

Four years of Awami League government

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THE government recently completed four years of its five-year tenure. It is time to review its performance, particularly in governance, to see how far it has accomplished our hopes and aspirations. The World Bank defines governance as traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. I shall attempt an understanding of governance by way of some shared experiences and illustrations.

I often travel back and forth from Dhaka and Brahmanbaria. The ten mile highway from the district town to my village home has big potholes, further aggravated by occasional rerouting of traffic from Chittagong due to maintenance of Meghna bridge. Besides, the two small bridges have been in disrepair for over three years.

This is not an isolated instance but is typical of road conditions throughout Bangladesh. It is a shame that we could not build a few highways of reasonable standard even after forty years of independence. Dhaka city streets are bursting at the seams under pressure of burgeoning rise of cars. Everything is out of joint and dysfunctional. It is business as usual, a far cry from pre-election pledges of "change" for the better.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA,) which issues driving license and motor vehicles fitness certificate, is infested with corrupt employees, shoddy brokers and middlemen with political links. Communication Minister Obaidul

Qader's surprise visits, a welcome departure from practice, had some salutary impact, though. It is inconceivable that there is insufficient senior level supervisory staff in Mirpur BRTA. No wonder there is spiraling incidence of death in road accidents caused by non-qualified drivers. According to a recent study by Accident Research Centre of Buet, road accidents claim an average of 12,000 lives annually.

My brother's wife recently died of cancer. Doctors treating her in a hospital in Singapore asked my brother curiously if his wife worked in a chemical factory or if they lived near a chemical plant. My brother gave a vacant look as he did not have a clue to the answer. Later, it dawned on everybody that it must be the food adulterated by formalin and other chemicals and pesticides. Yet, we have enforcement and inspecting agencies to detect and punish the greedy profit-seeking businessmen who are carrying on such criminal activities. What is urgently needed is a strict Food and Drug Administration.

A visit to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, let alone upazilla health centres -- riddled by scarcity of doctors, medicines, emergency facilities, food and bed linen etc and scarred by trade union interference -- indicates the inadequacies and depth of decline in public health care facilities. What is the alternative? The vast poor multitudes do not have access to expensive private hospitals and clinics.

Campus violence in Dhaka,

Chittagong, Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar Universities by feuding Chhatra League, Chhatra Dal and Shibir student fronts, the recent reports of student and teacher unrest protesting against the politically appointed vice chancellors in Buet and Jahangirnagar University, the public uproar over profiteering in admission to city schools and the mushroom growth of private universities as commercial ventures by influential persons, are some cases of governance failure in the education sector.

The recent reports of epidemic of deceit, dissimulation and fraud by Sonali Bank, Hall-Mark and Destiny and share market scam

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involving thousands of crores of takas are blatant examples of failure of governance and financial discipline in the banking and financial sector. The appointment of bank directors on political consideration regardless of their merit and integrity is responsible for indiscipline in the banking sector. Foreign direct investment in the country is shy because of governance failure to provide adequate infrastructural facilities, gas and electricity and political stability.

This government, like its prede-

cessors, spent scarce foreign exchange with least care for austerity and financial discipline when the prime minister, during official foreign visits, was often accompanied by an entourage of more than hundred members. MPs have been given the privilege of duty free import of expensive motor vehicles. The size of the government, particularly the proliferation of advisers, considered by many as redundant, together with alleged corruption by cabinet ministers over graft and over forestalled Padma bridge construction contributed to public distrust of the credibility of the government.

Reports of police excesses

against the opposition at the behest of the government; extra-judicial killings and disappearances; the innocent boy, Limon shot, maimed and persecuted by the enforcement agency; brutal killing of Biswajit by Chhatra League cadres and governments denial of their involvement; rising incidence of social repression of women; garment workers, mostly female, burnt to ashes in garment factory fires without safety equipment and escape routes, the disenfranchisement of Grameen Bank shareholders, mostly women,

by government intervention; the recent attack on Buddhist monasteries in Ramu; grabbing of river beds and wetlands by influential persons; appointments of High Court judges, by all governments past and present, sometimes without adequate stress on their academic and judicial excellence and recent reports of clemency to some convicted killers, are some bizarre instances of governance failure to ensure accountability, human rights and dignity, protection of rule of law and administration of justice.

Our bureaucracy, supposed to provide the strong edifice and structure of good governance, is thoroughly demoralised and crippled under the grip of an agonising campaign of purge and political regimentation at the expense of seniority, merit and efficiency. It has lost all direction and purpose, and the will and capacity to perform. Institutional weaknesses of Local Government, Public Service Commission and Anti Corruption Commission raise questions about their autonomy and independence.

In democracies, governance failure is hotly debated and discussed in the Parliament. But here the Parliament is rendered dysfunctional because of confrontational politics and the opposition party's boycotting of parliament sessions. In a lackluster Parliament, we listen, ad nauseam, to a cacophony of self-praise by the ruling party. But democracy is not merely electing a government but a vibrant, practic-

ing and participatory Parliament in cooperation with the opposition.

Nevertheless, the redeeming feature is that our press, the watchdog of governance, is vocal, free, fair and fearless. The government's selective subscription of five newspapers is reminiscent of counterproductive reprimand in the past to punish the perceived offending dissidents.

Governance failure is a result of incompetence, corruption and politicisation in every layer of government activity and national life. However, the government can certainly claim appreciation for holding the ongoing trial of collaborators charged with war crimes against humanity by the International War Crimes Tribunal. Although some socio-economic achievements of the government are not insignificant, public perception is different. While dispensing governance, the government is unwittingly smearing its own image by what many describe as signs of authoritarianism characterised by arrogance of power and disdain of public opinion.

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Consolidate politics and democracy

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POLITICS in our society is vibrant because almost every thinking man and woman takes interest in politics, whether it involves the community, society or the nation. Our nation, since independence, has seen steady development of politics of many streams. There had been interruptions in the political development when it was stifled by coups d'etat.

Coup leaders in Bangladesh innovated their own brand of politics, which people repudiated when the opportunity appeared. They even agitated violently for restoration of democracy. Finally, democracy was restored in early '90s after nine years of "back seat" military rule in the garb of democracy, but political parties or party in power have not practiced democracy till date.

Formal democracy is characterised by regular elections, a competitive system of political parties, and a system of separation and checks and balances between different components of government. Anyone desiring to understand the process of democracy will have to take these elements into cognisance.

Transparency and accountability and the absence of partisanship will also have to be added, without which the democratic process loses its representativeness and legitimacy.

The performance of democratic governments between 1991 to-date does not bear the testimony of the trust reposed in the politicians. Our politicians futilely try to distort history and divided the nation into pro-liberation and anti-liberation forces, so that their poor performance does not come to the fore in the next election. Recently, money laundering and corruption have been increasing, which affects development.

Politics and good governance complement each other. If one fails, the other is doomed to failure. Some politicians have been trying more for their personal gains than for their constituents and that is why they depend more on their leader's charisma than their own ability to

win an election. Mutual trust between electors and elected, which is imperative, is decreasing as most of the time the latter have failed the former. The tendency to elicit favour from the leader by restoring to pampering leadership has been detrimental to the growth of healthy politics. The moral eclipse of the leadership has frustrated the people.

Initiating and implementing the structural, economic, social and political reforms necessary to institutionalise democracy have to be undertaken. Sustainable democracy needs capacity building within and among state institutions. The challenges pertaining to integration and enhancement can be overcome through exercise of political will and availability of resources from public-private partnership, and also that made available by external institutions. Civil society can facilitate gender equality and help in the

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building of inclusive structures of power in the production and distribution of goods and services, because we have problems of low absorption capacity, deep inequalities and developmental deficits.

Until the time politicians seek the people's welfare above everything we can not expect a quantum jump in the quality of our politics. Without doing them too much injustice, we may assume that the desire -- of many politicians -- to be elected takes precedence over policy preferences, ethical barriers and moral constraints. Politics in our country is dominated by strong personalities at the expense of substantive political dispensation. We must create a transparent political process with the help of civil society to pressure political parties to become more responsible to their constituencies. Politics requires prudence and judgement, which are what we need

in life. We must understand that politics is not just about what happens between elections, it is also very important to culture free exercise to choose leaders who would give priority to the interest of the constituents over their own.

Politics of the people should aim at feeding the hungry, clothing the unclothed and providing a roof for those that have the sky as their overhead cover; in other words, the welfare of the many who remain unseen, unheard and unsung, despite the sweat and blood with which they nourish the country and make it sustainable. Let politics be the domain of people who yearn to serve the people. If politics needs to grow for our sake then we must not allow the bad people to combine by pursuing the good people to associate with them lest we should fall one by one, a unities sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

The majority of politician flaunts their wealth, no matter that they owe banks crores of taka as overdue loans. Maybe it is true that we are ruled not by people who fought for our freedom but by those who have the most money. And it does not matter where the money came from. Shockingly, the weakening moral standard, politicisation of administration and ego of the politicians in total disregard of the people's welfare and need only increase arbitrary power of officials at different tiers of administration.

Institution building has to allow more equitable power relations, specially between different groups of citizens. Democracy has to follow the path of democratisation at all levels. The principle of responsiveness needs to range from the family to all state structures. This should apply uniformly within all institutions that affect political, economic

and social realms. The absence of participatory politics as well as governance encourages corruption and informal practices that bypass democratic dispensation. Failure to systematically participate will eventually affect economic growth and create insecurity. Poverty and social vulnerabilities cast a shadow on the expected meaningful governance.

As a result, even though people have the right to vote, they are unable to participate in the decision making process.

We have had local government elections, but the process of devolution of power from centralised state structures has still not been agreed upon. There needs to be consensus so that there can be institutional linkages between each tier of government. Without this there cannot be consolidation of democracy. Under the democratic system, the leaders should be politically and economically educated. The quality of leaders at upazila and national level is not up to the mark. To most of us politics is the elixir of life. If it is time-friendly, it will thrive to revive the hopes of the many hopeless people who long for the impetus to promote good politics.

Strengthening politics and democracy is complex and touches constitutions, electoral system, political parties, legislative arrangements, the judiciary, central and local government and formal and traditional government structures. Strengthening democratic perception require bolstering the developmental approach to politics and democracy. Consolidation of politics and democracy is the need of the hour for the welfare of the people as well as overall development. We need to build local capacity in secondary education by strengthening local universities and enhancing their academic capacity and their technical and political capacity in development planning. The existing governance can be made more functional and user-friendly so that the social benefits of better management can be apparent and accessible.

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We are all becoming phone-starers



HAVE you noticed them? Every big city you go to these days, you see people staring at mobile telephones.

They walk absently down the street, eyes glued to tiny screens. They walk off railway platforms, they stroll off cliffs, they die horrible

deaths, or, worse still, they bump into me.

I have a newspaper cutting about a 17-year-old woman in Seattle who was so absorbed in her phone that she didn't notice the approach of a train that ran her over. There's a woman I see on the way to work whose eyes never leave her phone. I realised it was only a matter of time before she walked into a hole in the road. For weeks, I seriously considered getting up early and digging a hole in the road myself, just so I could watch my prophecy come true.

Why have I been sneering at these people? I could see why they would want to escape from the dullness of commuting, but staring at phones seemed so naff. Phone entertainment stinks. I've checked it out. Even on fancy 3G services, you get tiny, fuzzy images, childish games and over-priced sports clips.

And then, one dark day, something happened that changed my mind for ever.

I was on a business trip as usual, jumping from plane to plane, when I found myself running late for a connection. There was no time to stop at the airport bookshop. I made it through the departure gate a fraction of a second before it closed. It was like Indiana Jones rolling under that descending stone door, except the airport was more primitive and the journey more dangerous.

Boarding the plane and finding my seat, I sat back and breathed a sigh of relief. Then I noticed how ancient the aircraft was. There were no magazines. In fact, there were no pockets in the seats at all. There were no television screens. There was no newspaper rack in the cabin. There were no books in my bag. I didn't have a pen or paper, so couldn't do any work.

I suddenly realised that I was going to be stuck in a seat with no entertainment except my own thoughts for several hours. I found this utterly terrifying. (And so would you, if you had a brain like mine.)

When that flight was over, I was a shivering wreck and had to be helped off by attendants.

The next day, I asked commuters on the bus to teach me how to download interesting stuff onto my phone. They showed me a service at www.mobipocket.com which has loads of top bestsellers. I even found, at www.ebooks.com, downloadable versions of my own books! Good grief. I was a next-gen hi-tech writer without even realising it myself.

Now I have this huge great library of books on my phone. It's amazing. You switch it on, and the gadget goes straight to the page you were on. It remembers your favourite type size. It remembers your reading speed and scrolls the text at that speed. You don't even need to turn the pages, which was a tiresome chore I always deeply resented.

Last week I read Deep Storm, a novel so gripping that I was glued to my phone screen all the way to work.

And that's why I fell into a hole in the road.

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