

Government's 'zero-tolerance policy' against corruption

How we can use RTI to help achieve it

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

In her first address to the nation after being sworn in for her third consecutive term last month, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced "zero tolerance for corruption" as a key policy of her new government. This was followed by the release of Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index, in which—much to the government's annoyance—Bangladesh was ranked below all other South Asian countries except for war-torn Afghanistan.

Whether or not Bangladesh deserves to be so downgraded, the resolve of the PM to combat "corruption in any form" is welcome news. Her announcement acknowledged the pervasive spread of corruption in governance and recognised that corruption is a serious blot on the otherwise excellent reputation of the country, earned in recent years under her leadership, for progress in economic and social development.

In order for the PM's mission to succeed, citizen's support would be crucial. While this will be a tall order given the fractured politics of the country today, the PM can start by injecting new life into the moribund regime of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which her government enacted in 2009.

The difference between RTI and anti-corruption laws is that the former is enforced by citizens and the latter by the government. In fact, RTI is the only law in the country that citizens can use vis-à-vis public authority. Every citizen can, therefore, be a watchman for good governance.

The Preamble to the RTI Act 2009 captured the basic objective of the law in the following words: "if the right to information of the people is ensured, the transparency and accountability of all public... organisations... shall increase, corruption of the same shall decrease and good governance of the same shall be established."

Countries that are found to be the least corrupt also have effective RTI regimes in force. Where RTI works well, government offices function more transparently, public servants are more accountable to the people and corruption is kept under check. The preventive role of RTI is thus an important element for an effective anti-

corruption strategy, and citizens are allies of the government in this effort.

One of the earliest achievements of the RTI Act 2005 of India was to end corruption in the government rationing system in New Delhi, under which basic food and other essential items of daily consumption are provided to the needy at subsidised prices. People were not getting their items because government-approved dealers claimed they were not getting the goods from the government. Using their RTI, citizens asked the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution for copies of reports that dealers are required to file with them. This revealed that the dealers falsely reported that they had

distributed goods to the beneficiaries while actually selling them on the black market. Corrupt dealers lost their licenses and the public gained confidence in the system.

Similar gains have been made in Bangladesh. Concerned citizens have used RTI to obtain information about the selection process of beneficiaries for the government's safety-net programmes, such as vulnerable group feeding, vulnerable group development, old-age, maternity and widow benefits. There were complaints about widespread corruption in the process.

Faced with their RTI applications, the authorities concerned often considered it

scholarship money at government schools. Indigent patients now benefit from free medicine provided by the government from the local health clinics. This was often denied to them till they resorted to RTI requests for the list of free medicines. Many clinics are now voluntarily posting the list of free medicines on their notice boards, thereby closing a window of corruption.

RTI can also help to combat corruption in public institutions by exposing abuse of power by the police, irregularities in the recruitment process of public jobs, and corruption in awarding contracts for public work.

The usefulness of RTI for the PM's mission is limited only by how often and how many of us use it. On an average only 7,000 RTI requests are submitted annually to public offices in Bangladesh, compared to some 6 million in India. The requests are also largely confined to issues of private concern. Unless the law is used by more people, and more to probe transparency and accountability issues on matters of larger public interest, the efficacy of the law will remain limited.

The Prime Minister can help advance this objective by reiterating her commitment to RTI at regular intervals. This will encourage public officials to obey the law, which presently many disregard without any qualm. It will also be useful to publicise that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) too has to respond to many RTI requests addressed to her. In one instance, it provided an applicant with information on how many people accompanied her each year, between 2010 to 2015, to the UN General Assembly, why so many went, what was their purpose and who paid for their trips. Had it been publicised, it would have encouraged others to emulate.

The PM's vocal support of the law will also help reassure citizens' minds that by asking for sensitive information, they will not face the wrath of concerned officials. There are unfortunate instances of the latter harassing the applicants, and in one case, even setting the police against them and, in another, filing a case. If such fears are removed, more people will use the law, which is important for any systemic change. The Information Commission too will be more confident to apply the law without fear of displeasing the administration. The prime minister's endorsement of an oversight mechanism for the Information Commission itself would also help to set in motion necessary reforms of the Act. It is time for all of us to recognise that RTI can be a formidable tool to advance citizen-government relationship, contribute to better governance and take the fight against corruption forward.

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Brick kilns are major polluters

Penalise errant kilns as per law

A five-year survey by the Department of Environment (DoE) on the quality of air in seven major cities has found that 50 percent of the pollution is being caused by brick kilns resulting in all sorts of health hazards for the city residents. Narayanganj was worst affected, followed by Dhaka, Gazipur, Rajshahi, Chattogram, Khulna and Barisal. The omnipresence of polluted air causes various diseases, ranging from respiratory infections (including pneumonia) to heart ailments and lung cancer, amongst other things. While it is mandatory for brick kilns to get prior permission from DoE to set up a kiln, 2015 data shows that 1,957 (out of 6,895) of them did not bother to obtain a clearance. And although the government has been promoting the use of Hybrid Hoffman Kiln (HHK) technology that requires less coal and wood, thereby lessening pollution, change has been slow.

The deadly nature of the black smoke billowed out by traditional brick kilns goes a long way to explain the alarming rise in the number of patients of asthma, bronchiolitis, respiratory tract infections and common cold during the dry season. According to the Brick Manufacturing and Brick Kiln Establishment (Control) Act 2013, no brick kiln can be established in areas declared as a municipality, city corporation, reserve forest, or sanctuary. Yet, as we see from DoE's own survey, the law is there only in name.

Though the DoE claims that it has shut down various kilns and fined others over the years, the sheer size of the industry and the fact that kiln owners rush to get a stay order on the few attempts by DoE to shut down an illegally constructed or operated kiln, effectively bar any serious effort to bring to heel this hugely polluting and largely unregulated industry. It all boils down to the seriousness with which authorities view matters of public health because when it comes to air pollution, seriousness at policy levels to check the menace has been sorely lacking.

Ducusu election should set an example

It must reflect the students' will

WE are finally on the verge of witnessing an election of the Dhaka University's Ducusu (Dhaka University Central Students' Union), which would be the first democratic exercise of the iconic student body in nearly three decades.

With all major student organisations poised to contest the election, the prospect is certainly a promising one. The atmosphere and mood in the campus have so far been amicable. Press reports carried photos depicting a friendly meeting between leaders of Chhatra League, the pro-ruling party organisation, and Chhatra Dal, the opposition-linked student group.

However, there are signs of discord between Chhatra League and almost all other student groups over the decision to set up poll booths in student dormitories that are dominated by the pro-ruling party student organisation. Even the Sadharan Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, an apolitical organisation that led the anti-quota movement, has voiced concerns and expressed doubt whether the decision would be helpful to conduct a fair poll.

Ducusu, established in 1922, has had a glorious history. Its leaders played a critical role in national movements that eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh. Ducusu always reflected the democratic aspiration of the people of Bangladesh. Yet, unfortunately and ironically, its democratic exercise ceased when a democratic system was restored in the country in the 90s.

Now that the system of election has made a comeback in the campus, if the election is found to be tainted with allegations of irregularities, it would cause irreparable damage to the image of the country's premier student body. Therefore, it is imperative that the university authorities live up to the expectations of the students of Dhaka University and set an example by holding an election that would reflect the aspirations of all the students.

Looking at some of the dynamics of India's Lok Sabha election

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

SOME historical glimpses shed a very interesting light on the enormous changes that have taken place in India's political landscape since the early days of India's independence. One can say that throughout the period of Pandit Nehru and later, of his daughter Indira Gandhi, up to the mid-eighties, the political framework was far less complex. The results were predictable and almost a forgone conclusion. With his fabled stature not only in the domestic arena but in the wider global politics, Nehru's position was unchallengeable. He had no rival or adversary. Besides Nehru, there were formidable figures in Congress like Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and so forth, contributing to the unassailable position of the party. Having played the vanguard role for India's independence from colonial rule, Congress reigned supreme in early decades. Some smaller parties which got only small crumbs of share in the legislature were practically anonymous (as shown in the statistics below).

Today, the electoral scene is vastly different, very defused and marked by baffling diversity and great unpredictability. The complexities that define India's electoral scene makes analysis a daunting job. Unlike in the early days, leaders with national credentials are few. Narendra Modi has been in some sense an exception in today's context. His commanding performance in his home state Gujrat propelled him to a national stature. Mr Modi is an enthralling orator. He also successfully weaponised Hindutva or promotion of Hindu interest and culture, to construct a vote bank. Whether this is a wise strategy in the long term is another matter. His policies have shown that they are divisive and have triggered a nationwide reaction. Regional leaders are now trying to mobilise an anti-BJP front, though only time will show if this enterprise leads to anything. The recent meeting in Kolkata between Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu with West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee was an effort in this direction.

Here are some of the early Lok Sabha election results:

- i) First Lok Sabha election, 1952-57; 483 seats. Congress won 364; CPI 16; Socialist Party 12.
- ii) Second Lok Sabha election, 1957-62, 494 seats. Congress won 371; CPI 27; Praja Socialist Party 19.
- iii) Third Lok Sabha election, 1962-67, 494 seats. Congress won 361 under Indira Gandhi's leadership; six other parties got double digit seats.
- iv) Fourth Lok Sabha election, 1967-70 (the first after Nehru's death); seats 520. Congress under Indira Gandhi won 283 seats; six other parties got double digit seats.

Up to 1984-89 election, Congress's domination continued except for a brief period following Mrs Gandhi's emergency in 1975, a time of infamy and the only break in India's democratic politics. It is from the early nineties after Mrs Gandhi's departure from the political scene and Mr Rajiv Gandhi's first term that the

trend of a single party dominance came to an end and a pattern of alliance system emerged. The fact that in this difficult landscape, BJP under Mr Modi achieved an impressive absolute majority in 2014 Lok Sabha election is testament to his political acumen.

As India approaches the Lok Sabha election shortly, Mr Modi's BJP is having concerns. A sense of overconfidence was behind some policies that have become contentious and have had a political cost. A red light began to blip after a resurgent Congress Party won state assembly polls in three heartland states, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in December 2018.

On the whole, India's economy has been in good shape. *The Economist* magazine said that India's growth rate is better than most big nations. So in that important area it seems the ruling party is safe.

In Indian politics, and for that matter anywhere else, the power of money is a crucial factor in elections. Recently, with the polls about two months away, BJP government used what was meant to be an interim budget to dispense favour to important segments of



Rahul Gandhi (left) and Narendra Modi.

voter's social security schemes to placate farmers, workers in the unorganised sector and youths ("Modi government's last attempt at wooing voters", *The Daily Star*, February 7). This largesse will take immediate effect before the start of the new financial year in April. The Congress leader Rahul Gandhi made an announcement of a minimum income guarantee for farmers. It may be noted that as election time comes, ordinary people get empowered.

The Economist complimented the BJP government for its record on corruption, and noted that it is less corrupt than the one it succeeded. It also improved infrastructure, made bureaucracy more efficient and targeted more aid towards the poor.

Turning to the areas of vulnerability, India's state-owned banks have been badly managed. They have



PHOTO: PTI

Although Congress's victories in three state assembly elections and signs that Rahul Gandhi has matured as a leader are interesting developments, we have to wait to see how the situation evolves as the election nears.

The three non-BJP political figures who are in the limelight are Mamata Banerjee (West Bengal) Mayawati (UP) and Chandrababu Naidu (Andhra Pradesh). None of them alone looks like a threat to Modi. Their appeal does not seem to transcend beyond their states. The question is, can they rise above their personal ambitions and combine effectively to mount a serious challenge to the BJP. At this point, it seems, these elections are for Mr Modi and BJP to lose.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Hoping for fair Ducusu polls

The schedule for the Dhaka University Central Student's Union (Ducusu) has been announced at last. After 28 years, Ducusu polls are poised to take place on March 11. As many as 42,000 voters will cast their votes in their respective halls this year as per the DUCSU constitution.

Several opposition-affiliated student organisations, however, have expressed doubt whether the election would be fair as polling booths would be set up inside the dormitories that are dominated by the pro-ruling party student organisation. Bangladesh Sadharan Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad has also voiced its concern. But the atmosphere on campus has so far been largely peaceful.

The Ducusu was formed in 1922, a year after the university was established. The aim of the platform was to promote cultural activities at the university and foster a spirit of cooperation among the students of different dormitories.

We hope that in order to uphold the tradition and stature of the organisation, the poll day will not be tainted by allegations of irregularities that were features of many past polls held in the country.

Mobarak Ali, Gopibagh, Dhaka