

Cabinet reshuffle

Points to seriously ponder

FOR a long time we have been demanding cabinet changes in the face of non-performing, incompetent and disreputable conduct of some ministers. At long last comes a cabinet reshuffle; better late than never. Along with it we also have had another expansion of the cabinet. How worthy the new entrants will prove only time will tell.

Of the changes brought, the most significant one is the replacement of Sahara Khatun by Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir in the home ministry. Sahara's four years of handling the crucial ministry has been disastrous and has frequently spurred demand for her removal owing to a spiral of failures.

MK Alamgir comes to the post with huge administrative experience and reputation for hard work. But people would expect him to sort out a huge backlog of unsolved murder cases, disappearances, extra-judicial killings all topped up by a general sense of insecurity among citizens. He should know it only too well that police and Rab are the public face of the government. There is a serious issue of inappropriate conduct in their public dealings. Allegations are rife about their abuse of power and intimidating behaviour. At the same time there is the question of law enforcement agency's legitimate demands including those of salary, working conditions and enforced partisanship. We are looking to MK Alamgir to set an extraordinary example by giving a new direction and injecting professionalism into the police force.

We recall that the new home minister had been subjected to reported mistreatment and torture both during BNP's rule and the last CTG. We expect that he would not use his power and position to settle scores. If he did that, he wouldn't be serving his government at a time when it needs it.

Distribution of portfolios in a large part looks ill planned and arbitrary. Sahara Khatun taking charge of post was ok but telecommunications is an ill conceived choice. Telecommunications is one of the most dynamic and expanding of sectors that requires both a scientific mind and one that is open to new ideas. Her predecessor was a disaster.

Culture and information, though important, do not need two ministers. However, the separation of disaster and relief management from the food ministry is well-conceived. Similarly, the untangling of the railways from communications ministry is a step in the right direction. The former in its own right deserves to be an exclusive charge of a minister. We have doubt as to whether the new incumbent will prove equal to the task.

However, the taste of the pudding is in eating. So our final judgment will come later on the basis of their performance. What the government needs to be cautious of is its self-congratulatory mood. Its position that it has done nothing wrong so far is not a recipe for path correction, which it needs so desperately.

Enforced disappearances

Let wise counsel prevail

THE matter of enforced disappearances touches the vital issue of good governance in Bangladesh, insofar as it relates to security of individuals and rule of law. The issue was once again spotlighted at an advocacy meeting on accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, organised by local rights group Odhikar and Asian Federation against Enforced Disappearances.

The matter has not only ruffled the collective conscience of the people at large in the country it has also drawn some very harsh criticisms of the government from international human rights watchdogs. For any government, most of all those that claim to adhere to the rule of law and uphold the rights of individuals, the fact that 51 persons have gone missing, and have remained untraced only between 2011 and now, should have been a cause for concern. As per Odhikar it has documented 72 cases of enforced disappearances since 2009.

The situation has become even more awkward and sensitive because most of the disappearances have been linked to the law enforcing agencies, and most of them were allegedly picked up by RAB. And several of the untraced happen to be high profile persons linked to politics. The slow pace of investigation remains a worrisome issue.

We strongly echo our NHRC chief that the government must not display indifferent attitude on this matter. It remains the duty of the government to trace out the missing persons and resolve the mystery. We would also hope that the NHRC would be invested with adequate power and resources to institute probes on all matter of infringement of human rights. It is also our demand that the government accedes to the international convention on enforced disappearance. It is time too, we feel, that custodial torture and death in custody, as well as enforced disap-

A zero-sum game or what?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, our prime minister went out of her way and added four more ministers and three ministers of state to her cabinet. Of the four new full ministers, three belong to her party, while the remaining one comes from a party which is in coalition with her. With these appointments the number of ministers in Bangladesh stands at 51. This number includes eight advisers to the prime minister enjoying cabinet rank with all privileges but who have not been elected. One was expecting that she would be showing the door to the poorly performing ministers.

The question that is in the mind of every conscientious citizen, why did the prime minister induct four more full cabinet ministers with just over a year left before her term expires? Will their inclusion add weight or give a better image to her government? Do these politicians have any political clout that the prime minister could bring to bear in the forthcoming elections?

There are no clear cut answers to these questions. The Prime Minister has the right to appoint any politician who has returned in an election to be a member of the cabinet. But any leader will calculate the political gains or losses before a person is taken in the cabinet. The measure here is whether the cabinet member can help the prime minister achieve her political goals. It could be also that this person brings with him excellent credentials that enhance the image of the Government. It could also be that the person has previous experience and is a professional and his inclusion would bring positive changes in governance. By all measures, three of the Cabinet ministers inducted are rookies. Only the fourth, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir has previous experience as a minister. We shall not talk here about the state ministers.

Two things stand out for all to take note. The first is that the Prime Minister had earlier asked one of her senior most politicians Mr. Tofail Ahmed to join the Cabinet, who declined. When the press

accosted him he could only say that he was not mentally ready to join the Cabinet. He was being extremely diplomatic. In the past few months Tofail Ahmed had been critical of the Government's handling of various financial and political scandals that had brought the Awami League and the cabinet into disrepute. He is a political stalwart having served the prime minister during her last tenure. He is well respected within the party. The Prime Minister must have felt the necessity to have him close to her so that, as reported, he cannot involve himself in any activity that could be detrimental to her political interest. Tofail is especially spooked about the alleged corruption in the inner political coterie.

The other veteran politician who was approached to join the cabinet was the Workers' Party leader Rashed Khan Menon. Menon is distraught about his party's alliance with the Awami League. He knows that the various scandals could

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affect his party's future. So in response to the invitation he said that proper protocol was not observed while inviting him to join the Cabinet. It was the Cabinet Secretary who had telephoned him instead of the Prime Minister. Later the Prime Minister said this was a common practice and Menon has no reason to feel insulted. But the truth could be somewhere else. Menon must have calculated that by joining the government at this late stage, he would not be able to change things and the downward slide may continue. He must have weighed that by remaining in the coalition, but outside the Government, he would have a better chance to distance himself from the wrong doings, if push comes to shove, just before or even after the elections.

But what about another coalition partner who is the leader of the JSD (Inu), Mr Hasanul Haq Inu? He had also been critical of the government

and had publicly said that his party would not take any responsibility for the mistakes that the Awami League is making. But lo and behold, he joined the cabinet wearing a colourful body length scarf and was seen leaving Bangabhaban in a black government car flying the Bangladesh flag. So why did his conscience not stir and deter him from taking the oath? Was it his lifelong ambition to be a minister that prompted him to take the oath for the first time? Inu of course brings energy and political acumen into the cabinet. He can be counted on to fight alongside the prime minister when she has to face the political ire of the opposition parties over the issue of the Caretaker Government.

The remaining three full ministers are bureaucrat-turned politicians which includes the mercurial Mr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir. He was a minister in the first cabinet of the prime minister. He found himself

incarcerated when the prime minister completed her previous tenure. He has tasted fire and brimstone and could prove helpful to her in her political journey ahead. He has been given the sensitive Ministry of Home portfolio. He will definitely set the tone and style of containing opposition agitations in the near future. The other two ministers were former ambassadors with no political experience at the national level. They are well known in their electoral districts. About them we have to wait and see how the prime minister uses their talents. Mahmud Ali has been given Ministry of Relief and Mostafa Faruq, Ministry of Information Technology.

The other aspect that is to be noted is the reaction of the BNP, the main opposition party. They are having a ball. There is all round glee at the refusal of Tofail and Menon to join the cabinet. It has strengthened the BNP's argument that this government is unable to deliver on its prom-

ises and even some of its own men do not like what is happening. The BNP Secretary General commented that inducting persons in the cabinet now is like pushing 'antibiotics' to save the body politic of Awami League. To BNP, the exercise is futile as the additions in the cabinet are a zero-sum game.

Some analysts however say that the Prime Minister is gearing up for a serious political programme to counter BNP and their 18 party alliance. The opposition has put tremendous pressure on the government at the grassroots and she needs to tackle that before the upcoming elections. Even her major ally, former President Ershad, has openly declared that his party will part company with Awami League and go its own way in the next elections. His calculation is that if Awami League decides to go for elections without the BNP he is bound to become the leader of the main opposition party. In the event BNP joins the election, his Jatiya party will be able to win enough seats to be the deciding factor in the formation of the next government.

On a serious note, the Prime Minister should have first given Mr Suranjit Sen Gupta, the Minister without portfolio some responsibility before calling on others to join her cabinet. But she could not as he still has the opprobrium of a graft scandal. But then the Prime Minister should also have calculated the cost of maintaining 51 ministers from the national exchequer. India has 32 cabinet members while the US only 16. Britain does well with 21 members. Bangladesh cabinet has become quite unwieldy. Any image of the cabinet in session looks like a civil society seminar with collective decision making thrown to the winds.

It is not too late to downsize the cabinet. Let the non-performing and the poorly performing ministers go back to their constituencies to earn the support of the people. That will help the Prime Minister more. We must take note of what a sage once said, 'Finality is not the language of politics'.

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Mashiur's dilemma

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steering but shadowy role in Bangladesh-India relations, a subject of derision for his remark that asking India for transit fees will be uncivilized, seen by many as a counter to the influence of the finance minister, reputed to have the ears of the Prime Minister. He is increasingly seen to wield a lot of power but has no accountability as he is neither a member of parliament nor is he a political leader who has to answer to the press. He is shy, avoids publicity, and prefers, I think correctly, to attend book launches rather than seminars.

Mashiur never expected to be put in such a hot spot. The turn of events, however unexpected, has, and he will have to make a decision soon, in fact within the next couple of days. The question that he must ask himself is: Does he want to be remembered by posterity as the man who cost the country the Padma bridge, the man for whom his party could not fulfill an important election pledge, the man who put his personal interest above that of his government, his country and his people? Or as a man who vindicated his love for the country and sacrificed himself for a public good, without caring about what others thought.

Justice demands that a man be assumed innocent unless proven otherwise. Even though I know him very little I am not willing to believe that he could be implicated in corruption unless proven otherwise. And truly Mashiur has not been proven guilty of any wrongdoing. So

why then does the government of a sovereign country need to remove an advisor just to get an essential loan? The answer is simple. A government is a political institution whose raison d'être is to serve the interest of its people. It is not a court of law and does not pronounce on anyone's guilt. It takes political decision to serve the best interest of the country. And today the country is best served if we can build the Padma bridge, and as of now, the World Bank provides the cheapest loan and the most effective partnership along with ADB and Jica to do that, and Mashiur Rahman is standing as an obstacle to the government to fulfill that goal.

From the very outset our government fundamentally mistook the World Bank's (WB) request as a determination of guilt. Its position was that a "corruption conspiracy" has been unearthed and "credible evidence" has been handed over to our government which it wanted our law enforcement agencies to investigate and find the veracity of. It further demanded that some key figures be removed from positions of power so that they cannot influence the process of investigation.

Imagine that our government acted differently from the outset, that it welcomed the WB's findings, carried out a thorough investigation to everyone's satisfaction for we ourselves want unearthing of corruption if it has actually occurred and implemented whatever came out. If we are as clean as we claim then everyone's innocence would have been proven. And if we are not,

then isn't it better to get rid of the rotten eggs? It could have been a win-win situation for both the WB and Bangladesh.

But instead we made a prestige issue out of the case of Abul Hossain. We behaved as if removing him amounted to finding him guilty. Misplaced patriotism was suddenly brought into play as if any aspersion on Abul Hossain made for a slur on the nation itself. We took a simple case of the WB pointing to a "corruption conspiracy" and made it into a WB versus Bangladesh issue. We depicted it as an attempt to insult us, term us as a corrupt nation, denigrate our people and given our proclivity for discovering conspiracies around every corner, termed it as a conspiracy against our sovereignty.

Every so often reputable companies and renowned people, even government leaders, in the US, UK, France, Japan, etc., are found embroiled in corruption. Does it in anyway lower either the prestige or the reputation of the countries concerned? Did the case of 3G scam, where a sitting minister is now behind bars, lower India's prestige? On the contrary, it enhanced it by showing that the corrupt are punished. So why then are we turning a simple case of "corruption conspiracy", yet to be proven, into a national prestige issue? In fact by not vigorously investigating the so-called "credible evidence" we are giving an impression of a cover up, which is actually harming the image of the country as a place where corruption is not taken seriously.

Coming back to Mashiur's case we are again making a simple case of corruption investigation into one of "national self-esteem". Neither, in our view, is this a proof of his guilt. We repeat. It is simply a case of investigating possible corruption, during the conduct of which Mashiur has to be away from the position of power he now holds.

The recent case of the former German President Christian Wulff may help Mashiur Rahman make up his mind. On 17 February 2012, being accused of taking some bank loan at a lower rate than the prevailing one, he resigned saying "unproven accusation... has affected the trust and confidence in my ability to serve... and so it is no longer possible for me to continue as President...". Dignity and honour is not necessarily best protected by demanding proof. It is sometimes far better served by demanding public scrutiny instead, and removing oneself from power when that scrutiny is being done. This vindicates honour and integrity far more robustly.

Mashiur Rahman may choose to resign, announcing that he is doing so only to serve a national purpose, and while doing so demand both of the government and the World Bank to carry out the sternest and fastest possible investigation to clear his name. If he chooses not to, he will always be remembered as a man who stood between our people and their dream bridge, and suffer forever the lingering suspicion as to what a thorough investigation would have revealed.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 17

1939
World War II: The Soviet Union joins Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland during the Polish Defensive War of 1939.

1948
The Nizam of Hyderabad surrenders his sovereignty over the Hyderabad State and joins the Indian Union.

1970
Civil war breaks out in Jordan. King Hussein's army and Palestinian guerrillas engage in fierce fighting in major towns all over Jordan.

1974
Bangladesh, Grenada and Guinea-Bissau join the United Nations.