

BOTTOM LINE

Rahul Gandhi: Joining the cabinet?



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

IT is reported that on August 11, India's Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said that Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi's entry into the cabinet would be a welcome development. "When it happens you all will know. I have always maintained that I welcome Rahul's entry into the cabinet."

The move to ask Rahul Gandhi, politician and scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, to join the cabinet, is reportedly aimed at lifting the sagging popularity of the ruling Congress party.

In July, Rahul Gandhi indicated that he would take up a more hands-on role in the party and the government. "I will play a more proactive role. The decision has been taken, the timing is up to the leadership," he said at the time.

Rahul, who entered politics in 2004, is currently a Member of Parliament. Congress-led coalition, which has governed the country since 2004, has been grooming Gandhi to succeed his mother, Sonia Gandhi, as president of the party and a potential prime minister.

Uttar Pradesh has historical significance for the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty. During the past hundred years, six generations from the family have fought and won elections in Uttar Pradesh, with three of them ruling India as prime minister, including Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi.

He played a lead role in Congress's state election campaign in Uttar Pradesh in February, to capture enough votes to regain power. While Rahul campaigned for the Congress Party another young man, Akhilesh Yadav of Samajbadi Party, was also in the field. Samajbadi won majority of seats and Yadav became the

youngest chief minister of the largest state, while the Congress Party could only secure 28 of the 403 seats.

Analysts say that it proved that Rahul was not a "vote getter" as was expected and all the hard work put in by him did not translate into votes and seats when the local party organisation was weak and local Congress leadership was virtually non-existent in Uttar Pradesh.

One factor for defeat of the Congress party is reportedly the waning support of Muslims for the Congress in the state. Muslims were considered in the past as Congress's vote-bank. However, the decline of support to the Congress began when, in 1992, the Congress Rao government acted as a silent spectator

while the militant Hindus, with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), demolished the 464-year old Babri Mosque.

The Congress Party is going through a tough time politically. Corruption scandals tainted the Congress-led government. BJP demanded the resignation of the prime minister on coal allocation policy and obstructed parliamentary proceedings. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sounded the alarm about the functioning of the world's biggest democracy after parliament broke up on September 7 at the end of an almost entirely wasted legislative session.

Recently, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj openly stated that the Congress leadership has made huge sums of money in the allotments of coal, popularly known as

"Coalgate." It is a clever strategy of BJP to bring their allegations against the party instead of the government because any allegation against the prime minister would not be credible to the people.

The disruption in parliament came at a time when India's economy is badly faltering, with investors and business leaders looking for economic reforms from the government to restore confidence and spur economic

expansion. The economy grew just 6.5% in the fiscal year ended March 31. Foreign investment in the first six months of this year fell to \$16.5 billion, down 18% from the period last year, according to the Reserve Bank of India.

The World Economic Forum recently ranked India 106th in the world on global competitiveness, 30 places behind Russia and a staggering 80 places behind China.

Shekhar Gupta, editor of the *Indian Express*, an English-language daily, said. "In nearly eight years so far, the [Congress-led government] has completely changed the reformist mood to a dark, negative 'povertarian' discourse of the 1970s."

Observers say that at the time of crisis of the Congress Party, Rahul has not been seen to be active either in parliament or outside to re-energise the rank and file of the party and defend the Congress party against the BJP's allegations. Furthermore, his mother had gone to the US for a medical check-up and as a general secretary Rahul Gandhi should have

taken charge of the party.

Furthermore, political analysts say Rahul remains an enigma to the Indian people. Questions have been raised whether he has been pushed into politics, like his father. His thoughts on many major issues remain mostly unknown. Pratap Bhanu, President of Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, who has met Rahul, reportedly said: "What is Rahul's vision? It is not apparent to a lot of people what his political convictions are." Analysts say that Rahul Gandhi has to reveal more about himself to the people.

Some say his sister Priyanka is a more natural politician than he is. A recent poll commissioned by NDTV found that 65% of respondents who claimed to be Congress voters want Priyanka Gandhi to join active politics. She reminds a lot of people of her grandmother, Indira Gandhi.

Critics say that this is a time for Congress to take a deep breath and do some analysis of factors that affected its popularity. Some of them are beyond Congress control and some are of its own making. Inept handling of corruption scandals and the weak economy have adversely affected its popularity.

The government has to face election in 2014 and it is unclear whether the Congress can manage a coalition again to form the next government.

Observers, however, say that no one can be certain about the future of Congress and BJP in Indian politics as it depends on variable factors that change quite often. Furthermore, political power does not rest on the two major national parties. It is the regional parties that have a great influence as to which party will hold power in New Delhi in 2014.

The writer is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Dr. C.R. Abrar, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, and Executive Director, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), talks to Zaheen Zaema Khan and A.B.M Shamsud Doza of The Daily Star on the ongoing crisis in our manpower export sector.

'Our major limitation is that we remain dependent on unskilled workers'

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you evaluate our present manpower export situation?

CA: C.R. Abrar (CA): Sending workers abroad is a complex task. Workers are human beings, not inanimate commodities, and hence their protection issues need to be of primary concern in any policy planning. Although a number of policy initiatives have been undertaken to provide services to outbound migrant workers at home, we have not been able to look after our workforce with as much care in the countries of destination.

Overall the number of workers going abroad has remained steady, but there have been some changes in market composition. While we are still struggling to re-access the Saudi, Kuwaiti and the Malaysian labour markets, the news from the UAE is rather disappointing. Oman is turning out to be a country to which our workers are going in reasonably large numbers. With reconstruction opportunities looming if we get our policies right then Libya and Iraq can be big markets and so could be Qatar, which is hosting the next World Cup. In addition, there is a big potential in Eastern Europe and Africa.

The global demand for different types of workers is constantly changing and based on that we need to prepare our workforce. Our major limitation is that we remain dependent on unskilled workers.

TDS: It seems that there have been some changes in the recruiting policies of the Middle Eastern countries. What are the reasons behind these changes?

CA: Number one issue is with regard to their demographic balance. Many Gulf States are very cautious that people from a particular nationality or ethnic group are not present on their soil in large numbers. Bangladeshis constitute a major segment of the labour force in Saudi Arabia and UAE. That may be one of the factors that prompted the recent UAE decision to go slow on receiving Bangladeshi labour.

Second, limited scope for social dialogue in many receiving states lead disgruntled workers to vent their frustration in extra-legal ways. A few weeks ago, there were reports that in Al Ain, UAE, Bangladeshi workers had allegedly burnt some camps and torched a few buses. We do not know whether these reports are true, but these incidents could have contributed to the UAE government decision. The failure of Bangladeshi diplomatic missions to mediate and prevail on such situations further compounds the problems.

Third, there were reports of several thousand Bangladeshi passports going missing, and reportedly a consignment of those passports was detected at one of the UAE airports, upsetting the authorities there. The unfortunate fact is that we don't have bipartisan approach to this important sub-sector of our national economy. Some quarters claim that opposition campaign on the ongoing war crimes trials are impacting on our labour market. I have doubts if the Gulf States are that much interested in our domestic affairs. Their decisions are shaped by their own domestic compulsions. When BNP was in power, Bangladesh imprudently contested for the OIC secretary general's post, which upset the Malaysians and had an impact on our labour market. The bottom line is diplomacy is an important tool both for protection of our workers as well for securing market in the destination countries. We need to be deft in conducting it.

TDS: So, there is a sort of negative perception about Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East. Why so?

CA: Yes. Earlier Bangladeshis enjoyed the reputation of being very committed workers who could pick-up the local language and skills quickly and were diligent. But now in some countries they are presented as a rowdy group engaging in criminal activities. This can be explained in two ways. Many genuine workers with valid visas, passports and work permits become victims of misdeeds of their recruiters and kafeels (sponsors) and are left to fend for themselves. With massive debts on their shoulders they become easy prey to machinations of local criminal gangs. So instead of treating them as mere criminals, the authorities of the countries concerned should first look into what led those workers to engage in such activities and take appropriate action against their own nationals who initially inflict wrong on them.

In other instances local media, dominated by nationals of particular countries, disproportionately highlight the misdemeanours of Bangladeshi workers, underreporting those by their compatriots. This creates backlash against Bangladeshi workers. Even doctored video footages attributed to Bangladeshi workers were circulated in some cases. But so far there has been little effort to counter those moves. The government should have an effective press wing in important destination countries to counter negative coverage and highlight positive contributions of our workers.

TDS: What is your assessment of the government performance on the policy front?

CA: It is pleasing to note that the government continues to uphold the principles and spirit of the Overseas Employment Policy that was framed by its predecessor. It has also taken an initiative to frame a fresh law to replace the outdated Emigration Act of 1982. RMMRU is actively engaged in the process. The draft law takes into cognisance the 1990 UN Convention on Migrant Workers that the government had earlier ratified in response to civil society demands. The law creates the office of the Protector of Emigrants and gives affected persons power to file civil or criminal cases in any court of law, if government fails to file case within a stipulated period of time. It also proposes the renewing of licenses of recruiting agencies contingent upon their performance.

TDS: Our embassies, especially our labour attachés, are supposed to take care of our workers in foreign lands. So what are they doing?

CA: This is a very important issue. Firstly, it is difficult to look after the nationals who are under the jurisdiction of another country. To a large extent that can be addressed if bilateral agreements can be reached with those countries. But as things stand labour receiving countries do not want to commit their responsibilities under a legally binding arrangement. That weakens the protection structure of our workers.

We can offset some of their problems by having an effective presence in those countries with properly trained and committed personnel in labour wings. But most labour attaches are failing our workers. Our workers claim that the performance of our mission staff is worse than others missions of South Asia. Our workers have a lot of grievances against the labour attaches. There is a strong case for increased number of posts,

enhanced funding and proper training of the labour attaches. Anyone aspiring to serve in labour attachés office should have prior experience in dealing with migrant workers. Currently, they are deployed with rudimentary knowledge and learn on the job. This is unacceptable. There have to be appropriate training courses that labour attaches should undertake before they are posted. That should include orientation of national customs, legal structure and labour laws, language, international labour law and more importantly motivational components. In the Philippines persons meant to staff the labour attache's or welfare officer's post have to serve in the Philippines dealing with migrants for at least a year before they get overseas posting.

In three key posts -- Abu Dhabi, Oman and Iraq -- people from defence services are routinely stationed as labour attaches. The concerned ministry has no effective role in their selection process. Serving workers at the grassroots level is not something that they are trained to do. This is a serious anomaly and needs to be changed.

We have seen that under successive governments political considerations figured prominently in appointing heads of missions in some key labour receiving countries. All these need to change and it is about time that political leadership understands that good policies and dynamic leadership can go a long way in protecting our workers and securing markets in these countries.

TDS: The government decided to send people on their own. How do you look at that policy?

CA: I think the government took this decision to lower the cost of migration, but it needs to be thought through. There are people who have gone overseas through the BOESL but they have not always paid the amount that the government had stipulated. There have been problems in labour recruitment. It is true that the private sector has not been providing a fair deal to the workers and the cost of migration has increased phenomenally. But does that provide adequate rationale for the government to take over the responsibility of labour recruitment, particularly when rent seeking is the order of the day? One should not throw the baby with the bathwater. If there are problems with recruitment agencies then the government should shore up its regulatory authority and take actions against errant agencies. Also there is a strong case for providing incentives to the good agencies that are exploring new labour markets, sending workers to safe conditions and promoting skilled migration. Government should play an effective regulatory role and not deny the role of the private sector.

TDS: Our manpower export is almost totally of unskilled labour, but there is always high demand for skilled labour. What are the government's efforts in this regard? Also tell us about diversification of skills.

CA: The government approach to skills development is mainly defined in terms of the number of Technical Training Centres (TTC). But more important is the institutional capacity to offer types of courses. Many of the courses that are offered are not relevant for even local jobs, so TTC trainings need to be more demand-oriented. Instead of having more TTCs a few should be selected to offer trade courses at levels where there is

major demand internationally. Master trainers from overseas, including Thailand, Singapore and India, should be appointed to train the TTC trainers. There has to be targeted design and development of courses of TTC



Dr. C.R. Abrar

instead of enhancing only their physical capacity. Globally, there is a huge demand in the hospitality and tourism and health care sectors. So far we have not seen any concerted effort to tap these sectors. Instead, vested interest groups have put a bar on private institutions offering courses on health care services. Long ago there was some UNDP or ILO programme for tourism training centre but there has not been any investment since. Proper planning keeping in view global demand need to be made and here a major hurdle is inter-ministerial coordination. We have been trying to engage the government on these issues with little success, particularly in the nursing and hospitality sectors.

TDS: What are your suggestions to boost up this sector?

CA: There needs to be long term planning and that is why RMMRU has proposed that the government declare a decade of migration and develop strategies, long-term, mid-term and short-term to cover protection, service delivery, as well as skills development needs of the workers. It will also help identify the responsibilities of various stakeholders and ministries and scope to develop legal and institutional mechanisms.

The government should give due consideration to the concerned Parliamentary Standing Committee's endorsement of RMMRU's recommendation to develop a separate cadre service for those who deal with labour migrant issues. The government could encourage research to analyse trends and make projections of demands of workers in the foreseeable future in different trades under various scenarios.

There has to be improved inter-ministerial coordination. Often decisions of summit level are not followed up. For example, during the prime minister's visit to Saudi Arabia the Saudi King promised to allow akama transfer. Years have gone by without any delivery on the promise. Who is to be held responsible for this? The mindset of our policy makers needs to change.

They are too defensive and worry that if they talk about workers' rights then Bangladesh would lose its market. That is a wrong approach. Both bilaterally and multilaterally we should negotiate from a position of strength. In various forums Bangladesh should take the lead in exposing the role of rent seeking intermediaries at the destination countries that shore up migration cost, the negative impacts of the kafaala system on our workers, and the unlawful treatment that our workers are subjected to. Past examples from the Philippines and Indonesia have taught us that ultimately sending countries can gain better deal from the receiving countries if they stand firmly behind their workers.