The Daily Star CELEBRATES

GLORIOUS 50 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

COURAGEOUS 30 YEARS OF JOURNALISM

ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2021   SEGMENT 1

FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2021, *MAGH 28, 1427 BS*

34

Socio-political evils of corruption: Not everything is lost yet

As a State Party to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) Bangladesh has also promised to "promote active participation of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, in the prevention of and the fight against corruption."

To cap it all up, the ruling party has been very articulate in anti-corruption pledge as per their election manifesto as well as the prime minister's commitment to zero tolerance against corruption repeatedly pronounced in recent times, and specifically reiterated in the coronavirus context. What happens in reality is just the opposite. Corruption has flourished, particularly since the coronavirus crisis began when a section of unscrupulous people, often linked with power, have taken the crisis as an opportunity to abuse power and increase their income and wealth illicitly.

The advent of coronavirus crisis has deeply exacerbated governance challenges in general and with respect to response to the crisis and its fallout. A TIB study launched in June 2020 showed stark deficits in terms of all seven indicators of governance examined—rule of law, preparedness, capacity and effectiveness, coordination and participation, transparency, irregularities and corruption and accountability.

The recovery and stimulus package have been ill-designed and distorted in favour of the powerful and against the underprivileged. Unaccountable use of nationally and internationally mobilised financial resources, especially in procurement, distribution and delivery are accentuating the impact of increased unemployment, poverty, deprivation, vulnerability and inequality in terms of gender, faith, ethnicity, disability, etc. Violations of civil and political rights are becoming acute with accompanying risk of further deficits in governance and governmental trust.

The pandemic has exposed and reaffirmed the infrastructural, systemic and resource deficits in the health system as well as other related sectors like social protection and education which are likely to continue to cause public sufferings including further discrimination, injustice and lack of

redress. People are confronting the challenges of reduced and distorted access to public services in health, education, safety nets and the like. There is more micro-level abuse of power and rent-seeking in the troubled waters of deficits and institutional decay, and hence more opportunities for corruption.

It is not unusual in the context that compromise of business integrity and lack of corporate accountability have flourished in geometric proportions. Media and civil society face greater prospect of shrinking space, not to speak of their own institutional and financial crisis. Mobilisation of voice and accountability has become more challenging.

Beyond those unleashed by the coronavirus crisis, Bangladesh confronts greater challenges of governance in many forms. On top are indications of increased concentration of power, followed by reduced space for political dissent and hence shrinking scope of checks and balances and accountable governance. The already dysfunctional institutions are further subjected to

partisan political use while low level of law enforcement is leading to reduced access to justice and increased impunity especially for abuse of political and governmental power. Risk has increased about discrimination, especially based on various markers of identity, side by side with increased deficits of social, economic, political, and especially human rights. Increased control and surveillance on information has become normal which is undermining the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of information and opinion.

The silver lining in the form of enhanced scope of digitalisation of public service and more robust flow of information from non-traditional IT-based sources like social media are also under stress by enhanced risk of misinformation flow coupled with the government control on freedom of information. While digitisation is raising hopes, these are also being undermined as limits of benefits of digitisation are also being exposed. Another recent TIB study has shown how the much-hyped E-GP (Electronic Government

Procurement) has failed to have much impact in terms of improved governance and corruption control, mainly because procurement continues to be subjected to manipulation by the politically powerful.

In fact, a major qualitative transformation has taken place over the years in our political space. In the first Parliament of Bangladesh the proportion of MPs who had business as their primary occupation was below 18 percent. Rising steadily since then, the ratio has reached 59 and 61 percent respectively in the 10th and 11th Parliament. This does not include indirect beneficial ownerships. People enter politics and assume politically important positions including that of public representatives not by virtue of political participation and experience, but by treating the political identity or position as investment and as designs of profit-making.

Politics has also for long been a zero-sum game where the winner takes all approach is striving to establish monopolistic control of the political

space and the spoils that come along. Business and profit-making relationships of public representatives with the government is considered a matter of politically legitimised right. Business, investment, recruitment, public contracting, profiteering, land grabbing, embezzlement, extortion and influence peddling have become the object of a turf-war involving various forms of same-side violence, including deaths associated with a narcotic dependence on corrupt practices for self-enrichment. In a context of collusive abuse of power, corruption has on the other hand become a killer, as witnessed in case of Churihatta or Rana Plaza like tragedies.

Deficit of effective enforcement of the political pledges is considered to be the most important predicament against democratic and accountable governance. The key institutions of democracy and national integrity system—the parliament, executive, law enforcement agencies, administration, judiciary, media, private sector, civil society, and even various professional groups—have been deeply politicised causing low level of rule of law, institutional performance and enforcement of policies and systems. Other cross-cutting issues are no less important, like weak oversight functions, deficits of technically skilled human resources imbibed with integrity, lack of incentives and dearth of professional competence of stakeholders.

Politics and governance are bedevilled by conflict of interest, nepotism and a pervasive practice of collusive non-compliance while the deficit is acute of exemplary punishment of the corrupt which facilitate further governance deficits, corruption and impunity. The ACC continues to struggle to gain the trust of the people. Abuse of power, especially at the high level, is hardly brought to justice. On the other hand, a denial syndrome prevails amongst a section of the powerful who not only react sharply, but also find evil designs and conspiracy against the state when civil society raises voice against corruption.

Even though corruption is already deeply entrenched and institutionalised, its effective control may be still possible. Much of it will depend on how serious our political leaderships are about corruption control. Four