

Shake-up at the top echelon of bureaucracy

Will it make governance dynamic?

WHEN 21 secretary-level functionaries of as many ministries and divisions have to interchange positions and four get marginalised as OSD, it cannot evidently be seen in the category of the 'routine' as a top official of the government would have us believe. In fact, since the shuffling encompasses nearly half of the total number of ministries and divisions, it is anything but a massive shake-up, almost tectonic in nature.

The size of the re-shuffle at the nearly two-year point of the AL government lends itself to an interpretation that the PM has acted on her oft-repeated displeasure over what she termed bureaucratic sloth taking hold of her government. How far the changes are going to inject dynamism into her governance and service delivery pattern only time can tell. But one thing is for sure, unless she succeeds in impelling her ministers, MPs and party activists to draw a line between the concerns of ruling party and the affairs of governance and cease to meddle in administrative affairs, changing of places at the top of the bureaucracy including the police, can only be of cosmetic effect.

On taking over the reins of administration, the AL government had made ten secretaries into officers-on-special duty (OSD), and with four more made added in the current installment, the total number of OSD stands at 473 to-date. Such a huge number of virtually laid-off officials is a sheer waste of manpower, experience and above all public money, a costly luxury a country such as Bangladesh can ill-afford.

This together with contractual appointment and compulsory retirement galore has been a fixture with power alternating between the two major political parties every five years. Although such changes are sought to be interpreted as attempts at de-politicisation of the administrations by turn; in truth, however, these invariably ended up being politicization -- in perpetuity, so to speak.

Whatever may have been the overt or covert objective behind such shake-ups, the net result has been a sense of insecurity pervading the administration, which in turn, bred de-moralisation across the rank and file of the bureaucracy. Another repercussion of all this has been witnessed in the race the officials engaged themselves to ingratiate before the government of the day by giving an unceremonious burial to their professional norms as functionaries of the republic.

Dhaka as regional centre for counter-terrorism

The need is to make the most of it

THE news that a regional Counter-Terrorism Centre will be set up in Dhaka with European Union (EU)'s financial assistance is a welcome development. Though Bangladesh is not quite a focal point of terrorism, still in the South Asian context, in particular, our vulnerability to this global menace cannot be overemphasized.

In fact, local variants of terrorism, especially militancy, have tried to raise their ugly heads from time to time in Bangladesh. And these forms of terrorism are not entirely home-grown either. That is because, in the modern-day world no country is an island and impervious to international events including terrorism. That is why, without appearing to be a direct target of terrorism, a country can still host terrorism by acting as a transit for terrorists and their arms and weapons. And there is growing proof that Bangladesh has in the past been used as a safe shelter as well as a corridor for terrorists and their deadly cargoes.

What is of particular concern is the recurrence of terrorist, especially, militant attacks at different places in India and Pakistan over the years. In the circumstances, there is no reason to think that Bangladesh as a South Asian nation will not ever be a target of global terrorism in the future.

Against this backdrop, it is reassuring that both India and Pakistan have supported the move to create a regional counter-terrorism centre in Dhaka. The concurrence of the both India and Pakistan in the matter marks a growing realisation between the two traditional South-Asian rivals to view South-Asian theatre of terrorism from a regional angle and combat it accordingly. And with Dhaka hosting the centre for combating regional terrorism, our regional as well as international image as a nation committed to the cause of combating the global scourge of terrorism will be further enhanced.

As a nation facing the dual challenge of poverty and overpopulation in its struggle for economic development and graduating to a middle-income country within a decade, the threat of terrorism is staring us in the face. In this situation, we cannot afford any laxity in combating this danger lurking in the shadow. So, the government needs to make the most of the regional Counter-Terrorism Centre to go operational from next year in Dhaka and enhance the nation's preparedness against and capability to combat all forms of terrorism that may come in the way of its economic growth.

We regard the centre will give a tangible expression to the urge of South Asian countries to coordinate and cooperate in the common war against terrorism in any form, overt or covert.

Politics out of tragedy

It is not quite these two matters that we are interested in today but something even more distressing and contemptible, and it has to do with politicians and politics in Bangladesh, more specifically how human tragedy is being exploited to outdo a political rival or reap political mileage.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

WHILE for most part of our history we have been making tragedy of our politics we have been equally adept in playing politics with our tragedy. And it is the people that have come out the second best in both the cases all the time.

It is said that some people in Bangladesh thrive on its tragedy. In fact, had it not been for some of the natural, and sometimes man-made, afflictions that keep us constant company many that are doing hefty business and making big profit would have very little to exploit and make a fortune out of, like poverty and hunger.

However, it is not quite these two matters that we are interested in today but something even more distressing and contemptible, and it has to do with politicians and politics in Bangladesh, more specifically how human tragedy is being exploited to outdo a political rival or reap political mileage.

This practice has been with us for a long time and it is disappointing that the trend has not subsided. We were hoping that with the coming of a new regime with the promise of "change" the days of cheap shots were over, that there would be a degree of sanity in the utterances of the politicians, more so of the senior leadership of the two parties. It would be an understatement to say that we are disappointed -- and we hope that we speak for a vast majority.

The gory pictures of October 2006 in the penultimate weeks before the end of BNP-led alliance rule did very little to dignify our politics. The streets were turned into battlefields and the manner in which the two political rivals set upon each other bears comparison with the Tutsi Hutu clashes in Rwanda. To term these events as aberrations in the rather short continuum of our history, would be taking shelter in semantics. These have been indelible blotches in our rather chequered political history. And



A tragedy compounded by politicisation.

we are continuing in the same vein -- with the abrasive nature of inter-party and intra-party relationship dictating politics in the country.

One should not waste time trying to find out how much the two major parties have benefited from the current state of their relationship, but what is not hard to notice is the immense disservice it is doing to the country and the impact the situation is having on the lives of the people in general -- because in the ultimate analysis the situation manifests itself in the form of bad governance. The Serajganj train accident that killed seven and the killing of UZ chairman in Pabna have once again brought into sharp focus the nature of politics in Bangladesh.

To see people crushed under the wheels

of a speeding train is itself a catastrophe. The situation becomes atrociously tragic when that is politicised, as has been done by both the AL and the BNP. But one would not mind if the utterances of the party men revolving around the incident were backed by good sense and logic and would be acceptable to a degree if that were so.

It is hard to believe what the BNP chairperson said, that it was staged by some agencies of the government to foil the rally.

But be that as it may, the responsibility of the deaths will have to borne by both the parties and the administration for what each of them did and did not do in respect of the rally. This is also a good example of how denial of political space to the opposition by the ruling party can often lead to human catastrophe.

The Boroigram chairman killing is perhaps the latest in a chain of political killings in Pabna that started early this

ASIA'S CLOUDED HORIZON

ASEAN remains wary of a US role

It would be a mistake to construe the New York summit as the beginning of a new Asian-American alliance against China. Despite anxieties about China's growing power, no Asean countries would be willing to put their money where their mouths are.

MARVIN OTT

THE second Asean-US leaders' summit in New York may have conveyed the impression of an emerging alliance. Sure, after years of keeping a low profile on Southeast Asian problems, the United States is more engaged than ever.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton angered Beijing by taking a public position supporting Association of Southeast Asian Nations efforts to seek peaceful resolution of territorial disputes with China through multilateral diplomacy and for status of the South China Sea as a "maritime commons" rather than a territorial sea.

The image of Chinese expansion and US resistance has been reinforced by events to the immediate north in the East China Sea, after a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel off the disputed Senkaku-Diaoyu islands. China demanded release of the arrested captain, reparations and an apology from Tokyo. Japan agreed to the release, but declared acquiescence to the latter two demands "unthinkable."

Japan has been bolstered by Clinton's assertion that Japanese "administration" of the islands falls under the purview of the US-Japan Security Treaty and Defence Secretary Robert Gates' terse observation that US "would fulfil our alliance obligations."

However, it would be a mistake to construe the New York summit as the beginning of a new Asian-American alliance against China. Despite anxieties about China's growing power, no Asean countries would be willing to put their money where their mouths are.

Suddenly the US is seen as standing athwart Chinese strategic ambitions in Southeast Asia -- with Asean governments apparently lining up in support of Washington against Beijing. While much is valid in this characterisation, it's crucial that US policymakers and strategists not over-read Clinton's comments in Hanoi, particu-

larly when it comes to Asean support.

Beijing's strategic ambitions in Southeast Asia are real. From China's perspective, Southeast Asia is its southern doorstep -- China has deep roots in the region derived from geography (a common border with Vietnam, Laos and Burma), ethnicity (large, economically powerful urban Chinese communities throughout the region) and history (the "tribute system" that expressed Southeast Asian deference to China over millennia).

In terms of strategic outlook, Chinese leadership evokes the classic realists of 19th century Europe -- vitally concerned with prerogatives of sovereignty and the sanctity of borders, animated by calculations of power and influence. From the standpoint of the Chinese regime, Southeast Asia is properly understood as a natural and rightful Chinese sphere of influence, a region where China's interests are paramount.

When these are properly acknowledged, China is prepared to adopt policies that benefit Southeast Asia as well as China -- a dominion of Confucian harmony and benevolence. Since the mid-1990s China has emphasized the latter with a sophisticated diplomatic "charm offensive" designed to portray a good neighbour dedicated to the economic advancement of Chinese and Southeast Asians alike.

The South China Sea is central to this ambition, but in a special category. China presented an ox-tongue-shaped dotted line, calling it historic waters, effectively encompassing the entire South China Sea and cutting across the major sea-lanes. Until recently Chinese officials have cloaked the Chinese claim in a shroud of ambiguity, epitomised by careful avoidance of the key word "sovereignty."

Yet careful examination of Chinese statements and actions over the years left no room for doubt that China viewed the South China Sea as Chinese sovereign territory. Because China lacked the military capacity to enforce this assertion, it made strategic sense to obfuscate rather than

clarify intentions. Deng Xiaoping often reminded his countrymen of a traditional Chinese aphorism: "Bide your time and conceal your capabilities until you are ready to act."

Clinton's statement at the Asian Regional Forum in Hanoi was delivered in the context of growing concern among Southeast Asian governments regarding China. For months Vietnam had complained publicly and through diplomatic channels about Chinese "bullying" of Vietnamese fishermen and international oil company crews that want to prospect off Vietnam's coast.

Other Asean governments, while less overt, showed signs of disquiet over China's build-up of its armed forces, particularly those designed for offshore power projection. China's dam building on the upper Mekong, giving it control over that vital river system, has alarming implications for downstream states. The willingness of several Asean ministers to speak out in support of Clinton in Hanoi was testimony to US diplomatic preparatory spadework and growing unease.

There's no question that the US willingness to stake out a position in support of a maritime commons, not a territorial sea, and multilateral diplomacy, vide China's determination to deal with the Southeast Asian countries one at a time, was welcome in many regional capitals. It provided a vital, long overdue signal that Asean governments did not have to cope with China alone. In that sense Clinton's initiative has provided a dose of courage and self-confidence for Asean in its relationship with China.

That said, US policymakers must have a healthy respect for the limits of what Southeast Asian governments are able and willing to do. To employ an overused metaphor, at least some Asean members may be prepared to show up and hold America's coat if Washington duels Beijing. But don't expect them to get into the arena in any but carefully circumscribed ways -- for a number of compelling reasons.

First, it's long been a truism that the Southeast Asian governments fear being forced to choose between China and America. No Southeast Asian country wants to make such a choice, but no less an authority than Singapore's widely respected ambassador to Washington, Chan Heng Chee, has observed that, if forced, the Southeast Asians would gener-

ally opt for China. There's a consensus in the region that the US-China relationship is vital to all concerned. When asked what kind of relationship best protects Southeast Asian interests, the answer is the proverbial Goldilocks principle -- "not too hot and not too cold." A cooperative but not deeply collaborative relationship is just right.

Second, as previously noted, China's influence and strategic reach into Southeast Asia is deep, powerful and growing. This is particularly evident in the economic sphere. As the global financial crisis weakened the credibility of US and European economies, China emerged as the largest trading partner of Asean. Between 2009 and 2010, aggregate trade is up roughly 50 percent year on year. Not coincidentally, the China-Asean Free Trade Area entered into force at the beginning of 2010.

Third, despite significant investments in military modernisation, no Southeast Asian country is prepared to confront China militarily. The only country that has done so in recent decades is Vietnam in response to China's 1979 invasion across its northern boundary. Vietnamese forces acquitted themselves well in that encounter, but Hanoi is under no illusion that such success could be replicated today.

The only naval and air forces that can credibly face off against China in the South China Sea are American -- and if it came to that, US commanders should expect little or no operational support from Asean, with the possible and limited exception of Vietnam.

Fourth, Asean is not the feckless cave of winds that some Westerners describe. But it's also not a unified, purposeful actor regarding the South China Sea. Several Asean governments, including Laos, Cambodia and Burma are highly responsive to Chinese interests and have no proverbial dog in the South China Sea fight.

The best Washington can expect -- and only if assiduously nurtured -- is cautious diplomatic support along the lines of what was seen at the Asean forum. It's an important shift from the past that Washington should welcome, with realistic expectations.

(The concluding part of this article will appear in Friday's issue.)

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