

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA TUESDAY MAY 9, 2017, BAISHAKH 26, 1424 BS

Ershad's new alliance

Will it add value to our politics?

WE have another coalition, the country's biggest-ever, titled United National Alliance (UNA) led by Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad. Coalition is not new to Bangladesh. But the newest one has generated a few questions.

To begin with, it is still not clear how many parties are there in the partnership. Though the spokesperson of the UNA has claimed it is 58, the detailed list of the members mentions names of 56 parties. Among these parties only two are registered with the Election Commission. It is also alleged that most of the parties do not have the adequate political set up such as an office, local committees and so on. It seems there is little substance in this new political move by Ershad except the high number of parties and their pompous names.

It has also raised questions about the status of Jatiya Party (JP) in the AL-led 14-party alliance. Currently, the JP is a part of the ruling alliance. Awkwardly enough, it is also the main opposition party in the parliament while having three members in the cabinet. With its latest move to form a separate election coalition, JP has only made the whole political state more confounding.

According to the press statement, the new alliance is aimed at contesting the upcoming elections and forming government together with the alliance members. But given the credential of the constituents of the new coalition one wonders if that is possible. Hence the question arises why this new coalition? Is it a bargaining tool in future electoral politics? Or, has the former autocrat been put up to it?

Macron's victory

Far-right message rejected

WE are relieved at the result of the French elections with pro-European centrist Emmanuel Macron winning the battle with the far right leader Marine Le Pen who sent chills across Europe and the rest of the world with her anti-immigration, racist rhetoric.

We congratulate Macron on his victory for it signifies a win over an onslaught on liberal, progressive and secular values for which France has stood for and which has set the basic standards of a democratic world. The results prove that the majority of the French voters have rejected rightist, populist politics and are willing to put their faith in a young president with little political experience.

We are heartened by this victory which reflects Europe's maturity in its efforts to retain the values of inclusiveness, tolerance and egalitarianism. Denmark and now France is in contrast to the mindboggling return of regressive, racist and insular politics in the US, and also in contrast to the Brexit experience, both of which were imitated by Le Pen.

While it is a laudable and comprehensive victory, for Macron the challenges are many. Being a newcomer in the political scene he has no representation in the parliament besides himself although he intends to contend all the seats in the upcoming parliamentary election. His success therefore, depends on not only convincing his voters but also the members of parliament that he is a man who will deliver on his goal to deal with several prickly issues including removing anti immigrant sentiments, creating jobs for the marginalised, revitalising the French economy and intelligently fighting terrorism. If he can tackle all these ambitious tasks successfully there is a fair chance that he may help in uniting the French people. Certainly this is a step in the right direction for a united, inclusive Europe.

End of 'strategic patience'?

NO FRILLS



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

PRESIDENT Trump's policy towards North Korea is a major departure from his predecessor who preferred direct talks with Pyongyang when the country was undergoing

rocket, missile and nuclear tests. The policy under the Obama administration revolved around stricter sanctions against North Korea and wooing the Chinese to take a tougher stand against the Pyongyang leadership on the nuclear issue. President Trump, on the other hand, has stated, "If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will." But is it that simple? Yes, moving a US carrier strike group near North Korea in April 2017 and the joint exercises with South Korea and Japan make wonderful headlines, but the only country which has serious leverage on North Korea is China. Period.

Because China not only protects North Korea from a belligerent United Nations, it also happens to be its biggest trading partner. The close ties between the countries go back to the Korean War (1950-1953) in which China actively participated with boots-on-the-ground on the side of North Korea. In 2014, the bilateral trade between the two neighbours stood at nearly USD 7 billion, according to Seoul-based Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency. As the leadership in Pyongyang grows increasingly erratic, especially with the assassination of Kim Jong-un's exiled brother in Malaysia, the Chinese leadership is beginning to worry. This is reflected in the temporary suspension of coal imports from that country in February 2017, which happens to be one of the few items that are exported legally. It is understandable why Beijing is not too keen on going along with the proposed UN sanctions that would cripple the economy and hence the Pyongyang leadership, which if pushed into a corner may react militarily.

No, the policy must be "carrot and stick" and not stick alone. Despite all the bluster coming out of Washington, it would be madness to give North Korea ultimatums. Those never work against hardliners, and the Kim sitting in Pyongyang is as hard as it gets. Given, that "China is currently North Korea's only economic backer of any importance", as stated by Nicholas Eberstadt, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, any solution without Chinese participation is not a

solution. When we look at the economic cooperation between the countries of late, we see that Beijing is in no mood to let Pyongyang go under because Washington proposes it. In 2015, the two neighbours opened a bulk cargo and container shipping route to boost North Korea's coal export to China. That is not all. The same year, the Guomenwan border trade zone was opened in Dandong (a city on the Korean border) to boost bilateral trade.

These are hardly any indications of Beijing going tough on Pyongyang. Dandong promises to be a crucial hub for bilateral trade, investment and

in Pyongyang by any action a Western-led coalition could cause.

When one takes into account this perspective, one begins to understand why China has not been too keen to push North Korea. Yes, the Americans have provided South Korea with an anti-ballistic missile defence system (THAAD), but does the world really need another Cuban missile crisis on its hand? And we should have no doubts that North Korea will not fold like Libya or Iraq. During the Korean war, the north was bombed indiscriminately and in a country where the Kim(s) have been around for as long as they have - in

leadership and hence we are stuck in this endless cycle of nuclear tests and military brinkmanship on all sides. From Kim's point of view, the only thing standing between him and an American led "invasion" is his nuclear arsenal. The only way out of this situation is of course for China and the United States to work out a deal with North Korea that would guarantee a non-aggression pact between North Korea and outside powers, in return for a dismantling of the nuclear programme. Washington for its part has to go the whole nine yards with a normalisation of relations, i.e. lifting of sanctions and aid to help



People watch news on television showing file footage of a North Korean missile launch, at a railway station in Seoul on April 5, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP/JUNG YEON-JE

tourism. Indeed, the food and energy aid China provides to its impoverished neighbour is of critical importance, especially with the Six Party Talks failing in 2009 (until then 75 percent of the aid came from the US, Japan, South Korea, China). While Washington sees the Pyongyang leadership at its weakest since the September 2016 floods that decimated crops, and with UN agencies stating that up to 15 million North Koreans (60 percent of the population) are now food insecure, China views the situation from a completely different angle. It does not savour the prospect of millions of refugees flooding over the border in case of a political meltdown

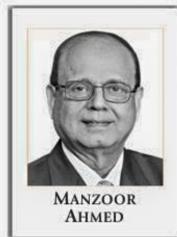
isolation where the State has absolute control over every facet of life and which remains (ideologically at least) stuck very much in the Cold War era, every action by the West will be viewed with deep suspicion.

China for its part remains in a bind on the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which makes it obligatory for Beijing to come to the assistance of Pyongyang in case the latter faced military aggression. A sore point to say the least, although one may wonder if push did come to shove whether China would live up to that clause. This is hardly lost upon the North Korean

rebuild the battered North Korean economy. Full diplomatic relations may be some way away, but a denuclearising process could pave the way for relations sometime in the future. The last time the world powers faced off was during the Cuban missile crisis in the early '60s. The situation is much more volatile this time around because the stakes are also much higher. We need cooler heads to prevail, and a peace deal can be worked out given all parties are sincere in their efforts.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Lack of accountability in education an Achilles heel



MANZOOR AHMED

JAGANNATH University recently appointed 12 leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League as "special officers" without advertisement - a practice that Vice

Chancellor Mijanur Rahman justified as the natural right of the ruling party men (April 27, *Prothom Alo*).

"I am bound to appoint the Chhatra League men. They are 12 hardworking leaders. Two of them are from Tungipara of Gopalganj; that is their most important identity," said the Vice Chancellor, according to the report.

This decision and the explanation of the vice chancellor, not unique, going by media reports, is an example of a gross violation of accountability and impunity of illegality in the education system.

An independent scrutiny conducted in 15 different districts by an audit firm of the USD 5.8 billion Third Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP3), funded by the government and a consortium of donors, revealed extensive waste and malpractice. The chartered accountant firm engaged for the review found "fraud and corruption, syndicated bidding, collusion, and malpractice" in 91 out of 163 procurement packages which it had investigated.

Assuming this level of corruption in all of USD 1.6 billion worth of procurement, which was estimated to be taking place during the five years of the primary education programme, this would amount to about USD 880 million of corrupt tenders for goods and contract in the largest primary education development programme of the country.

When asked about the audit report, spokesperson for the Asian Development Bank said, "ADB, World Bank and other development partners, along with the ministry of primary and mass education, take a zero tolerance approach to fraud and corruption."

(New Age, July 5, 2014) Evidently, zero tolerance did not go far enough to prevent massive waste and corruption.

A 2015 Transparency International report mentions "obvious" and "less obvious" corruption in education: "In Bangladesh, the main forms of corruption identified in the education sector include more obvious forms such as, bribery in admissions and in the disbursement of stipends; nepotism in the recruitment of teachers; and corruption in procurement."

questions; and sexual harassment in schools and universities (Transparency International, tihelpdesk@transparency.org).

The effects of widespread lack of accountability in the education system are manifested in two major ways - in poor learning achievements and competencies of the next generation and in the lessons the young learn about ethics and morality.

Accountability and performance of the education system obviously is not a

management seriously hampered the goals of quality with equity.

A national assessment of student learning, Mujeri reported, showed that only 25 percent of Class 5 students achieved the expected competencies in Bangla and Math, as assessed by a national sample survey conducted under government auspices. However, over 95 percent of the students sitting for Class 5 primary completion examination passed. These two kinds of data point to a deep problem of accountability.

The Minister of Primary and Mass Education, Advocate Mostafizur Rahman, chief guest at the event, noted the government's determination and commitment to promote quality education for all. In a context of ethical and moral degradation in society, all the good efforts of the government do not bear fruit, he argued.

"Let's all work together," Minister Rahman pleaded. "Parents and mothers want the best for their children. Let's harness the energy of the mothers." He asked, "Why shouldn't all teachers, in government schools and those of NGOs, work with the same sincerity and be answerable to the community?"

Nurul Islam Nahid, the Minister of Education, standing in a rally against corruption in education on March 9, said that the government was mulling adoption of a new law to stop corruption in the education sector, which would be discussed in the next parliamentary session. "Whoever gets involved in corruption cannot be spared and must face due punishment," he affirmed, reiterating the government's zero-tolerance policy towards corruption (*Dhaka Tribune*, March 10, 2017)

No one would argue with the expectations of the two top policymakers in education. The chances of their hopes being fulfilled would rise significantly if these expectations are backed up by the right measures at the highest political level.

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SOURCE: 123RF

The government has taken steps to recruit primary teachers applying transparent procedures. Student stipends are being paid out by mobile banking. Electronic tendering is expected to control grabbing of procurement bids by politically patronised muscle men.

The "less obvious" malpractices are also more difficult to control. These include teacher absenteeism; misuse of private tuition by teachers; collusion of corrupt officials, teachers and coaching centres to leak public examination

unique Bangladeshi concern. The Global Campaign for Education, an international civil society coalition for education, adopted for its annual campaign in 2017 the theme of accountability and citizen participation.

A seminar organised by CAMPE, a forum of education NGOs, and the Citizens' Platform of SDGs in Bangladesh to observe the Global Action Week, deliberated on the theme. In his keynote presentation, Dr. Mustafa Mujeri underscored how lack of accountability

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Our betrayal to the Sundarbans

My hometown is Khulna. It gives me great pride to have grown up close to the Sundarbans. Ever since the signing of the MoU over the Rampal Power Plant in 2016, experts have been warning the government of the environmental damage it will bring to the people and the ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The increasing salinity in the water bodies, frequent sinking of oil tankers, and the subsequent spill of furnace oils by hundreds of thousands of litres are already damaging the health of our beloved Sundarbans. In addition, the recent Greenpeace report, published by *The Daily Star* on May 6, has forecasted 6,000 premature deaths and low birth weights of 24,000 babies that will result from the power plant.

No major initiative has been taken by the government in the recent years to protect the Sundarbans from deforestation, illegal possession of land, and the environmental damages mentioned above, all of which has made the forest uninhabitable for flora and fauna. We, the people living around the Sundarbans, are feeling completely helpless in the light of the government's decision to ignore all the warnings issued by environmental experts. We are being utterly ungrateful to a forest that is our national pride - one that has been protecting us from natural forces for hundreds of years. In return, we are planning its destruction for material gains.

For the very last time, as a Southerner of Bangladesh who has grown up around the Sundarbans, I beg the government to stop the Rampal Power Plant project and prevent the natural disasters that are imminent.

Md. Jonny Hossain
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