

Integrity does not deserve persecution



A CLOSER
LOOK

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Recently, three admin shuffles took place in one week. A total of 28 districts got new DCs. While placing preferred officials in strategic roles is a routine practice for any regime before the national election, there was one transfer that stood out from the rest: that of former Manikganj Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Abdul Latif. To most, his transfer to the Economic Relations Department (ERD) seemed like a punishing move, given his role in uncovering the health minister's alleged attempt to swindle public money.

For context, it has been reported that Minister Zahid Maleque, along with his immediate family members, purchased 20.65 acres of land in Meghshimul area of Jagir Union of Manikganj Sadar Upazila. This was done just 20 days before the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) approved a Tk 1,905.26 crore project in April last year to relocate the only government-owned drug manufacturing company there.

While one can always buy a piece of land in any part of the country, the issue lies elsewhere. Particularly, the way portions of the land in Meghshimul were bought, filled up to be re-categorised, prices inflated, and then sold off emits a foetid whiff. A company owned by the minister himself had bought 6.39 acres of the land in Meghshimul, his son's company bought another 3.12 acres, and the minister's cousin bought 5.54 acres. But the lion's share of 11.14 acres was bought by his daughter, which she later donated to her husband showing an inflated price (compared to the mouza rate).

Neither the health minister nor any of his family members kept the land they'd bought in Meghshimul.

Being farsighted, they filled up the land, converted it to homestead category from being under wetland and agriculture category - following all relevant procedures - , inflated the price of the land to Tk 120,000 per decimal (the health minister gave a DO letter to the law ministry requesting an increase in the price of the land in Meghshimul mouza), and then sold the portions off to different buyers. To note, the price of homestead land varies between Tk 16,000 and Tk 35,000 in four other mouzas. This was a flawless replication of previous such models, and would have been actualised totally unnoticed during the government acquisition, had it not been for the "interference" of Mohammad Abdul Latif. Like the fly in the milk, Latif not only found these

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ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

discrepancies during an assessment, but also unwisely (for him, at least) wrote a letter to the health ministry saying that implementing the drug plant project on the Meghshimul land would be a financially wasteful venture, as it would require about an additional Tk 100 crores to buy land there, in comparison to land of the same class in nearby areas.

Such interference usually does not yield good results, and the same happened for the ill-fated Latif. As soon as word got around about his letter, local ruling party leaders and activists took to the streets demanding the removal of this controversial DC.

Ours, unfortunately, has become a land where the truth lies with the powerful, even if their actions suggest otherwise. The incident with Mohammad Abdul Latif reminds me of the case of Bangladesh Railway travelling ticket examiner (TTE) Shafiqul Islam, who was suspended in

May 2022 for allegedly misbehaving with relatives of the railway minister's wife, travelling without tickets. According to Shafiqul, he was only doing his job after consultation with his superiors, when he fined the ticketless passengers.

While the minister later admitted his wife's ill-judged behaviour, and also had Shafiqul's suspension withdrawn, the TTE's reputation was not spared by railway officials. Shafiqul had been branded as a person with a "mental problem" who behaved rudely with others, just like Latif has been called "corrupt," by local ruling party leaders and activists in Manikganj.

It seems that some kind of infectious cancerous disease has infected all our systems, with nepotism, corruption, self-interest, misgovernance, incompetence, and inefficiency eating away at our integrity, ethos, and morals. Why else would an honest DC be called

corrupt and transferred, or a TTE be suspended, for doing their job, for doing what is right?

Last year, a Transparency International Bangladesh study found that 0.4 percent of the country's GDP (amounting to Tk 10,830 crore) was lost to bribery. Almost 71 percent of the surveyed households were affected, with the most corrupt sectors being the police and its different wings, the Department of Immigration and Passports, and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.

Since the health minister's alleged money-making misadventure inspired this piece, it would be fair to mention the myriad irregularities in the health sector, which are all but common knowledge. An audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh revealed that financial irregularities to the tune of Tk 193 crore were carried out in the health sector during the initial

period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The report came out last year, and the minister has yet to take responsibility for the shameless level of corruption that has been committed under his watch. Unfortunately, many such ills plague our healthcare system. And, as per standard operating protocol, whenever such findings come out, investigation committees are formed but the outcomes remain buried under the rubble of more corruption.

In an ideal scenario, authorities would take serious note of these allegations and reports, and work on strengthening the governance system by rooting out corrupt and corrupting elements. As such, the government must look into the concerns raised in the letter by the former Manikganj DC and take action against the culprits, even if they hold the highest offices. No government official should be subjected to persecution for doing their job.

Does India need a Uniform Civil Code?



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When the Indian government's 22nd Law Commission came out with a notification on June 14 seeking public opinion on a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), the opposition parties immediately flagged it as a move by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to advance its three ideological tenets as an electoral strategy for the upcoming election. The crux of the opposition's criticism against the UCC rests on the question: why now? The BJP has already fulfilled its two key ideological agendas: constructing a Ram temple in Ayodhya following the Supreme Court order; and abrogating Article 370, ending Jammu and Kashmir's special status, in 2019.

A week after the law commission's notification, Prime Minister Narendra Modi strongly batted for the UCC, in a first-ever public push. Modi said that the country could not run on the dual system of "separate laws for separate communities." This was viewed by political observers as indicative of Modi trying to set the agenda and the tone of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. To back his pitch, Modi quoted Article 44 contained in Part IV of the Indian Constitution, which is part of the Directive Principles of State Policy. It says that "the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India."

That Modi's remarks gained considerable traction is evident from the reaction of most of the opposition parties, including Congress, who are alleging that he was "diverting" attention from issues of price rise and unemployment. National Conference President Farooq Abdullah of Jammu and Kashmir cautioned against any move to push through with the UCC and asked the government to rethink the consequences of implementing it in a country of people of different races and religions, and given the fact that Muslims have their own Shariah law. Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party, however, broke ranks from other opposition parties and declared in-principle support for UCC, but said a thorough debate and talks with all stakeholders are required for its implementation. The All India Muslim Personal Board met virtually, hours after Modi made the push for UCC, in order to tighten its opposition towards the adaptation of a common code. The law commission has

so far received over 50 lakh opinions online on the UCC, besides hard copies of responses. In a bid to further widen the consultative process, the deadline for submitting views has been extended till July 28.

Just five years ago, the 21st Law Commission had released a consultation paper that said a

similar views were sought by the previous panel and that time has come for eliciting varied opinions. But, clearly, there is much more to it than that.

In a way, the BJP's campaign on the UCC has been in the works for several months now. The BJP-led governments in Gujarat, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh states have already gone public with their intent to introduce state-specific UCCs. In fact, Gujarat last year announced the formation of a committee to implement a UCC. In May this year, Uttarakhand announced a committee led by retired Supreme Court Justice Ranjana Desai to undertake a similar exercise. Assam, another state where the BJP is in power, has also backed it.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

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uniform civil code was "neither necessary nor desirable" at that stage. Its contention then was that the focus of initiatives to reform the laws of different religious communities should be elimination of all forms of discrimination rather than an attempt to bring about uniformity in the laws governing various religions. It also pointed out that the Muslim community, by and large, seemed averse to the UCC as they feared their own religious laws could be threatened under it.

The legitimate question now is: what has prompted the 22nd Law Commission to revisit the UCC? The present law commission's rationale is that years have elapsed since

Now that Modi himself has led the charge in favour of a UCC, it remains to be seen if the government brings it up as a bill in the winter session of parliament. The BJP, however, has to grapple with a key challenge as it moves forward - it may risk losing the votes of tribal communities which have their own sets of personal laws. Although a UCC has always been a part of the political agenda of BJP and its previous avatar Jan Sangh, no BJP government since that of Atal Bihari Vajpayee has moved to implement it due to a variety of factors, including the compulsions posed by coalition politics. The Vajpayee government was critically dependent on parties which did not share its

Hindutva ideology. The BJP under Modi, which is seen as a more radical presentation of Hindutva, also did not make any moves regarding a UCC in its two consecutive tenures since 2014. So why is it going for it now? The inescapable conclusion appears to be to build a polarising narrative in the run-up to the election.

On the political front, the BJP's UCC pitch has already achieved what it had intended to: set off a fight between two anti-BJP parties, Congress and CPI(M) in Kerala. The Leader of the Opposition, VD Satheesan of Congress, dared CPI(M) state secretary MV Govindan to deny that the Marxist patriarch EMS Nambudiripad had, in 1985, urged

the party's women's front (the All India Democratic Women's Association) to agitate for a UCC. The CPI(M), for its part, has been aggressively opposing the UCC in an attempt to woo minority votes. No doubt, state level rivalry has come into play between the two parties, which are allies outside Kerala when they are not competing with each other for the political turf. After all, the CPI(M) has not forgotten its miserable show in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll in the state, even though it had convincingly won the state assembly polls two years later. The main challenge for anti-BJP parties would be to decide if they will take the bait offered by the debate on the UCC, and how they will respond to it.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Office of the District Primary Education Office

District: Thakurgaon

www.dpe.thakurgaon.gov.bd

Memo No. dpeo/thak/2023/859

Date: 18-07-2023

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