

BNP pick's AL's pledge

FOUNDER EDITOR

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ACC not functioning properly

Effective investigation methods needed

ACCORDING to the 'State of Governance Report' brought out by Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), the government's anti-graft body ACC does not follow up on over half the graft complaints it receives. Indeed, the rate of pending enquiries is large and it has built up a very big backlog of cases at labour courts. The study points out systemic problems that include archaic methods of investigation, which effectively stymies ACC's ability to conduct probes efficiently.

When one takes into account that Bangladesh is suffering from graft in various sectors, it is near impossible for a body like the ACC to handle this issue on its own. Experts point out that the job of curbing corruption lies in strengthening other state bodies like the law enforcement agencies to address the sticky issue of graft that may exist in different forms in such institutions too.

We feel that the lone watchdog body should be empowered by bringing about changes that would allow for it to play the role it was meant to play. Better investigative tools coupled with the right type of manpower are steps in the right direction. How is it that the body completes some cases totally and then dismisses them due to "lack of evidence"? These lapses point to the fundamentals of investigation to be either flawed or not thought out in a manner that would bring about a conviction. If we are serious about tackling graft, we need to rethink the structure of the ACC and fit it with the right tools and people to tackle the issue of corruption.

Youths becoming unproductive

Whose fault is it?

THE worryingly high rate of illiteracy, unemployment and inactivity amongst the youth of our country, poses a significant challenge for the state and society. According to an International Labour Organisation report, 40 percent of youth in Bangladesh are currently unproductive. Although the trend seems to be following a similar pattern across the international arena, out of the 21 countries situated in the Asia-Pacific region, Bangladesh was disappointingly ranked third worst in terms of youth productivity.

Along with the obvious losses to economic productivity this is causing, it also adversely impacts on the country's social conditions in countless other ways. Many young people who eventually come to the realisation that they are, in no way, contributing to society and the direction it is headed, are then beset with various forms of frustrations. This increases the likelihood for young people to get involved with substance abuse, illegal activities and to isolate themselves from society.

Experts from different professions have clearly outlined some of the reasons for the surge in youth unproductiveness, such as the lack of work opportunities, absence of work related competency amongst them and constraints and obstacles in the way of youth entrepreneurship. But, apart from these, there are many other reasons, one of which is the short-sightedness of both the state and society that has led to the pursuance of short-run benefits rather than nation building, which naturally requires the participation of young people.

If we think long-term, however, this cannot be allowed to persist. Society and the state must broaden its vision for creating a better future and provide the youth with better support from every angle to do that. And the sooner this realisation appears the better.



SHAKHAWAT LITON

HERE is a similarity between two arch-rivals Awami League and BNP in their preference for the formation of the Election Commission (EC). Khaleda

Zia's present proposal for formation of the EC on the basis of consensus among political parties was a commitment of the ruling AL for the last eight years until last October.

In its manifesto, modified in national council in July 2009, the then ruling AL pledged to form the EC through political consensus. The promise remained in the AL's manifesto until it was amended dropping the pledge in the party's national council last October. However, the AL itself did not take steps according to its pledge to form the EC in 2012. Upon the advice of then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, then President Zillur Rahman initiated talks with political parties in December 2011 seeking their opinion on the formation of the EC.

The president's move could not forge a consensus among political parties. The then political situation became volatile after the cancellation of the election time

non-partisan caretaker government (CG). The BNP-led alliance was agitating for restoration of the CG system. In a show of positive gesture, they joined the talks with the president. But BNP and its components of the alliance showed a lack of interest in the formation of the EC. They focused on their main agenda and urged the president to take steps for restoration of the CG.

This time around, the situation is different. The BNP-led alliance is not agitating on the streets demanding restoration of the CG. Khaleda Zia herself in November came up with a set of electoral reform proposals focusing on the formation of the new EC in February next year on the basis of consensus among the political parties. Her party requested President Abdul Hamid to

CG.

The dialogue led by the president seems to have offered an opportunity to bring a qualitative change in the confrontational culture of politics. Politics returned to the discussion table after a long time. Formation of a new EC through consensus among the political parties will be a groundbreaking development. And this seems possible as



President Abdul Hamid and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia talk to each other on December 18, 2016 at Bangabhaban when a BNP delegation met him as part of a dialogue on the formation of a new Election Commission.

PHOTO: PID

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As many as 23 political parties including AL and BNP joined the talks. Of them, 13 political parties, including the BNP, strongly proposed a restoration of a CG although it was not on the agenda. Six parties, including the AL and Jatiya Party, opposed the CG system either at the dialogue or outside. Two of the remaining four parties that did not say anything on this issue had earlier spoken in favour of the caretaker system. Wrapping up the talks with the political parties, then President Zillur Rahman formed a four-member search committee to propose names for formation of the EC. The present EC led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad was formed in February 2012.

hold talks with the political parties to form an EC acceptable to all through a search committee. The president responded to the proposal and began holding discussions with the BNP on Sunday. He will sit separately with other political parties including the AL.

Khaleda Zia proposed names of some eminent persons for the search committee. This shows BNP's change of heart. The party seems to have taken a realistic approach in the context of the prevailing political situation. Its demand for restoration of the non-partisan CG system will no way be accepted by the ruling AL. A strong EC is needed for the next election to be conducted in a free and fair manner in the absence of the

the BNP now wants what the ruling AL committed to earlier.

The success of the president's move may pave the way to bring fresh reform in laws to strengthen the EC and the electoral system. If so, this may help the ruling AL to fulfill its own pledge made in the run up to the January 2014 parliamentary election in which the party made the same promises.

If the EC is strengthened and successful in holding free and fair elections, it may bury the demand for an unelected election-time government. Otherwise, the demand will remain valid.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A presidential truthfulness oath



YASHENG HUANG

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump will be sworn in as the 45th president of the United States. I say "sworn in," rather than "assume the presidency," because, under Section I of Article II of the US

Constitution, Trump cannot actually become president unless he takes an oath of office, publicly committing himself to uphold the Constitution and perform to the best of his ability while in office. That is, of course, the case for all presidents. But, given how Trump comported himself during the campaign, it is particularly meaningful in his case.

Until now, Trump has made no effort to behave in an honest or reliable way. Technically, he didn't have to. The US does not require any sworn statements from the men and women who run for president, nor does it have any enforceable code of behaviour or constraints on the kind of rhetoric that can be used. Candidates may conduct themselves however they see fit.

This approach is based on the assumption that we can trust the candidates' judgment. People seeking the country's highest office should know how to balance the political imperative of winning votes with a sense of responsibility for the feasibility of – and reasoning behind – their policy promises.

By and large, experience has vindicated this view. The US has had the good fortune of choosing largely from among presidential aspirants who adhere to generally accepted norms. With Trump, it seems that fortune has turned into bankruptcy.

During his primary and general election campaigns, Trump lied incessantly about himself, his businesses, his opponents, other countries' behaviour and motivations, America's electoral system, the size of trade deficits, the actions of the Federal Reserve, and data on everything from labour to crime (to name a few examples).

Moreover, many of Trump's campaign promises – building a Mexico-funded wall on America's southern border, bringing back lost manufacturing jobs, deporting millions of illegal immigrants – are patently impossible to implement. Mitt Romney, the Republican Party's presidential nominee in 2012, was right when he called Trump "a phony, a fraud," a candidate whose promises are "worthless."

But while these traits are clearly problematic, they obviously have not hurt Trump's political career. Trump convinced a sizable portion of the electorate to ignore – if not condone – his flagrant policy reversals and lack of knowledge. Even Romney himself bowed to Trump in the end, meeting with the president-elect a couple of weeks after the election, reportedly in search of a cabinet

position.

This has to be one of the most sobering lessons from this past year: outrageous lies and hollow promises can win even the most consequential elections. And adhering to basic norms of decency – facts can be massaged, but not manufactured, and promises must be plausible, if vague – can lose them. Trump's opponent in the campaign, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, learned that the hard way.

During the campaign, Clinton often quoted First Lady Michelle Obama: "When they go low," she would declare, "we go high." But when your opponent goes as low as Trump, "going high" is like choosing, in a classic prisoner's dilemma, to remain loyal to your partner in crime, who, sitting in the next room, is cutting a deal to testify against you. When you "go high" in such circumstances, you get

same time, new members of the US Congress and Trump's cabinet will make a similar pledge.

Given this reverence for oaths, it is reasonable to assume that taking a truthfulness oath before initiating a campaign for public office would have some impact on candidates' approach.

There is nothing partisan about this proposal; many Republicans were victims of Trump's unbridled campaign style before Clinton was in his crosshairs. The public and the media could use the oath as a tool for assessing – and holding accountable – would-be leaders. And candidates would stand to gain a competitive advantage against opponents who refuse to take the oath.

Implementation would not be difficult. While the presidential oath is required by the



US President elect Donald Trump.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ LUCAS JACKSON

what game theorists call a "sucker's payoff." Candidates should never be put in such a position. Instead, we must make sure that all candidates adhere to a basic code of conduct. One simple way to do that would be to demand that all presidential candidates, beginning in 2020, take an oath to be truthful, responsible, and transparent in their campaign rhetoric and conduct.

In American society and political culture, the oath has a rare status. Testifying in a court of law or before a committee of the US Congress, witnesses "solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Doctors take the "Hippocratic Oath," pledging first to do no harm. Students at many universities swear to uphold an honour code. And Trump will not be alone in taking his oath next month: at around the

US Constitution, a candidates' oath wouldn't have to be. Political and market pressure would be enough, if print, television, and social media simply refused to carry campaign advertisements from candidates who refused to take the oath.

The political advantage should not go to the most mendacious candidate. For the sake of democracy, we must take action to solidify basic norms of decency and transparency in vital election campaigns. We can start with the modest step of demanding a truthfulness oath from all future presidential candidates.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Chittagong needs help

Despite accounting for the major part of the country's GDP, Chittagong is worsening by the day. Public transport is infrequent. Narrow roads lead to frequent traffic congestion. Water and electricity are in scarce supply, and dust makes it difficult to breathe in open air.

According to online reports, Chittagong generates 40 percent of Bangladesh's industrial output, 80 percent of its international trade and 50 percent of its governmental revenue. The Chittagong Stock Exchange had more than 700 listed companies, with a market capitalisation of USD 32 billion in June 2015. The city is home to many of the country's oldest and largest corporations. How is it that we face such disintegration despite all of this?

Steps should be taken to diminish these unbearable problems. If WASA took initiative to water the city every morning, the dust problem would be mitigated to a large extent.

The government must take measures to transform Chittagong into a clean and healthy city.

Rafik Alamgir
Chittagong