

Education calendar at sixes and sevens

The future of our youngsters at stake

IN the ongoing political turmoil, routine public examinations have been thrown into a chaotic state. SSC exam schedules have been interrupted regularly and not a single exam was held on time. Now the HSC and equivalent examinations are to start from April 1. People are apprehensive that this time the examinees will face even a greater ordeal.

As the number of tests at HSC level is higher than at the SSC one, it would require 30 weeks to complete the exam schedules on weekends alone. This unusual delay will have serious domino effect across the whole education system. Frequent changes in examination schedules demoralize students and make it really difficult for them to perform to their potential. If it happens it will have serious impact on their future educational career. Also disruption in exam schedules will certainly delay the university admission process and prospective students for higher studies will lose valuable time of the academic year.

People from all walks of life, especially students and their parents, have repeatedly requested the political parties to settle their differences which has so far fallen on deaf ears. In particular BNP-led alliance by its continuous blockade and hartal has irreparably harmed the cause of education. One wonders what a political party will gain from this abuse of power other than alienating themselves from the people. We want to reiterate our demand for a swift end to this politics of violence leading to restoration of peace for normal pursuit of education and other avocations.

Solar pumps -- the way forward

Irrigation made affordable

IT is interesting to see farmers living in a village that has no access to electricity come up with an innovative solution to their irrigation woes. With the aid of a local NGO, they formed a cooperative to pay for setting up two solar pumps in Hardevpur village under Kaliganj upazila. The two solar units consist of 80 solar panels generating sufficient electricity to power the pumps, which in turn churn out 1.4 million litres of water to irrigate 50 bighas of land every day. The Tk7.5 million project is benefitting 100 farmers.

Now it may be argued by some that the solar units installed are a hefty investment and major components will require replacement after a few years of operation. The counter-argument to that scenario is that the average farmer had to foot Tk. 8,000 per bigha of land for irrigation by shallow tubewells using diesel for fuel. Now during the IRRI season, a farmer pays Tk. 1,000 to the local NGO financing the scheme in advance; the next instalment of Tk. 1,000 before harvesting and the rest Tk. 3,000 after the harvest. That still constitutes Tk. 3,000 worth of saving per bigha of land irrigated and the money is paid in instalments.

In off-grid areas where there is no electricity available, solar pumps do make a difference in reducing the cost of paddy produced. With financing institutions like Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL) tying up with local NGOs and growers, this switch-over can be replicated in other parts of the country. Whilst this will help farmers desist from using up precious ground water it will also ensure food security.

COMMENTS

"Why won't the treaty (CHT Peace Accord) be implemented if the government that signed the deal rules for 10 years?"

--Santu Larma

Mukti Sena

That area has a different culture and geographical nature which should be preserved. The government must act quickly in this regard.

"Hartal becomes work-vibrant"
(March 15, 2015)

Maria Lourdes Fatima

Good to see that life is back in normal ways.

"Fresh election only solution"
(March 14, 2015)

MH Khan

The case of the missing politician

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

Salahuddin is not the first politician who has gone missing in Bangladesh and I think I echo the feelings of most of my fellow beings in this country that he is the last of any politician or any citizen to vanish. The manner of his 'disappearance' has raised concerns and questions, but even more, generated a fear in our minds for reasons that need no explication.

Salahuddin of late had assumed the image of a phantom figure. He was the un-anointed spokesperson of the party dishing out press releases occasionally announcing the continuation of hartal, from unknown location/s. He had become quite a pain in the neck for the government which perhaps wanted to deactivate him as a part of its tactics to stave off BNP programmes.

The statements of the law enforcing agencies have added to the confusion and fear, given the wide discrepancies between their statements presented to the High Court and the eye witness accounts of the goings at the house from where Salahuddin went missing on the night of March 10.

It will be in order to dwell on the assumptions and possibilities and see if we can arrive at a conclusion through a

process of elimination.

As far as I can see there are three possibilities. One, he has gone into hiding on his own volition, two, some third party has abducted him, and three, he has been picked up by the law enforcing or intelligence agencies. Let us examine each one of them objectively.

First, going into hiding on his own. The question is why? Is it out of fear? He was already in hiding, and one is sure that the police were looking for him to neutralise him. And there could be compulsions for him to change his locations particularly, if he felt his position was compromised in any way. But why make a show of it and let everybody know that he was changing his lair? It could have been done surreptitiously in the manner that he had adopted in living in places other than his own house the last two months.

The second possibility that he was abducted by a third party cannot be ruled out. But what could be the motive? It cannot be for ransom because no demand has been made as yet. It could be a case of settling old scores taking the advantage of the current flux and putting the blame on the law enforcing agencies. But would a third party descend on the catch with so many vehicles (according to eye witness accounts). Would it not be too risky an operation?

The last possibility that it was a police operation must also be thoroughly dissected as should be their statements to the court denying anything to do with Salahuddin's disappearance. The police can certainly arrest anyone on genuine grounds. But why the clandestine opera-

tion? What was the problem in following the existing procedures in arresting a genuine offender?

It is difficult to believe that a third party with a mission to abduct someone would come with a fleet of vehicles and barricade the road in the manner it was reportedly done.

It is also difficult for me to believe that police would deliberately give false statements to the court under oath. However, there are many holes in the police statements, and I shall not go into

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the discrepancies because only yesterday a columnist in these very columns had dwelt on the major ones in great details.

We in these very columns had also expressed why it is difficult for the public to accept the police versions without questioning their veracity. Past experi-

ences, the recent being that of the case of Manna, about whom the same thing was said, but who appeared from the custody of Rab 17 hours later, is a good reason why the statements of the law enforcing agencies cannot be taken at face value.

I leave it to the readers to draw their own inferences. But whatever may be the circumstances of the BNP leader's disappearance, it is for the police to unearth the mystery of a leading political figure who has remained untraceable for nearly ten days. And one wonders whether the agencies have launched a vigorous investigation in this case. It is also a mystery that the police refused to register GD in this matter. And even more, it should be a matter of great concern for the state, the police in particular, if there indeed there were such a group capable of conducting such operations right in the capital.

In the present situation it could be possible that personal scores are being settled. Reportedly, more than 50 people have gone missing in the last two months, and not all of those are due to police actions. There are many compelling reasons why the police must trace out the missing politicians. It is their credibility that risks further denudation.

It was exactly a month short of three years that Ilyas Ali, a prominent BNP leader had gone missing. He remains untraced to this day and his fate remains unknown. Will Salahuddin's be the same? One hopes not.

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Local Government - another Casualty of Deadlock

TOFAIL AHMED

THE year 2014 and the 10th Parliamentary election are turning points in the political history of Bangladesh. The Westminster type parliamentary model practiced so far under a multiparty system since 1991, with many limitations and distortions, took a new twist as single party rule after the 10th Parliamentary election. The elections held in 2014 at national (10th Parliament and by-elections) and local level (Upazila Parishad elections) did not have credibility, inclusiveness and legitimacy. The 'Grand Alliance' under the leadership of Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took responsibility of presiding over the government, party and Parliament after the 10th Parliamentary election. The Grand Alliance runs the parliament with a 'brute majority,' and there is no credible opposition in the parliament.

The general election held in January 5, 2014, was boycotted by 28 out of 42 registered political parties. The political alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), which was in power three times and also alternatively played the role of opposition in the parliament twice since 1991, did not participate in the 10th Parliamentary election in protest against the 15th Amendment of the constitution that abolished the caretaker government (CTG) system. In spite of all this, the year 2014 passed apparently peacefully but with suspicious silence and hidden tension. There was less political agitation, but criticism and discomfort at home and abroad. The withdrawal of the World Bank from the Padma Bridge project, Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International (TI) and various scams and scandals in the financial and banking sectors made headlines during the year. The European and North American diplomats were criticised for their stand on credible and inclusive election. The government created its own comfort zone by publicising the consistent growth rate of around 6% per annum, issues of social development, achieve-

ment of MDG goals, etc, as compensatory issues in facing the criticisms of its democratic credentials. To some extent, 'democracy' and 'development' were portrayed as trade-offs or alternatives to one another rather than being complementary.

The year 2015 started with political violence that reached unprecedented levels. There has been state violence through police brutality, together with participation of ruling party cadres on the one hand, and opposition political violence through *oborodh* (siege) and *hartals* (strike) along with bomb throwing, burning, killing and injuring people on the other hand, every day since January 5, 2015. The possibility of a 'political settlement' between the two opposing camps still seems remote and uncertain. The ruling regime is trying to stay in power at any cost and the opposing camp is determined to unseat them. So, policy making and improvement in governance are not on the political agenda of any camp at the moment.

The 9th Parliament (2009-2013) passed most of the Local Government (LG)-related acts, and a few rules were also issued by the government from time to time. So far, five sets of 'rules' for each of the institutions -- Upazila Parishad (UZP) and Union Parishad (UP) -- have been issued. The training for newly elected UZP representatives and officials was completed. Similarly, UP representatives and secretaries also received training and UZPs and UPs received increased amounts of funds under ADP and Local Government Support Project (LGSP) respectively. The offices of Director Local Government (DLG) and Deputy Director Local Government (DDLG) were streamlined and provided with a new ToR and logistics. Many other policy changes were promised by the government, such as appointment of one additional staff (accountant / assistant secretary) for UPs; transfer of funds of the government functionaries (17 department have already transferred their manpower) to the UZP; transfer of union level government employees to UPs as per provision of UP act 2009; formation of a 'Policy Advisory Group' at ministry level for initiating policy

review, and strengthening of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) wing of the ministry for more effective monitoring of the Local Government Institutions (LGI) affairs. All the pending activities have been overshadowed by a 'political heat wave' of deadly confrontations for the time being. Unless a 'political settlement' is reached between the government and the opposition, any meaningful development in LG sector is a remote possibility.

There are many other unresolved issues in the sphere of local government and local governance. Some of the important steps and issues are:

- Holding of overdue elections in two City Corporations of Dhaka in a free, fair acceptable and inclusive manner;
- Election of reserved seats of women representatives in the UZPs;
- Issues of the reorganisation of Zila Parishads (ZP) and holding elections as soon as possible;
- Creating ownership of 'district budget' with the ZPs;
- Restraining the undue interference of law makers in the executive functions, especially in the domain of LGs (UP, UZP and ZP);
- Formulation of proper policy for making the transferred subjects functional at UZP level and properly implementing the provision of transfer system at the UP level;
- Initiation of integrated planning system at district, upazila and unions in line with five year plan strategies

The autonomy of LGI representatives after 10th Parliamentary election during the government's current term did not improve, rather LGI governance deteriorated further at upazila level. The role of officials, especially UNO, police, upazila engineer, etc, has become more aggressively or passively partisan. The political activists of the ruling alliance are playing a *de facto* role in different decision making process, such as enlistment of safety net receivers to the management of primary schools, high schools, madrassas and colleges with blessings from local MPs as well as management of institutions like UPs and UZPs. The Local Government Division (LGD) also supports the actions of the ruling party from behind the scene. In the last two years (2013-2014), there were

many foreign trips in the name of 'study tour' under the sponsorship of LGD. Almost all officials of the LGD visited different countries of Europe along with a few 'administrators' of ZP, UZP, and chairmen and vice-chairmen belonging to the ruling party. Political affiliation of LGI leaders was the main criterion for selection of candidates for those trips. The resources for the trips were siphoned from the ADP allocation shown in the national budget in favour of LGIs (UZP and ZP) arbitrarily by the LGD. There were many suspensions, arrests and warnings to the representatives elected from the opposition. The work environment everywhere (UP, UZP, pourshava and city corporations) has become difficult to work in. Interference by the bureaucracy and party activists increased to an intolerable proportion. Even the UP chairmen and members and UZP chairmen and vice-chairmen belonging to ruling alliance are complaining against their own MPs and activists.

The innovations already made through many of the donor-assisted LG projects through different NGO partners in the process of wider replication are under threat, and the possibility of implementing new innovation is very unlikely if the current volatile situation continues. Nothing other than a 'political settlement' of the current stalemate can put the policy makers and LG functionaries back on their feet, or to a point from where fresh thinking can be linked with the existing development. The donor community in general seems hesitant to think of further expansion of areas and activities at this juncture. Instead it may concentrate more on the consolidation and deepening of the interventions already made. Investment already made needs to be protected rather than wasting resources amidst the prevailing political uncertainty. This might have a negative impact on the general growth situation as well as continuity of growth and development at the local levels. After the MDG, the UN is formulating SDG for the period 2016-2030. We cannot afford to miss that train due to our internal political unrest and stalemate.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Crimes of Cops

Abu Sayeed, a nine-year old schoolboy was kidnapped and brutally murdered by a constable of police whose duty is to protect people. We do not know how his family will bear this agony; we have no words to console them.

Nowadays, cases of law-enforcing agents becoming involved in criminal activities have been on the rise. The abduction and killing of seven persons in Narayanganj whose bodies were put in sacks and were dumped in the river, which horrified the nation, was done by the RAB, our elite force!

We do not know why they are not given exemplary punishment; other delinquent members of the law enforcing agencies are becoming more daring because of the government's lenient attitude towards their crimes. Members of law-enforcing agency who are guilty must face justice without delay.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Rape of a nun

The news of a 71-year old Christian nun being gang-raped in eastern West Bengal state is beyond belief. The nun was attacked after a gang of about half a dozen robbers broke into a convent school in eastern West Bengal state and ransacked the premises.

A few days ago, we celebrated International Women's Day. I do not know how much impact it has on us really in terms of reducing violence against women. This terrible incident happened in the state of Mamata Banerjee who is also a woman and she should try everything to ensure the exemplary punishment for the culprits.

Pradip Das
On e-mail

Nasheed's arrest and judicial excesses

This refers to the report, "Maldives defends jailing of Nasheed" (March 16). The ex-president of Maldives has become another victim of judicial excesses. He has been accused of jailing a judge. It is strange that criminal charges were dropped against Nasheed but later revived. It is high time that there should be a global support group for victims of judicial excesses. This brings us to an interesting debate on western-style judicial independence which the top court of China has termed as an "erroneous thought". Many nations have adopted this concept of judicial independence - separation of powers of the government and the judiciary. One American chief justice has said that judicial independence is public property. Should not the concept of judicial independence undergo a change in modern times?

Nasheed's trial should have been telecast live. No doubt, Nasheed can go for an appeal. But the question is - will he get justice? Maldives has always been in the news due to political turmoil. A picturesque nation in the Indian Ocean should remain peaceful and work towards economic prosperity of its population.

Deendayal M. Lulla
On e-mail