

Control corruption – don't shoot the messenger

IFTEKHARUZZMAN

THE year 2014 began with a high level political message to depart from the culture of impunity when a number of former Ministers reportedly alleged of corruption were showed the door out of the newly formed Cabinet. The Prime Minister also declared that those alleged of corruption including former Ministers and Members of the Parliament who by their own affidavit claimed to have accumulated enormous wealth disproportionate to legitimate source will have to face justice.

The mandate of Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) was thus boosted by the political blessing from the top, though it was undermined by unabashed assertion by some near the top that it was only natural that being in power meant a licence to become rich. It was equally shocking to hear a public representative asking for "cash not crest" as gift for being declared elected. Talking of crests, while the government was embarrassed by the forgery with materials used in gifts to honour foreign friends of our liberation war, high-profile statement was also made to justify the same.

Out came by the end of the year the amazing story that as many as six Ministers, two Deputy Ministers, one Chairman of a Parliamentary Standing Committee and a central leader of the ruling party recommended and put pressure on the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, a Constitutional body, to recruit a candidate on partisan political ground. They had no qualms to undermine all standards of morality and constitutional commitment of equal rights and opportunity for all. The logic is profoundly simple – the key institutions of democratic accountability must be made partisan and incompetent enough to ensure that these are conveniently used to promote the agenda of a section of the ruling authority.

By undermining all standards and principles to avoid conflict of interest many of the Cabinet drop-outs soon occupied the offices of chairperson or membership of the parliamentary standing committees of Ministries mandated to look into allegation of abuse of power when they were in charge.

Political pledge against corruption was hardly matched by actions. The proverbial denial syndrome has prevailed. A section of the powerful has remained faithful to the tradition of reacting sharply against those who report on corruption. Flying in the face of evidences they found evil design in such reports to bring political opponents to power, or even conspiracy against the State. What was often said in public was in sharp contrast with that in private. To add to own embarrassment the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) joined the foray at

least twice during the year, and indeed humbled its political peers in a bid to "shoot the messenger".

The ACC has agreeably created a good example and raised expectations when for a change some former Ministers and MPs belonging to the ruling party and senior officials of the government were subjected to inquiry by the Commission for allegation of corruption. However, the way many such cases proceeded and ended

the ACC staff has been allegedly involved in corruption and extortion.

The twists and turns around the high profile conspiracy to corruption in the then Padma bridge project, in which ACC's own inquiry had found cognizable offence by a number of individuals, reached anti-climax when ACC decided to close proceedings without credible information for public knowledge on why its own report was no longer tenable. There

rights as graphically manifested in the high profile multiple killings in Narayanganj.

On the other hand, the zero-sum game of politics has rendered institutions of accountability including the parliament into monopolized territory of ruling coalition. Putting to shame the practice of parliamentary boycott that had reached highest possible proportion during the ninth parliament, the tenth has chopped off the head for headache. This time there was no boycott of the parliament thanks to the introduction of an opposition party in the House that is seized by dilemma of self-identity of being the part of the ruling coalition on the one hand and so-called opposition on the other. The process of crippling the capacity of the Parliament to promote accountability of the government has advanced further.

Thanks to continued provision of whitening black money people have been told again that corruption is rewarded not honesty. Bangladesh has been reported in 2014 to be a leading actor in the trillion dollar global scandal of illicit money transfer supplying at least \$1.3 billion a year on average. Bulk of such illicit transfers takes place through over-invoicing and under-invoicing in import and export indicating strong linkage of business with corruption. Bangladesh has also reinforced its status as a leading customer of the Malaysian second home project, a popular conduit of illicit transfer.

The state structure is being increasingly captured by those who benefit from corruption or protect it. This is happening in spite of the Government's intent "to confront and root out the scourge of corruption from the body politic of Bangladesh", as declared in the Vision 2021 document, which also promised to "strengthen transparency and accountability of all government institutions as integral part of a programme of social change to curb corruption".

The high hopes and opportunities created by many recent legal, policy and institutional reforms such as the Right to Information Act 2009, the Whistleblower Protection Act 2011, Implementation Plan of the UN Convention against Corruption, National Integrity Strategy 2012, strengthened Financial Intelligence Unit, introduction of e-procurement, and initiatives to introduce information technology in public service delivery, etc. must be fully realized. The key to preventing further worsening of the situation lies in ensuring the space for citizens to stand up against corruption and to demand enforcement of laws and effectiveness of institutions to ensure accountable governance. The wider the space for citizens to raise voice the better is the prospect of corruption control.

The writer is Executive Director of TIB.



A section of public representatives, Ministers had no qualms in engaging in business with the state directly or through beneficial owners. Public contracting has continued to be not only a source of profiteering by virtue political capital but also the main factor behind in-fighting

often reinforced public skepticism about its intent, commitment and capacity to bring to book those alleged of corruption without being influenced by the identity of the individuals concerned.

While the ACC has consistently denied it, they have shown ample evidences of being subjected to direct or indirect political pressures and manipulation. Efforts to undermine the independence and effectiveness of the Commission through various means including legislative amendments have continued. A section of

was much to be desired about ACC's handling of other high profile cases like bag-loads of cash connected with recruitment business in railways, share market, Sonali Bank and other scandals in the banking sector. Barring a few exceptions precious little has happened to bring to account alleged accumulation of massive wealth disproportionate to legitimate income.

On the other hand, people with direct or indirect links with power have continued unauthorized capture of land, forest, river and water bodies and the practice of loan-default. Land acquisition for infrastructure and other public sector installations like cantonments in the name of national security has taken place in some cases through abuse of power and undermining human security, livelihood and other basic rights of the affected people.

A section of public representatives, Ministers had no qualms in engaging in business with the state directly or through beneficial owners. Public contracting has continued to be not only a source of profiteering by virtue political capital but also the main factor behind in-fighting within the ruling political party and front organizations. Thus corruption continued to kill people and criminalize the political space.

Corrupt transaction of money joined other forms of abuse of power by a section of law enforcement agency like RAB as key factor in violation of basic human