

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Keep the bull off the glasshouse

A WAMI League appears to be caught up in a delusion of grandeur. Call it a lingering spell cast over the party by the three-fourths parliamentary mandate it had

ascended to power with. Three years on, much of the ground has slipped from under its feet.

The downward slope of the ruling party has been reflected on its poor showings in three mayoral polls, Habiganj by-election and near trouncing by the BNP in the upazila and union parishad polls.

This found an echo in The Daily Star-designed survey recently conducted by Centre for Strategic Research. The public satisfaction level over the AL government's performance at the end of first 100 days was 62%; after a year it decreased to 53%; at the one-and-a-half-year point it fell to 36%; and now it is down to 33%.

Yet, the AL is unfazed, it puts up a brave face. Rather than reading any warning signal into the electoral defeats, the AL is gleefully passing these off as a justification for holding the national election under party government. They seem to overlook the fact that by-elections and local government polls are held by the party government anyway, whenever these are due.

On the issue of declining popularity the general feeling is that it's the outcome of a

deepening economic crisis rather than that of the opposition's agitation and demonstrations.

The opinion surveys clearly reveal an underlying important message, which is that both the ruling party and the opposition have failed to meet popular expectations. But because the government is the dispenser the disenchantment with its performance is naturally quite intense.

The covert and sometimes overt dissensions within the AL; its student wing BCL's unabated criminalities and ham-handed activities of some sections of AL leaders and workers are said to have bred resentment in people towards the ruling party.

Sometime ago, many people felt that with scurrilous remarks of AL leaders including the tongue lashing of the PM at the leader of the opposition (who too is no less acrid in her words), the AL didn't need any political opponent to bring it down in public esteem. The intensity of the diatribe is completely out of step with invitations to dialogue which cannot take place unless



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an environment conducive to talks is carefully nurtured.

All the prime minister's fire and vituperation are reserved for the opposition, so it seems. To some extent this is understandable given the sometimes tempestuous

nature of two-party power politics. But when consequences of a blunder or two committed by the government of the day are misread or underplayed a cycle of irreversible confrontation inevitably sets in.

That shouldn't mean the PM meting out a kid-glove treatment to her party men when manifestly they are bringing the ruling party to harm and corroding the very authority of the government and the state.

Did the prime minister ever sternly admonish the Chhatra League leaders after every wave of terrorisation the ruling party student wing has unleashed from time to time? The glory of 64th founding anniversary of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) was tainted by a broad brush of criminalities within the BCL across a large swathe of the country.

A female artiste was taken from Khulna to Satkhira to perform at the celebrative event of the BCL founding anniversary. The function over and as the darkness fell some BCL elements offered her a safe trip home. On the way, she was gang-raped by them.

After the incident, the Satkhira BCL unit was dissolved and the police have been ordered to take stern action against the rapists. Such has been routine responses handed by the government following such deviant incidents, so the scourge remains. As though that was not enough, Zubair, a final year student of English Department, Jahangirnagar University was beaten mercilessly, dumped in a hospital for hours, and then taken to another hospital where he died.

We now expect the prime minister to blare out to the factious degenerate BCL: "Listen, I disown you and refuse to sit down with you when your peers raped an artiste and killed a highly promising student who was at the doorstep of the bigger world."

Recall here the fact that the Awami League's victory in the last general election was scripted by the swing vote represented by the youth. And now it is another specimen of youth which seems set to unmake that victory.

So far as some ministers go their reputation has been an embarrassment to the government; yet it goes on ring-fencing them against unceremonious exit.

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Making citizen's charter effective

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As a tool of the new public management, Citizen's Charter (CC) has become popular around the world as a means of improving public service delivery. According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, the idea behind the introduction of CC, conceived in 1990s, aims at improving the quality of administrative performance, particularly at the point of contact where the public administration and the public meet.

Though CC was first introduced in the United Kingdom in 1991, its origin can be traced back to the Magna Carta 1215, a document that King John of England was forced to sign, and the People's Charter of 1838, a petition to the English Parliament asserting the rights of ordinary people. The progress of CC in UK set a milestone, and it was followed by a number of European as well as Southeast Asian countries.

In Bangladesh, the suggestion of introducing CC in public offices was first made by the Public Administration Reform Commission in 2000. It was also discussed in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). Subsequently, on May 8, 2007 the CC initiative was adopted by the then Caretaker Government (CG). It was declared by the CG that every ministry, division, wing and attached department would formulate and publish CC in their office premises and websites with the stated goal of providing the citizens with high quality service, and ensuring the ambit of transparency, responsiveness and accountability.

According to a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) report, approximately 80% of public offices in Bangladesh display the charters. While this is a big step forward as far as the citizen-friendly public services are concerned, it is also imperative to look at whether the introduction of CC has actually improved the state of service delivery.

There are several studies that focused on the impact of CC. A study on Upazila Land Office, conducted in 2010, showed that even after two years of its existence, CC has not made any substantial dent on the old bureaucratic service delivery mechanism. After reviewing some relevant literature and reports my own field study focusing on the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) reveals similar findings.

The key question asked during the study was whether the introduction of CC in the



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has a powerful message for the advocates of CC. A coercive or even a voluntary policy transfer may not always be compatible with the country's social and political culture, where the civil servants adhere to traditional and process-oriented administrative systems, leading to poor service delivery. Under such circumstances, CC can play very little role in ensuring better service to citizens.

This problem is faced not only by Upazila Land Office or DIP. The service quality might not have improved markedly following the introduction of CC in some other public offices also. Politics aside, the recent division of Dhaka City Corporation, for instance, on the ground of its inability to provide better services to its citizens is yet another example of poor public service delivery in the cities. Nevertheless, there are always some exceptions.

As a matter of fact, the experience in some Indian states concerning the implementation of CC is no different than that of Bangladesh. A comprehensive study on CC programme in India, that assessed 760 charters from across the country, showed that even after 14 years of its implementation, the CC programme has

not lived up to its promise yet. Amongst many factors, the study highlighted the major drawback -- the practice of promoting CC that demands significant changes in the behaviour and attitude of the agency and its staff towards citizens is lacking -- which hampers the progress of CC programme in India.

Since 1980s, as a "whim of fashion," the ideas of new public management have attracted governments throughout the world.

Many countries, especially the developing ones, in order to accelerate their reform initiatives, have started borrowing or transferring new techniques of administrative reform from developed countries on the assumption that "one size fits all."

However, in the policy transfer arena, it is argued that various forces could expedite or impede the "success" or "failure" of such policy transfer or reform initiative. Therefore, the question that arises at this stage is, how useful is it to mimic the recipe, like CC, which has been copied from the developed countries by a developing country like Bangladesh without analysing factors that could impede the utility of such initiative?

In this backdrop, it may be argued that while the concept of citizen's charter has been flaunted at random, very little has been done to realise the aspirations contained in the declaration. And that is so because in most instances the service seekers as well as ser-

vice providers are hardly aware of the values and principles of CC programme in Bangladesh. As a consequence, despite the CC displayed at their office premises or uploaded on their websites, the customers, particularly the socially and economically marginalised ones, are not getting the services within stipulated time from public offices as promised.

Maybe, as recommended in the case of India, the CC programme in Bangladesh too perhaps needs more time for internal restructuring of the service delivery chain. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the concerned to explore the issue further, particularly focusing on a number of factors: benchmarking the end-user feedback, holding the top level officials accountable and including the civil society in the process, *inter alia*. It is also imperative to enhance awareness amongst people who receive the services from public organisations regarding their right to get the advantage of citizen charter.

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Playing to the gallery of which side?

ALAMGIR KHAN

A LL the discussions about the Tipaimukh dam are about the advantages and disadvantages in building this dam across the Barak river. All the write-ups, except one, in the newspapers in Bangladesh argue against building of this dam by India. During his visit, Dr. Manmohan Singh assured the people of Bangladesh that India was not going to do anything that would harm the interests of this country. The present government had projected this as an assurance that India will not build the dam without the consent of the government of Bangladesh.

Prior to Manmohan's visit to Bangladesh, the AL government went gaga over the

Teesta water sharing treaty.

Soon after this, the pro-

AL people became

angry at Mamata

Banerjee for her

throwing the

possibility of sign-

ing the treaty into

the Teesta waters

by not accompa-

nying the Indian

PM on his "his-

toric visit" to

Bangladesh. This

act gave Sheikh Hasina the rare

strength of saying "no" to transit for

India. As Mamata took a stance as

the protector of the interests of her people,

so did our prime minister. But unfortu-

nately, our prime minister failed to

read the political thermometer that

showed the temperatute of our peo-

ple's minds. Maybe she could have, but

for Mr. Gowher Rizvi.

It was Mr. Gowher Rizvi who made

some people over-enthusiastic over the

equal sharing of Teesta's waters.

Sharing the waters half and half

between India and Bangladesh would

have been bad because international

rivers should be allowed to flow unin-

dered, not blocked by anyone, and

there are fifty-two other common rivers besides Teesta. Again, what about the Ganges Water Treaty? The eminent Indian columnist Praful Bidwai wrote in *The Daily Star* (September 21, 2011) that Farakka has "caused an annual loss estimated at 2.5% of GDP" for Bangladesh. He wrote: "This is equivalent to taking the entire Information Technology sector out of the Indian economy! Even worse was the human tragedy, including large-scale displacement, destitution and forced migration. Farakka became

a symbol of Indian domination."

Now that our government has failed to make the Indian government respect the opinion of the people of Bangladesh, the foreign affairs adviser to the prime minister has taken the job upon his shoulders of convincing the Bangladeshi people that there will be a lot of benefits for us if the Tipaimukh dam is built. Mr. Rizvi asserted in his write-up, "Pleading for rational and scientific discussion," in *The Daily Star* (December 13, 2011) that he "had spoken to many experts, environmental scientists, policy makers and politicians from all shades of opinion to understand the impact of the Tipaimukh project prior to traveling to Delhi." They helped him to understand the issues and they also raised some concerns. And he writes: "During our visit we met with the key decision makers in India, including the prime minister, and raised those concerns."

Mr. Rizvi's arguments for the proposed Tipaimukh dam are "facts and information" that he had "been able to gather" from the Indian government, including its top man. He has star-marked all this in his write-up in *The Daily Star*. He has not given the name of any person he had talked with in Bangladesh. It is clear from Mr. Rizvi's write-up that those unnamed experts also raised their concerns. But all the concerns were washed away whenever he sat at the discussion table with the Indian officials.

Mr. Rizvi appeals for a scientific study instead of mere politics of playing to the gallery. He seems to forget that he advises a person who is the foremost politician, and could not come to this rank if she were not good at playing to the crowd. His suggestion is: "With the assurances that we have received from the government of India and the access to the information that we have got, we should get on with scientific and scholarly studies."

Sorry, the government of India is political. And the name of only one "scientist" that we have learnt from this nice write-up by this Harvard-returned political scientist is

Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India.

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