

Cleaning up the rot in politics and business

BITTER TRUTH



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH the political parties busy in hurling abuses at each other and pre-occupied with just digging up the past, the country's administration is going through a crisis of confidence. Growing corruption is the worst problem facing the government.

Majority of the politicians flaunt their wealth, no matter that they owe banks millions of taka as overdue loans with little intention to pay even the interest due. We are ruled not by people who fought for our freedom but who have the most money. And it does not matter where the money came from.

The weakening moral standard and authority of politicians only increase the arbitrary power of officials in the administration. Bureaucrats are indifferent to public cause and shirk their administrative responsibilities. Public employees demand pay offs for moving a file from one table to the other. Water, gas, electricity, income tax assessment, land registration, and land possession, city corporation tax assessment and tax payment, train and bus tickets during 'Eid' rush can all be had but for a small price.

People want fulfilment of the promises made to them time and again by the leaders -- freedom from hunger and poverty, job for all, education for all, and healthcare for the vast multitude of suffering humanity. People are now convinced that unscrupulous and dishonest persons in public offices cannot be booked, because of the politicisation of criminal investigation at certain stages.

The embezzlement of Tk. 3,600 crore from the Sonali Bank by Hall-Mark Group and five other companies in collusion with the bank officials points to simply poor

governance.

A former APS of a state minister in the past government pocketed huge sum of money, other than land and flats he has purchased in and outside the country through issuing Hajj licences to unscrupulous agencies. ACC has already unearthed traces of such hefty sum of money in the bank accounts of the alleged offender and his relations.

Providing illegal gas connections to about 20,000 houses in some villages by extracting Tk.35,000-45,000 from each consumer, with or without the knowledge of the Titas Gas authority, must be construed as robbery in broad daylight. There is no indication that Tk.54 crore collected through such illegal means has been deposited in the public exchequer.

An elected government has only five years to cleanse, relocate and adjust structural reforms. If it resorts to dilly-dallying or is accused of narrow vision, ethical flexibility and partisan mind set, the cost will be heavy in terms of diminishing popularity, increasing public disgust and future election prospects.

The High Court verdicts in three cases -- recruitment in the food department by increasing the marks in the oral examination after the written test; annulment of Section 32(ka) of the ACC ordinance that required prior permission of the government for instituting corruption cases against the government servants; and the death sentence verdict against 8 government servants in the 10 truck weapons haul case in 2004, for siding with the then ruling party, have put the government servants in jeopardy. People have seen what it might entail if the government of the day tries to politicise the administration.

Few countries in the world are more scandal ridden than Bangladesh. Charges of impropriety are labelled against politicians almost routinely after they quit power. However, reports of such scandals disappear from the papers and public memory within a few days. But some of them, like Padma bridge graft allegation, Hall-Mark and Destiny fraud and stock market scam, have remarkable staying

power because of the their importance.

It is not hard to find why and how corruption spread its venomous wings in this country. The defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption was shackled by an order of the ex-president Ershad, and no cases of corruption of officials in the high offices could be taken up without the approval of the chief executive. Subsequently, the parties that were in power reaped the benefit of this bad decree that discriminated between common masses and the persons in the high state offices.

There was a time when in every walk of life there were men and women who rose to heights of professional excellence, yet led austere lives. Politics was a blessed vocation. Till 1970, some of the best minds were drawn to politics. They had no goal except fighting for freedom and economic emancipation of the people, and reaped no reward except imprisonment.

Consider the sea change that has taken place in the political landscape in just about 40 years. Politics is no longer considered a service, but has become an industry. Most of the politicians are now business tycoons. It is because of the politicians' attitude of bending the law to suit their own convenience that the country now bleeds. In consequence, callousness, indifference, and defiance of law have become a trademark.

Corruption is now a buzzword in the country and has sent shockwaves across the world, causing a sharp dip in donor assistance. Politicians must now understand that rhetoric can neither feed the people nor keep the nation marching towards prosperity and stability.

Power and glory ultimately come from the economic muscle, and that is the greatest challenge a sensible government must try to meet. Unless we can imbibe the age-old credo that honesty, hard work and commitment bring rewards, the whole society may be doomed to destruction. In a society that increasingly covets money over glory a politician's job has lost its lustre.

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A cry for playgrounds in Dhaka

RASHED BHUIYAN

ALMOST a month back, an interesting comment by an online news commentator caught my attention. He proposed, although indirectly, a Tk. 6 billion playground project in Dhaka. The translated comment, as published in the *Prothom Alo*, reads: "Rather than wasting Tk. 6 billion by playing election-game (10th national election 5.1. 2014), please make play arrangements for young people by providing some playgrounds in Dhaka city." The commentator simply expressed his reaction at the news containing the prime minister's comment that if political parties can reach a positive agreement, then she will be ready to terminate the 10th Parliament and go for another election.

What impressed me was the second part of the comment. The commentator urged the PM to make playgrounds for children even at the cost of the long awaited general election. Now the election is over. One might wonder, at the first instance, how the issue of playground is related to the general election of the country. There are apparently so many important issues in the country, why playground and play?

Certainly, these are related questions and will draw different expert viewpoints. But it will be difficult to deny that, on this issue, many of us feel the same pain in our heart as the commentator does. Laments for lost and encroached playgrounds are being regularly published in the news media as well. But such cries hardly reach up to the authorities and policy makers concerned. Is there any hope?

The law for conserving playgrounds, open spaces, parks and natural water bodies in the mega-cities, divisional and district towns was accepted by the parliament in September 2000. The Act basically imposes requirement of mandatory approval for changing existing land use of playgrounds, open spaces, parks and natural water bodies, and has provision for punishment of up to five years of jail term or a fine of maximum Tk. 50,000 for violation of enacted rules. The law, however, does not mention any minimum area requirement for playgrounds. Even if we abide by the law, we shall have as many playgrounds in the cities as there are now. Will this meet minimum criterion of public health? We all know it will not.

From physical planning perspective, Detail Area Plan for Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DAP 2010) was passed under the Town Improvement Act, E. B Act XIII, 1953. Surprisingly, there is no reference in the DAP regarding minimum quantity or quality guidelines for playgrounds with reference to, say, number of people, density or geographical boundaries (blocks/wards/thanas). Although the Real Estate Development and Management Act 2010, mentions some important common facilities, it does not mandate play facilities within the high-rise compound. So this remains optional. Since playgrounds are not profit-yielding facilities, we can guess what will be the outcome of such options within the plots.

The only guideline that we have is the Private Housing Project Land Development Rule 2004. This rule provides space standards for playgrounds and parks with respect to the size of the population living on that privately developed land. The standard (under Rule 9(3) and 10(3)) states that minimum of 0.2 acres of land must be allocated for playgrounds and parks for 1,000 residents. Is such standard applicable to public areas of the city as well? At least, we are happy that it exists.

An election is occasional, although immensely important; but the need for children to play is important every day in every family's life. Recent international researches show that, apart from developing physical, cognitive, social and mental health, play helps to develop resilience and social cohesion as well. Thus the issue is related to the long-term sustainability of the city. Beyond political and other economic constraints, cities should have adequate amount of playgrounds distributed all over.

Bangladesh ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Article 31(1) of the convention says that all state parties are responsible to ensure children's right to 'play' and their 'recreation.' So the importance of the issue is of beyond doubt. But we, and I guess our authorities as well, do not know the extent of complexities involved in addressing such an issue. Is it time to ask every institution and person, starting from the prime minister and the city development authorities to the responsible planners and architects, what they are going to do to make minimum play arrangements for children in Dhaka for 2041?

Urban design research involving Dhanmondi R/A, conducted by us at the department of Architecture, BUET, shows that there is immense scope to enhance play-friendliness by rethinking existing open spaces and street systems. Redirecting vehicular traffic of thoroughfares to create close-ended streets can be one of them. However, such design related proposals could only be of any use if the higher authorities involved realise the significance of the issue of play and playground first.

I empathise with the commentator mentioned at the beginning of the article by painfully acknowledging that, although we common people realise the importance of playgrounds, our 'city-heads' seem to be too indifferent to address such an important public issue. It is the state and the city authorities, on behalf of the individual residents, who promised to ensure the right to play for children. No matter what, our children and we must keep alive the dream to have a play-friendly city.

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Is Khaleda embarrassed by her aides?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

BNP chief Khaleda Zia, in a press conference on October 21 last year, unveiled a formula for forming a polls time administration by picking 10 advisers from the 1996 and 2001 caretaker governments. The formula was prima facie attractive. But when its flaw was exposed, it lost its appeal.

What was the flaw? The two caretaker governments had 10 advisers each. But two of them being common to both governments there were 18 individuals in the two councils of advisers. Of them, four have passed away. Of the remaining 14, some are not in good health while some others are unwilling to take state responsibility again.

This proved that BNP did not do proper homework before its chief made the proposal. Most of the BNP national standing committee members who were not involved in drafting it were in the dark minutes before the formula was unveiled in the press conference. A number of members of BNP national standing committee at that time told this correspondent that the party chief would not have faced such an embarrassing situation had she engaged them in drafting the formula as they could have checked if there was any flaw in it. Some close aides of Khaleda Zia had drafted her speech carrying the formula. Was she embarrassed by the flaw in her formula? Did she rebuke her aides who drafted the flawed formula?

On February 4, she claimed in a press conference that 242 leaders and activists of BNP-led alliance were killed by law enforcers and Awami League cadres between December 26, 2013 and January 27 this

year. She gave a district-wise list of death figures. She did not give details of victims in defence of her claim. She cited only five names of victims -- two were killed and three were forcibly disappeared. *The Daily Star* made an effort to verify her claim about the death figures in nine districts with high number of deaths. It was found that Khaleda's claim was exaggerated, fabricated and false as so far 17 people were killed in the said span of one month. *The Daily Star* published a report on it on February 10 under the headline "Sorry, Khaleda: death figures blown out of proportion."

Upon cross checking, it was found that Khaleda's claim about the death figures was more or less accurate if the time frame was expanded by more than a year from the one month she specified. More than 200 people were killed in political violence in the last one year. National newspapers including *The Daily Star* ran reports on each of the deaths. All the victims were not involved in politics and did not belong to BNP-led alliance. Many of them were ordinary and innocent people who fell victim to political violence. Who were responsible for all the deaths?

Of the 200 victims, many belonged to the BNP-led opposition alliance. Nobody can deny this fact. In a civilised society, even a single extrajudicial killing can in no way be accepted and tolerated. And when the number crosses 200 in a year, it really depicts a vivid picture of barbarism, negating the rule of law. Khaleda's claim has triggered controversy over its authenticity. Did she feel embarrassed by the distortion of the figures? Will she take any actions against those who provided her with the exaggerated death figures? In our political

culture, the supreme leaders of the major political parties are not accustomed to say sorry even after making a gross error. It is their belief that they can never make a mistake. As if they are not human beings. Khaleda is one of the supreme political leaders in the country. So can she make a mistake?

What will those who drafted her speech with exaggerated death figures do now? They may blast BNP's district level leaders who did not support Khaleda's claim about the death figures in their respective districts and spoke the truth while talking to *The Daily Star*. The BNP may keep claiming that the death figures Khaleda Zia presented in her press conference are authentic. They should know that such efforts will only expose the bankruptcy of BNP's politics.

The above two incidents -- the flawed formula on the formation of the election time non-partisan government and the claim about the death figures -- have also exposed the fragile state of BNP as an organisation. The way the party is being run can in no way make it democratic and strong. Only a few people who are very close and blindly loyal to Khaleda Zia are running the show. This should not be continued any longer. The BNP senior leaders must put their head together to rescue the party from such an unhealthy situation. Khaleda Zia should allow her senior party colleagues to hold discussions to find the weaknesses in the party.

BNP is not a property belonging to a group of people. It is a public property. It cannot be run as per the whims of a group of individuals.

The writer is Senior Reporter, *The Daily Star*.

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QUOTABLE Quote

I don't believe you have to be better than everybody else. I believe you have to be better than you ever thought you could be.

Ken Venturi

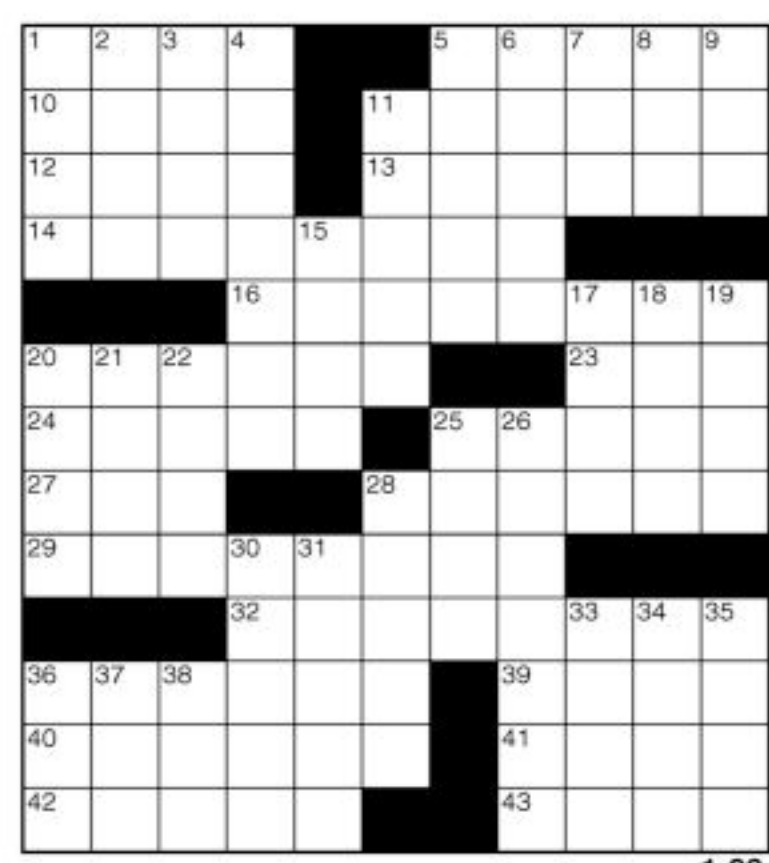
CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Part maker
- Take the wrong way?
- Andy Taylor's boy
- Gets a point
- Shopper's place
- Dojo doings
- Hands and knees
- Top players
- Large amount
- Director spike
- Aids in crime
- "Common Sense" writer
- Casserole bit
- Fountain order
- April 1 honorees
- Licorice candy
- Of no use
- Authentic
- Egyptian god
- Visitor to Siam
- Gaggle members
- Prone to prying

DOWN

- Robin Cook book
- Milky stone
- Flour source
- Northern Ireland city
- Surgery souvenirs
- Most awful
- Lyrical Gershwin
- Fido or Fluffy
- Jargon suffix
- Skeleton part
- Flamenco cries
- Stepped down
- Painter Magritte
- Future flower
- Mama's mate
- Cain's victim
- Barking beast
- Cronies
- Campaign loser
- Lawn pests
- County events
- Stan's buddy
- Gambling city
- Works leather
- Do in
- London weather
- Purpose
- Even score



Yesterday's answer

HERO CORK
ONEUP LOREN
WRATH ERASE
TAD OPENTOE
OPENBAR ELL
TRAIN ODD
RAPID
TOY IDIOM
MUM OPENPIT
OPENSEA ICH
REGAL LLAMA
ALAMO SATAN
LOSE DECK

CRYPTOQUOTE

KQXIJ QZAWJD RGCKA KQXIJ RMWJ
SGX, EZGCD QZA SGX EKDDU QKGZD
- QZWJGSX FXCIDEE

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

It is possible to store the mind with a million facts and still be entirely uneducated.

- Alec Bourne

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte

