

Valuing criticism

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THE annual report of Transparency International (TIB) Bangladesh has raised a furore in Bangladesh. While most people have agreed with its revelations, some have questioned its correctness on the ground that it lacks confirmatory evidence.

Inferences made in the report, the critics opine, have stymied the government's efforts to ensure good governance by misleading the people. They castigate the report as being partisan.

Granted that the document may not contain the whole truth, there is no denying that people are suffering immensely due to rising corruption in almost all sectors of administration.

The people are convinced that the root cause of unabated corruption is that the corrupt are not being punished because of delayed legal dispensation. The situation has been further aggravated by weak political direction.

Since the return to democracy about two decades ago, we have been witnessing emergence of a new brand of politicians who are focussed on consolidating their grip on their constituency more by resorting to muscular internal politics than promoting in-house democracy, which should have been their major consideration.

Although ordinary people have little or no interest in politics, their response to those who rule or seek to rule depends on prejudices, vague notions, anecdotes and self-certified opinions. Facts, deeds and views expressed in newspapers rarely make them change their conclusions. This, in my estimate, is

the root cause of our politics going haywire and pushing democracy to the edge.

Any attempt to intervene in this kind of nonchalant political discourse is often prejudiced by the stronger stakeholder. That is why our politics is dominated by coteries that were catapulted to their current position by their sponsors. The sponsors themselves were installed as compromise candidates because senior political leaders got immersed in palace intrigue to seek party leadership.

Internal democracy was dispatched to rot in the backyard and was replaced by politics of the leaders. Maybe this is the reason why people wonder whether we have political parties or leaders' parties.

The glaring difference that we notice between politics of a truly democratic country and our declining democracy are the roles played by the politicians and the bureaucracy.

In the case of the former, respect for humanity and individual is given foremost priority while in the latter the leaders shape their own brand of democracy so that only their ardent supporters can be put in charge of politics at all levels to ensure that their leadership is never challenged, which is backed by politically inclined bureaucracy that thrives on political sponsorship.

Will it be wrong to conclude that the former is populist democracy while the latter is oligarchy? Bangladesh is presently ruled by one oligarchy with two names.

Weak democracy fuels instability and vulnerability, which retard development. Therefore, a new

angle of vision and a broad template for evaluating the causes of political decline should be mapped. A view of development highlighting that absence of internal democracy within the party constitutes a pow-

erful barrier to the development of democracy should be developed. This will provide opportunities for transition from weak democracy to vibrant politics of the people. Democracy respects those who

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IMAGE/COO

erful barrier to the development of democracy should be developed. This will provide opportunities for transition from weak democracy to vibrant politics of the people. Democracy respects those who

raise their voices for good governance aimed at welfare of the people. Those who fail to deliver should sing their swansong, and along with it the leadership should quit. This is the way democracy should function.

brokers from concentrating power in those who have the money and muscle to overpower their right thinking party colleagues.

Voters, unfortunately, do not realise that they are getting diminishing return for not using their rights of franchise judiciously. It is incredibly true that a large chunk of our voters are not aware of the person they are casting their votes for, because they put their stamp of approval on the electoral symbol printed on the ballot paper.

Their dreams of a quantum jump in the quality of life are very often dashed because their elected leaders are busier in currying the leaders' favour than in implementing the pre-election pledges. It is known that commitment and fair play are considered to be a formidable combination of good leadership. Are we blessed with them?

I observe a vague disquiet among the polity contemplating the consequences of the unwieldy political situation. It is said that "liberties, franchises, privileges and jurisdiction of parliament are ancient and undoubted bright light and inheritance of the subjects of democratic nations." This should help us judge the status of our democracy.

TIB's reports reveal the state of governance, and should be recognised. We should put all our energy in quest of a viable remedy instead of challenging their authenticity.

We know that too much agreement kills an issue, but we should not despise a bridge that carries us safely over -- even if it is apparently not strong enough. TIB's report should have been taken in right earnest as a tool that can construct

a bridge of confidence between well-intended government institutions and the public expectation to be governed justly and fairly by obtaining feedback of public opinion on the use or abuse of their finances and formulations.

We must not presume public compliance of actions of the government that seem to be a waste of money and time. Use of rhetoric and semantics to put a lid on the weaklings and performance by resorting to blame game should be avoided. One cannot climb if one tries to pull the other down from a tree.

Differences on issues are transitory, with time they may be resolved. We should see them against the background of the affinity that as a nation we can be proud of. Those in power by the grace of electorate are temporarily in charge of state affairs and should not step aside from their responsibilities of ensuring good governance, and should seek to know where they are failing or what their failings are.

Reports of watchdogs like TIB should be viewed by one and all in real earnestness, and everyone should work steadfastly to evolve ways and means to guard against erosion of human values to make Bangladesh a country where dispensation of timely justice and fair-play are the chief concern of politicians and bureaucracy.

This is how they can keep the nation together on the issues that may unbalance the nation temporarily if they are not mitigated. And this is the legacy of good democracy which history retains to open again when the problems are resolved.

The writer is a former Director General of BIIS.

The demons that haunt

SIKDER HASEEB KHAN

SOMETHING strange happens when one becomes the home minister. It seems that one begins to lose touch with reality. Claims that are incorrect are issued publicly. Denials of fact become frequent.

How else to explain the home minister's wholesale rebuff of reports on extrajudicial killings, her casual brush-aside of the stream of information that conscientious journalists, academics, and human rights analysts have researched and supplied over the years?

One's first instinct might be to blame her

cient, so affirming.

And then, you get cross at anyone who disagrees. You begin to think that the only reason critics would cry bloody murder must be political, not factual. Your transformation, from a principled opposition leader to a complacent celebrity, is thus complete.

The only way to break the stranglehold of "the office" is to assert an independent personality.

By declaring, in one sweep, that no extrajudicial killings happen in Bangladesh, the home minister showed that she was not capable of reversing the woeful record of previous home ministers.

What's more, she belittled a key electoral pledge of her own party, the pledge that is of direct relevance to her own ministry.

When the Awami League was out of power from 2001 to 2008, it recognised the severity of extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh. To wide acclaim, it promised to eradicate this scourge in its 2008 election manifesto.

Have things changed?

The instruments of torture imported during the previous regimes remain in place. The government has failed to hold accountable any member of law enforcement for extrajudicial killings, even though Rab itself has admitted that it has killed 622 people since 2004.

The rationale for this bloodbath has remained the same as the one put forward by earlier BNP and caretaker governments -- we have killed criminals. In other words, they deserved to die, without any due process.

One would expect that the home minister, herself a lawyer, would recognise that criminal or not, the victims were citizens of a republic, who have equal legal rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Or, was the oath she took to uphold the constitution a meaningless empty promise?

The fact is this: nothing on the ground has changed in the past two years, neither the trend of these killings nor their justification. But the home minister wants us to believe that simply because her party is in power, extrajudicial killings must have stopped.

The home ministry plays a crucial role in protecting the constitutional rights of the citizens. It has failed in that task. The government needs to shake up its composition and appoint a strong leader who can resist sycophancy, who reads and analyses trends thoughtfully, who has the courage to stand up to law enforcers who go berserk, and who can remain, at least for the next three years, anchored within a world of physical facts and palpable, evident truths.

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Nuclear trouble in Maharashtra?

A.B.M. NURUL ISLAM

(This is in reply to Mr. Praful Bidwai's article on the above topic (Point-counterpoint, Feb.3), which, according to the writer, contains a number of errors).

THE EPR design hasn't been cleared by nuclear regulators anywhere" is a patently wrong statement. There are currently four European Pressurized Reactors (EPRs) under construction in the world (two in China, one each in France and Finland). No construction firm would dare pour an iota of concrete without getting the construction license from the country's regulator. A regulator would issue a construction license only after checking all aspects

training and safety culture (ref. my Op-ed "Yes we can," DS, May 19, 2010). It did not have a concrete dome that is mandatory in the western reactors. This led to the release of radioactivity to the atmosphere and eventual deaths.

In the case of TMI, even though half the core melted, no radioactivity reached the outside atmosphere due to the concrete dome, and no death occurred. One bad apple should not tarnish the entire industry.

"Science hasn't found a way of safely storing, leave alone neutralising, radioactive waste." In fact, it has. The most advanced storage for radioactive waste is now under construction in Olkiluoto, Finland near the site of the under construction EPR referred to earlier. As for neutralising-

expensive. Capital costs are going up to meet ever-stringent safety requirements. For example, for the concrete dome some countries now require it to withstand not just natural calamities like high wind, earthquake etc. but also the direct impact of a fully-loaded Boeing 747.

For the reactor emergency core-cooling system, in case of the EPR, there are four redundant pumps, with each one capable of meeting the emergency even if the other three fail. Each pump is energised by its own diesel-generator stored in its own, separate concrete bunker (to avoid any common-mode failure among the four sets paralysing all four) strong enough to withstand any conceivable doomsday scenario. There seems to be no end in sight for the safety needs.

It is worthwhile to realise that the days of cheap energy are over. According to the venerable International Energy Agency (IEA), the world's conventional oil production through drilling had already peaked (in 2006).



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of the relevant design.

"... nuclear regulators have raised 3,000 safety issues about its design, including control and emergency-cooling systems" obviously refers to issues raised by regulatory authorities in countries like USA, UK, Italy, who are considering this Generation III+ reactor for their grids. It is the job of the regulators to raise questions and get satisfactory answers. Nothing wrong with that.

EPR is "based on an untested reactor design" is not true. EPR is an improved version of the tried and tested Pressurized Water Reactor (PWR). Worldwide, there are currently 269 PWRs in operation (out of total 442 operating reactors) and 55 PWRs are under construction. How can it be untested?

Mr. Bidwai refers to the Chernobyl accident but not to the one at Three Mile Island (TMI). Chernobyl was based on a design for which there were no takers outside the former USSR. The design was inherently unsafe, operators lacked in

ing the radioactive waste, the concept of plutonium burners (that will also incinerate the actinides separated through reprocessing) is already there. Only its application is awaited. The French are the most advanced in this regard.

However, Mr. Bidwai is 100% correct when he says, "Radiation is unsafe in all doses." The problem is that it is everywhere -- in your home, on the beach, while you travel by air etc. etc. Try to escape to another corner of the universe to avoid it, you will get bombarded with deadly cosmic radiation. Hopefully, in the life after death there will be none of it.

"It has a bleak future." I doubt it. Energy-hungry countries like China and India are lapping it up. Even energy-rich countries like the UAE are going for it. The bottom line is: when one needs large amounts of energy at competitive prices with near carbon-free footprint, the solution is nuclear.

Avoid it at your own peril. Admittedly nuclear power plants are

Ultimately, that translates into higher and higher costs.

However, it is worthwhile to realise that the days of cheap energy are over. According to the venerable International Energy Agency (IEA), the world's conventional oil production through drilling had already peaked (in 2006), which means future oil prices are bound to go up. Coal is still plentiful but if it is to meet the environmental requirements through clean coal technology, then the price of coal-derived energy will also shoot up.

Our own government will soon buy rental electricity at Tk.16 or so per Kwh to sell it at about one-fourth the purchase price. In future, governments will rise and fall, among other factors, on the availability of energy, whatever is its cost. Kansat and Sanir Akhra gave a foretaste of things to come.

Wake up and smell the coffee. The days of cheap energy are gone forever. Get used to it.

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personally, to think that she is ill-informed. But I think it's the office that's to blame. Because it's not just her; every predecessor of hers, whether from BNP, AL or the caretakers, has routinely denied the complicity of state agents in heinous crimes against the citizens. It goes with the job.

Think about it this way. If you become home minister, you're elevated to a secure life in a secure government house. You're whisked from place to place in a protected vehicle. You don't experience jams, for your officer-in-charge is constantly at his walkie-talkie, keeping the police HQ informed of your location, so that traffic can be cleared ahead. Within weeks, you become habituated to these luxuries.

That's not all. The salaams and subservience from yes-men that you get everyday lead you to believe that you can do no wrong. You particularly refuse to believe that the same security forces that protect you and ensure a speedy commute to your destinations can be responsible for wrongdoings elsewhere. You believe that the country must be in good shape, because the system that surrounds your own daily life seems so effi-