

How Padma Bridge will be built

ELLEN GOLDSTEIN

EVERYWHERE I go in Bangladesh, people tell me how happy they are that Padma Bridge will be built. Their happiness is understandable: the bridge will bring exceptional economic and social benefits for the people of Bangladesh, and is a critical link for the broader ambition of a trans-Asian Highway. Such are the expected benefits that the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project can -- without hyperbole -- be described as "transformational" for the country.

Two questions invariably follow the initial expressions of satisfaction: When will construction begin? When will it be finished? To these, a third question must be added: how will corruption be prevented in constructing the bridge? Let me answer these queries from the perspective of the World Bank, which serves as the coordinating agency among the external co-financiers.

When will construction begin? The answer is that it already has. Some of the most important construction work occurs long before piles are driven deep into the river bed. Land must be acquired, compensation paid and families resettled for the estimated 76,000 Bangladeshis directly affected by the massive civil works, which include the bridge itself, and also 12 kilometers of river training works, approach roads and adjacent toll plazas.

To create five resettlement sites, land must be raised by over five meters using dredged material from the river in order to construct schools, clinics, markets, municipal lighting and housing plots. Large-scale earthworks are also needed to create raised construction yards where components are manufactured and assembled to construct the bridge. This critical work has been underway for the past seven months. More than 60% of physical

work for the resettlement site has been completed. Down at the river, you can see structures rising at the resettlement sites and talk to families who have been compensated for their land.

When will construction be finished? The answer depends on the efficiency and transparency of project implementation, which would suffer if tainted by corruption. Large infrastructure projects can be a magnet for corruption throughout the world. Bangladesh suffers from governance weaknesses and entrenched corruption which undermine the efforts of many dedicated Bangladeshi individuals to reduce poverty and accelerate development.

At the World Bank, we recognise that we are working with Bangladeshis to fight poverty within a challenging governance environment. In everything we do here, we seek to strengthen governance and reduce corruption risks at the country level, across our portfolio and in individual projects. The Padma Bridge -- combining large-scale infrastructure with a weak governance environment -- is the definition of a high-risk, high-reward project.

How will corruption be prevented in constructing the bridge? The World Bank has worked closely with the government and other co-financiers to put in place exceptional measures to reduce corruption risks under the project. Most of these measures affect how government bids out and awards large contracts under the project. They include a special prequalification and two-stage bidding process for exceptional scrutiny of quality and integrity; a strict mapping of individuals with access to procurement information; financial and conflict-of-interest disclosure by public officials involved in the project; bidder disclosure of agents; reinforced bid evaluation committees; strict enforcement of public right to information; expanded grievance

mechanisms; oversight by an independent expert panel; and appointment of a project integrity advisor reporting directly to the prime minister on governance concerns.

The World Bank has taken the unusual step of reviewing all bids (usually done by the evaluation committee alone) and expanding our legal rights to inspect and

ensure construction of a high-quality bridge. Credible allegations of fraud and corruption will be investigated, and substantiated evidence will be acted upon.

When our Managing Director, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, visited here last month, she stated that the World Bank will have "zero tolerance" for corruption under the Padma

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audit bidders' accounts and records in an attempt to minimise the risk of corruption under the project.

With these measures in place, we still cannot entirely eliminate the risk of corruption under the Padma Bridge Project. Our goal is to minimise corruption risks, but take action against any evidence of corruption to

Bridge Project. I believe this stance is shared by most Bangladeshis. It's your bridge and -- with a nearly \$3 billion price tag -- you deserve the best bridge that money can buy. It should be beautiful and functional, creating economic opportunities, fostering regional cooperation and transforming people's lives for generations to come.

The Prime Minister, the Honourable Sheikh Hasina, has called for efficient and transparent implementation of the Padma Bridge Project, and has embraced the need for exceptional measures to reduce corruption risks. She has taken a courageous and principled stance on behalf of the Bangladeshi people, and we are committed to working with her government and other stakeholders to deliver on her vision.

If procurement and contracting are done fairly and transparently, then bridge construction will move faster. If procurement processes become tainted, they will be halted and repeated with greater oversight, adding to the time needed to finish the bridge. While speed is desirable, the quality of preparation for what will be the largest infrastructure asset in Bangladesh should not be compromised.

Thus far, the Bridge Authority and the co-financiers have followed an agreed timetable without major delay. Indeed, progress to date has been surprisingly good for a project of this remarkable size and complexity. This speaks of the sincerity and dedication of many involved in the day-to-day implementation of the bridge, including public officials, civil society organisations, co-financiers and affected households.

Some people believe that the World Bank imposes conditions that make it difficult to complete priority projects. This is an outdated image of the World Bank if ever it was true, and is certainly not the case for the Padma Bridge project, where government is unencumbered by donor-driven conditions. All we ask is that the government implement the project efficiently and transparently for the good of the nation. I believe the people of Bangladesh want this too, and deserve a world-class bridge built to the highest quality standards in record time. Together we can achieve this.

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CTG needs tuning

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THE Supreme Court (SC) of Bangladesh in a ruling on May 10, declared illegal a 15-year-old constitutional provision that mandates an elected government to transfer power to an unelected non-partisan caretaker administration to oversee a new parliamentary election on completion of its term. In the same verdict, however, the highest court said the voided system may be practiced for another two parliamentary terms for the sake of "safety of the state and its people."

The court also asked the Parliament to amend the constitution to make sure that former chief justices or any other Supreme Court judges are not chosen as heads of caretaker governments (CTG) in case the system is kept for another two parliamentary elections. A seven-member SC panel, headed by the chief justice, reached the verdict on majority vote.

The last nail in the coffin of CTG, however, is being driven in by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Following her meeting with the parliamentary

Shahbuddin Ahmed was equally credible despite the utterance of "subtle rigging" from the defeated party chief. However, that utterance, as was proven later, was not meant as an aspersion on the neutrality and integrity of that highly regarded justice since the same party chief invited him to be the head of the Republic during her tenure as the head of the government.

There was, however, no broad consensus among our citizens in attributing the caretaker administration under Justice Latifur Rahman with the similar connotation of impartiality and neutrality. Although BNP won that election, it probably took careful notes from the functioning of the CTG under Justice Latifur Rahman and did not want to leave the appointment of chief of the CTG to natural progression and played the trick of amending the constitution to induct one of their own men as the chief CTG. The rest is history.

To keep history in perspective, it must be accentuated that in January 2007, the armed forces of the nation rose to the occasion and prevented the nation from drowning in an irreversible catastrophe. The CTG under Dr.

This was possible only because they listened to all the stakeholders of the system and did not have the prior mindset about punishing the "misdeeds" of anyone, particular stakeholders.

No legislation is fool-proof and the possibility of its manipulation exists in all cases, and that is where the tuning should come into play. The last BNP government's enactment of a new law on age limit of the judges was a clear manifestation of that manipulation. Similar allegation of possible manipulation has been raised by the current opposition as the recently retired chief justice was appointed superseding two judges of the Appellate Division, and it must not be taken lightly.

It is not yet clear from the judgement of the SC, albeit not a unanimous one, as to why the CTG system was declared illegal since the full judgement has not yet been made public. However, taking into cognisance the reality of the political landscape, the SC advised continuation of the system for another two parliamentary terms for the sake of "safety of the state and its people." This observation could be categorised as so-called "doctrine of necessity." In the same observation, the SC has rightfully asked the Parliament to amend, not terminate, the CTG system to make sure that former chief justices or any other Supreme Court judges are not chosen as heads of caretaker governments.

The principal function of any government, especially the duly elected ones, is to look after the "safety of the state and its people." The constitution as a whole and the laws are enacted to meet that end. The PM, instead of taking a cue from the SC observation, is all out to abandon the system, which in the words of her followers was her own "brain child." Is she in a position to rightfully claim that the political landscape in terms of mistrust and animosity among the political blocks today is any different, if not worse, from the time when her "brain" gave birth to the system of CTG?

The PM is taking refuge in the trench of the SC verdict, jeopardising the "safety of the state and its people" and the intrinsic component of democratic practice, free and fair election, which she is oath bound to protect. The argument she is putting forward in favour of her position is, ironically, identical to what her political opponent and the former PM did when she (PM) was leading the movement for enactment of the CTG system in the constitution.

In the self-inflicted process, she is providing the much-needed wind that was missing so far in the opposition's sails to propel through the rough water ahead. While in government, both the political streams of the country apparently never contemplated winning the people's renewed mandate through good governance, rather through Machiavellian means. Time and again, especially when at the helm of power, they failed to read the writing of the wall, albeit written very clearly. To our greatest dismay, the current government has failed to become an exception.

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Prioritising education

MD. SHARIFUL ISLAM

IN the forthcoming National Budget of Bangladesh the education sector must be prioritised as it is the pre-condition for all types of development. If we look at the Indian Budget 2010-11 where, in the education sector the total planned expenditure has been raised to Rs.42,000 crore from Rs.36,400 crore, which includes Rs.31,036 crore for schools and Rs.10,000 crore for higher education (Muhammad Jamal Janjua, "Indian Budget 2010-11" in Regional Studies, Vol. XXVIII, No.4, p.81).

The budget has increased the allocation for elementary schools from Rs.21,700 crore to Rs.25,000 crore -- a raise of 15%. It is important to note that allocation for the midday meal programme was Rs.9,300 crore. Recent data show that out of a number of countries surveyed in Asia, Vietnam (5.3%) and Iran (5.2%) top the list in public-sector funding of education as part of the GDP. Perhaps these countries realise the value of an educated population.

It is very urgent to take into consideration the above factors. It is needless to say that the present government is doing better in the education sector than the past ones, such as introducing free book distribution till class VIII, introducing free education till B.A. for girls, giving stipends till VIII for girls, providing books by January to the students, etc. All of these are imperative for the development of the education sector.

Along with these, some other things must be kept in mind, such as introducing free meal system till class VIII, taking proper steps for the improvement of primary education system, including the improvement of teachers' quality, and introducing stipend systems for the poor boy students also.

Education is a basic right, but the question is how far have they been granted this right? It is the responsibility of the state to ensure accessibility to education by all children. When I was in class VI I was unable to buy a single pen or khata as my parents had died long ago without leaving me any resources.

Today, I am a graduate from the University of Dhaka, and for that I am always grateful to my country, and to the people in my country from whose taxes I graduated. But if I got such an opportunity in school and college then I could do better than this. Actually, there is huge potential in every child in Bangladesh. Now the question is, if half of them are left behind, then how will development be possible?

The call to ensure that every child starts primary school at age five is one that deserves to be heard and implemented by all quarters concerned. The state should seriously focus on education. Thousands of children are not in school and public-sector education is in need of a major revamping. Private schools are filling the gap, but in a patchy manner and with no one to keep an eye on standards.

The state is not only constitutionally bound to provide free and compulsory education, and various global commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals, also require Bangladesh to aim for universal primary education. Along with our government the influential, rich persons in our society, private banks, and businessmen should come forward to the assistance of the poor and talented students.

My humble request to our Honourable Prime Minister, please do something for the deprived kids in our society because, as the PM, you are our guardian. In another sense, you are not only Joy's mother but also of all the kids in Bangladesh. And, a "mother" can do everything for the betterment of her kids. Therefore, please do something for the poor, meritorious students in Bangladesh, please.

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special committee on constitutional amendment, she categorically declared: "Now there is no way to maintain the caretaker government system after the Supreme Court declared it illegal." About the Supreme Court's observation that the next two general elections might be held under caretaker governments, the premier said it was merely an observation, nothing mandatory. "We will have to follow the mandatory part," she said.

Just to refresh the memory, the CTG system was introduced in the Constitution at the behest of an all-out movement spearheaded by AL itself in 1996. The first election under the newly enacted constitutional provision was conducted by Justice M. Habibur Rahman. He had to work under a partisan president and unfortunately did not have a smooth sailing in his tenure. His great wisdom saved the day and the election was by and large fair. There was no major allegation of partiality of his administration, notwithstanding some noise from the defeated party chief.

Likewise, the election of 1991 under Justice

Fakhruddin Ahmed did a superb job of conducting, at the behest of a truly independent and impartial Election Commission, a free and fair election and gave the nation a truly representative government, thereby elevating the dignity of the nation in the international arena.

The provision of caretaker government, though very hastily formulated, is by and large a very well documented piece of legislation. It stipulates a wide range of flexibilities in choosing the chief adviser, which includes clause 58 C (5) that empowers the president to choose the chief adviser in consultation with the major political parties. If our honourable judges on line to succession are prudent enough to realise that they do not carry the confidence of all sides to begin with, the said clause will automatically trigger on.

The letter and spirit of the provision is neutrality, which was superbly demonstrated by Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed (though he did not work under this framework) and Justice M. Habibur Rahman and lately by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed.