public, and indeed private property is something that should be guaranteed, it being the bounden duty of the state to ensure that. And thus we wonder, given the sensitivity of the industrial sector, particularly the RMG sector, such an arrangement for law enforcing agencies to be in place, to either anticipate a situation or react quickly to arrest a situation from going out of hand, had not been made till now.

We take particular note of the training module and the subjects included therein, but ten days is hardly enough to acquaint the policemen on labour psychology, or owner psychology, for that matter. And one wonders whether it is for the police to interpose themselves between the owners and the labourers as 'arbiters' of disputes as has been, reportedly, suggested by the director of the Police Staff College.

While we welcome the development, there are a few things that we would like to point out with regard to keeping peace in the industrial areas. It seems that a complementary mechanism to ensure that problems do not occur in the first place, admittedly an ideal situation not always easy to attain, or do not go out of hand, is missing. There is hardly any outlet for the workers in the RMG sector to ventilate their grievances in the absence of a bargaining agent, namely, reformed trade unions dissociated from the big political parties.

It must be kept in mind that in keeping peace the industrial police do not become the handmaidens of the owners, meddling in the disputes. They should not only be seen to be impartial but should actually refrain from taking sides.



Administration vs party activists



## Indications of bigger malaise

A sense of insecurity has gripped the local administrations all over the country because of undue pressure from AL leaders and activists, especially in recruitment and tender process and the government's indifference to their plight

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT is surely a syndrome of bigger malaise when the officials in charge of district administration break out in tears in public for being subjected to assault by political cadres. The incidents that occurred recently in Pabna only served to expose an unforeseen scenario and the nation witnessed aghast the repulsive incidents centering round the recruitment test of some employees.

Both the newspapers and the electronic media were awash with reports of leaders and activists of the ruling AL running riot in their bid to have candidates with proven loyalty to the ruling quarters posted in the civil administration. It also had come in the wake of the arrogant assertion of the health adviser to the prime minister that none outside the ruling party would be among some 13,500 employees to be recruited soon for appointment in community clinics.

A group of pro-Awami League doctors from Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad (SCP) and Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) allegedly assaulted the vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University on September 25, after not being selected for the posts of medical officer.

A sense of insecurity has gripped the local administrations all over the country because of undue pressure from AL leaders and activists, especially in recruitment and tender process and the government's indifference to their plight. Many DCs and UNOs have reportedly expressed their worries to the higher authorities, but no effective steps have

yet been taken to stop interference in the functioning of local administrations by the leaders of ruling party and its associate bodies.

The conflict between the MPs and upazila chairmen has crippled local administration in many upazilas, where the upazila officials find themselves helpless. Five officials of the Savar upazila have filed general diaries with the local police, seeking security after they had received death threats allegedly from local leaders of the ruling party.

According to an official of the establishment ministry, many UNOs, who represent the government at the grassroots, have already approached the establishment secretary for their withdrawal from the field, citing the conflicts between the local administrations and upazila chairmen.

A few months back, BCL activists attacked and injured the AC (land) of Kachua upazila in Chandpur after he reportedly tried to prevent them from building a structure on government land. Such types of incidents have increased alarmingly across the country, and the people are extremely annoyed with this disturbing development.

The DC and two ADCs of Pabna have been withdrawn and made OSD. The SP of Pabna has also been closed and the UNO has been transferred to a remote place. This type of action will be construed as punishment to the civil servants, which will not only give a wrong signal to the field level administration but also boost the brusque political cadres.

The activists of the AL and its associate

bodies went on a rampage on September 17, forcing the administration to postpone the recruitment examination for appointing some employees in the DC's office of Pabna. They also set fire to answer scripts and admit cards and allegedly assaulted officials and staff of the district administration.

The old habit of denial also persisted in this case. H.T. Imam, an adviser to the prime minister for the establishment ministry, flatly denied involvement of the AL activists in foiling the recruitment test of employees in Pabna. He said that nothing like "sobbing" by the DC had happened though major dailies were awash with the photograph.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's remark, made from New York, on the Pabna fiasco frustrated both the government officials and the people, as it came as a defence for her party men. She reportedly uttered a Bengali adage "Ek hate tali bajena" (which roughly translates as, one cannot clap with one hand), indicating that only AL men should not be blamed.

The Pabna district administration filed two cases under the Speedy Trial Act in the Pabna Sadar police station, bringing charges against 32 activists of the Chhatra League and Juba League. They were sent to jail after they surrendered. The government must show the fairness in its action against these political goons as per the law of the land.

Recruitment to thousands of posts under various local authorities, including civil surgeon's office, has not been made in the 20 months of the incumbent government, either because of irregularities or because of interference by the AL activists. The Jessore and Panchagar civil surgeons' offices recently postponed recruitment of around 100 employees following attacks by AL activists.

The unwarranted interference by ruling party leaders and activists in the recruitment process has, however, raised

the speaker's concern, and he called for the formation of a high-level inquiry committee. Surely, it tends to indicate that there are still some persons in the ruling camp who have not yet been either intoxicated with the arrogance that accompanies power or lost sanity and sense of purpose.

Politicisation of the administration, including the police, has become a hallmark for all the successive governments, and the incumbent government is not an exception. Immediately after its assumption of office, the government had sought to populate key positions of the civil bureaucracy with its perceived loyalists.

The ruling quarter needs to realise that their party will not be in power for ever, and the next change of government, whenever it happens, will entail yet another round of cleansing in the administration. The bureaucrats perceived to be loyal to the AL will invariably become the target of such cleansing. These sorts of activities are sure to destroy the backbone of the civil administration and deprive the people of good governance.

The executive branch, one of the three organs of the government, comprises an extensive bureaucracy manned by civil servants, who have their specific administrative functions and responsibility. The individual officials posted at districts and upazilas are administrators whose prime responsibility is to implement government policies in the field level and maintain law and order.

The civil servants are entrusted with the task of turning the government's policies and programmes into action. So a working relation between the civil servants and political leaders is crucially important. Hence, security and neutrality of public servants have to be ensured at all cost, so that they can remain true to their role and responsibility as servants of the Republic, not of any political party.

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## 2010 is a century away from 1992

There is, however, a shortage of self-respect, since every hungry stomach in our country is a sharp slap on the face of the idea of India. 2010 is a hundred years away from 1992.

M.J. AKBAR

THE judiciary is more important than any judgement. Every institution has to be larger than the sum of its members, and nowhere more so than the two pillars of any democracy, parliament and the judiciary. We do not question the legitimacy of an enactment just because we disagree with an MP, or indeed because the behaviour of some MPs might have been unsavoury.

A substantial section of India did not agree with the passage of the nuclear bill in 2009; and evidence of bribery in the process was produced, in a fairly dramatic way, during the proceedings. This did not mean rejection of the new legislation.

Lawyers and leaders of the Sunni Waqf Board and the Muslim Personal Law Board have repeatedly insisted that they would abide by the judgement of the courts. This was both reasonable and acceptable [reason and response have not necessarily been in harmony during the long years of contention over a mosque at Ayodhya].

When the Allahabad High Court's

judgement was deferred by the Supreme Court for about a week, there was perceptible irritation among Muslims, who wanted the verdict to be announced. It is possible that such enthusiasm for the verdict was fuelled by a conviction that it would go in favour of the mosque.

The lawyers and spokesmen of the pro-mosque movement displayed considerable confidence. Maybe they forgot that however strong a case may be, it still has to be argued before a bench, and complacency within the legal team can be a fatal flaw. It was the BJP that was preparing for an adverse judgement.

Its leader L.K. Advani told his party repeatedly, before the verdict, that any remorse should be a private matter; and that violence was unacceptable. No disputant can deny the validity of the judicial process, or the credibility of the verdict, just because it has gone against you. That is counter-productive, and dangerous.

In any case, the Allahabad judgement is a semi-colon, not a full stop. The full stop will come when the Supreme Court takes a decision. Muslims will appeal, as they have every right to. It must also be stressed that in 1993 Parliament clearly

prevented the courts from hearing any other dispute over a place of worship. Ayodhya is the last case of its kind.

The Congress, which has been in power during all four of the nodal points of the Babri-Ayodhya controversy -- opening of British Raj locks and installation of idols in 1949, laying of the foundation stone for a temple in 1989, destruction of Babri in 1992 and the verdict in 2010 -- is in search of an "amicable" settlement. The game is old and evident. Congress policy on the dispute has rotated around one axis: how to get the temple built without losing the Muslim vote. The BJP has no Muslim vote to lose, but it will support such an under-the-surface endeavour since it obviously wants a temple to be constructed as soon as possible.

If Ayodhya is the last case of its kind perhaps we should let it complete the legal process as well. We have waited for six decades; why not wait for two or three years more? Any "amicable" settlement is unlikely to be amicable enough for everyone, to begin with and could degenerate into a "political" compromise that could strain community relations rather than heal them. If we trust our institutions then we must trust them fully.

Pseudo-politicians in religious garb seem to be able to resist everything except temptation, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde. Unsurprisingly, therefore, one or two professional fire-breathers among

Muslims have reinforced their reputation for irresponsibility by indulging in provocative rhetoric from the pulpit.

They have not learnt from the experience of a quarter century what the price of provocation is, for they never suffer. The price is paid by the poor and the defenceless, who live in crowded lanes, defenceless on one side and hostile on the other.

There is however some good news. Those who think they can still milk hysteria are blind to an extraordinary change that has come about in India. The people, Hindu or Muslim, have risen above the negative politics of communal conflict; they want the positive politics of development.

Faith and worship still matter to Indians; and it is a very limited, elitist, Delhi notion that the young have moved beyond religion. They have not. But they have moved beyond violence as a means to their horizon.

The impoverished have understood a simple, important, over-riding reality: poverty is not communal. There is no shortage of places for prayer in our country. There is, however, a shortage of self-respect, since every hungry stomach in our country is a sharp slap on the face of the idea of India. 2010 is a hundred years away from 1992.

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