

Public administration in dire straits

Reform imperative

THE government has again gone for another spate of promotion of senior level bureaucrats, despite its being already hobbled by excessive promotions given over the past five years more on considerations of loyalty than on merit, efficiency and performance. This has completed the cycle of politics making deep inroad into the administration.

The upshot of the promotion spree at the top echelons has reached such proportions that we have now three to four times more officials in the administration than are mentioned in the organogram. And this has caused to upset the ideal and time-tested pyramidal structure of the administration.

But giving politics the upper hand at the expense of merit, efficiency, performance and seniority, the civil bureaucracy has grown top heavy. And since it is not merit, but loyalty to the party in power that determines one's future in the job, the immediate casualty is the morale of the public servants in general. Small wonder, far from being infused with dynamism, they have been losing zeal and initiative for work. The administrative chain of command breaking, a tectonic jolt has been given to the whole administration's level of competence.

The government must stop the rot that has already set in. To that end, the imperative is to revive and implement the proposed public servants law to regulate the bureaucracy. It is worthwhile to note that recommendations made in the proposed law stress merit and performance from recruitment to posting to promotion in the public service.

Conservative prediction

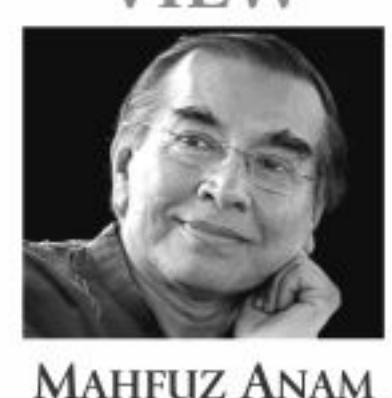
on GDP

Host of problems need to be addressed

THE World Bank (WB) in its Global Economic Prospects published on January 14 portrays a rather gloomy outlook for the country's development. Whereas the government has projected the GDP growth rate to be around the 7 per cent mark, WB puts it at a much more conservative 5.7 per cent. The organisation is of the opinion that Bangladesh is suffering from an image crisis due to unrest in the garments sector and sustained volatile politics has not helped matters particularly. This holds a message for both the ruling party and the principal opposition party, BNP. Any repeat of the political violence over the preceding months will debilitate the economy from chalking up at least 6-7 per cent growth rate that is prescribed to attain middle income status by the year 2021.

It is hardly surprising that the report has been less than generous towards Bangladesh's economic outlook. Political movement against the government has already cost the economy 50 working days adversely affecting both industry and transportation. The uncertainties arising out of a dubious election process has created fresh fears for more instability rather than any respite. We concede that the lion's share in the political violence is attributed to the BNP led 18-party alliance. But the ruling party cannot say that it has had no part in it. It is imperative that the two largest parties in the country realise the primacy of the economy in today's world and tailor their policies to that overarching reality of

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

THE party that has always been known to depend solely on people's power for all its activities since birth in 1949 has brutally, ruthlessly and according to plan used state power to 'hijack' the just concluded election and deny people their right to vote just to ensure its

stay in power.

What was dubbed as an election was engineered, its results bulldozed and the so-called victory that emanated from it was predetermined as evidenced by the fact that a majority of seats -- 153 out of 300 -- were already 'won' before a single vote was cast. If this is not predetermined, then what? Then again, formation of a new government, which is the central purpose of any national election, happened without the voters playing any part in the process as results of majority seats were determined without voters. In the truest sense voters for 153 seats were disenfranchised.

If in a democracy, as Abraham Lincoln would have us believe, that a government is "of the people, by the people and for the people", then the government that emerged after 5th January's so-called election is neither "of the people" nor "by the people." Whether it becomes one "for the people" is for the future to tell.

Events relating to the election reminded us of a joke from the Soviet era in which party Secretary-General Brezhnev calls an emergency meeting of the politburo and says: "Comrades, the proletarian republic faces a grave and unprecedented crisis, probably a conspiracy of the US imperialists. Our next year's elections results have been stolen."

Well, our election results were not stolen but the whole election was, and a so-called public verdict was extracted without the public participating in the process.

Whatever else she might have done, Sheikh Hasina surely did not strengthen democracy by holding the January 5th election, which is what she has always claimed to be struggling for. Under the guise of constitutional continuity she forced an election that officially had only 39% voter turnout for only 147 seats, signifying a drastic fall from last election's 87% turnout for 300 seats.

The credibility of the official figure is under severe doubt as the daylong coverage by both the print and electronic media proves beyond doubt that turn-out could not have been above 15%-20%.

The biggest loss from the January 5th election is perhaps the destruction of public confidence, built over the last two decades, that every five years voters will have a chance to express their views freely and without intimidation and that there was no force that could prevent them from doing so.

That confidence stands totally shattered and the contrary view stands proven, if proof was ever necessary, that given the nature of our two biggest political

parties, free and fair election is not possible under a party government, be it AL or BNP.

We feel compelled to ask a fundamental constitutional question as to whether or not the January 5th election has given birth to a "one person state". We do so not so much as a criticism but more as a friend of democracy to alert our Prime Minister of the enormous power she has now accumulated in her hands and the consequent danger she runs of falling into the trap that Lord Acton had justly warned us of: "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

A modern state is supposed to have three pillars -- executive, legislative and judiciary. Today, Sheikh Hasina unquestionably and effectively controls two. As is our practice the PM traditionally and totally controls the executive branch.

As for the legislative branch, the PM as the leader of the House normally has a lot of influence. However, the new development after the latest election is that even the opposition is now a handmaiden of the PM, with part of it being in the cabinet and other part in the opposition (first time in our history). We all know how the leader of the opposition came into being and how the so-called opposition is bargaining with the ruling party for more ministerial berths. Under these circumstances the Leader of the House is likely to have full control of the legislative branch.

That leaves only the judiciary, on which traditionally the executive branch always had enormous influence through the appointment process of the judges. With the highest respect for our higher judiciary one cannot escape the reality of the executive branch's enormous influence.

Thus we now have a state structure that has no check upon the government and especially the Prime Minister's powers. As experience has shown from governments the world over, the key to good governance lies in effective distribution of power between the various 'pillars' of a modern state. Governments are kept under effective monitoring and oversight by the legislative branch and on occasions by the judiciary. Where there has been too much concentration of power of one branch of the state over the other disastrous consequences occurred in the whole process of governance. Without a 'check and balance' of power our governance process is likely to degenerate even further.

In normal circumstances a party getting a two-thirds majority in the House has always led to disastrous consequences. South Asia is rich in such history which is popularly known as the "Curse of Two-Third Majority". With three-fourths majority, a handpicked and henpecked opposition and the emergence of a leader with unchecked power and no institution that can hold her accountable, the risks of Lord Acton's warnings coming true loom large.

Let it be on record that we rang the first warning bell.

The writer is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.

When every individual is a minority

CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSEN

THIS nation was still reeling under the burden of conscience after the concept of majority was taken for a ride in a disputed election. On the heels of it came depraved attacks on a minority population when miscreants descended on Hindu villages and ransacked their homes. They threatened men and women who had voted for

their party of choice, their atrocities culminating in the rape of two women and death of one elderly man. One doesn't have to be a wizard to connect the dots. A minority cannot have peace when the majority is restless.

American philosopher Ayn Rand explained why that's true. She said that the smallest minority on earth is the individual and those who deny individual rights cannot claim to be defenders of minorities. If we look at the reality in our country, it's divided into many minorities. Women are a minority, children are a minority and so are the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Christians. The tribal people are minorities as well. Compared to the ruling party, the opposition is a minority in the parliament.

So the minority isn't restricted to the sphere of religion alone. Neither is it restricted to the number of people. By definition a minority is the smaller in number of two groups forming a whole. But there're minorities within the majority in this country. The rich are a minority in relation to the poor. We have more illiterate people than educated. There are more farmers than industrial workers. There are more people than politicians.

This gives us the contrast, which also gives the contradiction. Not all minorities are persecuted by the majorities. In some cases it happens the other way around. A few thousand wealthy people exploit millions of destitutes. A handful of factory owners control thousands of workers. A few hundred politicians hold the fate of teeming millions in their hands.

Only abiding example of the majority dominating the minority is mob rule. That's when the number overpowers norms as a disorderly crowd finds its strength in force. More organised groups find force in their strength. The rich have strength of money, which give them the force to exercise control over the larger society. The politicians find strength in their offices, the holy men in the devotion of followers, and the law-enforcement bodies in their regimentation and

weapons.

What about the ordinary people broken down to the individual level? Where does the individual find his strength? Where does he in his individual capacity find the courage to face the world? What is his weapon that protects him from exploitation and aggression? Who guards his life and property?

The answer, known to all, is good governance and rule of law. This is where democracy plays the pivotal role. People are supposed to find strength in the power to choose their own government. When people are denied that fundamental right, deprivations trickle down. A farmer's land is taken by the more powerful while he runs in futility from court to court. Inflation eats up the savings of the middle class. Market manipulators swindle small investors in the stock market. Lecherous men molest wives and daughters of others while justice remains as elusive as shifting sands.

It boils down to a simple question. If the individual is persecuted in a society, where does one draw the line between the majority and the minority? American science fiction writer Robert Anson Heinlein has defined that sin lies only in hurting others unnecessarily. One may not agree with the other half of Heinlein's observation that all other sins are invented nonsense.

It doesn't matter how we divide the whole. Whether it's done along religious, political, gender, economic or any other line, the business of hurting each other is our main problem. The garments workers who were roasted alive at Tazreen Fashion or crushed to death under the rubble of Rana Plaza were victims of this hurting business. So were the victims of petrol bombs who ended up in hospitals as percentage riddles embodied by their degree of burns. The persecution of religious minority only comes as an aggravated extension of that barbaric insanity.

In fact, it's not a matter of minority and majority. It's rather the matter of predatory nature that constrains the strong to hunt the weak. Tigers terrify dogs, dogs daunt cats, and cats chase rats. This chain of animal cruelty also runs its course in the human space.

Human heart is a seething pit of this deadly compulsion, and it has its occasional eruptions. Those eruptions choose their targets, prejudices of the time igniting the fuse to trigger the explosion. Religious intolerance doesn't rise from piety but from the vexing vapours of godless intentions. The majority is the number of minority in this country where every individual lives in the tyranny of others.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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EC's realisation

From the very beginning, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad has been disappointing us with his actions. The election was not inclusive, voter turnout was very low, but the EC said that more than 40% votes were cast, which is totally unacceptable. Now suddenly he seems to have come out of his slumber, and on January 11, 2014 he asked the police and other law enforcing agencies to get tough against 'trouble makers' and open fire if necessary to ensure 'smooth re-polling in eight constituencies' on January 16.

We learned that the EC in a letter asked the government to take all actions necessary to prevent further attacks on minorities and immediately bring those involved in the recent attacks to book. We slate the attacks on the minorities, but do we know why were they attacked? The percentage of votes cast suggests that they were attacked for not going to the polling booths, and due to the rivalry between two candidates of the same constituency.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Politics of 'merger' and 'acquisition'

'Merger' and 'acquisition' are two words that have become very popular in the global business. The term 'merger' means when two similar business companies agree to work together for mutual benefits, while 'acquisition' means when a larger and cash-rich company purchases a smaller and potential company for their own mutual benefits.

We can see the same thing in case of our politics when several small parties like Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Workers Party, Jatiya Party (Monju), etc., merged with Awami League. Besides, when negotiation failed between the Jatiya Party (Ershad) and Awami League, just before the 10th parliamentary election, the Awami League acquired Jatiya Party by purchasing its big shareholders' share namely Rowshan Ershad, Ruhul Amin Hawlader, Anisul Islam Mahmud, Kazi Farook Rashid, for their common benefits.

We know in business large and powerful companies always grab small and potential companies for enhancing their power and dominance in the market. I am very much worried that in near future there might be only one large political party in the country, because politics means business here.

Tanim Iqbal
Mohammadpur
Dhaka

Sri Lanka war crimes probe

This refers to the report, "US seeks probe into S. Lanka war crimes" (Jan.13). The US should first be willing to be probed for war crimes in Iraq, and other nations. When the US invaded Iraq, the US government claimed that Iraq had nuclear weapons, and it was a threat to the world peace. After the war ended, and the Iraq ruler Saddam Hussein was executed by a Kangaroo court, the US government admitted that Iraq did not have nuclear weapons. Before the US invasion, there was no civil war in Iraq, but now that country is facing civil war problems. After the decimation of the LTTE, Sri Lanka is peaceful. The US itself has declared the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. The US is a global cop, and it's talking of a probe for war crimes in Sri Lanka is a pressure tactic, to tell Sri Lanka not to lean towards China. China is reported to be helping Sri Lanka, by supplying its defence requirements, and is also keen to set up a naval base in Sri Lanka.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Mumbai, India

Comments on news report, "Chinese boost for new govt," published on January 14, 2014

Sharukh Khan

Good: China means business. The reason for China to recognise Hasina's government is to compete with India for business and other political influence. However, for the time being this is a good and pragmatic step by China.

Zman7

Well said. China means business plus political understanding. China knows which government is constructive, development-oriented and has long-term development plans. She also understands which government is actually backward in development works, plans and programmes. In its evaluation, China made the right choice to strengthen the friendship with Bangladesh.

Dev Saha

Time for Khaleda Zia to talk and have a good resolution of this crisis. BNP needs to come to the middle before being gobbled up by extreme rights and religious bigots. That is a recipe for becoming a pariah party.

Shah Mostain Billah

Chinese support is not only a boost for the government; it also reflects BNP's failure even on the diplomatic front.

SM

China and Vietnam -- the bastions of freedom and democracy supported 14 percenter and an unelected majority lead by AL. Very good for Bangladesh, we have bright days ahead.

What people think



Thursday: January 09, 2014

Do you agree with the US, UK, Canada and Commonwealth that the results of Sunday's elections had failed to reflect the will of the people?

● Yes (87%)

● No (13%)

Friday: January 10, 2014

Do you think that the government would be able to take stern action against the persons responsible for the attacks on minority community?

● Yes (22%)

● No (78%)

Saturday: January 11, 2014

Do you agree with BNP standing committee member Mahbubur Rahman that the ongoing movement of the BNP-led opposition alliance is "democratic and peaceful"?

● Yes (57%)

● No (43%)

Sunday: January 12, 2014

Do you agree with Mizanur Rahman, chairman of National Human Rights Commission, that the government had failed to protect the Hindus?

● Yes (93%)

● No (7%)

Monday: January 13, 2014

Do you think BNP chief Khaleda Zia should consider foreign diplomats' suggestion to sever ties with Jamaat and stop her son Tarique Rahman from making political statements from abroad?

● Yes (59%)

● No (41%)

Tuesday: January 14, 2014

Do you think there would be really any opposition in the new parliament?

● Yes (14%)

● No (86%)

Thursday: January 16, 2014

Do you think that the government should form a special tribunal to punish those involved in the recent attacks on Hindus?

● Yes (72%)