

Healthy critique promotes good governance

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ANNUAL reports of Transparency International, (TIB) Bangladesh chapter raise a furor in Bangladesh. While most people agree with their revelations, some have questioned the correctness of the reports on the ground that they lack confirmatory evidence. Inferences made in the report, government sources opine, have stymied its effort to ensure good governance by misleading the people as they might start questioning government decisions. The government apprehends that this may lead to political instability and social insularity. They castigate the report as partisan.

Maybe the documents do not contain the whole truth, but there is no denying the fact that our people are suffering immensely due to spiralling corruption in almost all sectors of administration. Delay in the dispensation of justice has firmed up peoples' conviction that the root cause of unabated corruption is that the corrupt are not being punished. The situation has been further aggravated by weak political direction.

Since our return to democracy about two decades ago, we have been witnessing emergence of a new brand of politicians who are focussed more on consolidating their grip on their constituencies than promoting in-house democracy, which should have been their major aim. Although the average people have little or no interest in politics, their response to those who rule or seek to rule is made up of prejudices, gut feelings, vague notions, words of mouth, anecdotes and self-certified opinions. Facts, deeds, views expressed in the newspapers rarely cause them to adjust their conclusions. This, in my estimate, is the root cause of our politics going haywire, dispatching our people to sit on the fence and pushing democracy to the edge.

Our politics is dominated by a coterie that has been catapulted to its present posi-

tion by the sponsors as the sponsors themselves were installed as compromise candidates because senior political leaders got immersed in palace intrigue to seek party leadership. This is how the last nail was pegged on the coffin of the politics of the people. Internal democracy was dispatched to rot in the backyard and was replaced by politics of the leaders. May be this is the reason why people doubt whether we have political parties or leaders' parties.

A glaring difference that we notice between politics of a truly democratic country and our declining democracy is in the role played by the politicians and the bureaucracy. In the case of the former, respect for humanity and individuals is given priority while in the latter case, the leaders shape their own brand of democracy so that their sole leadership is never challenged. To our dismay, even the bureaucracy does not waste time to hitch its cart with the king's caravan. The bureaucracy's partisan dispensation in the management of state resources has probably thrown governance into quicksand to sink. Will it be wrong to conclude that the former is a populist democracy while the latter is oligarchy? Weak democracy fuels instability, which retards development. Therefore, a new



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angle of vision and a broad template for evaluating the causes of political decline should be mapped. Development highlighting the positive dimension of the concept that absence of internal democracy within the party framework should be avoided, and this will provide opportunities to liberate potential for transition from weak democracy to vibrant politics of the people.

Democracy respects those people who raise their voice for good governance aimed at welfare of the people. Those who fail to deliver should sing their swansong. So far,

we have not seen any leadership to encourage building up of institutional capacity, which has brewed disillusionment about the possibility of constraining the power brokers from constructing their ways to concentrate power in those who have money and muscle to overwhelm their right thinking colleagues.

Unfortunately, voters in Bangladesh do not realise that they are getting diminishing return for not using their rights of franchise judiciously. Although incredible, it true is that a broad majority of our voters do not know the person

they are casting their vote for, as they only put their stamp of approval on the electoral symbol printed on the ballot paper because they cannot read. Their dreams of a quantum jump in the quality of life are very often shattered because their voted leaders are more inclined to curry leaders' favour than care to implement the pre-election pledges. It is known that commitment and fairplay are considered to be a formidable combination of good leadership. Are we blessed with this?

I observe a vague disquiet among the polity, foreseeing the consequences of the contemporary unwieldy political situation. It is said that "liberties, franchises, privileges and jurisdiction of parliament are ancient and undoubted bright lights and inheritance of the subjects of democratic nation." This should help us judge the status of our democracy. TIB's reports insinuate at the state of governance, which should be recognised, and we should go all-out in quest of a viable remedy instead of challenging their authenticity.

TIB's reports should have been taken in right earnest as a tool to construct a bridge of confidence between well-intended government institutions and public expectation to be governed fairly. TIB can serve the government and the people equally well only if its findings are accepted with grace. This can help the government to evolve ways to address the weaknesses, which is not intended for taking the defaulters to task or for tarnishing the image of the leadership. We must not presume public compliance of actions of the government that seem to be waste of space and time. Use of rhetoric and semantics to put a lid on the poor performance by resorting to blame game should be ruthlessly avoided.

Differences on issues are transitory, with time they may be resolved. 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 what their failings are. Reports of watchdogs like TIB should be viewed by the government in real earnest, and it should work steadfastly to evolve ways and means to guard against erosion of values to make Bangladesh a country where justice and fair play will be the chief concerns of politicians and the bureaucracy.

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Judicial solution of a political problem?

PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

THREE most important features of a sound and effective democratic system are consensus, tolerance and responsible behaviour from both the ruling and the opposition parties. Although we claim to be a democratic country, these three features are totally absent in the political environment.

A debate started on the issue of caretaker government when the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court declared the 13th Amendment of the Constitution illegal. Considering the political context of the country, the judges gave a direction that the next two elections may be held under caretaker government system.

On the basis of the verdict of the Court the ruling party is opposing the caretaker system while opposition BNP is supporting it. The issue has become a political rather than a constitutional problem, which could destabilise the political situation. Is it possible to have a judicial solution to a political problem?

The caretaker government system was introduced as a result of long-standing political movements and was, to some extent, successful in holding free, fair and credible elections. The system was appreciated by the world community and has been used to ensure credible election in many parts of the world. Starting from 1991, the system functioned well until 2001. It came under serious criticism when the BNP government increased the retirement age of the chief justice of the Supreme Court from 65 years to 67 years.

The main intention behind the decision to increase judges' age, as argued by the AL, was to ensure appointment of Justice K. M. Hasan as the chief of the caretaker government. But, the plan did not work well since a chaotic situation was created in the country after the expiration of the tenure of the BNP government. At the height of the political turmoil, a new type of caretaker government took over on January 11, 2007 and ruled for two years.

Despite the criticism of their efforts to depoliticise politics, their efforts against corruption and in strengthening different institutions including the Election Commission (EC), deserves appreciation. Finally, the reconstituted EC conducted an election in December 2008 that was termed as the most free, fair and credible election in the history of Bangladesh.

What will happen in the coming days? I think we are about to go through political turmoil in the near future. The two leading political parties are poles apart and consensus building will be very difficult.

So what is the solution?

The government should realise that BNP will not allow it to hold election without a caretaker government. Election under the political government would not be welcomed by the majority of the population. Thus, I am surprised at the government's stand against caretaker government. The government should understand that it is under pressure due to increase in prices, unstable situation in the share market, electricity deficit etc.

In a situation where an election under caretaker government is not appreciated by the losing party, election under the ruling government will not be welcomed. On the other hand, BNP's stand on the issue of caretaker government is also not good. Instead of joining the parliament, they are calling hartal even before the full verdict of the Appellate Division has been made public. Moreover, their long absence from the parliament has made people think about the main intention of opposition politics.

Under the circumstances, there is no alternative other than holding a dialogue. Both the political parties will have to realise that if they fail to reach a consensus there is a possibility that political violence may take place in the country when political leaders would be affected most. Thus, it is necessary for the opposition to go back to the parliament and express their opinions on this issue. If they do so, the whole country would know about their stand. Dialogue could be held even outside the parliament. If both the parties are sincere about the caretaker government system, consensus building will not be a problem.

Both the parties should realise that it is a political problem rather than a constitutional problem. Political consensus is the only solution that can save the country from political turmoil. I hope that our leaders realise this and come forward to save the country from another political disaster. Considering the direction of the Supreme Court, if both parties agree to hold the next two elections under caretaker government we would get another 10 years to build a new political culture. After 10 years, we can expect that our democracy will stand on a strong footing and we could expect to have an election under the ruling government with an independent and strong Election Commission.

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Engineering Bangladesh

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I had the opportunity to read "Engineering the future of engineers," and an interview of Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal in the Star Magazine (May 20), that inspired me to write something about engineering.

I believe engineers will play a vital role in shaping Bangladesh's future. At the same time, I would like to point out that it is important to encourage our youth to be studious and innovative (not necessarily technical). Innovation may be opening an engineering design house, a fashion design house or even a grocery shop. Creating opportunities for others is the best innovation.

Bangladesh should not focus only on producing software engineers/developers as that alone cannot shape our economy. We have a great climate but are unable to produce enough food, which is a shame. But that does not mean everyone has to become a farmer. We should encourage software, civil, water resources and mechanical engineers to be involved with farming. Industrialisation and agriculture are not opposing paths but mutually beneficial ways of achieving development, growth and opportunity.

The government can encourage engineering students to develop business plans in the last 2 years of their studies, and provide machinery and equipment -- not cash -- to start businesses when they graduate. The government should dedicate industrial zones to set up small-scale machine shops, which will be able to manufacture machine tools 5 years after start-up.

The "assistance" received will have to be paid off as per the business plan, which should focus on purpose of the business, intended production, business life cycle, contingency plan/s if it fails to return a profit, and measuring tools to assess its overall success. Regular assessment of success/failure is critical, because if something is not measured it cannot be managed.

Teachers and students should ask the people what is needed; e.g. they should ask a farmer how they can help ensure timely irrigation and adequate pesticides, ensure enough electricity and so on. We have so much construction going on in the capital and almost all the buildings have lifts. Are we thinking of designing or manufacturing lifts?

A group of mechanical engineers can set up a machine shop with government assistance to produce high/low precision tools, components for pumps, compressors, engine components for auto rickshaws etc. A 5-10 year plan to produce and use these goods could identify quality and operational, manufacturing, marketing and management issues. This will help us understand associated best practices and produce better quality products.

I encourage free market economy as competition can only make us better. I see Bangladesh as a potential

manufacturing hub, with the low value of our currency to assist us in this regard. Software engineers/developers can help by developing effective management tools and communication network among other things.

Some may think this is a costly plan, but maybe we are wasting too much money in other areas (e.g. mobile phones). Ask our premium institutions to design and produce prototype of mobile phones to be produced and sold in Bangladesh. Creating both a production and a consumer base in the country is the only way to sustain growth. Exporting is an option but is not the primary path to becoming a developed country. The world economic base is shifting and more and more countries are trying to tighten their belts on imported goods and people (i.e. immigration). It is imperative to invest now to ensure a sustainable tomorrow.

Some people of this country get the opportunity to study abroad. Some of the bright and lucky ones get the opportunity to work. I encourage both studying and working as this provides an opportunity to grow. The non-resident Bangladeshis can also assist by playing 2 critical roles: (i) People who are working in business, engineering sectors can contribute with the knowledge they obtain through their work. I believe a big portion of today's NRB will one day return to Bangladesh, and they can apply or at least share the knowledge, process and procedures, and best practices -- providing a competitive advantage over others (ii) NRB population can also act as the buying and marketing agents of Bangladeshi products abroad.

Bangladesh government should work with the expatriate community and foreign governments/ business leaders to export skilled workforce (e.g. engineers, tradespersons) to countries/projects (Middle Eastern projects, Australian mines and Canadian oil sands) where potential shortage of workforce are imminent. Expatriates involved in teaching in foreign universities or colleges have a role to play to draw up a roadmap on how to obtain degree and experience equivalency for welders, machinists, and pipe fitters. Bangladesh has a few polytechnics that should become the hotbed of producing skilled tradespersons. Foreign assignments will add value in the long run. I hope my piece stirs up some discussion.

I humbly ask the student population to look beyond software/computer science. Software and computers are part of today's life but they are not the one-stop shop to success. I encourage the youth of the country to focus on the actual fun stuff -- "studying and implementing." Spend your time studying, thinking, discussing and implementing, alone or in groups, and actively inquire about how other engineering fields (e.g. mechanical, civil, naval etc.) may be right for you, if you are thinking about engineering a better Bangladesh.

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