

Decentralise the government

Allow LG system to play due role

THE key to addressing some pressing issues related to governance, development and balance of power lies in strengthening the local government system. Yet, as recently highlighted by discussants at a conference on "LG: Reflections on Agenda for Reform," our local government system is in a mess.

The local government in Bangladesh isn't empowered enough to take autonomous decisions. Elected officials at local government bodies are still controlled and dictated by mid-level bureaucrats at the ministry. They don't receive enough funding, while their authority and functions are often undermined by district-level public servants. After the local government elections began to be held with party symbols, experts have observed, they are now forced to toe the official party line.

In addition, their rivalry with local influential lawmakers—who eye development projects despite having an entirely different jurisdiction—is the most damaging for them. The lawmakers need to understand that it's not their primary job to oversee development projects in their constituencies. Their first and foremost job is to debate policies and enact, repeal or modify laws to suit the public interest, not to govern.

The benefit of having an effective rural government system is that, through bottom-up planning, it helps spread the fruit of development to the masses.

As promised by the ruling party in its Vision 2021 manifesto, the AL-led government should focus on decentralising the governing system. It should take measures to overhaul the local government system, perhaps, by forming a commission, as suggested by the experts, so that the system can live up to its name and function as a real government—not as a subordinate agency of the central government.

How could examinees be given wrong question papers?

Make an example of the bunglers

WE have written volumes about question paper leaks. Today, we are writing about something equally troubling. Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinees in several centres in four districts were handed question papers based on the old syllabus (2018) as they sat for examinations on the first day of SSC. This is completely unheard of. As per a report published in this paper on February 3, some 600 examinees in Manikganj Daulatpur upazila took an examination with a wrong multiple-choice question supplied by invigilators. Only when some students pointed out the mistake did the authorities realise what had happened but tried to sweep it under the carpet, insisting that examinees had to attend the examination based on the wrong question paper.

It is preposterous that attempts were made to treat students as guinea pigs to hide the gross negligence of the education boards. No student should pay the price for negligence and incompetence of exam controllers. We are informed that in some districts, show-cause notices were issued to invigilators for distributing wrong question papers, and some centres allowed extra time to students to start answering the right question papers.

Regardless, it is a grave mistake and undoubtedly unsettling for the students. The ministry needs to get to the bottom of this debacle since the mistake took place at the respective board offices. We expect a thorough investigation into the matter and those guilty of supplying the wrong sets of question papers need to be taken to task so that there is no repetition of this.

POLICE WEEK 2019

A citizen's expectations from the police

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

AS the Police Week 2019 commences today, it seems like an opportune moment to compile the thoughts of citizens on what they expect from their police force. There is no

denying that police's principal role of maintaining law and order has increasingly been rendered more difficult and the balance of power within our society has turned ominously against the forces of peace and order. One unfortunate predicament in this regard relates to the absence of an agreement among different segments of the society as to what is expected from the police department.

However, as far as I understand, the expectations of ordinary citizens are simple and meeting those to a satisfactory extent should not be too difficult. A few such expectations are: 1) Police must not evade the registration of a crime as that means committing a breach of law under the Penal Code. Such evasions embolden the criminal, to say the least; 2) Police must not misbehave with the citizens; 3) Police must not implicate innocent persons in criminal cases and must not fabricate evidence with a view to securing conviction; 4) Police must not resort to third-degree methods in the investigation of cases. Such practices only tend to alienate the police from the public, and are not permitted by the law either; 5) Police must not extort confessions from the accused by adopting tortuous methods of investigation; 6) Police must be apolitical in their professional capacity and impartial in their application of law; 7) Police shall not indulge in excesses like violation of the principle of the minimum use of force; and 8) Police officials must not show any proclivity to please the political bosses for their personal and professional gains.

Citizen's expectations as outlined above can be met significantly if remedial steps are taken by police department itself. There are, however, some urgent measures that will involve other agencies and require a strong political will for those to be successful. In specific terms, we need to understand that the required administrative and legal reforms in tune with the republican provisions of our constitution must be in place. This is essential to transform our largely colonial police force into a modern, forward-looking outfit befitting



PHOTO: REUTERS

a democratic polity.

It needs to be borne in mind that policing in South Asia has been, by and large, a one-sided affair with communities having no or little say in the local policing plans and strategies that affect them the most.

Understandably, the Police Act 1861 was silent on the issue of community consultation. Rather, it focused on the responsibility of communities to ensure order, and should anyone step out of line, the whole community would face vicarious punishment.

For a long time, unfortunately, an outmoded administrative legacy has been undermining police reform supported by national and international expert missions. For too long, the basic functioning of the police has remained unchanged. What is needed is to make improving the quality of law enforcement an integral part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.

There is a growing understanding that police reform requires a concerted effort by all parties—the state, the private sector, and the civil society. Without an enduring partnership and coalition-building among the principal actors involved, there can be no hope of a significant police reform. An enlightened and determined political leadership, high levels of public support, and a motivated and well-led private sector are

absolutely critical to change. Equally, or perhaps more importantly, a civil society that demands and supports higher standards of police performance is a must for the desired change.

It is worth noting that our policing system had worked reasonably well during the colonial era but started faltering after the British left in 1947. The system failed because its design was inappropriate. It has no built-in checks in place against the forces that were unleashed by the political processes in the wake of the independence struggle. The basic object of the colonial police design was to create an instrument for the ruling class to control the natives. Service to the people was not the objective of this design.

Under the circumstances, if we want to turn our police force into a symbol of trust and security, then the first order of business will be to enact a new Police Act to replace the present archaic legislation enacted in 1861. The reasons for its replacement are: 1) The Act gives the government the authority to exercise superintendence over the police, without defining the word "superintendence" or giving some guidelines to ensure that the use of power is legitimate; 2) It does not establish any institutional and other kind of arrangements to insulate the police from undesirable and illegitimate outside control, pressures and influences; 3) It does not recognise the

responsibility of the government to establish an efficient and effective police force; 4) It does not make it necessary to outline objectives and performance standards for police, nor does it set-up an independent mechanism to monitor and inspect their performance; 5) The charter of duties outlined in it is antiquated, narrow and limited; 6) It does not mandate the police to function as a professional and service-oriented organisation; and 7) It is not in consonance with the requirements of democratic policing.

If our aim is to make quality policing a way of life, then the existing police setup has to be replaced with one that is more "customer-friendly". There has to be a clear, shared sense of mission accompanied by clearly understood organisational goals. The citizens have to be a part of the police decision-making process. The police command and control structure have to fully rest with the police chiefs. The police leadership has to be empowered to effectively control their erring subordinates. There has to be credible and effective mechanisms for policing the police. And finally, the Police Act 1861 has to be replaced with new legislation that embraces all the essential elements of reinvention, based on the best models available in the world.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP.

Conserving wetlands to tackle climate change

QUAMRUL CHOWDHURY

EVERY year on February 2, nations have been celebrating the World Wetlands Day since 1997. But unfortunately, despite national and international efforts, wetlands are still treated as revenue-generating machines or wastelands in many countries including Bangladesh. Apparently, nobody would like to think of wetlands as a natural solution in adapting to the global climate change.

Many people don't even bother to think that these ecosystems play a significant role in mitigating the adverse impacts of climatic change. Hence, many wetlands have already been encroached, degraded or polluted. The theme of this year's Wetlands Day is "Wetlands and Climate Change"—and it has been chosen to highlight the important role played by

the world's forests. Although they cover only 3 percent of the world's landmass, they contain 30 percent of its soil carbon (Parish et al, 2008; FAO, 2012b). Wetlands such as mangroves like The Sundarbans, saltmarshes, haors and coral reefs play crucial roles in controlling flood peaks and spreading the water table. Thanks to their vegetation, such as trees and root mats, wetlands act as permeable barriers that slow waves, reduce flooding, and offer natural protection for coastlines against destructive weather events.

Wetlands are an important source of water everywhere, including in places where resources are scarce. Local populations and animal and plant species benefit from wetlands as providers of water. Wetlands allow water to reach the underground water table, making the resource available in dry periods.

Thus, wetlands are key for groundwater recharge and allow ecosystems to cope with drought in places like Barind Tract. By the same process, by releasing underground water, wetlands help to maintain the flow of rivers when precipitations diminish. These enormously valuable natural bodies also offer solid evidence that investing in natural solutions is a cost-effective way to enhance resilience to climate change in vulnerable coastal areas and communities.

But with the degradation or encroachment of wetlands, human well-being is being compromised. It is raising the risk of flooding of houses and infrastructure, and increasing the risk of exposure to water shortages and drought. Against these threats, initiatives to conserve wetlands can make a difference and benefit the well-being of the future generations of people and wildlife.

I think our policymakers should help raise public awareness of the importance of wetlands. They should ensure stakeholder participation in wetland management to maintain human well-being including livelihood. Strengthening national legal and policy arrangements to conserve all wetlands is an urgent task and that should be an integral part of Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) which should be prepared without any further delay.

I would also suggest developing and implementing NAP as per the NAP Roadmap prepared in 2015 and it should be our high priority along with revisiting Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. Coastal, haor and unprotected wetlands are expected to be most severely impacted by climate change, but conserving and restoring the wetlands is an effective way to mitigate climate change impacts for people and biodiversity. Revisiting the Delta Plan is essential before it enters its implementation phase to ensure people's participation in the formulation and implementation of this long-term plan, with more adequate public consultations.



PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

wetlands, as a natural solution, in terms of adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Many developing and developed countries as well as their economies and natural ecosystems have been battling with an unprecedented degree of climatic change in recent years. Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), prepared in 2008 and revised in 2009, identified that water security, food security, energy security, health security and livelihood security are being threatened by the adverse impacts of climate change.

As one of the lead authors of BCCSAP, I know that many of the 45 programmes included in this plan couldn't be implemented because of resource constraints, deficits in programme preparations and planning problems. This is quite unfortunate.

Many of our coastal, haor, dry and upland regions are likely to lose large numbers of wetland species as a result of climate change. Wetlands, particularly coastal and haor wetlands, are important in the process to mitigate climate change because they help to manage extreme weather events through the multiple services that they provide. Important wetland functions include water storage, groundwater recharge, storm protection, flood mitigation, shoreline stabilisation, erosion control, and retention of carbon, nutrients, sediments and pollutants (Dugan 1990).

Experts say that wetlands are also significant carbon stores. According to the Ramsar Convention, it has been estimated that peatlands contain at least 550 Gt of carbon, which is almost double the amount stored in

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take action against attackers of imam in Noakhali

As reported by *The Daily Star* and other news outlets, a madrasa teacher and imam of a local mosque was beaten up for allegedly trying to prevent a child marriage in Noakhali. It's a disturbing incident and calls for swift action from the law enforcement authorities against the perpetrators.

The incident is significant for various reasons. It's important for religious leaders such as an imam of a mosque to intervene against child marriage. Their opposition to child marriage is extremely crucial to defeat the social curse as they are highly regarded in society and their opinion taken seriously by the general populace.

Therefore, the stance against child marriage taken by the imam in question was an encouraging sign. If other imams follow suit, there will be a real change hopefully. However, the way the imam was treated could discourage other religious leaders from adopting a similar stance. The authorities should take a hard stance against those who beat the imam.

Labib Hasnat, By e-mail