

Income statements of cabinet members

Why to PM and not to the public?

THE cabinet has decided that all ministers, ministers of state, deputy ministers and individuals of similar status in government will submit annual statements of their income and wealth to the prime minister. It will then be for the cabinet division to keep records of those statements. Whether or not such statements are released in the public domain will be for the prime minister to decide.

The move does not quite arouse the kind of enthusiasm among citizens it should have. The cabinet decision clearly leaves everything -- transparency, public accountability -- to be decided by the prime minister as she deems fit. It actually increases PM's hold on her cabinet colleagues, but does not add to public transparency or accountability. In fact, the PM could receive information from the NBR, why should she insist on getting it from her colleagues if she does not make it public?

Actually, it is of critical importance that by taking such a step the cabinet has patently ignored the manifesto the Awami League made public prior to the general elections of December 2008. Citizens at the time were cheered by the party's pledge to have the income and wealth statements of the prime minister, members of the cabinet, members of parliament and their families made public every year as a way of promoting transparency and accountability in governance. The ruling party has in these past two years and a half inexplicably and, we might add, to its own embarrassment, studiously turned its back on the promise. What it now offers only raises more questions than it can answer.

Moreover, while the finance minister himself led the way by submitting his wealth statements since becoming a minister, why did his other colleagues fail to meet the requirement for more than two years?

To suggest that public concerns will be assuaged by cabinet members' submission of wealth statements to the prime minister has something of the farcical about it. That is because it makes no mention of the income and wealth of lawmakers as well as of family members of ministers and parliamentarians. Finally, all statements of income and wealth must annually be made public. Such statements must be monitored through effective mechanisms. And rather than the cabinet division preserving wealth statements, it should be for bodies like the Anti-Corruption Commission, Bangladesh Bank and National Board of Revenue to keep track of the wealth of the nation's public figures. The cabinet must rethink the issue.

Into the death tunnel

Opposition's total lack of concerns for public convenience and economy

TODAY begins the long drawn out version of a hartal, with 48 hours on Wednesday and Thursday opening out to weekend Friday and Saturday. Meaning thereby, the whole nation could come to a grinding halt altogether for 96 hours.

Economy comes to a standstill, daily wage earners are forced to starvation, students cannot take their exams and seriously ailing patients find it hard to get emergency medicare. The suffering of the people during hartal knows no bound indeed.

Hartal may appear righteous option especially when the ruling party doesn't allow the opposition space to ventilate its grievances. Even so hartal should be taken recourse to as the last resort, for no political party has any right to punish people for no fault of theirs.

But usually opposition in our country is used to calling hartal at the earliest opportunity before even trying and exhausting other valid options. For instance, we thought if the BNP has made it into a habit of attending parliament it wouldn't have a need for hartal.

Hartal as a means of protest and articulation of the demand of a political party in extra ordinary circumstances, though admissible, is however, an anathema in an independent democratic country. It shows a disregard for the institutions of democracy and people's wishes.

Since hartals are an imposition on the people, we should try to exempt the economy of the country, the industries, ports, hospitals and education institutions from the purview of hartal.

If a political party thinks it has a right to call hartal it must be equally sensitive to rights of those who do not want to participate in it.

Finally, we call upon all sides to exercise maximum restraint, so that vandalism and destruction of public and private property are scrupulously avoided and police refrain

GROUND REALITIES

A garden buried under weeds



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

the Awami League, Ronald Reagan was in the fourth month of his presidency in Washington. Francois Mitterrand had just been elected president of France. A year later, Leonid Brezhnev would die and the doors to rapid political change would open in the Soviet Union.

In 1983, when Begum Khaleda Zia took over the Bangladesh Nationalist Party as its chairperson, Indira Gandhi governed in Delhi as India's prime minister. In that year, in a new, dictator-free Argentina, Raoul Alfonsin would be elected president and would inaugurate the country's transition to democratic governance. Only a year earlier, the young Spanish socialist leader, Felipe Gonzalez, had led his party to victory at the elections in Madrid, sealing the end of a turbulent era following the phasing out of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. In 1983, Benigno Aquino was murdered on the tarmac at Manila airport moments after his return home from exile.

By the time 1986 came around, with the Awami League and the BNP loudly quarrelling over who had betrayed whom at the elections called by General Ershad's regime that year, Mikhail Gorbachev had already been on the road more than a year promoting perestroika and glasnost. A people power revolution brought down Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and raised Corazon Aquino to power in that year. In 1988, as both the

Awami League and the BNP stayed away from the new elections called by the military regime, George Bush senior defeated Michael Dukakis in the race to succeed a retiring Reagan. In Britain, Margaret Thatcher, having demolished James Callaghan, Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock, was in full command of the stage.

As Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia battled the Ershad regime in 1990, the ruthless Pinochet regime took the first steps toward a restoration of democratic government in Chile. In India, VP Singh and then Chandrashekar hurtled toward political irrelevance.

Nelson Mandela was a free man and South Africa was on its way to a dismantling of apartheid. When in 1991 Begum Zia took office as Bangladesh's prime minister, Indians turned, post-Rajiv Gandhi, to PV Narasimha Rao to lead them as prime minister.

John Major, having taken over from Thatcher, was on his way to beating the Labour Party at the general elections. The Soviet Union was coming apart at the seams and Boris Yeltsin moved inexorably toward assuming control of Russia. In post-Mao China, having weathered the storms thrown up by the Gang of Four and the wobbly leadership of Hua Guo-feng, the wily Deng Xiao-ping governed supreme.

South Korea, to the east, offered a refreshing kaleidoscope of democratic opening. In the aftermath of the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, the country cheerfully moved to political liberalisation, with long-

struggling politicians like Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam, Roh Tae-woo, Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Meung-bak serving as presidents elected through an exercise of citizens' voting rights. As Nelson Mandela took the oath of office as South Africa's first post-apartheid president in 1994, a rigged by-election in Magura led to a new wave of agitational politics in Bangladesh, with Sheikh Hasina demanding a caretaker system to oversee the next round of general elections. Khaleda Zia laughed off the suggestion as madness. In Britain,

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, dreams of New Labour swirling in their imaginations, took over Britain's parliamentary opposition after the death of John Smith.

Sheikh Hasina rose to power through the general elections of June 1996. In that year, Bill Clinton

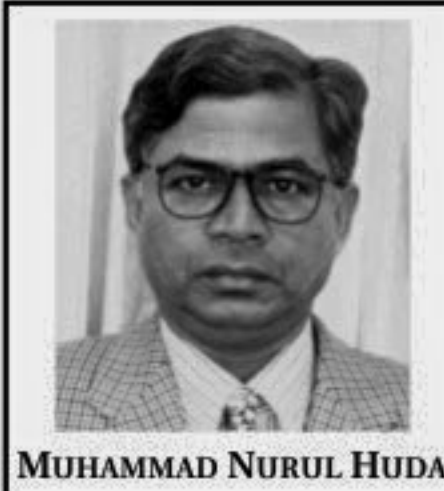
would be re-elected, to serve a second term as president of the United States. India would go into the hands of H.D. Deve Gowda and the Taliban would sweep to military victory and power even as the Mujahideen disappeared into the mountains in Afghanistan. Pakistan's president Farooq Leghari dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government, the second time the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had been turfed out of office. A year later, Tony Blair would become Britain's prime minister, Deng Xiao-ping would be dead, Princess Diana would die, Hong Kong would go back to China and Inder Kumar Gujral would assume India's

Around the globe, political parties have reinvented themselves. Elections have thrown up new leaders and sent old ones into retirement.

Dynamism has been the engine of politics.

STRAIGHT LINE

Painfully prolonged investigation



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

supplementary charge sheet relating to the grisly grenade attack case of August 21, 2004, accused 30 individuals that included former ministers, prominent political leaders and top functionaries of intelligence and police organisation. This was reportedly in addition to 22 others charge sheeted in 2008. To recollect, the horrendous event resulted in the death of 30 persons and injured 300 persons, many of them grievously, including the present Prime Minister who was then leader of the opposition.

It may perhaps be said that the above incident was the most macabre and dismal occurrence in the catalogue of alleged annihilation of political opponents in Bangladesh. The compounding tragedy is that it has taken an inordinately long seven years to complete the investigation. While the victims of the tragedy would, undoubtedly, not really benefit from a causative analysis of such delay, to the general public it may be a matter of valid interest.

Before venturing into any discussion of the delay and the accusation and counter accusations about the credibility of the investigation of the grenade attack case, it needs to be stated that the job of the investigating agency is to ascertain the facts and circumstances of the incident and place it before the court whose job it is to adjudicate the guilt or otherwise. It is still not time to make judgments.

Newspaper reports indicate that the delay in investigation was necessitated for proper and sustained investigation with a view to prosecuting the actual criminals and their abettors. It was also informed that startling cover-ups were coming to light that needed to be properly unearthed. All these appear to be valid justification

for lengthened investigation. What, however, is baffling and tragic is that a case of such magnitude was treated so poorly and with such apparent negligence by those in authority.

Extreme views advocating and implementing annihilation of the political opponent has been a sad socio-political reality of our society. It is a fact that many political murders have not been investigated properly while some cases are still under investigation and some have been perfunctorily looked into. Such a state of affairs demanded the supreme necessity of a comprehensive investigation of the incident of attempted assassination of Shaikh Hasina because that was expected to be an example-setter in the criminal justice system in whose effectiveness and impartiality there is a disturbing slide.

To recollect, the multiple grenade assault of August 21, 2004 was clearly a manifest attempt to wipe out the entire leadership of a major political party. The damage already caused with its far-reaching ramifications cannot be brushed aside. The double figure deaths and crippling injuries of hundreds should make us wonder if the state organs investigating the incident and the then political authority did realise the enormity of the dastardly attack.

We may also recollect that the investigation of the above incident was not taken in right earnest that it deserved and the first indication of that was the unpardonable failure to protect and preserve the scene of occurrence. There was allegation that physical evidence was tampered with and destroyed. The field units did not act with desired speed and circumspection. The question is, did this happen because of the so-called instruction

from above? The culpability of all concerned has to be examined.

Investigation of a criminal offence is the field exclusively reserved for the executive through principally the police, the superintendence over which vests in the government. The executive is charged with a duty to keep vigilance over law and order situation and it is its bounden responsibility to investigate into a criminal offence and bring the offender to book.

The powers of the investigators are laid down in the Criminal Procedure Code but the qualifications that an investigator must possess is largely an abstract subject, law and procedure cannot guide it and in reality is often an individual trait. The investigator

must not start with a pre-conceived notion and should strive to bring out the real unvarnished truth.

In view of the above stipulations, both mandatory and directorial, what has gone wrong, one would like to know? Why the high profile cases have not been resolved as frequently alleged? Was there a cynical

attempt to shift the blame as suspected and were there attempts to exploit pathetic incidents in a politically partisan manner? Has undesirable delay prejudiced the investigation thereby protecting the criminals and irreparably harming the victims?

In the fitness of things every criminal case should be disposed of on its own merit. That is the ideal. There are, however, objective conditions in Bangladesh to doubt that the fate of some cases, if not many, did not have the benefit of such ideal standard. In our situation, it would be necessary to dwell upon certain facts and circumstances of our socio-political existence and in particular the perilous political polarization of our society

leadership. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia would go on engaging in unending skirmishes, their followers vociferously egging them on.

The world outside our frontiers has moved on. The Germans have had reunification and a host of chancellors from Helmut Schmidt to Helmut Kohl to Gerhard Schroder to Angela Merkel. The Indians have seen Atal Behari Vajpayee and then Manmohan Singh in office. Gordon Brown and David Cameron have followed Blair, in that order. America, after Bill Clinton, has had the junior Bush and Barack Obama. Indonesia, de-toxified of Suharto in 1998, has experienced the presidencies of Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Michelle Bachelet has served as Chile's president; and Cristina Kirchner runs a fairly good show in Argentina. Dilma Rousseff has succeeded the popular Lula da Silva in Brazil. In South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, serving as president after Mandela, was to make way for Jacob Zuma. Mitterrand's France was led, after him, by Jacques Chirac and is today governed by Nicolas Sarkozy. Spain and Japan have had a succession of leaders.

Around the globe, political parties have reinvented themselves. Elections have thrown up new leaders and sent old ones into retirement. Dynamism has been the engine of politics.

Only we have hung on to outmoded ideas, to old bankruptcies. We still mistake tribalism for politics. Hartals are yet our preoccupation. Our garden is buried deep under the weeds we have watered for years.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 6

1609

Bohemia is granted freedom of religion.

1785

The dollar is unanimously chosen as the monetary unit for the United States.

1917

World War I: Arabian troops led by T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") and Auda ibn Tayi capture Aqaba from the Ottoman Empire during the Arab Revolt.

1939

Holocaust: the last remaining Jewish enterprises in Germany are closed.

1942

Anne Frank and her family go into hiding in the "Secret Annexe" above her father's office in an Amsterdam warehouse.

1964

Malawi declares its independence from the United Kingdom.

1975

The Comoros declare independence from France.