

Reforming police

Recommendations gather dust

THE urgency of police reform has again come to the fore. Particularly, the agenda of raising the state organ's professionalism has been a long felt need to be attended to.

The issue of police reform is supposed to have been on the agenda since the Draft Police Ordinance was promulgated in 2007. Except laying occasional emphasis on the matter by different quarters, including some government leaders, no concrete step has so far been taken to do away with the colonial era Police Act of 1861 that still runs the police.

At a discussion held recently, speakers again echoed the predominant view about making this law and order organ of the government into a people-oriented force. It was pointed out how successive governments have turned police into a partisan tool of the powers that be. Gradually, it has also become an instrument of oppression, at the hands of the party in power.

Small wonder, local and international human rights groups have been voicing repeated concerns about excesses being committed in the human rights domain. This is unfortunate for the police of an independent nation run by a democratically elected government.

It is not understandable why dust has been gathering on the issue of police reform. With a few months left in office, the incumbent government that came into office with a massive popular mandate can ill afford to ignore the issue and leave it unaddressed.

A plenty of recommendations for reform are on the table. This is high time they are made use of.

Nimtoli's woes linger

Relocation of chemical stores a far cry!

THREE years down the line, we are perplexed and horrified to see that authorities have taken few steps to stop a recurrence of the deadly fire that engulfed Nimtoli area of old Dhaka. It claimed 123 lives and injured more than 200 others. The storage of combustible chemicals continues to be within the premises of residential buildings dotted all over Nimtoli that serves as a wholesale market for chemicals in the city.

No wonder, why human life is so cheap in Bangladesh. The appeal by chemical traders to the government effectively stopped mobile courts from doing what they are supposed to do, raiding storage depots that were deemed unsafe. So much time has passed, yet no relocation has taken place and no government initiative is apparent in this direction. The failure of authorities to allot land in Sonakandi, Keraniganj since 2011 is in part to blame for this situation. Notorious bureaucratic red tape has helped to slow down the process to a snail's pace and people of Nimtoli are once again sitting on a powder keg.

With little by way of relocation, residents of the locality go to bed at night not knowing what lies in store for them. The chemical business at Nimtoli and adjoining areas are rampant because no trader has been taken to task for the fire three years ago. Unless authorities start to consider loss of human life unacceptable, such irresponsible behaviour is set to continue.



Legislation to end parliament boycott

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE issue needs serious consideration by the lawmakers. Indeed it has become more than a culture to abstain from the parliament. And there is need to ensure that this abhorrent practice is brought to end immediately. It is odious to fail the trust of the electorate, and those who are elected to represent their constituency in the parliament are in a way abdicating their responsibility and shunning their duty towards the people. This makes a mockery of the parliament and democracy.

Abstaining from the parliament cannot be a political tool. Yet this is what the country has come to see both the parties use it as, since democracy was restored in the country in 1991. And here one must differentiate between a walkout and indefinite absence from the House. The former is a perfectly legitimate practice to register protest. But one has not come across instances of abstention from the parliament for such a great length of time on political grounds anywhere else. Surely, this cannot be a democratic right.

One should not overlook the fact the parliamentarians are also paid employees, of the people, bound by their obligation to attend the house, of the people. And one cannot expect to get paid for not 'attending office.' Yet the boycotting members of the parliament over the last 22 years have been drawing their perks and pay without discharging their obligations to the people fully.

But if the parliament has been badly served by the absence of the opposition, who attended only 54 out of the 370 sittings in the 9th Parliament, equally unacceptable is the quorum crisis due the absence of the treasury bench members. One fails to understand why this should happen when the AL led alliance have more than 300 seats in the parliament.

There is merit in the suggestion, made by the TIB recently, to reduce the permissible period of absence from 90 days to 30. We would hope that the two major parties will come together to address this issue.

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The pains of the presidency

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

What is critically important here is that in January 1975, the presidency went through a revival in terms of political power. Through the Fourth Amendment to the constitution, politics became presidential and an already all-powerful Bangabandhu took over as president.

THE nation's presidency is once more in the public domain. In recent times, it became a matter of renewed interest with the death of President Zillur Rahman and his subsequent replacement by Abdul Hamid. The election of President Hamid was absolutely in line with the constitution, as are so many other things in this otherwise flawed democracy of ours.

But constitutionalism is not what we speak of today. We choose to dwell on the presidency again because General Hussein Muhammed Ershad has informed us that if an election is called for the presidency, with him and Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia as aspirants for the office, he will win hands down. Not even the combined strength of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party can defeat him should a presidential election, based on adult franchise, be held.

The former military ruler may be right. Or he may not be. But what he does is give all our memories a jog about the tortuous, serpentine ways the presidency has travelled down the years since the liberation of Bangladesh. Begin with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was named the country's president by the provisional Mujibnagar government in April 1971. But since he was a prisoner of Pakistan at the time, it fell to Syed Nazrul Islam to serve as acting president during the entire course of the war. In January 1972, when Bangabandhu came back home from Pakistan, there was somewhat the expectation that he would either adopt a Gandhi-like role, meaning he would not seek or accept any office; or that he would continue to be president, leaving governance in the hands of Tajuddin Ahmed.

Bangabandhu did neither. Two days after his return, he took full

presidential office. And into that ceremonial office stepped Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury. A respected academic, Chowdhury began well. Along the way, however, disillusion set in. And by the end of 1973, President Chowdhury resigned, to be replaced swiftly by Mohammadullah, the speaker of parliament. Early in August 1975, Justice Chowdhury came back into the limelight when he joined Bangabandhu's government as minister without portfolio. That was on August 8. Soon after the coup of August 15, he took over as foreign minister in the usurper Moshtaque's government.

Having served as president, Justice Chowdhury ought not to have agreed to be a minister. But that is beside the point. What is critically important here is that in January 1975, the presidency went through a revival in terms of political power. Through the Fourth Amendment to the constitution, politics became presidential and an already all-powerful Bangabandhu took over as president. Cabinet government went out of circulation. Over the next many years, it would be a powerful presidency overseeing the nation's fortunes, with mixed results.

The presidency has had its dark moments. Through a brazen violation of the constitution, Commerce Minister Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed seized power and proclaimed himself president once Bangabandhu had been assassinated. For good measure, Vice President Syed Nazrul Islam was placed under arrest together with three of his colleagues. The blood-drenched Moshtaque presidency was replaced by a seemingly moral one, in the person of Supreme Court Chief Justice ASM Sayem. Once General Khaled Musharraf had ousted Moshtaque and his killer majors and colonels on November 3, 1975, he had Sayem

charge of the government as prime minister. Tajuddin Ahmed had little choice other than agreeing to be his finance minister. Bangladesh opted for a cabinet form of government, which meant a dilution of the powers of the

take over as president. The Taher-Zia counter-coup the next morning pulled the country back into darkness, but it left Sayem untouched. With Zia becoming the strongman of the new regime, Sayem now became nominal chief martial law administrator as well. The ambitious Zia could hardly wait to take over the presidency, a job he accomplished in April 1977 when he 'persuaded' Sayem to turn over the office to him. And so it was that a la Ayub Khan in 1958, Zia became Bangladesh's president. He remained in office till his life was brought to an end in May 1981. If Zia was a powerful occupant of Bangabavhan, his successor Abdus Sattar was a symbol of ineffectual leadership. Within five months of his election as head of state, he was put out to pasture by General Ershad who, clearly wanting to be seen as a man without unbridled ambition, placed Justice Ahsanuddin Chowdhury in the presidency. But since ambition is a fire that rages and leaps ever higher if it is not satisfied, Ershad by the end of 1983 predictably showed Ahsanuddin Chowdhury the door before taking over the job himself.

Bangladesh's presidential history suggests a mix of the good and the bad, with big patches of the ordinary. President Abdur Rahman Biswas, contrary to popular perceptions of him, moved swiftly and bravely to check the advance, literally, of his army chief and therefore helped the country to go ahead with an election in 1996. That courage went missing in President Iajuddin Ahmed, whose unashamed loyalty to the party that elected him led the country to near disaster in late 2006-early 2007. President AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury simply caved in when his party pounced on him over his attempted neutrality as head of state. He resigned when he could have waged an epic battle with the ruling party over the place of the presidency in the life of the nation. President Mohammadullah remains a rare example of a politician whose career comes close to being an economic graph: he moved from being a law-maker to deputy speaker to speaker to president to minister to vice president to lawmaker.

Ershad would like to be president one more time. Suddenly you are reminded of Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Turkey's authoritarian turn

SEYLA BENHABIB

THE huge demonstrations that engulfed Istanbul over the weekend were initially prompted by a small grievance: the government's decision to build a shopping mall and a replica of Ottoman military barracks in an old, much beloved park where I played as a child. The impending destruction of Gezi Park and Taksim Square, an important civic space with beautiful water fountains and flower stands, has touched a nerve because it seems an effort to erase the face of the old, majestic Istanbul, which has largely disappeared in recent years in favor of shallow, gaudy, stupefied consumerism.

But the protests are not just about protecting urban greenery; they reflect a much deeper resistance to the political path being taken by Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his increasingly Islamist Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish initials, AKP. Erdogan was re-elected for a third term in 2011 and he has used the mandate to pursue an authoritarian agenda that many see as an assault on the secular republic that emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

In the weeks preceding the Taksim demonstrations, tempers were already flaring around new curbs on serving alcohol in public places passed hastily by the AKP -- dominated Parliament but not yet signed into law. The real problem, in a country where alcoholism is minimal, is Erdogan's "culture war" against the country's secular classes and the illiberal form of democracy that he is advancing. I've heard many Turks, both devout and non-observant, say: "If consuming alcohol is a sin, let me reckon with my own maker. The government cannot force us not to sin."

Erdogan's attempt to forge a Muslim moral majority is evident also in his government's stance on abortion, which, until recently, had prompted no theological or political controversies. Islam, like Judaism, gives priority to the mother's life and health over that of the fetus, but Erdogan, borrowing a page from America's Christian right, has introduced legislation to curb the availability of abortion through Turkey's national health insurance system. And he has compounded such measures, which would hurt poor women more than the wealthy, with nationalistic calls to increase the population of the great Turkish nation by recommending that all women have at least three children.

This moral micromanagement of people's private lives comes amid an increasingly strident government assault on political and civil liberties. Turkey's record on journalistic and artistic freedoms is abysmal; rights of assembly and protest are also increasingly restricted.

The highest political stakes involve a proposed transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Erdogan's model would give a newly empowered presi-

dent the prerogative to dissolve the legislative assembly. Coupled with other reforms of Turkey's Constitutional Court, Erdogan's proposal portends the most extensive refashioning of the political system since the establishment of the secular republic in 1923. If a constitutional referendum is approved and Erdogan is elected the new president next year, Turkey could find itself with an authoritarian, charismatic presidential system resembling Russia's or Venezuela's much more than that of the United States or France, where a strict separation of powers defines and limits the president's authority.

Erdogan is playing shrewdly with the prospects of peace with the country's Kurdish separatists by seeking to conclude a three-decade-old war by co-opting them into his presidential vision. The legislative wing of the militant Kurdish movement has become a junior member of the parliamentary committee on constitutional reform, giving

Erdogan the numbers he needs to eviscerate Turkey's parliamentary system. It is widely believed that he has promised the imprisoned Kurdish militant leader Abdullah Ocalan some regional and cultural autonomy in return for this support.

For Turkish progressives who have supported some form of Kurdish autonomy for decades, it is bitterly ironic to see their old allies becoming pawns on Erdogan's chessboard as he seeks to fulfill his presidential ambitions.

Not all of the proposed reforms are objectionable. The 1982 Constitution, which remains in force, still bears marks from a military coup, and Erdogan's proposals would rightly establish a more representative Constitutional Court, not dominated by the old secular elite. What is irritating and bewildering to most Turks is the speed with which both good and bad reforms are being undertaken.

This power grab has struck chords of alarm and anger deep enough to suggest that Erdogan may have miscalculated his strength. Some factions of his own party oppose him. Even President Abdullah Gul has urged moderation in response to the demonstrators.

The people who have now taken to the streets all over the country represent a new majority of observant and non-observant Muslim Turks, as well as some Kurds who had supported Mr. Erdogan's government because it seemed tolerant, pluralistic and cosmopolitan. But a new opposition, not only secularist and nationalist, is stirring. So far Erdogan has arrogantly dismissed his critics. If he continues to ignore their voices, the danger is that Turkey will descend further into violence and see its much-trumpeted experiment in Islamic democracy fail.

The writer, a professor of political science and philosophy at Yale, is a senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Restore CTG

Prime minister Sheikh Hasina is constantly reminding us that under the supervision of her government, city corporation, municipal and many other elections were held in which lots of BNP candidates have won. So there is no need to restore the caretaker government to hold the next general election, she argued.

We have become tired of hearing this. How could the general election be compared with local government elections?

If she is willing to control the unrest, she must immediately reinstate the caretaker government system and save the country from further catastrophe.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

SMS nuisance

SMS is a good way of communication. But frequent SMSs sent to the subscribers by mobile companies for product advertisement are irritating. Sometimes the SMSs carry objectionable contents. Delhi High Court has already warned the companies not to bother the customers. Would the authorities here take note of Delhi court order?

Abdullah al Mujahid
Lecturer in English
Qadiriabad Cantonment Sapper College
Natore

Save coastal embankments

Every year the severity of cyclone and tidal surges is increasing. Coastal embankments are not strong enough to stop saline water intrusion. Saline water is coming inside the embankments. Agricultural production is low due to saline water intrusion. Production of poultry, livestock and fresh water fishes has also decreased. People are suffering from various water-borne diseases, and there is scarcity of safe drinking water. On the other hand, some politically and economically influential people are cutting the embankments for shrimp cultivation, which has added fuel to the flame. I request the government to take necessary steps against those who make money at the cost of other people's distress.

M. A. Kashem
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Safety measures at garment units

Garment industry has been mushrooming. But the workers who toil from dawn to dusk to keep this industry thriving and the economy growing are largely ignored. They earn a meagre amount with which they can hardly make both ends meet. Despite repeated remonstrations held by them, the owners of the garment industry have not taken any step.

The man-made catastrophe at Rana Plaza and the conflagration at Tazreen garments have exposed the horrendous working condition of the labourers. Recently, the international buyers of renowned brands cancelled their orders to import from Bangladesh. Now our nouveau riche garment owners must swallow the bitter pill as they cannot evade the buyers' demands to take safety measures.

Md. Nahid Iftekhar
Muradpur, Chittagong

Comments on news report, "JS boycotted, not the money," published on June 3, 2013

Ash C.

However, these 'practices' by most of the parliamentarians -- particularly those in the opposition, have been going on for a long time. But the money wasted, as reported by TIB, appears to be a drop in the ocean compared to the Tk.96, 000 crores of share market scam, thousands of crores of Hall-Mark-Sonali Bank, Destiny, Quick Rental scam, etc.

Vikram Khan

Of course, this is extremely shameful waste of public money and public trust. But what about the costs of incompetent and bad governance?

Dev Saha

Pay without work! This should be stopped for the sake of decency.

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"Of an unholy race" (June 03, 2013)

Md. Shahjahan

Monarchy should be removed from the two major parties.

Paulette93

Why are we blaming the opposition? Our flawed system of democracy ensures that our prime minister is the judge, jury and executioner. There is no point of BNP embarrassing themselves acting like policy dialogue is going to affect any decisions, because at the end of the day AL will do what they like.

Anonymous

AL or BNP, whoever is in the opposition at whatever time, should stop this unethical practice. It is nothing but waste of public money.