

Bulldozing constitutional amendments

Such unilateral action is self-defeating

THE PM's statement in Parliament on Tuesday and the placement of the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on law ministry before the House last evening make it abundantly clear that the AL government is hell-bent on abolishing the caretaker system. We feel that the speed with which the whole thing is being done trivialises both the Constitution and its amendment process. The PM's claim that she has waited 11 months for the opposition's response cannot hold good for the CTG issue surfaced only after the SC verdict on May 10 making it less than a two-month old issue.

What surprises us even more is that the full verdict of Supreme Court is not yet out and the nation does not know the full extent of the ruling given by the SC. The very fact that an issue of such national importance as a constitutional amendment on CTG is being implemented without the full verdict makes the process extremely questionable, especially when it is being done by showing the SC judgment as its main justification.

The PM's positioning is that with the ruling party's two-thirds majority in parliament the constitution maybe re-amended to accommodate the opposition viewpoint on the CTG issue, if need be. This is double-speak; only very recently she had invited the opposition to talks but now she is bent upon abolishing the CTG system unilaterally.

The ruling party's hasty handling of the caretaker issue is patently inexplicable when it has more than two years to go before the next general election.

By fast-tracking the amendment process, the ruling party is making a blunder. The prime minister cited instance of an autocratic regime carrying out amendments at a breakneck speed. Actually, that has been the bane of the constitution leaving it distorted beyond recognition, which it is now the prime responsibility of a democratic government to set right -- through a consensus.

We think the ruling party is using its brute and overwhelming majority to bulldoze a whole set of constitutional amendments which have far-reaching implication both for democracy and the country.

We feel the government is underestimating BNP whose strength should not be merely judged by its number of seats in the JS but rather by the size of its voter support.

Quorum crisis in JS

It needs addressing in earnest

A Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) study shows that since the ninth Jatiya Sangsad (JS) came into existence, the main opposition remained out of the House for 83 per cent of its total working days. In this manner, the opposition did not only abdicate its oversight role in parliament, but also failed to speak for its constituencies.

As if that was not enough of an impediment to parliament's full functioning, what has come out of TIB's survey is even more depressing when the business of the House has been stymied by quorum crisis it reflects the lawmakers' lack of interest in parliamentary proceedings. That is very unfortunate given the absolute majority the Awami League (AL) government enjoys in the JS combined with the strength of its grand alliance members. As such, for the AL government, it should not have been any problem with maintaining quorum in the House.

As for the cabinet members, they, too, are conspicuous by their not-so-inspiring record at JS attendance ranging from 40 to 60 per cent. But on one occasion, 80 per cent of the ministers defaulted on that score, which hardly speaks well of the ministers' responsibility in keeping the JS functional and dynamic.

Amidst this disheartening scenario, the punctuality and record percentage of attendance by the Leader of the House stands out as an example worth emulating by other lawmakers. This is a measure of the importance the Prime Minister attaches to Parliament.

Now the opposition should see it fit to join parliament to attend to issues of vital national importance. Simultaneously, the Treasury Bench should play a hands-on role to enhance the quality of debate through regular presence of the lawmakers.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 30

1520

The Spaniards are expelled from Tenochtitlan.

1651

The Deluge: Khmelnytsky Uprising the Battle of Beresteczko ends with a Polish victory.

1688

The Immortal Seven issue the Invitation to William (continuing the English rebellion from Rome), which would culminate in the Glorious Revolution.

1758

Seven Years' War: The Battle of Domstadt takes place.

1794

Native American forces under Blue Jacket attack Fort Recovery.

1805

The US Congress organises the Michigan Territory.

1864

US President Abraham Lincoln grants Yosemite Valley to California for "public use, resort and recreation".

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

even those that the Transparency International rates at the top of the list of "least corrupt" are also corrupt. The culture pervades, only the degree differs. And it is not corruption described in the monetary context only because corruption encompasses ones moral and ethical behaviour also.

Japan, which is rated as one of the least corrupt countries would much rather leave the Lockheed scandal behind and not talk about it at all. A US president was saved by the skin of his teeth, thanks to his successor who spared him the ignominy of impeachment through a presidential pardon for a series of acts of moral turpitude that included illegal snooping over the rival party's headquarters and then resorting to lies to cover it up.

And then we have an example of moral depravity of another US president who used the privacy of the Oval Office to satisfy his libidinous propensity without remorse, and defended his act rather skillfully on the face of questioning by the grand jury. He was impeached for perjury and obstruction of justice for allegedly lying under oath, but acquitted by the Senate. He paid by having his Arkansas law license forfeited after

WHILE it is not a matter of consolation for us in Bangladesh, it is a reality that no country is free of corruption. And

retirement.

And those who think that it is our MPs only that indulge in financial indiscipline should look at how some British MPs misspent public money.

And I am only relating these incidents not to wallow over the fact that we are in excellent company when it comes to corruption but to highlight the difference between them and us. Each one of those referred to above had to pay politically, apart form being subjected to the process of the law. That is not so in Bangladesh where the corrupt are seldom penalised, and more often wriggle out of the judicial process due to systemic lacunae or political influence or both.

It is the regime of impunity that stands us apart from the rest of the world. Had it not been so, many against whom there are strong prima facie evidence of dishonesty should have been doing time rather than exploiting the benefits of a rotten system and pleading innocence from the comfort of a luxurious apartment through incoherent statements. It is even more painful when such sleaze and dishonesty compromise severely the country's economic and strategic interest.

Making short shrift of anti-corruption drive

Given that oversight and cleansing must start from the top such a caveat would make anti-corruption drive ineffective. It is corruption at the top that is more harmful for the state and which must be dealt with, with heavy hand.

It seems that we are unwilling to rectify and change. And this apprehension has been reinforced even more by the way the issue of combating corruption has been handled in recent times. And it seems that despite the expressed commitment of the government to fight corruption, there is an effort, unwitting perhaps, to prove Gibbon's profound observation that corruption is the most perfect indication of constitutional liberty.

Regrettably, the unwillingness to grapple with the curse occurs at the very level from where the anti-corruption drive should commence, right at the top. And this ideally should be done in several ways. By formulating strategy to root out corruption, and by setting personal

examples in transparent conduct, and last but not the least, strengthening the institutions that help the government to fight corruption. And there are reasons to feel let down on most counts.

There is very little that one can say about setting personal examples, but the country is still waiting for the wealth statements of the members of parliament, a commitment made very soon after the grand coalition came to power but has not been honoured. It

would not have been such a big deal had it not been for the fact that such a pledge was made publicly by the prime minister herself.

As for making examples of the corrupt, the situation is even more pathetic. Not only have cases of corruption been handled in a very partisan manner, quashing of cases and dismissal of corruption charges on technical grounds have lent a great deal of opacity to the matter. If the so called truth commission of the erstwhile caretaker government was a rank errant policy -- one cannot and should not be allowed any quarters even after admitting to corrupt practices, as was the idea behind the commission -- reinstating some self-confessed corrupt while allowing a few others of the same category to retire with full benefits, doesn't speak much about the present government's anti-corruption pledge.

And as for institutional effectiveness, one has to only recall the helpless cry of the ACC Chairman at having his tooth and nails shorn. An ACC reform proposal is with the relevant parliamentary committee. However, there are differences within the committee on some important issues like seeking prior permission of the government before proceeding against a public servant.

Given that oversight and cleansing must start from the top such a caveat would make anti-corruption drive ineffective. It is corruption at the top that is more harmful for the state and which must be dealt with, with heavy hand.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

My syria, awake again after 40 years

MOHAMMAD ALI ATASSI

IN 2009, National Geographic published an article on Syria by a special correspondent, Don Belt, who had interviewed President Bashar Assad. In 2000, shortly after the funeral of his father, President Hafez Assad, the son entered his father's office for only the second time in his life. His first visit had been at age 7, "running excitedly to tell his father about his first French lesson." The president "remembers seeing a big bottle of cologne on a cabinet next to his father's desk," Belt wrote. "He was amazed to find it still there 27 years later, practically untouched."

The bottle can be seen as an allegory for Syria itself -- the Syria that has been out of sight for the 40 years of the Assads' rule, a country and its aspirations placed on a shelf and forgotten for decades in the name of stability.

Now this other Syria is appearing before our eyes to remind us that it cannot be forever set aside, that its people did not spend the decades of the Assads' rule asleep, and that they aspire, like all people, to live with freedom and dignity.

I remember my father, Nureddin al-Atassi, who himself had been president of Syria before he was imprisoned in 1970 as a result of Gen. Hafez Assad's coup against his comrades in the Baath Party. I was 3 years old then, and it took me a while to understand that prison was not only for criminals, but also for prisoners of conscience. My father would spend 22 years in a small cell in Al Mazza prison, without any charge or trial. We counted the days by the rhythm of our visits to him: one hour every two weeks. At the end of a struggle with cancer, for which he had been denied medical treatment, he was finally released. He died in Paris in December 1992, a week after arriving there on a stretcher.

For the great majority of Syrians, the forgotten Syria meant a police

state, a country governed with an iron fist. It meant a concerted international effort to keep a dictatorial regime in power in the name of regional stability -- preserving the security of Israel and maintaining a cold peace on the Golan Heights, like the snow that covers Mount Hermon.

The forgotten Syria meant thousands of political prisoners packed for decades inside the darkness of prisons and detention centers. It meant disappearances that left families without even a death certificate. It meant the tears of mothers and wives waiting since the 1980s for their sons and

collapsed while the Syrian regime kept its one-party state. It happened in 2000, with the death of Hafez Assad and the transfer of power through inheritance -- as if the regime could defeat even the certainty of death. And it happened in the year that followed, when the Damascus Spring was buried alive, its most prominent activists arrested after they called for Syria and its new president to turn the page and proceed toward democracy.

All through the past four decades, the regime refused to introduce any serious political reform. But meanwhile, Syria witnessed great demo-

History did not end, of course, and occasionally it peeked in on Syrian life. But the regime buried its head in the sand, living the delusion that it could keep history out -- if only it abused its people enough.

husbands to return, even if wrapped in a shroud. It meant daily humiliation, absolute silence and the ubiquity of fear. It meant networks of corruption and nepotism, a decaying bureaucracy and a security apparatus operating without control or accountability. It meant the marginalization of politics, the taming of the judiciary, the suffocation of civil society and the crushing of any opposition.

A terrifying slogan, "Our Leader Forever Is President Hafez Assad," emblazoned at the entrance to every city, and on public buildings, told Syrians that history ended at their country's frontiers.

History did not end, of course, and occasionally it peeked in on Syrian life. But the regime buried its head in the sand, living the delusion that it could keep history out -- if only it abused its people enough. This happened in the 1980s, with the bloody massacres in Hama. It happened in the early 1990s, after the Soviet bloc

graphic, economic and social transformation. The population became larger and younger; today, more than half of all Syrians are not yet 20 years old. Enormous rural migration to the cities fueled a population explosion at the outskirts of Damascus and Aleppo. With unemployment widespread, wealth became concentrated more tightly in the hands of a small class of regime members and their cronies.

Many Western diplomats and commentators expressed doubts that the Syrian people might one day rise up to demand their rights and freedoms. But those skeptics consistently understated the depth of resistance and dissent. It was no surprise that at the moment of truth, Syrians opened their hearts and minds to the winds of the Arab Spring -- winds that blew down the wall that had stood between the Arabs and democracy, and had imposed false choices between stability and chaos or dictatorship and

Islamic extremism.

History did not leave behind that other, real Syria. Syria returns today to demand its stolen rights, to collect on its overdue bills. Compared to the other Arab uprisings, Syria's has been perhaps the most arduous, considering the regime's cruelty and the threat of civil war. At the same time, the people's unity and their determination to remain peaceful will ultimately enable them to win their freedom and build their own democratic experience. Our exceptionally courageous people, their bare chests exposed to snipers' bullets, understand the meaning of this freedom; it has already cost them dearly, in the lives of their sons and daughters.

In his interview with National Geographic, Bashar Assad did not say what he had done with the big bottle of cologne. It's a moot point. The regime's response, and Assad's last three speeches, indicate that no one in the presidential palace, not even the president, can move the glass bottle of despotism that has held Syria's future captive.

My own father governed Syria for four years, but I inherited from him neither power nor fortune. What I inherited was a small suitcase, sent to us from the prison after he died. It held literally all of his belongings after 22 years in confinement. All I remember from this suitcase today is the smell of the prison's humidity that his clothes exuded when I opened it.

The next time I visit my father's grave, I will tell him that freedom is reviving again in Syria. I will reassure him that the Syrian people have finally succeeded in breaking this big bottle of cologne, that the scent of freedom has finally been dispersed, that it cannot be drowned by the smell of blood.

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