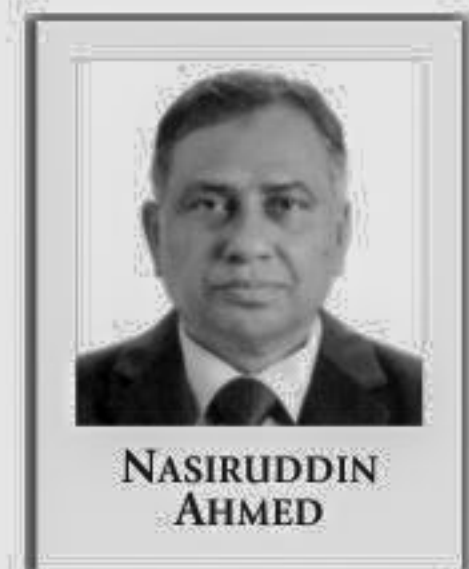


Public hearings can fight corruption



NASIRUDDIN AHMED
 Bangladesh is a lower middle-income country with a promising and stable economy. The economy of Bangladesh continues to maintain its sustainable growth momentum with a healthy 7 percent-plus growth rate in FY 2015-16. The head count poverty rate declined from 31.5 percent in 2010 to 23.2 percent in 2016 while the extreme poverty rate decreased from 23.2 percent in 2010 to 12.9 percent in 2016 (BBS, 2016). The foreign exchange reserve shows a steady increase and the exchange rate of US dollar remains stable. The country's remarkable steady growth is possible due to a number of factors including macroeconomic stability, population control and openness of the economy. Building on its social-economic progress so far, the government has taken up multifarious initiatives to elevate Bangladesh to a knowledge-based and technology-driven middle-income country by 2021.

However, despite economic progress, corruption remains a formidable problem in Bangladesh. According to all major global indicators of corruption, namely Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), World Bank's Control of Corruption, World Economic Forum's Irregular Payments and Bribes and Fund for Peace's Fragile State Index, Bangladesh finds itself among the most corrupt countries in the world. Empirical evidence from a number of countries shows a strong correlation between government effectiveness and the level of corruption. Highly corrupt governments usually have big problems in delivering public services, enforcing laws, and representing the public interest (Fukuyama, 2014).

In Bangladesh, citizens have to travel long distances, often multiple times, incur high costs and endure considerable delays and hassle to access public services (PMO Bangladesh). Systemic corruption sufficiently undermines a state's ability to carry out its basic functions such as supplying public goods and services (IME, 2016).

With the help of a social accountability tool, such as public hearing, it would be possible to deliver corruption-free public services to citizens. Article 7(1) of the Constitution stipulates that all powers in the Republic belong to the people. This study is based on the corruption experiences of about 1000 people who participated in 42 public hearings conducted by the Anti-Corruption Commission in collaboration with Transparency International Bangladesh, JICA and the World Bank in 37 upazilas of 36 districts and 5 offices in Dhaka, namely RAJUK, BRTA, Passport, three offices of AC (Land) and three offices of Sub-Registrar and a follow-up of public hearing on RAJUK.

information, who can be expected to be in a better bargaining position than before. Second, anecdotal evidence suggests that the presence of a large number of citizens in the public hearing creates collective pressure on public officials who respond to the complaints raised by the citizens and tries to address their grievances. The public hearing invites public officials of a few government agencies and citizens of the same locality and allows them to question the officials directly on issues of corruption, and other hassles they face in service delivery. According to the World Development Report 2017, the three key conditions include transparency, which makes information available, publicity which makes

organisations for improving service delivery through business process reengineering. Thirdly, public hearings attempt to fulfil the three key conditions for bringing accountability in public offices through citizen engagement.

The Anti-Corruption Commission in collaboration with Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) conducted an information fair and public hearing for the first time in Muktagachha, Mymensingh from December 28-29, 2014. A large segment of common people attended the programme. It was found through these public hearings conducted by the ACC that every public office is vulnerable to corruption; the system hardly works for public service delivery, and systematic corruption prevails in public offices, land management, health, and rural electrification appear to be the most corrupt departments.

The major reasons behind corruption are the lengthy and cumbersome process of public service delivery, many intermediaries, little transparency and accountability, absence of exemplary punishment for corrupt practices, heavy reliance on manual system and so on.

The existing irregularities and corruption may be controlled if the following measures are to be taken like undertaking business process reengineering for better service delivery, introducing online public service delivery, recognising the champions of accountability in public service, developing partnership with government organisations, NGOs, civil society including media, introducing decentralised governance, bringing the corrupt officials to justice, etc.

The ACC works to achieve the two objectives of building effective citizens against corruption and improving the system of public service delivery. In this regard, public hearing and its follow-up appear to be effective instruments of corruption prevention. The ACC has decided to take follow-up action of public hearings already conducted and document the success stories. The ACC and TIB will jointly undertake a research work to assess the effectiveness of public hearings. However, the challenge is to institutionalise public hearings and other social accountability tools in the system of public service delivery.

The writer is Commissioner, Anti-Corruption Commission.



ILLUSTRATION: WWW.SIMPLE.COM

The Cabinet Division in a circular issued on June 5, 2014 authorised the Anti-Corruption Commission to conduct public hearing for improving integrity and preventing corruption in public offices.

Public hearings are formal meetings at the community level where citizens express their grievances on matters of public interest to public officials and service providers try to address their grievances. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) conducts public hearings at the upazila level for ensuring the accountability of public officials and also transparency of their work. Public hearings can be thought of as a way of removing asymmetric information and thereby, empowering citizens with

information accessible, and accountability which makes information actionable. The ACC organises public hearings in collaboration with its Corruption Prevention Committees at the district and upazila levels, and Transparency International Bangladesh and development partners (World Bank, JICA and GIZ). The focus of public hearings is on land management (land registration, settlement and administration), health and rural electrification. The reason for selecting these organisations is that these services are essential for larger sections of households and, further, the ripple effect is even more. Based on the feedback received from public hearings, the ACC is holding dialogue with government

Underage marriage bill passed

Special Provision will legalise child marriage

MUCH to the public's dismay, the parliament has passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act-2017 with a very significant proviso – special circumstances – that allows a boy or a girl to get married before reaching the minimum age limit. This Bill, that has been passed, could very well turn back years of advocacy work that has been done to protect the rights of girls in this country. According to section 2 of the bill, any male who is yet to complete 21 years or any female who is yet to complete 18 years, will be considered underage for marriage. However, Section 19 of the proposed law states that if any marriage takes place in line with the directives of a court and consent of parents or guardians alongside specific process in context in the best interest of an underage female, such marriage will not be considered an offence.

So why exactly did the authorities turn a deaf ear to pleas and protests from different sections of society to not include the special provision? What rights groups fear, and we agree with them on this, that "special circumstances", being ambiguous in definition lends itself to large-scale abuse. It will legalise child marriage rather than deter it. What is the compulsion of the government to insert a special provision? It defies rationale. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this act is that it is an act of appeasement meant to placate those who are virulently opposed to having a minimum marriageable age.

Hooliganism at RU

Bring the perpetrators to book

THE repeated attempts of the local unit of the ruling party to influence and obstruct the recruitment process at Rajshahi University (RU) is deplorable. On numerous occasions, reportedly, leaders of the local Awami League tried to force the RU administration to recruit their chosen candidates. In a mockery of democracy, it staged protests demanding jobs for the party faithful, and later burst into none other than the Vice Chancellor's office to manhandle him. Embolden by a culture of impunity that surrounds the affair, some ruling party members foiled a couple of recruitment tests and a viva voce in December last year. And finally, this month, they locked the varsity's main gate.

What is shocking is the response of the president of Rajshahi city AL, who has questioned the university authority's "motives" for holding the recruitment exams in the first place. Are we to assume that from now on universities are supposed to seek the local ruling party's approval before starting recruitment process? This behaviour clearly shows some out of control ruling party men demonstrating a complete disregard for the rule of law.

We urge the AL leadership to come down heavily on these errant party members who are giving the ruling party bad press. We also believe that the repetitive pattern of such incidents is indicative of a deeper malaise within some of the party's local units. The AL needs to remove the impunity that some of its members seem to enjoy. We demand that the law enforcers take stern action against those responsible for such acts of hooliganism in RU.

How will China shape the international order?



SELINA MOHSIN
 MUCH of the world is beset by uncertainty. Regional conflicts and climate change threaten intensified population pressures and migration. Brexit and the polarisation of the US under President Trump are echoed by rising nationalism and populism, notably in the EU. Global trade, financial flows and regulation are threatened by protectionism. The international order established under UN and US leadership after WWII is being challenged. However, world economic growth continues, particularly in much of Asia; the information explosion and technological and scientific advances create new opportunities for human progress.

When Xi Jinping made the first ever visit by a Chinese President to the Davos conference and defended the causes of international order and free trade the world sighed with relief. China's three decades of phenomenal economic development, since Deng Xiaoping, set it on a new course of communist party controlled capitalism creating an economic giant, which in purchasing power parity terms is equal to the US and perhaps bigger than that of India, Japan and Germany combined.

This raises new questions: How does China see its new role in the world economy and order? Can it successfully manage its transition to somewhat slower growth and greater emphasis on services and domestic consumption? Does it wish to challenge the post-WWII international order and US leadership by creating its own, or will it rather largely adopt, but modify, that order?

China has made impressive progress in its ambitious plans for international outreach and influence. From western China, through central Asia and on to Europe there now stretches a long belt of infrastructure investment, including oil and gas pipelines, road and rail connections. A long freight train from China recently made its first trip through the Channel tunnel to England. Other lines run through Moscow to Scandinavia. Similarly, the USD 46

billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor includes at one end new highways over the Karakoram Range and at the other the new Chinese-operated Gwadar port on the Indian Ocean. China has built huge rail and other projects across Africa and Latin America. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which includes Russia and four Central Asian countries, India and Pakistan will become full members later this year.

Less noticeably, but just as importantly, China has built up massive holdings in US federal treasury bonds using its large bilateral trade surplus. President Trump's withdrawal from Obama's Trans Pacific Partnership trade pact, which excluded Beijing, has left China free to advance its own Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The new China led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is rapidly developing to complement, or rival, the longer established World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

In the realm of 'hard power', President Xi Jinping has sharply cut the size of the Chinese army to modernise its professional effectiveness. The navy has also been expanded and its activity extended into the Indian Ocean, including participation in international patrols against Somalia based piracy. Refuelling and other rights have been established in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, while in Djibouti a full naval base is being constructed at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and the Suez Canal route to Europe. More controversially, China has laid claim to most of the South China Sea on the basis of the famous 'dotted line' on an old Chinese map. It overlaps the maritime areas of Vietnam, Philippines and others. Likewise it claims much of the East China Sea on the basis of islands also claimed by Japan.

These conflicting claims involve not only sovereignty issues and freedom of maritime movement but also important fishing resources and potential offshore mining, especially for hydrocarbons. China has fortified its position by artificial expansion of islands for airstrips and military facilities. The US claims to have evidence showing that China is now adding missile sites. In addition to overflights the US has sent a naval carrier force into the disputed areas

to reassert freedom of navigation. Analysts, alarmed by the risk of military confrontation or accidental incident, have noted China's recent resumption of purchases of US federal treasury bonds and now its ban on imports of North Korean coal as possible gestures to Washington to reduce bilateral tension.

How the relationship between China and the Trump administration will develop is clearly significant. There seems some risk if President Trump follows up his campaign allegations of currency manipulation and unfairness as reasons behind the massive bilateral US-China trade imbalance. In fact, rather than lower the renminbi to support its exports, China has for over a year been

executive powers of the White House remain formidable.

On the Chinese side there is fortunately less uncertainty. President Xi Jinping faces an important CCP Congress meeting this autumn but this is likely to mark a further consolidation of his power, rather than herald any great change of established policy, unless in response to new challenges from Washington. Despite Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, its military modernisation, CPEC and OBOR outreach, China's present ambition seems primarily regional. In military terms the US remains the only superpower.

China is still a middle income country



The Djibouti-Ethiopia electric rail line was partly financed by China. China has invested in many such infrastructure projects in Africa. PHOTO: AFP

trying to support its currency. The possibility of any new US restraints on imports of Chinese consumer goods, beyond some existing US and EU cases under World Bank rules, is already alarming US importers such as Walmart.

As the new US administration slowly takes shape some good key secretary level appointments are encouraging. Together with Vice President Pence they are likely to provide advice to a President lacking in experience. Trump may or may not take that advice. Under the checks and balances of the US constitution both the courts and Congress can limit Presidential power, particularly with respect to legislation. However, the

and analysts are divided on whether it can follow the examples of South Korea and Poland by escaping the "middle income trap". Some point to its aging population, its enormous debt and its problems of excessive investment. On the other side, it is argued that technology can make up for the decline in working age population and the debt is predominately domestic. It has huge currency reserves, positive trade balance and the central bank has an excellent record of skilful use of fiscal and monetary policy.

China appears to be going ahead in a positive manner.

The writer is a former Ambassador.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Engine serial numbers should be exempted from vehicle documents

Engines are spare parts in a vehicle, just like water pumps and radiators; they also have serial numbers. So why aren't these recorded? Engines don't run as long as the vehicle itself and have to be replaced sooner or later. Modern engines don't run properly when over-hauled and have to be replaced. When they are replaced, it is a huge hassle to try and change the engine serial number in the fitness documents. In many countries, the vehicle chassis number is the only number recorded in the vehicle documents, because it is the chassis that will stay with the vehicle forever. I hope this will be considered by BRTA.

Aminur Rahim
 Mohakhali

We are at one with the new CEC

We wholeheartedly congratulate all the commissioners including the CEC. In the oath taking ceremony, the CEC said that their main challenge will be to hold a fair election and that they will work to earn the trust of all political parties. We are at one with the CEC in that regard. The last EC received a lot of flak over discharging duties in conducting polls of various national and local bodies, though it guaranteed impartiality.

We hope the new commission will take its place in our nation's history by discharging its constitutional duties neutrally. Unlike the last commission, we hope that the new one will succeed not by words but by deeds.

Md. Golam Azam, Gurudaspur, Natore