

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Bull in the china shop ...



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

NOT even a week has passed since the prime minister beamed a certain geniality towards the opposition but here we are now pushed to the throes of a deeper uncertainty.

Surprising, yes; but not inexplicable. After the visits of three foreign dignitaries to Dhaka

recently a sobering wind has been blowing across the political terrain. But recall the wise words of James Herbert, a British author: "Never underestimate the hypocrisy of politicians."

The BNP thought the AL was on the back foot and vice versa. None emerged a gainer, none a winner. Both diminished with their mutual distrust of each other which couldn't be concealed to the foreign visitors. That keeps glaring on the debit side.

Sheikh Hasina had signaled only the other day that for a dialogue to be held on the caretaker issue, both parties needed to concede some ground. She then topped it up by saying that Hillary Clinton had pleased both herself and the opposition leader. In her characteristic enigmatic style, she, however, fell short of explaining what transpired between Hillary Clinton and both of them that she thought was so pleasing to them.

In this backdrop, sending 33 senior leaders of the opposition to jail on charges of torching vehicles and committing arson may have surprised many but not the weather-beaten. For, we have had the tradition of using police and judiciary as instruments of political expediency and power play.

Why did the AL-led Mahajote government suddenly turn so arbitrary and autocratic? A plausible explanation can be that the government's failure to find out Ilias Ali and solve the murder cases of Sagar-Runi along with other journalists, RMG labour leader Aminul and the Saudi diplomat has been too much of an embarrassment for the government, not to be seeking a diversion.

Government insiders, however, believe that the hardline approach to the opposition is a reflection of a new emphasis in the ruling party's strategic thinking. The AL probably perceives that dialogue needn't be an immediate concern, it can be timed at a nearer date to election. So, they have plenty of time to play with. They are up to weakening the opposition.

The opposition for their part thought that through their agitation programmes they would be gaining in strength and popularity by highlighting governance failures and high prices of essentials. They

were wrong in thinking the government would give them a free hand.

Like law, politics is taking its own course. Justice is

"blind," meaning it knows no fear or favour. Due process of law is a matter of principle to be scrupulously upheld in all circumstances.

When politics takes a unidirectional course it amounts to bulldozing the opposition. And when cases are grounded in politically motivated

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police-work, law enforcement agency has been used by a political government. The way the police presented 33 cases before the judiciary the latter had only to follow its procedures.

Following a divided HC verdict in two successive benches the cases were referred to a third bench of the High Court which asked the accused to surrender before the lower court. In the meanwhile, charge sheets had reached the Metropolitan Court. On hearing both sides, the honourable judge could either grant or

refuse bail. He opted for the latter on the ground that the cases before the Speedy Trial were non-bailable. However, an exception was made about BNP Joint Secretary Barrister Mahbubuddin Khokon. He was set on bail.

Bail is denied in cases where the accused might flee the grip of law but the 33 leaders are politicians of a certain stature and reputation and, therefore, they are hardly the persons who could have fled. Besides, could they have all torched vehicles or committed arson in a blanket fashion?

Now what is the remedy for the 33 detained politicians? After they receive the certificate of the Metropolitan Court verdict, their lawyers will move to the Sessions Judge's Court for bail of their clients. If the SJC refuses, they can take recourse to High Court and should the HC also decline then it will be for the Supreme Court Appellate Division to grant them bail.

It is understood that it may take 5 to 7 days for the detained leaders to complete the cycle of appeal and be set on bail.

But if the government thinks release of these leaders could ratchet up the level of political agitation then their predicament might be prolonged. Actually, it tests the government's intention as to whether it wants to keep the political temperature at a normal level and not shut off all avenues for a dialogue. Without talks there cannot be any political settlement of the contentious caretaker issue, participatory election and equally importantly, sustenance of economic growth and peaceful living.

We trust the judiciary will act in defence of democracy allowing the opposition to play its legitimate part.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

Effective local governance

ZAHURUL ALAM

PEOPLE'S welfare is the ultimate objective of democratic governance. Economic, socio-political, rights based, peace and conflict resolution policies and strategies at the national and international levels are futile unless they address the basic requirements of the people. Democratic governance at the national level should identify the most effective instruments and ways to attain that goal in a sustainable manner.

Strengthened democratic local governance, of which appropriately empowered local government institutions constitute an integral part, is a means to ensure effective service delivery through decentralisation and democratisation of the service delivery system. While decentralisation is transfer of resources, power and responsibility from central government to local government institutions, democratisation means enhanced accountability, responsiveness, transparency and participation.

Democratic local governance would definitely imply transfer of such power, resources and responsibilities to the democratically elected local government. More importantly, the democratic local governments should have sufficient autonomy to take decisions in all or majority of important local government issues. That is the key to the creation of optimal level of service delivery at the local level. People's participation in policy making and local planning is crucial for proper identification and assessment of local needs and cost effective strategies to address them. Responsive local governance addresses local issues in time, while accountability of the service providers and transparency of their work at all stages reduce time and resource leakages.

Thus, efficient local governance as a precondition for improved service delivery is directly linked to enhanced accountability of the service providers, transparency of their activities and greater participation of the major actors, including consumers, and to enhanced democratisation. Leadership of democratically elected people's representatives at the local levels is thus a prime prerequisite for efficient local governance.

However, in Bangladesh, where democratic local governance has been ignored for decades, rapid improvement of the service delivery system at the local level may not be attainable unless the scope of work of the newly formed local representatives (at the upazila level) is distinctly defined. Interference in local activities, although counterproductive and not desirable, will remain for some time since local developmental activities had been performed by bureaucrats and the MPs for long years as a substitute for democratic local government. There had been conflict of power between the upazila nirbahi officers and the upazila chairmen during Ershad regime, when the first local democratic institutions at the upazila level were formed. This diminished to some extent and a compromising solution was about to be achieved before the abolition of the upazila system overnight in 1992 by the then elected government.

A major contradiction now prevails surrounding the leadership tussle between the MPs and the locally elected representatives in developmental issues. This dilemma will cer-

tainly diminish with continuation of the local democratic system. We need to appreciate that democracy is refined through practice. Democracy in ancient Rome and Athens was not the same as it is now. Ancient democracy approved slavery and limited voting rights and ruling power to the aristocrats, which is inconceivable in modern democracy.

The ability of democracy to create a favourable environment for improved service delivery and living standards of the people through socio-political and economic stability remains an essential dimension of the governance and service delivery aspect. Flawed democracy, hybrid and authoritarian regimes lack above capacity and hence are unable to address basic community needs. Emerging democracies, on the other hand, inevitably contain residues of the authoritarian and colonial principles and hence they also fail to address the aspirations of the people.

Since democracy is refined through practice, it is time consuming, and more so if undemocratic forces capture state power and remain in the state-leadership for long time with ample scope to harm or destroy democratic institutions and undermine democracy. In fact, strong local government is fundamental to democratisation. Unconstitutional power

capture becomes difficult for undemocratic forces, while democratic norms and values are flourished and conceived appositely by the grassroots people, policy makers and implementers at all levels. History confirms that countries with democratic local governance can secure sustainable democracy and proceed with pro-people mandate more successfully than the others.

Lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of the public institutions continues to be the biggest deficiency of public administration in Bangladesh, leading to poor service delivery; violation of citizen, consumer and human rights; and increased corruption. Absence of effective democratic local governance due to long lasting non-democratic system delayed establishment of the democratic institutions at all levels. The local bodies were vigorously influenced by the military regimes.

Improved service delivery is one of the indicators of good governance, and is a must because the overwhelming majority of the people reside in rural areas. The experience of long lasting union councils/parishads shows that the UPs had never been in a position to impact substantially, neither on the developmental process nor on socio-political spheres. The resources that the UPs generate locally and the central allocations they get, coupled with the scope of the UP's work, do not permit those to get involved in an expected manner in the service delivery system. Considerable share of their resources are used for their own survival as institutions. Recent reestablishment of local government tier at the upazila level (and possibly at the district level subsequently), and strengthening of those democratically would certainly impact positively on the institutionalisation of democracy and on effectively enjoying the fruits of comprehensive service delivery network.

The writer is President, Governance and Rights Centre (GRC). E-mail: zalam111@yahoo.com

Sohel Taj sets good example

RASHIDUDDIN AHMAD

ON April 18, there was a news item on the front page of some newspapers, which, to my mind, could have been a banner headline item.

It was the news of Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj's resignation in June 2009, and his complaint that no gazette notification on his resignation was issued.

But the most surprising thing in a country like ours was that he asked why the government was still paying his salary and demanded that it take back the Tk.40 lakh deposited in his account as remuneration and allowances for the post (*The Daily Star, April 18*).

This news was extraordinary and unheard of in our country, where there are stories of exactly the opposite nature appearing in newspapers almost every day. I am a little surprised that so many noted authors, personalities and columnist, who regularly write big articles on so many subjects, didn't seem to take any note of this rare event and write about it. The item appeared in the wake of news of Tk.70 lakh taka being found in a car, but no one so far knows for sure where the money came from.

Coming back to Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj, my feeling is that his character is inherited from his father, the first prime minister of Bangladesh in the government in exile in Calcutta. Many people know about Tajuddin's character, and his frugal living in a small room. He even washed his own clothes -- being the prime minister of an emerging nation. It was due to his astute, dexterous maneuverability and careful planning and handling of the most difficult situations that Bangladesh finally emerged as a new free nation.

Even after returning to Dhaka he remained the prime minister until Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib returned. Then he became the finance minister but, because of his austerity and honesty, I believe he ran into trouble with World Bank because of conditions imposed by it. When he resigned as minister he phoned one of his friends, asking for his car and telling him that he was no more the minister so he could not use the office transport to go home. That is what Sohel Taj has inherited.

Some years ago one of my friends was walking along a street in Kolkata with his friend, when he noticed an elderly man with white hair wearing a khadder dhuti and punjabi walking on the pavement on the other side and everybody pass-

ing him was saluting him. He asked his friend who the gentleman was. The friend said: "You didn't recognise him? He is Jyoti Babu, the chief minister of West Bengal." My friend exclaimed: "He is walking down the street." The friend just said in a matter of fact way: "Oh probably his car didn't come so maybe he is walking to his office."

There is a story about Mahathir Mohammed and his heart operation when he was the incumbent prime minister. When his cardiologist told him that he needed heart surgery and that he should get it done in USA, Mahathir immediately asked: "Why? Don't our cardiac surgeons do such operations here? Does every Malaysian needing cardiac surgery go to USA for that?" His cardiologist mumbled: "No sir, not so, people in general do get their operations done here." The prime minister then got

his operation done in Malaysia. I was told by a Bangladeshi doctor who works in Malaysia that a Malaysian cardiac surgeon, who was then working in USA, was flown to Kuala Lumpur to perform the operation.

I was trained for my profession in Edinburgh from 1965 to 1970 and then worked for some more years in the mid-1970s. At that time the minister in charge of communication in Britain was the famous Tony Ben, who was supposed to succeed Harold Wilson as the Labour leader but couldn't because he was so far on the left that even his own friends used to call him a "Commy." Surprisingly, Tony Ben was the son of a big landlord of Bristol. The crux of this story is that when he was the minister in charge of communications (including roads and highways) he was driving a Jaguar sports car to his home the police stopped him for speeding. He stopped and apologised and paid the normal fine.

Why am I relating all these stories? It is because I feel deeply sad that we don't have people like them in our country. Another person very near to us, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, was one of them. Jyoti Babu, Mahathir Mohammed, Lee Kuan Yew changed their countries.

We need many more people like Tanjim Ahmad Sohel Taj. I haven't heard of anybody else who wanted to give back Tk.40 lakh to the government because he believed it did not belong to him.

The writer is Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Neurosurgery Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.