

## MPs interfering in local bodies

### Some change should be in sight

COMPLAINING to the prime minister that lawmakers are interfering in their work, Zila parishad administrators have demanded that they cease to be advisers to district bodies. Those MPs are said to be causing to divert a major chunk of the district's development fund to their own pet projects. It is worthwhile to note that Upazila Parishad chairmen have also been making similar complaints against local MPs since long.

This is very unfortunate. Far from lending a stronger hand towards each other in the greater interest of the development of the district or upazila, MPs and elected local government leaders are at loggerheads over utilisation of resources. Evidently, the conflict of interest between the district council administrators and the lawmakers has been hampering normal functioning of these important local government bodies.

The story is not different at the upazila down to the union council levels. Everywhere the local lawmakers have been a thorn in the side of the local government bodies. The upazila parishads are in an even worse situation, as the finance of the local government body is controlled by the government official, UNO, and not the public representative of the Upazila chairman.

If the elected representatives of the local government bodies are rendered powerless in this manner at every level, then what is left of devolution of authority?

The dissipation of the local bodies during the last four and a half years cannot be rolled back overnight. But at least some semblance of workability can be infused into the system.

## Extortionist policemen!

### An impediment to business

IT is shameful to hear of allegations that a section of the police is engaged in extortion at the outskirts of the city. There is little to be said when local traders are forced to part with perishable items such as meat and fish for free by the very law enforcers entrusted with the task of maintaining safety and order. That police officials in charge of the local police camp at Amin Bazar reportedly blackmailed traders into submission with the threat of implicating them in false cases reeks of gross misuse of authority.

Faced with a closure of this crucial highway by angered traders, the reaction of police authorities to defuse the situation is equally disappointing in that no serious attempt has been made to bring errant policemen to book. Although law enforcers are prohibited from discharging duty while in plain clothes, allegations have been levelled against select officers for arresting people and traders who manage to get "bail" upon payment of cash as demanded or run the risk of being falsely implicated in various cases.

Despite the police force's claim of innocence in any such extortion practice, the facts speak of a situation to the contrary. In the aftermath of this public outburst, police authorities have promised to investigate the matter thoroughly. Unfortunately such incidents have been occurring on a regular basis and there is no denying that certain elements of the police force are indeed engaged in extortion. And as such "investigations" never seem to get anywhere, public confidence in law enforcement will continue to plummet.

## Syrian war talk: Reaction to chemical attack

EDITORIAL

THE war talk emanating from various Western capitals regarding Syria may result in a dangerous escalation of an already bloody conflict. The US is mulling military action against Damascus in reaction to an alleged chemical attack last week, while the UK and France have said the UN could be bypassed in order to allow armed intervention. Washington also says Syria's decision to allow UN inspectors to probe the reported attack has come "too late." While international opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime blame the strongman for the alleged atrocity, Damascus says the Syrian rebels are responsible. Many in the international community are not keen to launch another pointless war: Russia and Iran have forcefully condemned the war talk while China has called for a "cautious" approach.

What is clear is that any war, whether it involves Western/Nato boots on the ground -- not likely in Syria's case -- or aerial bombardment, will only worsen the situation. While there are reports that US intelligence agencies have "very little doubt" the Assad regime orchestrated the chemical attack, this must be taken with a grain of salt. The devastation of Iraq is testimony to the folly of launching wars on the basis of questionable intelligence. Besides, if Mr. Assad falls because of Western intervention, who will fill the power vacuum? The list of candidates -- from hardened Islamist militants to the more secular yet hapless rebels -- is not very appealing and the US military's top brass has admitted as much. As for the chemical attack itself, it must be condemned no matter who perpetrated it. The UN team of inspectors investigating the incident must be allowed to do its job while global players must realise that going to war after bypassing the world body will have disastrous results. The fog of war often obfuscates the truth; that is the reason why irresponsible talk of aggression on the basis of unverified intelligence should not be used to push Syria further into chaos.

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# For a Sixth Republic . . .

## GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

achievements, which achievements were again undermined by a wobbly administration coupled with the multifaceted efforts of its enemies to run it down. The result was a state of emergency imposed in December 1973.

The Third Republic was extremely brief, seeing that it covered the period of the hapless Baksal system between January and August 1975. You could go into a whole lot of academic debate on whether the Fourth Amendment which brought the system into place should have been there at all. There was supreme irony in the fact that those who had inaugurated a cabinet form of government in early 1972 moved, in a mere three years, towards a wholesale change in the nature of the republic.

The Fourth Republic, roughly speaking, stretched from August 15, 1975, to December 6, 1990. It happened to be the darkest period in Bangladesh's history, seeing that within its time span the entire Liberation leadership was eliminated through conspiracy. This republic threw up such unsavoury realities as the Moshtaque cabal, the Zia and Ershad dictatorships, the strutting around of assassins, the coups and counter-coups, the formation of political parties in the cantonment, the rise and rehabilitation of the 1971 collaborators and a wholesale overturning of the principles of the War of Liberation.

The Fifth Republic commenced through the general election of February 1991, the expectation being that finally the country was on its way back to a proper, functioning and therefore stable democracy. But that hope has turned out to be a non-starter, with politics becoming increasingly entrenched in the hands of a leadership, in both major parties, that has refused to promote or encourage the growth of a new generation of leaders. Politicians have dwindled in number, their old places in a dysfunctional parliament taken over by businessmen and superannuated civil and military bureaucrats. Corruption has eaten away at the vitals of society. The nation has turned increasingly tribalised.

Which is why the Fifth Republic will not work, much though civil society and the international community might want it to. Which is why a Sixth Republic now becomes necessary. And what ought to be the underlying principles or characteristics of such a republic? Here is a general view of what might go into a making of the system, in the belief that the new republic will be in a position to do what the earlier republics have failed to: it will purposefully push the country into stability, in much the same way that Charles de Gaulle inaugurated a new France through

A Sixth Republic is what we need in Bangladesh today. And what have been the five earlier republics? Before we go into answering the question at length, let it be said without ambiguity that, save for the First Republic, which was the nine-month Mujibnagar period, none of the republics have worked to popular satisfaction. Here's showing you how:

The Second Republic, which covered the period from January 12, 1972, to January 25, 1975, was buffeted by crises both within and without. It had its

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his Fifth Republic in 1958.

First, the electoral system in Bangladesh will call for radical change, through doing away with the first-past-the-post system and replacing it with proportional representation. That will effectively mean electing political parties rather than personalities to parliament and apportioning seats on the basis of the totality of votes gained by the parties. And parliament could transform itself into a two-chamber structure, the better to ensure consensus in the making and implementation of legislation and executive policy-making.

For a Sixth Republic to yield results, the powers of the presidency will need to increase to a point where the president will be in a position to exercise authority in such areas as foreign affairs and defence. Let the president be elected by direct adult franchise, in the way parliament is elected through a free exercise of the popular right to vote. The prime minister, in this republic, will exercise authority without the arrogance that has come attached to the office since 1991.

The rules governing attendance in parliament by lawmakers will be tightened, to a point where a period of absence exceeding ten days without a credible explanation will lead to the parliamentary seat being declared vacant. By extension, in this instance as also in others, the Election Commission will have its power unchallenged by individuals and other institutions. And why not have the chief election commissioner and commissioners chosen for office through thorough parliamentary scrutiny conducted by both ruling and opposition lawmakers? Presidential appointments to the higher judiciary, in order to ensure maximum public satisfaction, must undergo full and absolute scrutiny by parliament before the appointments are ratified.

In a Sixth Republic, devolution of power to the local bodies will be of essence. Such devolution will not only mean a responsibility on the part of elected local authorities to administer villages, unions, upazilas, et cetera, but will also serve as much needed preparation for future leadership. The law will ensure regular and transparent elections within the parties as a way of ensuring a dynamic party system in the country.

Parliamentary deliberations in the Sixth Republic will freely and openly debate all issues of national significance, with its various committees empowered to call individuals, including the prime minister, to hearings that may be necessitated in the public interest. In the event of a conflict on policy between the president and parliament, a referendum on the issue in question will be arranged by the Election Commission.

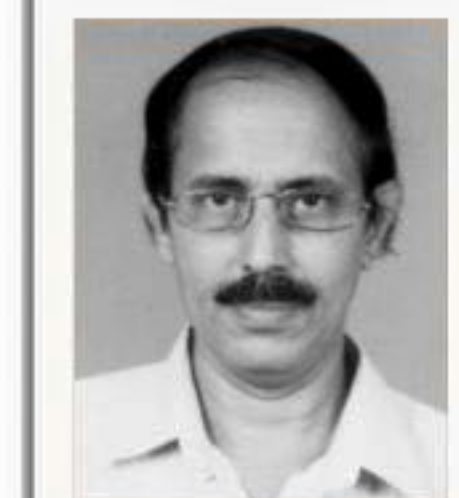
Finally, the Sixth Republic will function on the lines of the principles enunciated in the nation's proclamation of independence in 1971. The secular, Bengali nature of the constitution and the republic will be guaranteed in perpetuity, with all ethnic and religious denominations privy to equality in every area of social, economic, cultural and political activity.

Thoughts, simply thoughts. And yet perhaps we could mull on them, given that our experience with governance in its tried and tested forms has not quite enthused us about their efficacy?

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## Embattled JU VCs

### KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE four days' nightmare at the Jahangirnagar University (JU) is over at least for the next ten days. Vice Chancellor Professor Anwar Hossain, who was kept shut in his office from August 21 till August 24 by his agitating colleagues, has been freed from confinement, thanks to the assurance of Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid that the allegations against the VC would be looked into by a probe body.

But what had been happening since August 21 until the JU VC could breathe the air of freedom is appalling. To think that the vice-chancellor of a university was not allowed to go out of his chamber after office hours, meet his family members, or take rest in his house for four consecutive days! And the state of his confinement could have been prolonged had not the education minister intervened. What was the VC's fault? Did he commit any serious offence that his colleagues decided to punish him in this manner? No, but it was a method of agitation to force the VC to resign as they have a bagful of allegations against him and demands to realise.

A very strange and cruel way to treat the head of one of the highest seats of learning of the country by one's fellow teachers! One would not be surprised if it was the work of some unruly outsiders with no respect for the sanctity of a university campus. But no, it was done by persons recognised and revered by common people for their learning.

This is not meant to say that teachers cannot have their complaints and demands and they should not fight for those. Fight they must, but what is important here is the method they choose to voice their resentment. But their style of agitation should be like that of teachers. A line was necessary, to be drawn between their method of protest and that pursued by workers in a mill or an agitated mob on the street. Such difference was conspicuous by its absence in the case of JU teachers' agitation.

There were many civilised options of protest before the teachers. They could have given vent to their anger or disapproval by expressing no confidence in the VC by sending a letter signed by them to the president and chancellor of the universities. They could also make a copy available to the media. That would have been like the teachers of a university. Finally, they could make a representation before the chancellor. They actually made a similar kind of move by sending a delegation to the education minister but by that time the waters were already muddied.

Teachers' Association (JUTA) demanded the then-VC Professor Shariff Enamul Kabir's resignation. His faults were many, including highhandedness in running administration supported by pro-government student body. The prime minister's intervention in the matter notwithstanding, the situation continued to worsen. Within days of his resignation, Prof. Anwar Hossain was appointed VC on July 17, 2012. Nothing changed during his tenure. Now he is also facing a situation similar to his predecessor.

JU teachers have suspended the movement following education minister's assurance. They said they reposed all their trust in the minister. So far so good. But did they not also put their faith in the prime minister's assurance during their agitation against the former VC? And what will they do at the end of the 15-day pause in their movement and nothing comes out of the probe? Will the unrest begin all over again? And can they assure that there will be no further anti-VC agitation, if the incumbent VC is also forced to resign?



The government cannot wash its hands of the continued instability and violence. It must end the practice of politically appointing vice chancellors. For in every case of such appointment, the VC after joining office begins to concentrate more on making his political boss happy than restoring the academic environment and campus discipline. The university teachers' main concern then becomes getting rid of the VC through tough movements.

It appears that the main job of JU teachers now is not to impart lessons to their students in the classrooms, but remain forever engaged in a battle to remove one VC after another. They must get out of this vicious circle and work to remove the causes through which political appointment of VCs take place, for example, by violating the Jahangirnagar University Act 1973 as it happened in the case of previous VC Prof. Shariff Enamul Kabir, or by chancellor's selection from a VC panel that is not fully representative of the university teachers. In the latter case, they need to ensure that the panel sent to the chancellor to choose a VC from is duly voted by the majority members of a full senate. To that end, they will have to make the senate fully functional and proactive.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Syndrome of denial or deification

I wanted to wait until after the remembrances of the national mourning day to write this, so as not to be insensitive to the genuine feelings of sadness and outrage that the mayhem of August 15, 1975 rightly engenders amongst many. Information minister Inu correctly asks that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's legacy be freed from his partisan cage so that the entire nation can celebrate his life and ideals.

We besmirched history for two decades after 1975 by almost denying the very existence of the man but for whom there would possibly be no independence. We do no better, however, by deifying a great man whose flaws are evident to all but those with ideological blinders. Sheikh Mujib's legacy is secure in the Republic he created and we do his greatness no favour by whitewashing his strangulation of democracy with BAKSAL. The legacies of great men need neither denial nor deification.

Esam Sohail  
Kansas, USA

### Hazrat Omar (RA) and today's Muslim rulers

The Muslims all over the world know about Hazrat Omar (RA) who used to go out at night in disguise to get to know about the condition of his countrymen. The other day, Al Jazeera was showing the Prime Minister of Norway, Jens Stoltenberg, driving a taxi cab in disguise. As soon as a customer got into the taxi, the PM in disguise began a conversation with the passenger after exchanging formal greetings and soon got to know the opinion of the people. Most of the passengers who got into the taxi failed to recognise him and some said he looked like their prime minister. Immediately, I thought, this gentleman must have known or heard about Hazrat Omar and how he used to check upon the condition of his countrymen.

It is an irony that there is not one single ruler in the entire Muslim world who has followed the footsteps of Hazrat Omar. On the contrary, they are found to be amassing wealth by means of exploitation.

Saleh Mohammad Ayub  
Houston, Texas, USA

### Beggars a menace

Begging has become an intolerable problem in Dhaka. As soon as you take out your wallet to pay a fruit or vegetable seller at the roadside shops or stop at a traffic signal, you will be mobbed by beggars. Begging is a very profitable business. Beggars would rather beg than work even if they possess good health. Foreigners are also their victims and this is a matter of great embarrassment. Our government promised us that they would rehabilitate the beggars. What happened to that promise? Furthermore, Islam does not encourage begging.

Aminur Rahim  
New DOHS, Mohakhali

### Urea in puffed rice

Puffed rice is a very popular food item in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. It is consumed by people of all ages. Some traders mix urea to make rice white and puffy. Still some good quality puffed rice is produced in villages of our country. But these are lost in the crowd of the colourful bags of urea-mixed puffed rice produced by big traders. The authorities concerned should take action against these culprits in the interest of public health.

Shafkat Rahman  
BIAM Laboratory School, Dhaka

### Comments on news report, "UN for dialogue to end crisis," published on August 24, 2013

Nantu  
Apparently Khaleda is not interested to take part in the election under Hasina's leadership. So Hasina has to keep crying that she cannot go outside the constitution. This sacred document should only reflect people's will. Unfortunately AL is not bothered about people's will. They only consider their own will.

Molla A. Latif  
The UN Secy. Gen. has just wasted his valuable time. He has concerns for our people but those who must have concerns don't care at all.

Ash C.  
We're all keeping our fingers crossed!

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"Where's final report?"  
(August 26, 2013)

Nds  
Perfect example of mishandling a genuine problem. Dr. Yunus definitely made the Grameen Bank his personal fiefdom and a convenient spring board to promote his personal agenda. It was overdue to get the bank free from his clutch, but the government's foolish procedures have muddled everything and made Yunus a renewed hero by default.

Shahin Huq  
The government has made a mess!

SM  
What a joke!