

STRAIGHT LINE

Bangladesh's corruption image slightly better

Let the pace be sustained

BANGLADESH has fared better in 2011 compared to its performance in curbing corruption last year, according to the Transparency International (TI)'s report released on December 1.

Lifting itself by a notch on the Corruption Performance Index (CPI), it has scored 2.7. It ranks 13th from the bottom out of the 182 countries brought under this year's survey on global corruption.

This latest CPI shows that Bangladesh has made a good deal of progress in its performance between 2001 and 2005. Over that period, its status plummeted to the base level of the most corrupt nation.

So, this year's gain shows that Bangladesh is at least inching its way forward out of its poor records of the past.

That this is rather a very modest achievement is clear from the fact that Bangladesh is still well below the score of 3, the threshold that it must cross to get out of the category of nations red-marked as harbouring unbridled corruption.

As the report card shows, we have performed better than Afghanistan, Pakistan, Maldives, Nepal and Myanmar, but we are still behind Bhutan, Sri Lanka and India.

Steps like Right to Information Act, Whistleblower Protection Act, establishment of the Information Commission and Human Rights Commission, adoption of an implementation strategy of UN convention against corruption have gone into improving the country's score card.

There is hardly any room for complacency. For the proposal to clip the power of the ACC does not bode well for the sustainability of the achievements made on the CPI.

So, the need is to be focussed on the agenda of consolidating the gains on CPI to make it sustainable. To this end, the government must meet its electoral pledges.

The matter of spelling

Let it be beyond reproach

THERE is always a time to go back to basics, especially where learning is concerned. And a serious aspect of learning has to do with spelling. That is one of the earliest phases we go through in school and from then on it remains our endeavour to achieve mastery over a part of education that must sustain us in our personal and professional life. It is in that spirit that we are pretty enthused by thoughts of a spelling competition which we understand will take place next year. The moving spirit behind this rather innocuous but nevertheless necessary exercise is Champs21, an initiative of this newspaper. And on board with it is GlaxoSmithKline Bangladesh Ltd.

Of course, the spelling contest, in English, will involve students from classes six to ten from both Bangla and English medium schools. Now, the question just could come up as to why spelling needs to be part of a contest. A straight response to that is that there are hordes of people, and not just among the young at school, whose grasp of English word spelling remains in need of improvement. To be sure, there are other areas in the language --- phrases and idioms and the like --- which call for attention. Perhaps focused attention could be brought into these areas too. But, as examination papers have shown consistently, a failure to spell words correctly quite mars what otherwise might have been a healthy exercise. The problem is particularly acute in schools, both in urban and rural areas. There are, indeed, schools which have regular classes and exams on spelling. One wonders, though, if that could be turned into a nationwide trend.

Spelling correctly is important. And yet there have been historical figures whose sense of spelling has been appalling. The story, whether or not apocryphal, goes that an American president's poor spelling of 'all correct' led him to try 'oll korekt' and eventually to 'ok'. Good improvisation, but a rarity. Moral: our spelling needs to

Confrontational politics and enforcement dilemma



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

FROM all indications one can see that the two major political parties are once again on an ominous confrontational course. This

time also on the issue of holding the next general election under political party government or caretaker government the two parties hold diametrically opposite views. At least, as of now, there is no sign of either one budging an inch from their entrenched position.

From the above it would appear that the Bangladesh polity is going to experience more political confrontations in the run-up to the next general election, thus causing severe inconvenience for all segments of the population including the law-enforcers. Political thinkers who are reputed for their time and space-transcending relevance have pointed to the inevitable insecurity and suffering consequent upon political instability. While the fate of the teeming masses of our country may not favourably change due to the confrontationalist postures and actions of the mainstream politicians, the game of politics has a rewarding bearing on those who are the players.

Some say that politics is deeply rooted in our psyche and as such engaging in organisational politics has made it very volatile and dysfunctional. Such volatility and dysfunction are strongly suspected to be the result of the deficiencies of the actors in the art of politics. Their non-deliverance has meant demonstration of arrogance by incumbents to somehow stay in power or fearsome manipulation on the part of opposition to grab power. In such a scenario, the country is kept on tenterhooks and the process carries within itself multi-dimensional enforcement and security implications.

There is no denying that Bangladesh needs to be presided over by a capable, effective ruling group that can tackle aggressive and destructive forces and provide adequate protection to its citizens. Success of a political government is significantly measured by the absence of violence and the presence of confidence of the people in addition to the element of adaptability to new

conditions and challenges. Against such a background, the scale of our political instability may unfortunately turn out to be the prelude to political decay.

Many factors militate against our quest for a stable political order. A political culture conducive to stability is yet to emerge and unfortunately the facilitating factor of level-headed leadership is in short supply. Consequently, we have to witness a lack of social cohesion and the crippling state incapacity that is rooted in internal threats. Such deficits pose a serious threat to the core values of our independence and sovereignty. The phenomenon of our domestic instability has been elevated to the

developing society. The situation in the post-independence era and the specific law and order requirements arising out of continuing conflicts have, unfortunately, not permitted the full development of new traditions and attitudes.

While on the one hand, the police are expected to get closer to the people, they are repeatedly called upon, on the other, in their role as the agents of authority, to deal with violent agitations and disturbances of a wide variety. Challenges to authority are inherent in a pluralistic society. These are accentuated in a democratic polity and lead to agitations and disturbances. Additionally, there is the problem of the right use of authority by parties which

of national goals has resulted in rising expectations and aspirations among the masses. Any gap between the promise of constitutional ideals and the reality leads to strains and tensions which are mobilised for the "politics of agitation." There is no doubt that while these processes lead to the politicisation of the masses and the development among them of a greater awareness of their rights and of the methods of their achievement, they also intensify the ferment and lead to confrontations with authority. Those entrusted with the maintenance of stability in society thus often come into conflict with the forces generated by the political system which they are intended not only to serve but also to preserve. This makes the policeman's task both delicate and complex.

The police have admittedly a difficult role, and a role that they are often called upon to perform in the most provocative and trying circumstances. The police have always had to handle problems of law and order. What is new in the situation today is that many of the agitations have a claim to social legitimacy because they are undertaken in furtherance of goals which are recognised by the constitution. The police, therefore, are being cast in an anti-people role. Even so, the police have to maintain law and order and support the constitutional processes in society. Both in a negative as well as a positive sense the police have the obligation to defend and promote the normal legal and constitutional processes in the country. It is only through these that the desired social objectives can be achieved in a democratic society.

Bangladeshi society remaining afflicted with divisive tendencies is unable to come up with a consensus on major national issues. Most political discourses and deliberations, unfortunately, are not characterised by logic but by politicised emotion, and the principal differences have given rise to the tragic social divide. Social cohesion would be impossible in these conditions. Enforcement becomes a nightmare in such an atmosphere of opposing push and pulls. Sheer good luck and sudden good sense may prevent us from plunging into anarchy.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.



MAHABUB ALAM KHAN / DRINK NEWS

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rank of security threats.

From the foregoing, an apparently disappointing impression may be formed that Bangladesh is a politically unstable and weak state. Some may even say that we may have held democratic elections but we do not honour the rule of law and the rights of the citizens.

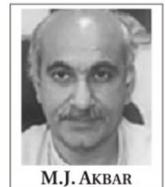
The role of the police in Bangladesh in a potentially confrontational and destabilising situation has to be viewed in the perspective of the historical process, the changes in the social situation, the values and aspirations of a

are in power.

There have been instances where governments have been accused of using the police machinery for political ends. There are also instances of individual politicians interfering with the administration and the work of the police. As may be expected in a society in transition, the norms which should govern the relationship between the party in power, the individual politician and the police have still to be developed.

In the political sphere, the enuncia-

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

IF it had been only another item on the continuing agenda of economic reform, the decision to permit foreign direct investment in

retail would have been taken at least two years ago. Dr. Manmohan Singh's government has been in its favour from the moment it was sworn in seven and a half years ago, but was thwarted by the Left, without whose support it could not have maintained a majority in the Lok Sabha during its first term. That is understandable. No sensible government risks its survival for the benefit of a multinational's bottom line. But 2009's general elections changed the arithmetic of the Lok Sabha dramatically, and with it the algebra of policy manoeuvres. However, the Left's decimation did not alter a basic fact: that opposition to retail FDI cuts across partisan lines. The government has majority support in a compliant cabinet, but not in the less obedient Lok Sabha. The coalition that governs India is now split, although not broken.

What prompted the prime minister and his Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to expose such fissures by pushing through a decision that could have remained dormant? Neither of them has any ideological commitment to adventure in governance. Both would rather live to fight another day than duel unto death over a policy-shift

that may have its merits, and certainly does not demand any trapeze swing immediately. They knew that support for FDI was fragile even among senior Congress leaders like Defence Minister A.K. Antony, who was at the top of the wobble list. As it so happened, Antony did wobble at the decisive cabinet meeting, but did not fall out of line.

Antony is not alone. A section of Congress believes that it is leftist by persuasion, and finds itself closer to the Marxist view on international retail chains. Even the broad pragmatic base

times more than a handful of seats would measure.

If the decision was meant to be a display of rejuvenation after more than a year of battering and injury, then Singh and Mukherjee should have ensured that the alliance remained intact through some persuasive pre-decision diplomacy with Mamata Banerjee in Bengal and Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu. Trinamool and DMK now have one leg inside government, and the other leg outside. It is an ungainly sight. Railway Minister Dinesh Trivedi

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of the party is wondering whether it is quite the right moment to alienate the influential local market, small-town vendor and supplier on the eve of an election as important as that of Uttar Pradesh. The change might impress those who are driving the Indian economy into the international matrix, but it makes no domestic political sense. If the Congress loses ten additional Assembly seats in UP because the shopkeeper has persuaded the mandi that foreigners will arrive with the capacity to eliminate those who make a living through the supply-and-purchase chain, then the psychological impact on Congress fortunes could be many

could not have confronted Pranab Mukherjee during this crucial cabinet meeting without permission from his leader in Kolkata. The DMK MP T.R. Baalu mocked the government claim that this would create employment, asserting that it would destroy jobs. Instead, the government has decided to confront its allies. Why?

There are paradoxical situations in politics when weakness can be a temporary asset. The Congress is probably convinced that neither Trinamool nor DMK is in a position to do anything more than make tactical noises. They dare not bring down the government because they have nothing to gain and

much to lose in a midterm poll. As partners, they will share the blame for rising prices and malfeasance. The electorate is not likely to praise them and punish the Congress alone. The paradox can be taken a step further. The Congress will become more vulnerable in the fourth year of this term, when allies could be tempted to choose a populist issue as the opportunity for fracture and consequent crumble.

But there is another possibility. Dr. Manmohan Singh and Pranab Mukherjee may have realised that the clock has begun to tick in the wrong direction, and that their period in power is winding down. A vociferous lobby within Congress, perhaps with support from Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, has been arguing that the only way that the party can face another election is under a new leader, and that leader can only be generation-next Rahul Gandhi. Since Rahul Gandhi would need some time to establish his credentials, the switch has to be by next summer. The assumption is that the older generation will perform their last service to the party by getting its candidate elected in the presidential elections, after which the new era can be formally launched.

Timing in politics is never determined by a single factor. But there is always a decisive factor. Two have been offered; take your pick. But get ready for 2012; there is lots of excitement ahead.

The writer is Editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 3

1959

The current flag of Singapore is adopted, six months after Singapore became self-governing within the British Empire.

1967

At Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa, a transplant team headed by Christiaan Barnard carries out the first heart transplant on a human.

1971

Indo-Pakistani War of 1971: Pakistan launches pre-emptive strike against India and a full scale war begins claiming hundreds of lives.

1984

Bhopal Disaster: A methyl isocyanate leak from a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, kills more than 3,800 people.

1989

Cold War: In a meeting off the coast of Malta, US President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev release statements indicating that the cold war between Nato and The Soviet Union may be coming to an end.