

ACC must work without fetters

We hail HC verdict

We hail the move by the High Court declaring null and void a provision undermining the independence of the Anti-Corruption Commission. With the ACC now free to prosecute public servants without having to seek the permission of the government to do so, all citizens believing in equality before law will have a sigh of relief. The provision, injected into the ACC law against clear public opinion, included among which was the finance minister's opposition to the step, should not have been brought in at all.

Now that the judiciary has struck down the provision, the lesson should dawn on the political classes, now and in future, that nothing that is inconsistent with the norms and practice of democracy should be forced on the nation. If the ACC is truly an independent body, it should be seen to be operating without fetters. That said, it remains inexplicable why any prosecution of public servants should need the authorization of the executive branch. When citizens across the spectrum -- in society, in the various professions, indeed in politics -- can be made to answer for their misdemeanours, there is absolutely no reason to treat a particular class of people in brahminical fashion.

We have been consistent in our belief that democracy does not admit of discriminatory treatment in the application of law. Let it, therefore, now be ensured by the government and of course by the nation at large that such bodies as the ACC will work absolutely independently.

New Act to protect environment

Will it be enough to deter pollution?

THE new Brick Making and Kiln Establishment (Control) Act 2013 is an attempt to arm mobile courts with necessary powers to tackle the growing threat of traditional brick kilns that spew out carbon damaging the environment. Indeed, with demand for bricks growing at nearly 6 per cent a year and the relaxed enforcement of the previous Act of 1989, the number of traditional kilns has spiralled to about 8,000. The new Act disallows setting up of energy wasting and carbon emitting kilns on agriculture lands and near hills. The UNDP's green brick project has been working with the government to transform the damaging kilns into complying with environmentally-friendly standards, but with only 52 such kilns in operation with plans for 150 more on the cards, it is an uphill struggle.

The problem has not been with the laws; it has always been the enforcement. Though the penalty regime along with imprisonment for setting up kilns without license or on protected areas such as hills is stricter, the question really is whether the authorities will be able to take steps against powerful business interests to check pollution. One cannot overlook the fact that it is not simply a question of setting a time limit for traditional kilns to upgrade to new environmental standards within the stipulated two years. It has much to do with regular follow up and enforcement of legal measures by the ministry of environment and forest that must be allowed to discharge its functions without hindrance. Otherwise the new Act will merely gather dust on a shelf.

Transshipment is better option than transit

SUNDAY
POUCH



ASHFAQUR
RAHMAN

We are happy to learn that Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed has been talking of offering transshipment of Indian goods from northeast Indian states through Bangladesh. He has requested the Indian high commissioner to revive talks on this issue. This is indeed a mature move to help India to move her products out of these landlocked states to Bangladesh ports or the rest of India. There are several reasons why transshipment is more acceptable to us than giving road or train transit for Indian goods. This proposition will have positive effect in our bilateral relations.

Transshipment is the movement of goods or containers to an intermediate destination for final delivery to another destination. Thus, Indian trucks would unload goods at the Bangladesh border custom port. Then our trucks will carry these sealed containers over to the northeast Indian states.

This arrangement, if agreed to by both parties, would be in sharp contrast to the controversial transit discussed by the last Awami League government between 2009 and 2013. There were a number of objections raised by Bangladesh, none of which was addressed seriously by India. It caused the government to face a lot of flak from the general public. It is only because of India's failure to give Bangladesh fair share of the Teesta waters from West Bengal that transit was politically scuttled by Bangladesh. Later, the matter was left on the backburner.

Transit with India by road or rail is not the best option available to us. If we allow Indian trucks to run through our country and cross over to the northeast Indian states there could be serious security threats. The northeast is a politically unstable area infested with several armed insurgencies. It is not sure how India can ensure that the trucks would not be carrying arms and ammunition for insurgent groups there. Bangladesh could very well be at the receiving end of this insecure state of things. There are also cost factors which if factored in will not make giving transit an economically viable proposition for Bangladesh. We have to build new highways for the heavy multi-axle Indian trucks immediately to cater to the transit. They have to be maintained at great expense without being able to recover the huge investment made from the fees received from India.

Other infrastructure including railway lines and goods stations have to be built. Custom checkpoints and refueling facilities have to be made available for Indian vehicles. Pollution, congestion as well social problems would be other serious side effects. India would pay us perhaps a flat rate which would not cover 1/3 of our costs. Transit would not benefit our drivers and trucking companies. All the money would go to the Indian drivers.

Transshipment would also mean building infra-

structure at intermediate destinations for the time being. Since Bangladeshi trucks would carry Indian goods most of the way we would not require massive investments immediately. There would not be attending social and security problems. Our drivers would be able to maintain greater transparency about Indian goods moving in and out under this arrangement.

Some of the largest transshipment destinations have kept trade moving swiftly and efficiently around the world. There are several such hubs, like Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai that have thrived on transshipment revenue. However, transshipment presupposes several things. These include an excellent bilateral relations with the neighbouring country for whom transshipment is offered. Unless relations are friendly there would be endless saga of bilateral incidents preventing smooth operation of transshipment.

Again, a set of regulations based on legislation would have to be introduced that would govern detailed operations of transshipment through Bangladesh. These regulations need to be strictly followed with provisions for penalty if infringed. However, such regulations should have provision to be interpreted in a flexible way to meet changing circumstances. Revenue earned from transshipment would have to be kept exclusively to reinvest in transshipment infrastructure. They would need constant upkeep so the money earned must be to maintain the high standards. In our case, the highways carrying Indian goods have to be kept upgraded and in tip-top condition.

Transshipment can bring in substantial revenue to a state as well as to the private sector. This can be more if the arrangement is decentralised. It will make the service not only smooth but also efficient. We need to study how some of the major transshipment hubs in our region operate to understand how we should begin.

We have a river transit system operating with India for many years now. But this is not in popular use as the infrastructure is poor and not efficient. It does not fetch much revenue for us. The Indians are also not happy as this system is antiquated and not commercially beneficial to them. There are many regulations that hamstring freer flow of goods. We need to see how we can integrate this system with a modern transshipment network that we are likely to introduce with India.

It would not be wise to delay implementation of a transshipment arrangement with India. Whatever is the present state of our bilateral relations an initiative by Bangladesh will go a long way in creating goodwill for Bangladesh in India, and vice versa.

Now that we have a senior minister like Tofail Ahmed to steer things forward it is appropriate that Bangladesh should move speedily ahead. India is expected to go to the national polls soon. Any new government there must be offered transshipment so that our bilateral relations can move ahead. Our foreign office should pick the cue and see if we can move forward quickly on transshipment with India.

The writer is a former ambassador and a commentator on current issues.
E-mail: Ashfaqur303@gmail.com

Rohani's lost chance

THE WORLD
IN WORDS



BÜLENT ARAS

IRANIAN President Hassan Rohani's charm offensive has stalled. It worked well in the United Nations General Assembly last September, when he had something solid to offer -- a deal on his country's nuclear program -- raising hopes that Iran's headline foreign-policy stance would finally soften. But UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's withdrawal of Iran's invitation to the Geneva II conference on Syria suggests that Rohani will need more than charm -- or even a visit by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Tehran -- to end his country's isolation.

Rohani has been largely successful in putting his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tone-deaf leadership firmly in the past. The Iranian establishment has supported his attempts to open the country up to its regional neighbors, court foreign investment, call for moderation in religious and cultural matters, and even pursue the nuclear deal with the West.

In fact, the nuclear agreement -- which seems close to completion -- is likely to be Iran's most important diplomatic achievement since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, providing it with considerable relief both domestically and internationally. The fact that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei personally backed the effort makes it all the more promising.

Nonetheless, the regime's possible rapprochement with the United States remains a source of concern in the Middle East, because it would empower Iran at a time when the US is gradually disengaging from the region. The question now is whether Rohani's moderation toward the West will be accompanied by a change in Iran's Middle East policy, with all eyes on its policy toward Syria.

Ban rescinded Iran's invitation to Geneva II under pressure from the US and the Syrian opposition. After all, since the civil war began in 2011, Iran has provided essential financial and military support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, while mobilizing its Lebanese proxy, the powerful Hezbollah militia, to fight against the rebels in Syria.

Whatever concerns the opposition has about Iran's allegiances, the country is undoubtedly part of the Syrian equation; indeed, its involvement is critical to reaching any accord. But Rohani's failure to make a decisive statement on Syria -- even after a series of leaked

photographs of systematic torture and massacre raised the ire of the international community -- has not helped the case for keeping Iran in the fold.

Rohani recently had an opportunity to discuss Iran's stance. But, addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos, he squandered it, sticking to platitudes about the need for governments in the region to listen to their citizens and provide young people with "jobs and hope." On the subject of despotic rulers, Rohani offered only the benign observation that they lack the ability to connect with and understand their people.

Rohani's recent rhetoric, however positive, falls far short of the expectations that his diplomacy has raised since his UN address last September. In Davos, the world expected a decisive statement on Syria and other regional problems -- not hackneyed nationalist rhetoric about eliminating "biases" against Iran.

Rohani must have known that his failure to address the humanitarian disaster in Syria would damage his diplomatic strategy, which suggests that he must have had a strong reason. Two possibilities stand out: either there is no consensus within the Iranian elite for a policy change, or the elite remain united in their determination to continue backing Assad. Neither alternative is particularly charming, which would explain why he preferred to obscure his country's position.

To be sure, Erdoğan's visit to Tehran this week could help to defuse tensions over Syria -- a subject on which Turkey and Iran have diametrically opposing views. But it is unlikely to smooth the divisions among Iran's elite, much less convince hardliners to stop backing Assad, leaving the visit's significance uncertain, at best.

In refusing to take a strong position on Syria, Rohani -- like so many other world leaders -- is placing his own interests above those of the 2.3 million registered Syrian refugees, the millions more who have been internally displaced, the estimated 130,000 people killed, and the rest of Syria's long-suffering population. Worse, he has refused to acknowledge Iran's own role in the tragedy. When he said in Davos, "we cannot be indifferent to the pain and suffering of our fellow brethren in the region," he might as well have been referring to the Assad regime and its partners in crime.

What Syria needs is not rhetoric or charisma; it needs action. Iran appears incapable of providing it. That is why Rohani's charm offensive will not be enough to persuade Iran's adversaries that the Islamic Republic is ready to come in from the cold.

The writer is Global Fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, and a Professor of International Relations at Sabanci University in Istanbul.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

We should play for a draw

Before the start of the first Test match against Sri Lanka, the Tigers looked like they had matured as a cricketing unit and looked to win instead of a draw. The way Tamim had played during the last Asia Cup and scored 4 consecutive half centuries made us think that he had developed as a cricketer. He had cemented his place in the team as a permanent opening batsman.

Unfortunately, this also made him very arrogant as a player. He went back to his old ways of hitting short balls in the air which got him out. During his second innings he again played an irresponsible shot in the air to get out. This is not expected from Bangladesh's so called best batsman or the Vice Captain. No matter how great the players have become, they should always remain humble. The greatest quality of Sachin Tendulkar, Steve Waugh and even his uncle, Akram Khan was that they were always humble.

One last word I would like to add is that we still have not matured as a Test playing nation. We should play for a draw. It's better than losing.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

Which side are you on?

Most institutions in the country have become highly politicised. Our teachers, lawyers, journalists, media and cultural personalities, government employees, economists, doctors act and speak for the political party they support. Our politics has divided people into two groups: Awami-minded and BNP-minded.

We need to be united; we need to breach the division between us so that we can think ourselves as citizens of Bangladesh first before we think which party we support.

Tanim Iqbal
Mohammadpur
Dhaka

RIP to Test cricket!

Time is ripe to bid RIP to Test cricket, as logically presented in an article published on January 29 in a local English daily. That is the present reality as people just can not manage to spend five whole days to watch cricket!

In my opinion ICC must be realistic in this matter, and in the interest of expanding and popularising cricket in more countries across the globe, it will be pragmatic and justified to go for establishing One-day cricket (50 over or 20/20).

This will go a long way in popularising cricket among people.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "From Casio to arms," published on January 30, 2014

Molla A. Latif

What is the surprise in it? Yes, there are surprises if anyone meticulously takes a look at his innocent pose with a rocket head in his hand and the big leaders of BNP at his back standing like fools.

Deepjelejai

So, your father, grandfather and previous generation were also PhD holders like you, I guess.

SY

This is what is expected from BNP-Jamaat: let the criminals become ministers.

Mahboob Hossain

May be Babar was involved with the smuggling of arms but people will not accept any judgement as fair under this government because of its control on the judiciary.

OpeeMonir

Becoming arms smuggler from Casio smuggler... that too being in-charge of home ministry of a democratic country...!! These are magic and can only happen in Bangladesh. We all know the history of our leaders, especially the top ones. It is something to be ashamed of.

"Shun anarchy" (January 30, 2014)

Aasfiswarar

Very disappointing speech. How on earth one can congratulate people for this election when half of the seats were grabbed without any votes and rest were taken by only 5% vote?

Observer

"Shun anarchy" is the news headline as the Honourable President urges while delivering his first speech in the 10th parliament. The parliament is the place of people's representatives but many of the present MPs are not elected by people's votes. Now, will the present PM pay any heed to the President's call to shun anarchy? She has destabilised our country by amending the constitution and that is the root

Broadcasting: People's voice

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

BROADCASTING media is perhaps the most powerful communication means to impact our everyday life, culture, behavioural patterns to countless other things. Thus, it needs a policy to promote and protect our culture, heritage and values as well as to secure our socio-political-economic interests. As Bangladesh races to get its first broadcasting policy -- one can only become a sceptic. Why? Since the broadcasting policy does not clearly underpin who will decide the broadcasting topic? It says every broadcast medium has to formulate a 'specific' editorial policy in light of the Broadcast Policy -- suggesting restrictions in subjects and scope for constructive criticism. Moreover, it needs to be clarified what type of contents will be considered as "anti-state and conflicting with public interest."

Isn't that enough to be sceptical about the policy? True, that unlike any of the previous regimes the AL government have been more specific in terms of formulating a comprehensive broadcasting policy, but not without a number of loopholes in it.

As the draft is about to be sent to the cabinet for approval, we expect to see the cabinet acting judiciously -- solely based on defending democratic values. However, it's the timing that has caught our attention. Though the government had dropped hints about forming such a policy long ago but the process was moving at a snail's pace. And all of a sudden, in the wake of controversial news reports, closing down of a paper was followed by a number of journalists being arrested -- the process got quickened. The finalised draft of the policy was rushed with such amazing speed that even the PM had to express her discontent as she was not consulted prior to it being finalised. Scuttling over the draft is clear indication of an over-reactive government. From another side, we would also expect our main opposition at the parliament to take a responsible undertaking when the policy arrives as a bill to be passed.

Awami League's last two manifestos focused on media and information rights. For public benefit, the AL-led government even retained a number of policies and ordinances promulgated by the last caretaker government. For instance: "Community Radio Policy 2008" and "Right to Information Act (RTIA) 2009" were among those laws that the current government, during its last tenure, endorsed as good policies, aside from implementing the 8th wage board for journalists. It is true that private channel talk-shows have never seemed livelier, bold and informative.

If, however, the broadcasting policy 2014 turns out to be a one to serve political purposes, then we fear that AL's past achievements will get concealed and then soon forgotten.