

# A move in the right direction

SHARIF AS-SABER

**A** MIDST nationwide protests against the existing quota system in public service recruitment, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced the abolition of the system altogether. The protesters demanded reforms in the system rather than its complete elimination, so the announcement came as a real surprise. It provided a twist and turned the table towards yet another interesting phase of the quota debate.

As the prime minister indicated that some sort of arrangements will still be in place to safeguard the interests of the ethnic communities and people with disabilities, a complete removal of the system is unlikely to happen and we need to wait to see the fine print of the decision in black and white.

The public service quota system has long been a contentious issue drawing attention from all walks of life. However, it became more complex and controversial following the inclusion of 30 percent quota in 1997 for the offspring of Freedom Fighters. It also generated a robust debate about the need and justification for the quota system for specific groups of public-service jobseekers.

The civil service quota system was introduced in Bangladesh in 1972 through an interim recruitment policy issued and implemented by an administrative order. Its primary objectives were to rehabilitate freedom fighters and war-affected women as well as facilitate a fair distribution of employment opportunities across the various geographic regions of the country. However, in 1973, the government-appointed Administrative & Services Reorganisation Committee, led by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, recommended abolishing the quota system in favour of merit in order to build a reliable and high-quality civil service. Subsequent reform commissions and committees raised similar concerns. But the quota system prevailed.

The impacts of this quota system, however, have been less than satisfactory. If more than half of the recruits come from quotas, the quality of civil service is bound to suffer. Civil servants coming out of such a system may fail to perform their responsibilities well or protect their official interests. Their lack of aptitude and competitive knowledge of key issues may affect their performance in important policy matters and decisions such as security issues, economic policies and cross-border negotiations, among other things.

While the initial objectives of introducing the quota system in a war-ravaged country were noble, an overhauling of it was badly needed. In the current scenario, the civil service needs to



PHOTO: COLLECTED

**Demonstrators flash V-sign as they bring out a procession on the Dhaka University campus on April 12 welcoming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's announcement that there will be no quota in government jobs.**

be invigorated and the quota system reformed in accordance with the changing context. We have an increasing literacy rate among all segments of the population and an extremely high level of unemployment among the educated youths. The quota system has, thus far, failed to create and maintain a quality civil service that the nation needs and tackle the challenges of the 21st-century realities. Even the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) has highlighted the complexities in applying the existing quota system on several occasions and recommended simplifying it in the interest of public service.

So what is going to happen after the abolition of quota? Since the prime minister also referred to the special privilege for minority communities and people with disabilities, we expect to see retention of some sort of a quota provision. It is now the task of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Public Administration to prepare the summary of the order. The order may contain clauses in relation to (i) special provision for minority communities and people with disabilities; (ii) the fate of the current calls for public service jobs as well as the applications currently under process, and (iii) the time when the new quota-free public service provision will come into effect. It would be prudent for the prime minister and her office to have

an immediate talk with the key stakeholders including the Public Service Commission, Ministry of Law (to check and consider any legal ramifications) and representatives from students, unemployed new graduates, academia and the bureaucracy. It will also be up to the prime minister to decide whether to pass an administrative order or prepare a bill and send it to the parliament for approval. The government may decide to impose a temporary freeze on all civil service recruitment processes until the new order becomes effective.

Nonetheless, there is no point in supporting a complete absence of quota since there is a reason why "positive discrimination" is common around the world. However, such discrimination must be transitory and should not outweigh the merit-based recruitment process. Whether a quota system is in place or not, if there is any special need for upgrading of skills or higher education training for young people from any backward community or disadvantaged class, or if any specific support is required by any special group, the government may decide to extend assistance to those people which will help them to be better educated and better trained and compete on their own merit rather than relying on any sort of favour or discrimination.

That means, a labour market improvement may be considered more

important than promoting and maintaining quotas. As a contingency approach, if any special circumstances arise, the President of the Republic, in consultation with the Public Service Commission, may decide to appoint people from any disadvantaged group as a one-off measure to maintain equity and justice. The maximum number of such considerations needs to be kept to a reasonable level. Another option is to keep the higher-level public service (first and second classes) completely merit-based while introducing new quota provisions for lower-level positions (third and fourth classes). It could be argued that, compared to the lower level, merit is much more essential for the higher-level positions to deal with critical policy and administrative matters.

Bangladesh, without a doubt, needs a strong civil service. We welcome the prime ministerial intervention that has created a real opportunity for the government of Bangladesh to tap into the huge pool of educated and talented young people available in the job market. A quota-free or a low-quota environment will allow the government to find and recruit the best and the brightest.

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## Shubho Nabobarsho

Let us celebrate unity through diversity

**E**VERY Pahela Baishakh comes with a new rhythm and new promises, but a common thread is the time spent with loved ones, the sights and smells that evoke Pahela Baishakhs past, and the warmth and hope that come from renewed pledges. As we welcome yet another Pahela Baishakh, leaving behind another year, we're painfully reminded of all the people that we have lost, the mistakes that we made, the plans that went awry, and the promises that weren't delivered. But Pahela Baishakh is as much about taking stock of the past as about opening a new chapter in life and making sure the apparitions of the past year do no cast a shadow over the possibilities of our future.

In recent years, this day has attained special significance because of its message of unity so essential for a diverse and multicultural society like ours. Pahela Baishakh, in that sense, strengthens inclusiveness and we hope, going forward, we will stress more on our commonalities rather than differences for a harmonious coexistence. We resent the attempt by some to communalise the celebrations and call upon them to acknowledge and accept the very eclectic character of the day.

While we go about enjoying the day, it would be important to keep in mind the safety of the revellers attending public events. The law enforcement officials are expected to remain vigilant at all times to avoid any unexpected occurrence. But they cannot do this alone, especially while handling large gatherings of people. Everybody should help them to keep order. We would also like to take this opportunity to call upon our political leaders to put aside their differences and work together for the sake of the country, imbued with the spirit of the day.

## How soon is 'very soon'?

Myanmar must create conditions for safe return of Rohingyas

**M**YANMAR must do more than offer verbal assurances of starting the return of the Rohingyas to their homeland "very soon". We had said in this very column yesterday that Myanmar should prove what it says by concrete actions on the ground. In fact, all its commitments so far have been belied by its barefaced use of subterfuges to delay the repatriation. And that has worked so far. Its dubious intentions have been furthermore reinforced by the official media in that country when it described the Rohingyas in Bangladesh camps, which its minister visited during his visit to Bangladesh, as internally displaced persons!

To start with, Myanmar must undertake confidence-building measures immediately. Saying that Myanmar would "try" to address the issue of citizenship, or that the returnees would be allowed to apply for citizenship, does anything but inculcate confidence in the minds of an ethnic minority whose citizenship has been very arbitrarily annulled. So there must a definitive commitment in this regard.

We have seen pictures of the Rohingya homesteads in Rakhine being totally razed to the ground and members of other communities being resettled in those areas. This has created deep but well-founded fears that they face ghettoisation on return.

The international community must bring to bear all pressure on Myanmar to deliver on its commitment and fulfil all conditions for safe return of Rohingyas and bring about a permanent solution as per Annam Commission recommendations which the military government in Naypyidaw has committed it would.

"Very soon" cannot be open-ended. Myanmar must be sincere in its international commitment if it wants to lend any face value to its words.

### AWAKENING INDIA



SHASHI THAROOR

**I**NDIA has no coltan or rare earths, little oil, and not enough water. What it does have is people—1.3 billion and counting. That makes India potentially very rich in what has

been called the "new oil": data. But who will benefit from that wealth, and who might be put at risk?

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi undoubtedly likes collecting data. Since becoming prime minister in 2014, he has led an enthusiastic campaign to expand digital governance, hailing its efficiency and extolling its capacity to transform the country.

Biometric devices are now used to track the attendance of students and teachers in schools, and of government employees at work. Following his disastrous demonetisation scheme in 2016, Modi has urged Indians to make digital, not cash, payments, even for small transactions.

More ambitiously, Modi's government has expanded the reach and scope of India's scheme to issue to all residents a "unique identification number," or Aadhaar, linked to their biometrics. The primary goal of the programme, initiated in 2009 by the previous Congress party-led government, was originally to manage government benefits and eliminate "ghost beneficiaries" of public subsidies, thereby preventing the pilfering of state funds.

When the Aadhaar scheme was introduced, Modi—then the chief minister of Gujarat—vociferously opposed it, pledging to scrap the project if his Bharatiya Janata Party came to power. As prime minister, however, Modi has embraced the programme, ordering that the identification numbers be linked to virtually everything. Bank accounts, school enrolment, mobile-phone contracts, travel records, hospital admissions, and even cremation certificates now all require an Aadhaar,

despite Modi's assurances to the Supreme Court that participation in the programme would not become mandatory.

Modi's objectives extend far beyond efficiency. He has unabashedly declared that data is "real wealth," and that "whoever acquires and controls" it can attain "hegemony." And political hegemony is Modi's goal. He has spent the last four years centralising and consolidating power, and his BJP has gained control of 22 of 29 states, complementing its lower-house majority with a likely majority in the upper house (which is elected by state assemblies).



**A villager goes through the process of a fingerprint scanner for the Unique Identification (UID) database system at an enrolment centre at Merta district in the Indian state of Rajasthan.**

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

But Modi's apparent vision of India as a country where Big Government meets Big Data has hit many snags. Machines meant to authenticate Aadhaar holders have often failed, particularly in rural parts of the country, owing to a lack of Internet connectivity or electricity. As a result, far from helping the poor, the Aadhaar scheme has prevented many poor people from claiming their Public Distribution System (ration) supplies—a violation of their rights.

Overall, the Aadhaar programme leaves participants far more compromised than even, say, the 87 million Facebook users whose personal data were wrongly shared with the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica. Yet, in response to such revelations, Modi's government has offered only denial, complacency, and concealment.

This failure to protect data seems to be a pattern with Modi. In 2015, he invited his supporters "to receive messages and

emails directly from the prime minister" by downloading and installing the "Narendra Modi mobile app" on their phones. "No intermediaries, no media, no officials, no red tape," he promised. The Android version of that app was downloaded more than five million times.

But there was a catch: the data to which Modi's followers gave the app access—including their photographs, contact lists, and GPS data, as well as their microphones and cameras—were shared with a US firm. The app's users did not know that this would happen, let alone consent to it, as it wasn't included even in the fine print. And while the app's privacy policy has since been changed, that US firm retains the previously acquired data, which it could use for commercial purposes today and for who knows what else tomorrow.

The challenges associated with collecting and protecting data will only intensify in the years to come. It is estimated that 90 percent of the world's data have been generated in the last two years alone. In India, that percentage may be even higher, as increasingly ubiquitous 4G services and increasingly cheap Internet-enabled smartphones have recently enabled millions to get online—and offer up significant amounts of personal information.

India will be the land of Big Data. The question is whether it will also be the land of the Big Leak. So far, the country lacks strong data privacy and protection laws. My own attempt to introduce one in a private member's bill was repeatedly thwarted by parliament-stalling disruptions. To protect the people who are generating all of that data wealth that Modi so covets, he must follow through on his campaign promise to deliver "minimum government, maximum governance."

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Release detained quota protesters

The protests by university students demanding reforms in the quota system in public service recruitment came to an end after the prime minister had announced that the system would be abolished. During their protests, the students blocked key roads and intersections in the capital. The protests turned violent when police fired teargas shells and rubber bullets to disperse the demonstrators, injuring more than a hundred people.

Although the protests ended, a number of students are still in police custody. It's time the government released all detained protesters and withdrew the cases against them. Those who vandalised the house of the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University should be arrested, but the general students who had no part in that should not be harassed.

Amdadul H Sarker, Comilla University

### Plight of private university teachers

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is hardly concerned about the working environment, salary scheme and workload of the teachers of private universities. In many universities, there is no policy on how and why a teacher should be promoted or terminated from their jobs. I think the UGC should create a policy regarding teachers' employment which will be mandatory for every university.

Mahbuba Sarker Shama, By email