

## NTCB – a den of mismanagement

Heed TIB recommendations

TRANSPARENCY International Bangladesh (TIB), the graft watchdog, has done a study on the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NTCB) and had some damning things to say about the board. It is timely, principally because we find NTCB in the news on a regular basis these days, either because of factual errors in textbooks, or more worryingly, the direct omission or misrepresentation of important events related to our culture, tradition and history. The study points out that 16 pieces have been left out of five textbooks (at primary and secondary levels) including poems, on the demand of certain pressure groups. The publication and distribution of textbooks process is apparently laced with corruption and nepotism which ultimately result in substandard editing and printing.

The TIB is not off the mark when it says that it is necessary to make NTCB an independent commission, free of politicisation and incompetent elements. Until NTCB is able to function with freedom, we will see no end to the meddling by vested interest groups who are both morally and financially corrupt.

It has been also alleged that certain NTCB officials are in cahoots with specific organisations whenever a tender is called. Indeed, the list of anomalies extends to awarding contracts to paper mills that do not meet the appropriate standards to awarding of honorarium to members who have little to do with preparing textbooks. All these point to systemic and entrenched graft at various levels of NTCB and perhaps it is time for the government anti-graft body to take a closer look at what is going on here.

## Low-speed vehicles on highways

Why not create parallel roads for them?

ADLY, it seems that we have readily resigned to the fact that the highways in the country are used for all the wrong purposes. At least that's the impression we get when we see rickshaws and other non-motorised vehicles plying highways—as a photo published in this daily yesterday indicates. The picture shows a number of rickshaws carelessly plying the Dhaka-Chittagong highway amid fast-moving vehicles. Needless to say, this poses a grave threat and is symptomatic of a total disregard for road safety both on the part of drivers and the traffic police.

That this happens with such frequency right under the nose of law enforcers—despite a government directive asking the BRTA to keep vehicles that cannot run at 60km per hour off the highways—is disturbing. Given the extremely high number of casualties and fatalities as a result of road accidents on highways, it is incomprehensible as to why harsher measures aren't being taken to keep non-motorised vehicles from blatantly flouting the law.

Both the Roads and Highways Department and the traffic police have a role to play in addressing the problem of low-speed vehicles on highways. What we need to do—and what seems to be the best option—is come up with alternatives such as frontage or parallel roads for these vehicles without which they will continue to ply highways. Parallel roads would also allow people of lesser means to get to their destinations without having to get on the highways—endangering their own lives and the lives of others. The time has come to think of realistic solutions such as these because it is clear that merely issuing directives that are rarely enforced will not make highways any safer.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Ease traffic congestion for admission-seekers

Many students will sit for an admission test at RUET on November 17, which will finish before noon. Soon after, some of them will travel to Sylhet to take another test at SUST the next day. After SUST, some will head back to Rajshahi for their interview at RU the next day. If the traffic becomes severe on the road, it will create a lot of problems for the admission-seekers who must move fast to attend their exams.

A few days ago, many students were not able to attend the RU admission test due to heavy traffic on the road from Dhaka to Rajshahi. In addition, the road is in a bad shape. I would like to urge the authorities to take appropriate measures so that the students can take their exams without any hassle.

Mawduda Hasnin, By email

## Oral saline factory in Jhenaidah

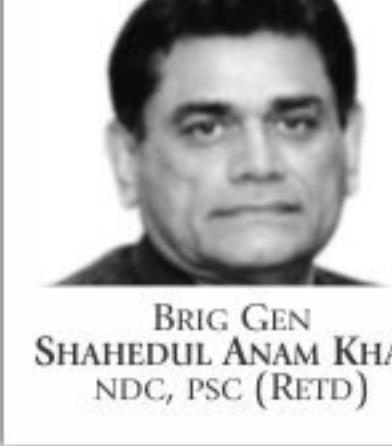
In 2013, the prime minister inaugurated an oral saline factory in Jhenaidah, the construction of which cost nearly Tk 1 crore and took six years to complete. However, the factory remained shut ever since. The case is further proof of how poorly government projects are planned and executed, often without conducting any feasibility study beforehand. It is necessary to ask why Jhenaidah was chosen for an oral saline factory in the first place.

If it was just to appease local voters who want to see infrastructural projects in their area, then those behind it must be held accountable for this flagrant waste of taxpayer money. If the permission was given based on a feasibility study, then we must ask why the factory production hasn't started yet. The government must refrain from wasting public money.

Sumon Kumar Paul, By email

## Let the political rival pick up the gauntlet

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

IT is good to see the BNP in the political arena after a period of hibernation. So far it has been a one-sided affair with the AL hogging the political show or whatever of politics we have

in the country. It was a change from last year when BNP's request to use Suhrawardy Udyan was turned down by the DMP. And even more refreshing was the fact that the meeting at the Udyan on Sunday went off peacefully. It has also left the AL without the future use of the oft-branded excuse for denying BNP the use of public venue, which is that the BNP programmes are preceded by disorder and end in chaos, and much inconvenience to the public. Both the BNP and the police deserve our compliments for an orderly political programme. But interestingly, police involvement in the BNP rally went beyond granting permission.

A notable aspect of the day was that, whereas, on previous occasions when the ruling party had organised such a meeting, or even of one of its appendages, there would be severe jams on the main roads and traffic would be closed on particular roads in the capital with police advisory well in advance as to how to beat the shemozzle on that day. Lo and Behold! There was hardly any public transport on the main streets of Dhaka! And all the entry into the city was blocked. Why?

As usual, in the case of the BNP, the permission for holding the rally was

**The AL has thrown down the political gauntlet, daring the BNP to join the elections. The least it can do is to allow its main political rival to pick it up.**

accompanied with 23 conditions which the BNP was obliged to fulfil before, during and after the rally. However, conditional political programme in the case of BNP is nothing new. In the past, it had to give undertakings to fulfil similar conditions before getting permission to hold meetings. And that is what begs the question: should the police be the ones to accord permission for a political event and be the final decision maker as to who should or should not be allowed to hold meetings, and where and how that should

of the police, but the police cannot be the final arbiter, as is the case now. The party in power needs to address this.

Some of the conditions laid down by the DMP would be considered ludicrous if only those were not imposed by the police. The organisers were directed to "end the rally by 5:00pm," they were not to make any "provocative remarks" or circulate "provocative leaflets" at the rally, and that "people must come at the venue two hours before the scheduled time at the public meeting and not to join the rally with processions." And

operators to put as much impediments as possible in the way of the BNP and keep attendance as low as possible by keeping their vehicles off the road that day. If it was the intention of the police to reduce as much as possible the sufferings of the people that such public meetings inflict, keeping private transports off the streets or putting check posts on the ingress to the city, through which only outgoing vehicles were allowed to pass that day, imposed more hardships on the people. Has it done anything to brighten



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PHOTO: SHAHEEN MOLLAH

be organised? Why should a political party have to obtain permission from the law enforcing agencies to hold political meetings in a public place is a question whose answers have eluded me. To hear political leaders in the government say that it is not for them but the police to allow meeting in a public place demeans both politics and politicians.

Certainly, the police must be informed of the political programme but that should be only to allow the force to take necessary measures to provide security and maintain law and order, not to seek permission. It should be the responsibility of the home ministry, which can certainly ask for the opinion

who decides what provocative remarks are? And public meeting venues are not classrooms that one is expected to enter at the bell and leave at the bell.

That being said, would one be misplaced to ask whether a written request was ever made to the police for use of Suhrawardy Udyan or such conditions had ever been placed on ruling party meetings?

As for the empty streets on that day, the use of state machinery to once again foil the opposition's political programme indirectly was not surprising but rather distressing. Even a child could see through the orchestrated action by the private transport owners and

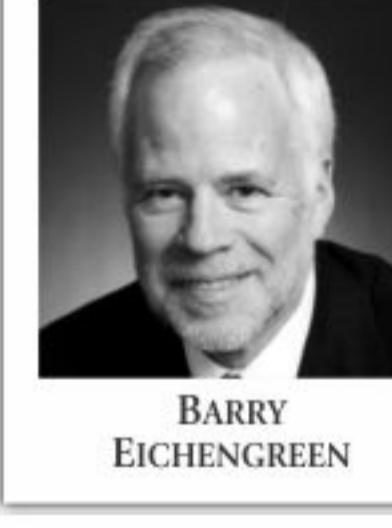
the image of democracy or politics or even that of the ruling party's?

Such measures do not demonstrate the strength of the party in power, on the contrary it betrays a degree of uncertainty in the minds of the ruling party, infused by the fragile character of democracy in the country today. The AL thinks very little of the political clout of the BNP, as evident from comments of its senior elders. So what is the worry? After all, the AL has thrown down the political gauntlet, daring the BNP to join the elections. The least it can do is to allow its main political rival to pick it up.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

## Central Banks in the dock



BARRY EICHENGREEN

ON November 11, 1997, the Bank of England took a big step toward independence, courtesy of the second reading in the House of Commons of a bill amending the Bank Act of 1946. The bill gave legislative affirmation to the decision, taken by then-Chancellor of the Exchequer

Gordon Brown, to free central bank operations from governmental control. This was a landmark event for an institution that had been under the yoke of government for a half-century. It symbolised how the need for central bank independence had become

Independence was also easier to defend when central bankers' task was limited to keeping inflation low and stable. Given this narrow remit, the distributional consequences of central banks' decisions were limited. It was easier, moreover, to explain how a central bank's policy instruments were linked to its politically mandated targets.

But after the global financial crisis highlighted the dangers of consigning monetary and fiscal policy to separate silos, central banks acquired additional responsibilities. Deciding whether or not to rescue a specific financial institution, whether to ensure systemic stability or for other reasons, has visible consequences for individual investors.

The same is true of unconventional interventions in markets for corporate bonds and mortgage-backed

reasons: for missing their inflation targets, for failing to maintain financial stability, for failing to restore stability in transparent ways, and for not adequately taking into account the global repercussions of their policies. Dissatisfied by their performance, politicians are seeking to reassert control.

Thus, we see the Bank of Italy attacked for its handling of the country's banking crisis. We hear the Bank of England criticised for voicing worries about the macroeconomic repercussions of Brexit. We encounter speculation that US President Donald Trump is intent on packing the Federal Reserve Board with politically compliant appointees.

But compromising central bank independence in order to enhance political accountability would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Monetary policy is complex and technical. Returning control to politicians is no more prudent than handing them the keys to a country's nuclear power plants.

Some will say that the way for central banks to ensure their independence is to abandon macroprudential and microprudential policies and forego unconventional interventions in securities markets. But a key lesson of the crisis is that macroeconomic and financial policies are closely intertwined, and that their coordination is most effective when the two tasks are housed in the same institution, if run by separate committees. Given the prevailing low level of interest rates, moreover, it is all but certain, come another crisis, that unconventional policies will be back.

What central banks can do to head off threats to their independence is become more transparent. They can announce the votes of individual board members on all policy-relevant matters and release minutes without undue delay. They can hold more press conferences and be less platitudinous in explaining their policies. They can avoid pontificating on questions remote from their mandates. They can acknowledge the right of politicians to define the goals the central bank is tasked with achieving.

And to shape the views of those politicians, they can better explain why cooperation with fiscal authorities and foreign central banks is in the public interest. They can publish more detailed financial accounts, including on their individual security transactions and counterparties.

Above all, they can avoid intervening in parliamentary politics, as the European Central Bank did when it hastened the fall of Silvio Berlusconi's government in Italy in 2011. Then they can keep their heads down and hope for the best.



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conventional wisdom.

Now, however, this wisdom is being questioned, and not just in the United Kingdom. So long as inflation was the real and present danger, it made sense to delegate monetary policy to conservative central bankers insulated from pressure to finance government budget deficits. Today, in contrast, the problem is the opposite, namely the inability of central banks to raise inflation to target levels.

To achieve this, it is necessary for monetary and fiscal policymakers to work together, including by allowing the central bank, *in extremis*, to monetise budget deficits. But when it comes to cooperating with the fiscal authorities, central bank independence is a hindrance, not a help.

securities. Not surprisingly, the notion of independence for central banks that visibly aided specific financial institutions—and this at a time when society as a whole was under unprecedented economic stress—quickly became politically toxic.

Independence is even more problematic in an age when the cross-border spillovers of national monetary policies have become powerful. Those spillovers make it important for central banks to take into account the impact of their policies on foreign countries and the global system. But the pursuit of global objectives is difficult, bordering on the impossible, when central banks function under the kind of narrow, domestically focused mandates that independence requires.

Today, central banks are under attack for all of these

Barry Eichengreen is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His latest book is *Hall of Mirrors: The Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the Uses – and Misuses – of History*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2017. (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)