

# Denying reality

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

**T**RANSPARENCY International (TI), or any of its chapters across the world, has perhaps not faced such an adverse situation as its chapter in Bangladesh is confronted with. The Awami League (AL) led alliance government has reacted vehemently to Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) survey report and is contemplating to go for legal action against the organisation, creating a bad example of denying reality.

The TIB found that over 88% households in Bangladesh became victims of corruption while receiving services from government and non-government institutions between June 2009 and May 2010. Most people became corruption victims at the judiciary. About 11% of the surveyed households that received services from the judiciary paid an average Tk.7,918 bribe each.

The TIB survey "Service Sector Corruption: National Households Survey, 2010" was conducted on 6,000 households. The households shared their experience involving 13 service sectors from government and non-government institutions between June 2009 and May 2010.

Households that sought service from the High Court paid on average Tk.12,761 each for services. They paid on average Tk.6,598 and Tk.6,178 each at the magistrates' and

the judges' courts. The report also said that lawyers, court employees, court clerks and brokers took money to hasten or postpone hearings, to withdraw or destroy case documents and to influence the judgment.

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of the TI shows that corruption

China, which was ranked 72 in the CPI of TI in 2010, is stepping up to fight corruption without denying the reality. The country issued its first ever white paper on the nation's anti-graft efforts. China's anti-corruption watchdog found 106,000 officials guilty of corruption in 2009, 2.5% more than the year before.

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is predominantly a problem in the developing countries. TI ranked India as the 87th country in 2010, which was earlier ranked at 84th position. The corruption charge during Commonwealth Games has taken a toll on India's ranking. But India, like many other countries, has shown its propensity towards accepting the reality by not taking legal action against the TI's India chapter.

The Party's discipline watchdogs investigated 119,000 graft cases from January to November 2010, resulting in 113,000 people being punished, of whom 4,332 were prosecuted. Corruption has long haunted the Chinese people, pervading almost all areas of life. It is considered the number one problem, ahead of issues such as piracy or steep pollution in the country.

The white paper is the latest in a

series of attempts by the Chinese government to crack down on corruption. China sentenced seven people to death for tax fraud in 2001, in what could be the biggest corruption case in the Communist era. Government officials and senior party members have been sentenced to prison in just the past decade.

But all the successive governments in Bangladesh either protested such surveys or ignored them, and the incumbent government is not an exception. The TIB report released on December 23 created a commotion and drew flak from the law minister, who termed it as "damaging for a democratic system." Three cases -- two in Chittagong and one in Comilla -- were also filed against the TIB officials.

The government's reaction to the TIB's report, which ranked the judiciary as the most corrupt institution followed by the police and the land administration, has been quite surprising. It was the public expectation that the government would take appropriate measures to dispel such a public perception, instead of castigating the survey report and the TIB. The chief justice of the country also pointed his accusing finger at the lower judiciary for indulging in irregularities, financial and otherwise.

The Chief Justice has formed a committee comprising of five senior High Court judges to examine TIB's report on the judiciary. The committee is likely to decide on the next

course of action after examining the report and other documents submitted by the TIB. Earlier, the TIB submitted its household survey report with an explanation to the apex court of the country.

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) has been regularly hogging the newspaper headlines for its excesses and atrocities since the AL-led government assumed office in January 2009. On almost every occasion the reasons behind the clashes involved extortion, rent-seeking, abduction, tender manipulation and the like. Sadly, both the government and the ruling party have thus far displayed a curious blend of indifference and indulgence with regard to the many incidents of excesses and atrocities of the BCL leaders and activists. It is a reality that the government cannot really deny.

Prices of almost all regular food items such as rice, flour, edible oil, sugar, vegetable, fish, meat and spices rose to a nearly unreachable height for the low and fixed-income groups. Because the price spiral issue is still unresolved, the majority of the people continue to face hardship and suffering caused by it. This is also a reality, whether the government accepts it or not.

Despite the government's initiatives for undertaking mega projects, the national economy, constrained by stagnation in investment, is yet to take on a higher growth trajectory. Moreover, higher inflationary pres-

sure and decline in inflow of remittances in the middle of the current fiscal remain serious causes for concern.

So far, in public debates, the government has not been prepared to accept that the economy is in trouble and large sections of the population are economically worse off than they were in previous years. The government puts out a regular flow of official figures and statistics that show record levels of economic growth, production and inflow of foreign remittance.

While the intelligence agencies of the government fail to feel public pulse correctly, the political arm of the government appears to be aware of the possibility of an electoral reversal. The chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on the information ministry has made an appropriate point, which can be considered as wise advice for the government from inside the ruling party. He has urged the government to accept criticism if it believes in democracy.

The denial of reality is bad enough to prevent any government from soul-searching, introspection and self-critical changes that are imperative to go for corrective actions. When a government goes into denial mode generated by refusal to confront a reality, it maybe sets itself up for a fall.

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# House of echo

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**O**UR National Parliament Building has brought us international honour. Unfortunately, however, the National Parliament is not in an ideal state. The architectural masterpiece that houses the assembly of the highest elected representatives of the country is beholden to uni-track litany of putting the leader on the pedestal, self-righteousness and deprecation of absentee opponents.

The mark of excellence that Louis Kahn gave to the National Parliament is yet to see the political spirit for which it was created. For most of the period it has remained a gallery of partisan apparatus. There were brief periods of camaraderie and deferential jousting. That was when the usurper was put in his place and democracy had its spring.

It was in the 5th Parliament when an amendment in favour of parliamentary form of government was unanimously adopted. The ruling party, a learner, was modest and the opposition was much animated. There was a vote of no-confidence against the government. It was an indication of how lively the Parliament was.

This lasted for around three years. Quite a time for our fractious Parliament! The spring ended. And the opposition was in the street with its prized weapon of hartal; enduring the beating sun and drenching in the pouring rain.

Since then it has become a cult. A cult that makes Louis Kahn's master-

piece a House of Echo. The opposition prefers the ignominy of suffering at the hands of even more contemptuous law and order forces instead of returning to the magnificent chamber and standing valiantly for which they have been elected. The ruling party appears to be too smug in its huge majority to people the House, and does not care the least that without the presence of the opposition the Parliament looks like a party congress in session.

This deadlock is a national loss of initiative at the highest level. Exchange of views is not a mere encumbrance of dissension. The complementarity of its nature enriches the initiative. The unbridgeable divide devours the very process that takes us forward.

It is in the best interest of the Parliament that the ruling party takes the responsibility to see that the opposition is in the House. Otherwise, the might of its majority will increasingly inspire its euphoric and neophyte members to indulge in making shallow observations to ingratiate themselves with their leader, which will be of little use both to the leader and the House she leads. The House will languish in languid proceedings.

In the concluding phase of the last session of the Parliament a number of ruling party members observed that their leader of the House deserved the Nobel Peace Prize for the excellent service she has rendered for peace. The observations were made in the euphoria of their

might and the immaturity of their support. This does not serve the democratic heritage of the House.

There was a time when this country was a province ruled by a despotic regional coterie. The Provincial Assembly used to sit in a nondescript colonial building where now stands a new students' dormitory. It was boisterous, and a fracas that broke out took the life of the deputy speaker. The quality was meaner, the proceedings were chaotic, but they stuck to it.

*Amar dekha rajnitir ponchash bachar* (Fifty years of the politics I saw), a popular book written by Abul Mansur Ahmed is a testament to that. A book written by famous politician and an illustrious chief minister Ataur Rahman Khan also bears testimony to the animated nature of the political spirit that dominated the time. The spirit at times was primal but they never abandoned the centre spot where they played out their part.

There were fabled episodes like *Abu Hossain er shapno bhongo* -- meaning dashed hopes of chief minister Abu Hossain Sarkar when his 12-hour ministry fell. Or *Ata montrisobhar poton*, meaning Ataur Rahman Khan's ministry has fallen. It produced politicians who fought with great zeal and stood their ground.

If that was the standard during a time of deprivation, one may genuinely want to know what exactly is the reason that our new and liberated democrats keep on boycotting the Parliament whenever they find them-

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STAR ARCHIVE

selves in the opposition.

The only time it looked that the opposition has accepted its role in the Parliament was during the first three years of the fifth parliament. The rapport broke down over caretaker government. It was the only time a principle was at stake. And the inflexible stand of the government in power at that time was much to be blamed. It could and should have been settled in the Parliament. It did not and a cult was born to make an important institution of the country ineffectual.

From then on, boycott of the Parliament by the opposition became a practice or rather an eventual recourse. The ruling party abets it with sanctimonious disinterest. This has happened with both the major parties and the practice is

getting even more disdainful with the margin of victory getting larger and larger.

What is the mother of this malaise that makes the Parliament an inhospitable forum for the opposition? It will not require a great knowledge of parliamentary norms and conducts. These are innuendos, cutting remarks and irreverent observations that rain on the opponents like barbs. Even this can be absorbed or weathered with wit, equanimity and studied manners.

It may be a tall order for general people. But for legislators who are the highest representatives of the country, there is a great reward if they are willing to reach for it. They do not have to be Catos or Ciceros, the Roman orators, but they have to be true and steadfast both in rain and

shine in carrying out the task for which they have been elected. The task has to be met in the House. And it is the duty of the government to see that the House is hospitable. Not a House that echoes the sermon you deliver.

Our Parliament Building would have shone equally brightly even in wealthy countries as an architectural masterpiece. One does not have to delve into figures and statistics to enumerate how much it takes Bangladesh to maintain this landmark. Those who should realise it the most are the legislators, both in the government and in the opposition. Only they can restore and maintain its eminence.

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# Proof the world is crazy x 2



**A**THLETES got into trouble for trying to bring their own milk to the Commonwealth Games in India. Why? Because the milk was still in the cow.

"Leave the animal outside," officials ordered. "And use packaged milk from the canteen." This is so dumb. Bringing your own cow as a portable milk carton (a common habit in India) is way more environmentally friendly.

The same day, there was an article in the business pages about an "appliance sales mystery." Asians buy all the same stuff as Westerners do, except for clothes drying machines, which we shun. Why? Because we have vast amounts of

miracle elements called "air" and "sunshine," which dry clothes at no cost. You may have heard of them. If you want to see them, I keep quite a large supply outside my window.

But the members of Satan's dark army ("businessmen") are planning campaigns to make us change our habits.

The world has gone mad. We Asians are being forced to drop our timeless, planet-friendly ways to adopt climate-destroying alternatives. I tried to raise these issues in

the local coffee shop -- but my friends and colleagues ("idiots") instead wanted to share toilet tales, inspired by recent nonsense in this column.

One guy had been collecting stories of people attacked with toilet seats. There was such an attack in America last week and another in Thailand earlier.

"But the news reports never deal with the obvious question," he lamented. "Did the attackers afterwards leave the toilet seat upright or

horizontal?" (As a married man, I agree this is a key issue.)

Halfway through writing this column, I got good news from India via email. A widow who kept a cow as a portable milk supply for her two boys was distraught when a tiger ate it. In the past, villagers would have killed the tiger. Instead, they forgave the tiger and started a Facebook page to raise money for a new cow. True story.

The tiger will probably become a YouTube sensation and Justine

Bieber will sing a song about it. That's the nature of fame these days.

But my smile was short-lived. In the next email, a reader told me that a new law has been passed in Shanghai. It is now illegal to hang your clothes out to dry in that city. People in China are being forced to buy clothes drying machines instead. Satan's army won that round.

Fight back. Save the planet. Never leave home without your cow.

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