

In defense of survey methodology

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THE recent tiff between the Supreme Court (SC) of Bangladesh and Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) is a watershed event for all professionals who conduct surveys and the organisations that use them to guide important decisions. In the business world, surveys often guide major strategic decisions. And the use of surveys for political opinion polling is ubiquitous.

What is surprising is that not one organisation in Bangladesh that makes a living using surveys, responded. Even from the universities and their esteemed researchers, there was not a single intellectual opinion in defense of survey methodology.

The TIB survey suggested that the judiciary is perceived as the most corrupt service sector in the country. According to one report, "...lawyers, court employees, court clerks and brokers take money to hasten or postpone hearings, to withdraw and destroy case documents, and influence the judgment."

Expectation and payment of "speed money" is not uncommon in the public sector. People face such practices routinely that in turn forms and reinforces their "perception" that the corruption menace is as healthy as ever. One might wonder why the use of speed money to facilitate court-related matters would be anything unusual to expect.

The visceral reaction to the suggestion that corruption exists in such a powerful institution was understandable. Similar reactions occur in the developed world too. In the United States when the rankings are revealed periodically about universi-

ties (in the US News and World Report), many "universities decry the commercialism of the rankings, [and] attack the methodology of the ranking process...."

Curiously, when the rankings are stellar, they are widely accepted and used liberally to bolster support from various stakeholders; when the rankings are not favourable, there is a big hue and cry.

The SC, given its extraordinary powers, publicly questioned the TIB report, concluding that it was baseless and without substance. It also opined: "The TIB report was just made for publicity as it could not help pinpoint people involved in corruption."

Surveys, to be clear, are not police investigations. They are not intended to identify specific episodes of corruption or corrupt persons. Rather, surveys are tools used to "estimate" certain attitudes, perceptions, propensities, behaviours and incidences that exist in a population. According to one source, "Surveys are a powerful, cost-effective tool for gathering important information and for identifying and diagnosing problems and opportunities." They provide statistical insight into a phenomenon -- in this case perceived corruption -- that exists in a defined population.

If the probe committee expected the study to identify specific cases of corruption, it must be respectfully submitted that it has little understanding of the purpose of surveys and their methodologies.

That does not mean, however, that all surveys are perfect. They can be flawed and sometimes their intent can be dubious. To refute the TIB's findings, the SC could have investigated the source of flaws by seeking clarifications in the following areas:



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- Was there a design flaw, particularly in sampling and generalising to the entire population of Bangladesh?
- Was there a flaw in the way the questions were framed and the measurement scales used?
- Was there a flaw in data collection, especially in how fieldwork quality was ensured?
- Was there a flaw in analysis, especially the statistical procedures employed?
- Was there a flaw in the conclusions that were drawn?

From my understanding, the study

used the Integrated Multipurpose Sampling Frame (IMPS) employed by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This is accepted protocol. The large sample size also suggests the study's representativeness.

The questions that needed to be asked of the respondents appear to be fairly straightforward. Actual data collection can be erroneous. And the type of analysis needed did not seem too esoteric to obfuscate the results. What remains is the conclusion: the interpretations here can be tricky because of such things as order, recency and halo effects. But that's technicality.

If the SC felt strongly that the study's conclusions were in error, it could have commissioned a replication study to compare the results. It may be cautioned, however, that replication studies will not produce identical results because of sampling and non-sampling errors that tend to creep in. But the confidence intervals can provide reasonable insights into the accuracy of the findings.

The SC's actions and conclusions could, thus, be quite disconcerting and raise a number of questions:

1) If the judiciary had been shown in a cleaner image (not leading), would the SC have displayed such a response?

2) If a replication study is conducted, the judiciary's ranking could fall from first place to second, third, or even fourth. Should that allay citizens' concerns about perceived corruption in the judiciary?

3) TIB reports have been called into question in the past too; but, was its credibility ever really destroyed? As part of an international effort to promote transparency, it seems to use credible methodologies;

4) Does the SC feel that surveys are inherently flawed and ought not to be used to assess public services?

5) Might the judiciary have strengthened the hands of the corrupt within its system? Will these elements now feel much safer to harass the citizenry, and in greater measure?

Transparency, today, is a crying need in the country. True development and alleviation of poverty can come about when the inner workings of the nation's core institutions are opened to the public for assessment. In this, TIB has played a vital role by seeking opinions of the key constituency: the beneficiaries of public services. A concern now is whether TIB is unlikely to conduct similar studies in the future for fear of being twice-burnt.

Instead of the angry reaction, the SC could have displayed a wiser and nobler stance by thanking TIB for helping unearth what goes on inside the judiciary's arcane world and its current state and health. This would reinforce the judiciary's clear intent to establish and deliver justice in greater measure, signaling hope for those who struggle with injustice almost daily.

A positive institutional attitude is what is needed today across various public sector services to better serve the nation in its quest for emancipation. In such an attitude lies the real possibility that appropriate measures will be taken by the higher ups to ultimately rid the people, whom they are duty-bound to serve, of their miseries. The present attitude comes across as ominous -- one that maintains the status quo, projects bureaucratic hegemony, and detracts from a people-centric ethos.

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Israel, alone again?

YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

ISRAELIS want to rejoice over the outbreak of protests in Egypt's city squares. They want to believe that this is the Arab world's 1989 moment. Perhaps, they say, the poisonous reflex of blaming the Jewish state for the Middle East's ills will be replaced by an honest self-assessment.

But few Israelis really believe in that hopeful outcome. Instead, the grim assumption is that it is just a matter of time before the only real opposition group in Egypt, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, takes power. Israelis fear that Egypt will go the way of Iran or Turkey, with Islamists gaining control through violence or gradual co-optation.

It is small comfort to Israelis, who fear that the Brotherhood's non-violence has been a tactical maneuver and know that its worldview is rooted in crude anti-Semitism.

The Brotherhood and its offshoots have been the main purveyors of the Muslim world's widespread conspiracy theories about the Jews, from blaming the Israeli intelligence service for 9/11 to accusing Zionists of inventing the Holocaust to blackmail the West.

Others argue that the responsibilities of governance would moderate the Brotherhood, but here that is dismissed as Western naïveté: the same prediction, after all, was made about the Iranian regime, Hezbollah and Hamas.

The fear of an Islamist encirclement

without a credible military option; indeed, the last conventional war fought by Arab nations against Israel was the 1973 joint Egyptian-Syrian attack on Yom Kippur.

Since then all of Israel's military conflicts -- from the first Lebanon war in 1982 to the Gaza war of 2009 -- have been asymmetrical confrontations against terrorists. While those conflicts have presented Israel with strategic, diplomatic and moral problems, it no longer faced an existential threat from the Arab world.

For Israel, then, peace with Egypt has been not only strategically but also psychologically essential. Israelis understand that the end of their conflict with the Arab world depends in large part on the durability of the peace with Egypt -- for all its limitations, it is the only successful model of a land-for-peace agreement.

Above all, though, Israeli optimism has been sustained by the memory of the improbable partnership between President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt and Israel's Prime Minister, Menachem Begin. Only four years before flying to Tel Aviv on his peace mission, Sadat had attacked Israel on its holiest day. Begin, Israel's most hawkish prime minister until that time, withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula, an area more than three times the size of Israel.

Bureaucracy for the people

A.B.M. NURUL ISLAM

IN this sub-continent, elitism in bureaucracy was introduced by the British in order to cement their hold on the colonial people. They needed a subservient, compliant group who would look after the interest of the colonial masters and collect taxes from the subjects for the benefit of the Raj. Hence came the ICS with all their perks and privileges.

CSP cadres in Pakistan followed as a natural corollary. In their training courses at NIPA, Lahore, they were taught to think of themselves as the masters and rulers of the ordinary people even though in name they were supposed to be "civil servants."

We need a civil service designed for a sovereign, independent country and not one that was created for a colony.

CSP officers enjoyed the peak of their power during the rule of Ayub Khan. No CSP officers could be touched or transferred without Ayub Khan's consent. Ayub thought of them as his citadel of power. However, when the mass upsurge took place against Ayub Khan in 1969, his citadel vanished into thin air. The rest is history.

In Bangladesh, separation of the judiciary had been the Holy Grail of every government in power. Every government paid lip service to it but nobody could bring it to reality mainly because the bureaucrats were opposed to it. They did not want to give up their privileged position of being simultaneously the head of the executive and the judiciary in the form of District Commissioner (DC). DCs considered themselves justifiably to be lord of all that they surveyed in their district and behaved as such.

During the term of the last CTG, when the bureaucrats suddenly woke up to find that the dreaded separation was becoming a reality, they staged a last-minute revolt led by their media-created anti-

adulteration-drive cult hero. It goes to the credit of the much-maligned last CTG that they (CTG) withstood the pressure. Now we are witness to the once-untouchable, powerful secretaries trembling in fear of having to stand in the dock for hours before the judges.

Bureaucrats are nothing if not a tenacious lot. They clawed their way back to regain some judicial powers for some special circumstances, e.g. to try certain offences during elections. But now if the proposal, already accepted by the cabinet, for

bureaucracy that we inherited needs to be revamped to make it modern, efficient and people-friendly. A system of genuine reward and punishment needs to be initiated to weed out the corrupt and the inefficient and make the bureaucrats accountable to their paymaster -- the taxpaying public.

It is a sad fact that successive governments, through politicisation of the bureaucracy, have created a largely dysfunctional, demoralised workforce. Many efficient officers are languishing as OSDs, sitting at



the ACC to take permission from the government to file corruption cases against government officials is passed by the Parliament, then elitism in bureaucracy will reach an Everest-like pinnacle.

It is unthinkable how a party like the AL with its large grassroots level support could surrender so abjectly to the bureaucrats. They (the bureaucrats) are being turned into holy cows. And this coming from a government that has more than two-thirds majority in the Parliament defies logic. It would be a travesty of natural justice. I would appeal to our popular government to rethink and not create a Frankenstein of corruption. Our lawmakers should not tarnish their image by passing such a patently wrong proposition.

Actually the whole colonial-style

home and drawing their salaries. The government has forgotten the fact that a demoralised workforce cannot deliver -- whatever carrots you offer them. In crunch times, the government's carefully built bastion will disappear like a sand castle, as happened to Ayub Khan.

For the Bangladesh economy to really take off, we need civil servants who are honest, efficient, truly "civil," and "servant" of the Republic in the truest sense of the terms. We need officials who would ask an ordinary man coming for a service: "How can I help you?" and not a rude, "What do you want?" We need a civil service designed for a sovereign, independent country and not one that was created for a colony.

Am I dreaming too much?

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