

TIB report and aftermath

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MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh (TIB) has recently published a report on the outcomes of its survey on the corruption of service sectors in Bangladesh. In the preface of the report TIB said: "It is a social movement against corruption, working towards strengthening the voice and demand for a transparent and accountable governance in Bangladesh where corruption is effectively controlled." TIB believes that corruption "is one of the key predicaments against achieving the goals and expectations of our glorious struggle for independence."

TIB is a transparent and accountable organisation, in line with its Berlin-based parent body, which monitors and publishes a Corruption Perception Index (CPI) report yearly for almost all the nations on our planet. In the trustee board of its Bangladesh chapter sit some of the eminent personalities of our nation, whose integrity and political neutrality is beyond any question by any count.

The methodology of the said research has been elaborated in the report, and it is no different from the scientific surveys conducted elsewhere, especially in developed nations where the authorities who could make a difference take serious predicaments of the prevailing situations in order to initiate remedial actions.

In fact, the report emphasised: "This survey will assist in advancing the anti-corruption commitments and activities of the government and the ruling coalition. Besides, the results of this survey will assist in implementing appropriate measures according to the nature of corruption in the different service sectors." So the honest intent of the survey was made clear by TIB. The definition of corruption was expanded to include "negligence of duty, nepotism, embezzlement, deception and making money or wealth through application of force and other irregularities."

In the report, TIB has compared its survey findings of 2010 with those of 2007, and the results are a mixed bag. While in some sectors the current findings are worse, they are better in others. This is to emphasise that the research was not regime-specific and it did not have any hidden agenda to magnify the magnitude of evils of one regime over the other. This is more

so for the fact that corruption is a social evil and it has grown over the years without any defined boundary of the political regimes.

It was reported that a staggering 84.2% of the households surveyed throughout the country had experienced corruption. From the sectoral analysis it was reported that the level of corrup-



tion was the highest in the judiciary. 88% of all the households that received services from this sector were victims of one form or the other of corruption. Law enforcing agencies (79.6%) and land administration services (71.2%) occupied the second and the third positions in the level of corruption.

While reading the statistics on judicial corruption in particular one has to recognise two aspects: firstly, the finger has not been pointed directly to the judicial magistrates or judges, rather 84% named lawyers, staff of the court, lawyers' assistants and brokers as the sources of corruption.

Secondly, extrapolating the nineteenth century Italian Economist Vilfredo Pareto's 80/20 rule, 80% of the crimes are committed by 20% of the criminals. So 88% corruption rating for judiciary by no means implies that 88% of people involved in the judiciary are corrupt.

The reactions of two ministers vis-à-vis the corruption of the judiciary were extremely disappointing to say the least. Instead of taking cues from TIB's findings, the state minister of law said: "The survey posed to hinder the ongoing trial of war criminals." The survey in question did not refer to anything relating to International War Crime Tribunals, and the said special court has nothing to do with the respondents who fell victim to the reported corruption of the judiciary. In that likelihood, how the TIB findings could have any bearing, whatsoever, on the trial of war criminals, is not apparent to any sensible observer.

In a similar tone, the law minister branded Transparency International Bangladesh's recent report "confusing" and "incorrect." He said that the people may lose confidence in the judiciary due to such reports prepared without proper data and information. It is doubtful if

the honourable law minister has really read the report. Contrary to his observation, the report was prepared with data collected following the widely-accepted scientific method, and analysis was done with similar universally-accepted techniques.

Any rebuttal of the findings could be made only if the minister has at his disposal the findings of another survey conducted by an independent agency which holds the credibility of conducting similar studies elsewhere. In the absence of any such study, the minister's rebuttal does not score any points and reflects government impatience of acknowledging and subsequently dealing with the wrongs, which are not necessarily of its own creation.

The most alarming news that came across from two cities is that some lawyers have filed defamation cases against the TIB chairman, its executive director and its senior research



to present Bangladesh as "a failed state" see him in the scorching heat of July 2006 in a human chain in front of the parliament demanding a neutral election commission for a free and fair election?

It is probably the time for the supreme leader of the government to step in and stop this freewheeling madness, once and for all. It may have been caused by individuals, but the government has to bear the brunt of its consequences. Our free media and equally free columnists have done enough free-styling with our only Nobel laureate. Let us, at least, keep this watchdog body alone and offer due kudos to its leaders who are taking time out from their own lives to offer voluntary service to the land they so dearly love.

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Political economy of Grameen controversy



Worryingly, the entire fracas that transpired over the first ten days of December, stemming from a documentary aired November 29 on Norwegian state television, might be indicative of the debilitating, tribal brand of Bangladeshi politics spreading its poisonous tentacles over the microfinance debate.

SHAYAN S. KHAN

THE most significant debate to emerge in the national discourse of Bangladesh, over the course of 2010, may well have been about the role of microfinance institutions (MFI). As the year draws to a close, however, a cocktail of sensationalism and misplaced righteousness on the part of certain sections of the media has threatened to poison the atmosphere needed for a reasoned discussion.

The Bangladesh Bank's recent articulation of a set of regulations for the MFIs was a welcome intervention. But the refashioning that is now required must be more comprehensive, to make the most of a realisation that the development model Bangladesh has been following needs to be radically reshaped.

For over three decades now, microfinance has been at the centre of the Bangladeshi experience of development. But the persistence of

diabolical levels of poverty throughout rural Bangladesh, compounded by the spectre of growing urban poverty, has finally given vent to some important questions concerning the impact MFIs are having on the ground.

That is all fair enough. But in order to prevent itself from sliding into mendacity, this scrutiny must be the extension of a conscience on the side of truth, not vested interests. Worryingly, the entire fracas that transpired over the first ten days of December, stemming from a documentary aired November 29 on Norwegian state television, might be indicative of the debilitating, tribal brand of Bangladeshi politics spreading its poisonous tentacles over the microfinance debate. And this politicisation of the debate threatens to jeopardise what should be an ongoing, national-level dialogue involving a variety of stakeholders.

Tellingly titled, "Caught in Microdebt," the documentary in question alleges that Grameen Bank "diverted" (the correct, and key verb to

use here) \$100 million from European donors to one of its for-profit sister concerns, Grameen Kalyan. While Dr. Muhammad Yunus is the face of everything Grameen, and even if it is difficult to imagine one without the other, in this case, the distinction does matter.

The fact is that the bdnews24 story ran in most with Dr Yunus's good name in the headline smacked of incompetence, if not ill-intent. Of course, they all took their cue from the original, which was particularly disingenuous: "Yunus siphoned Tk.7 billion aid for poor."

The personalisation of the story in the headline is what would have struck the reader. Thereafter, it becomes clear that the that the story itself packed far less of a punch. The use of terms such as "siphoned" and "drew off" clearly sought to implicate the Nobel laureate in the kinds of illicit transactions commonly associated with corrupt politicians in Bangladesh.

But it reeked of desperation, and really only vindicated the microfinance pioneer's original fears of an outsized backlash in Bangladesh as well-founded. Once all the spurious ink had dried, and paled in significance beside the truth, what was most worrying was the feverish frenzy that can be worked up around news generated almost entirely from one source.

Granted, the source has built up a reputation worthy of trust, but it has undergone a change of ownership recently, coming under the sprawling umbrella of a ruling party financier and pprime minister's adviser. If ever there was a story warranting editorial discretion, this was it.

The *Daily Star*, almost alone among mainstream dailies, demonstrated admirable restraint by not jumping on the bandwagon immediately. The fruits of this discretion were borne a day later by its readers, who received a much more balanced and discerning account of the "allegations," if one could call them that, and implications made in the documentary.

The truth is, Dr Yunus's misbegotten foray into politics in 2007, in the aftermath of "1/11", was had been poorly-received by the entire political establishment. Politicians were timid and quiet creatures during that period. But his audacity in trying to project a new political force won him few friends on either side of the crippling, but arguably collusive, political divide.

The apparent relish with which the pprime minister herself, indirectly and directly, laid into Dr. Yunus, the organisation he built, and microfinance in general, at a press conference

was revealing of the resentment felt by politicians in general. In the process, she pulled no punches, while likening micro-lenders to "bloodsuckers." It is difficult to come across any criticism, constructive or otherwise, even through a perusal of past comments made by the prime minister relating to microfinance.

Why now, then? Having once exhibited political intent, Dr Yunus is now clearly viewed as a threat. One best dealt with through an assault on the one area where he has a clear and present advantage over those who form the vanguard of politics in Bangladesh today. No slur can have a more direct and lasting impact in the political landscape of this country than *chor* (thief). But the gentleman in question, to the benefit of multitudes in rural Bangladesh, is hardly deserving of this sobriquet.

Irrespective of its faults, the work of Dr. Yunus (and others) has madmade considerable strides towards reducing poverty. The hounding he has been subjected to in the press did nothing for the national interest. Official inquiries may be commissioned, and their reports may even be publicised. But for tens of millions of Bangladeshis, the legacy of the whole affair will survive in the form of the allegations, rather than the acquittal.

The history of sensationalism teaches us that, amongst all the soundbytes and misinformation, the greatest danger lies in facts fading into obscurity. As the dust starts to slowly settle around it, a restatement of the facts from the case of Grameen Bank vs the Mainstream Media 2010 becomes imperative.

These facts tell us that neither Norad nor the Danish director of the documentary ever accused either Dr. Yunus or Grameen of any form of fraud, corruption, or embezzlement. The charges contained in the documentary rather pertained to duplicity, which is a different matter altogether and far more common within the ambit of donor-recipient relations. Some of the very loaded terms that were bandied about in the story were either invented, or poor, unfaithful translations.

Dr. Yunus is perhaps no saint, and some of his ideas on development may garner greater credit than is their due. But the work he has dedicated his life to, at the very least, assures us that he is not motivated by personal pecuniary gain, and he is certainly no thief -- which is more than can be said for most of our politicians, and some owners of news outlets.

Shayan S. Khan is managing editor of the Dhaka Courier.

Instant reactions of readers to issues of the day

From today onwards we are going to print instant reactions of our readers to current national, regional and international issues. We invite our readers to send us their comments, which should be to the point and within a maximum of 100 words. e-mail: dsopinion@gmail.com

• **Sujanmotalab:**
The TIB report reveals the real situation of the judiciary. The government should take action against corruption. TIB itself is not corrupt.

• **Saleh Tanveer:**
How does publication of a statistical study about perceptions of corruption in different sectors constitute defamation?

• **grahman007@yahoo.com:**
The way the judicial system is acting is surprising.

• **Golam Rahman:**
Corrupt groups always try to create a smokescreen to distort public opinion.

• **Gias:**
Truth is difficult to accept. The TIB report reflects that. In our society, there is a tendency, like in USA, to sue anyone for anything.

• **Faqrul Quadir, California, USA:**
Those who operate in the shadow have two plans, plan A and plan B. Therefore, watch your step before going to the court for legal action against the TIB. They are a powerful group of individuals operating under the guidance of strong mentors.

Take a professional approach by analysing TIB's report on corruption without any prejudice.

A dangerous game to play, which is hitting the foundation of the state. Stop it by all legal means and counter-PR campaign.

I understand that TI publishes a global picture, and TIB finds out the corruption index in Bangladesh. What is fate of the global report, does anybody pay any attention -- as we are doing?

• **Khondkar A. Saleque:**
Why are the ruling party activists so intolerant? The TIB report should be taken as a whistleblower. Common citizens experience the impacts of corruption in society. The government must take the TIB report in good spirit and become alerted. Patience and tolerance are keys to democracy. The government must react in a positive way if it differs with the report.

• **Anonymous, USA:**
What a ridiculous use of the courts by individuals or activists of Jubo League, which threatens the TIB local office against publishing something that would irk them (Jubo League). First, what Jubo League is needs to be analysed, and perhaps a court should give a verdict on its legal identity. Second, if an independent organisation cannot publish the results of a poll or survey in a democratic society, the whole nation must ponder if we have democracy. These days anyone can sue any other, including a Nobel laureate, if they "anyones" do not like an action or a person. The only exception is that no one should say anything against the ruling party or its leader even for the indecent remarks uttered against a Nobel laureate. Is it not a sign of autocracy?

• **Anonymous, USA:**
Those who are familiar with survey research must know that the results of the survey do not represent the views of the people who conduct the survey. The results are based on mathematical calculation/analysis. The results are what have been found and not what TIB thinks. It surveyed 6,000 households and found out what those households said about certain issues in the country. That is the main thing. Nobody can challenge that 2 plus 2 is equal to 4. That is what we find after mathematical operation. Also, those who live there know what is happening.

Common interests

EDITORIAL DESK: *China Daily*

THE world's attention is focused on the development of China's ties with the United States now that Washington is taking Beijing's increasing influence more seriously.

Observers across the world have been trying to judge or influence decision-makers in Beijing and Washington in different ways. But despite their obvious differences "China hawks" and "panda huggers" both seem to agree that Sino-US relations have transcended the boundaries of bilateral ties and become globally important.

President Hu Jintao's upcoming visit to the US in January will offer international observers a good opportunity to examine how the leaders of the two important countries review the past, chart the future and come up with better solutions to many of the world's gnawing problems.

The passing year has been eventful for Beijing and Washington both. In the first quarter, Washington's multi-billion-dollar arms sales to Taiwan and Google's exit from the Chinese market harmed bilateral ties.

US charges that the yuan is undervalued and its joint military drills with the Republic of Korea (ROK) dealt further blows to Sino-American ties. As 2010 passes into history, the world is beset with worries over the unwanted developments on the Korean Peninsula.

But despite their differences, Beijing and Washington are gingerly nourishing a harmonious environment to pave the way for Hu's visit.

These are indications that cooperation and confrontation co-exist in Sino-US relations. But they also prove that the two countries now act more maturely to increase mutual benefits and keep their differences at bay.

Apart from straightening things out at the bilateral level, President Hu and US President Barack Obama will be tested for their ability to steer Northeast Asia out of troubled waters. China and the US both are keen on defusing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Although many in the international community assume that China has a traditional influence over the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), China has always taken an impartial stance in any dispute between the DPRK and the ROK.

Even though the US has consolidated its traditional ties with the ROK this year and backed Seoul's show of strength against Pyongyang, raising tensions on the Korean Peninsula will not be in Washington's interest, let alone help it play a bigger role in Asia. The US should know that the ROK may lose its moral high ground if it continues with its hard-line stance against the DPRK, especially because the latter has shown obvious signs of backing off.

Facts, including two-way trade figures and personnel exchanges, reflect that relations between China and the US -- despite the confrontations -- are at their strongest. The two countries can increase mutual benefits and contribute more to world peace and stability if they respect each other's core interests, intensify their cooperation and reduce confrontations.