

GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Democracy has been undergoing a bumpy ride in Bangladesh since her creation as an independent state. Though a democratic set-up got going in 1991 after years of authoritarian and army rule, the train of democracy has again been derailed to a degree. Bangladesh has been under state of emergency for quite a long time now. Though the current government - caretaker or interim - made definitive statement regarding its goal of cleansing Bangladesh politics from corruption and criminalization, some of its steps fell terribly flat with many others failing to have sustainable impact.

When the present military-backed government took over, there were rising expectations among the large section of the people. The euphoria was such that it was even lauded as a blessing in disguise. However, it failed to contain - to cite one prime example - the businessmen from manipulating the market at will and virtually crumbled to their guiles thus showing a big chink in its confidence as well as efficiency. Interestingly enough, Bangladesh's stepping back into the road to democracy resulted from an election in 1991 under a unique system, namely neutral caretaker government.

This caretaker system of government took a better shape through constitutional modifications in 1996 and, that, too was done following the mass movement. However, the gloomy side of the development is that this very innovative system of government failed to hold fourth elections on the trot. Then, the very pertinent question follows: has the deficiency of the system

been badly exposed or machinations of worst forms, as alleged, rendered that system ineffective?

After the completion of the full 5-year term, the four-party alliance government left the office constitutionally and dramatically a Caretaker Government (CTG) was formed led by the President himself. The administration under this government proved themselves as blatantly partition to a certain quarter. Lots of criticisms of the government were made by the opposition parties and civil society of Bangladesh (Alim and Mozumder, 2008: 62).

The President is no doubt the titular head of the country. It is, however, needless to say that it is his failing - willful or not - that sent the country to a virtual precipice from which our patriotic armed forces salvaged the nation. There is no denying the fact that the country would not have reached that far had the President not usurped the position of Chief adviser.

Too many, -- as demonstrated in various state functions - -the caretaker government headed by Iajuddin Ahmed was, to all intents and purposes, an extension of four-party alliance rule. Whether he was persuaded or forced, President Iajuddin Ahmed's - despite being a party nominated president - taking up or usurping the role of chief of caretaker government dealt a severe blow to the non-party character of the caretaker system.

And, that led to a face off scenario between the immediate past ruling party block and the past opposition party alliance. Interesting indeed, a sort of crusade ensued between the two alliances, one alliance committing to hold the elections 2007 at any cost for the sake of safeguarding the Constitution while the other being determined to resist the same tooth and nail for safeguarding the voting rights of the people.

There were, however, widespread allegations that both alliances were so absorbed in the delusion of state power that they failed to reach even a modicum of compromise, which is inarguably the cornerstone of democracy. Painfully enough, despite rhetorical commitment and prolonged struggles to establish democracy, the political parties of Bangladesh have

miserably failed to establish a consensus over the ground rules for democratic competition and dissent (Jahan, 2000).

Moreover, it is no wonder that such politics breeds a politicized bureaucracy and a malfeasant system of law and order. And, these instruments of governance, operating without accountability and transparency, leads to the machinery of state being used as a political resource rather than an instrument of governance (Sobhan, 2000). Even the casual observers could discern the very existence of such a horrible scenario in Bangladesh in the recent past.

It is obvious that good governance is a must for the development and growth of a nation (World Bank, 1997). And, the most important distinction among countries relates not to their form of government but to their degree of government (Huntington, 1968). The tumultuous politics and politicized state institutions have always had a bearing on governance and Bangladesh case was hardly an exception. Bangladesh reached the brink of being a failed state following such an unprecedented chaos.

In its attempt to redeem democracy in Bangladesh, the current military-backed government initially seemed all set to send two phenomenal ladies, Hasina and Khaleda - labeled as, rightly or falsely, promoters of corruption as well as obstacles to political integration in Bangladesh - out of Bangladesh politics. Contrary to the government's expectations, however, eminent political scientists of the country have come up with the prediction that both the ladies would come back strong to Bangladesh politics just like mythological phoenix birds.

As government has to function through various systems and processes of the government machinery and private initiatives, the precondition is that the machinery and processes be good, flexible, sound, efficient, cost-effective and objective in approach. A nation's governance plays the vital role in shaping the destiny of its people (Ghosh, 2003: 28).

The current CTG has taken a number of initiatives to institutionalize democracy. Its attempts to combat corruption and

to reform public institutions have been well appreciated and have shown the determination of establishing a democratic republic. Concurrently, however, reform initiatives have drawn criticisms from different stakeholders and questions are being raised about the real intention of the government (Hasan, et. al., 2008:41).

There is no denying that failure to hold Bangladesh general elections, 2007 resulted not from a few reasons; it was rather culmination of a series of events. And, the future course of actions – more so amid impending apprehension of total military takeover - in Bangladesh politics and the future of democracy in Bangladesh would be matters of great interests for researchers on political and governance-related issues of the globe.

The government made a commitment before a long time that they would hold the next general election within December, 2008. The next parliamentary election is being considered very significant because of several pressing factors. These include transition from one generation of politicians to the next; the chance for parliamentary democracy to succeed in the face of *andolon* politics; hopes for limiting both corruption and the greed of politics and their supporters; and the good prospects for establishing effective governance (Rahman, 2006: 374).

DEVELOPMENTS BEFORE JANUARY 11, 2007

Unabated Criminalization of Politics

Truly, prior 1/11, politics and electoral systems in Bangladesh got polluted to the greatest possible extent. Black money holders, loan defaulters, musclemen had taken full control of our politics and electoral systems. For the honest and good people, it became next to impossible to even contest the elections, let alone come out successful. Civil society groups had long been trying to press home the demand for liberating the country's politics from the claws of unabated criminalization.

Joining and leaving parties was a common picture in our country at the times of national elections. Many loan defaulters and ill-begotten money holders used to offer themselves at those times. They used to present wonderful and expensive gifts to party chiefs and leaders. Parliamentary nominations remained up

for grabs for the capable - in terms of money no matter how the money came - ones at the time of nominations. Black money holders became pets of our leaders in no time (Quddusi, February 20, 2006).

Many dedicated political leaders were deprived of nominations and were hardly preferred to the black money holders. Even the top party leaders mocked at them for their desire because they were not rich enough to run the race. Top party leaders often regretted to the deprived ones saying that they were being deprived only to ensure the party candidates' victory in the elections and that in this age of fierce and unethical competition, candidates without hordes of money were unlikely to win the seats.

Money begets not only money, it perhaps makes the holders brain unbelievably fertile as well. In fact, in context of Bangladesh, the currencies are mere pieces of paper to the black money holders and loan defaulters because they have earned those less by their own efforts and hard work and more by fraud and forgery. Moreover, they do not have to account for those to anybody nor are they required to give them back to any authority (Quddusi, February 20, 2006).

Yes, things were so heavenly for such people in Bangladesh. Perhaps, moneymaking was the easiest thing in the world for the black money holders, corrupt officials, loan defaulters and, of course, political leaders of Bangladesh. Though some well-heeled politicians were behind bars, the big portion was at large and unlikely to be netted at any time.

That is why ill-begotten money holders used to find it really easy and enjoyable to waste money lavishly. By means of their ill-begotten money, they engaged themselves in buying not only votes but also the purified spirit of the destitute people. Necessity knows no law and thus commitment of such people was purchased, or rather, plundered in exchange for some money, though insignificant at the macro level.

However, there is no point in having the mistaken belief that such people wanted to become people's representatives for

mere honor. Money, money and more money was always at the back of their minds. They were at times overwhelmed by happiness and surprise at finding myriads of sources of money in such positions.

In our forward march to have a progressive society, we have seen positive development from primitive orientations towards developed ones incorporating shifts from diffuseness to specificity, from particularism to universalism and, more importantly, from ascription to achievement. Those days - not yet gone altogether - but, are, of course, on the sharp decline that people should be held in high esteem for their ascribed status - that whatever they have inherited such as caste, color, wealth and so on - rather than achieved status - gained through efforts and perseverance.

Truly, systemic destruction of institutions - like systematic annihilation of a nation - became the order of the day in the country. Almost all vital institutions were being made to suffer severely with respect to institutional capacity due to the state machinery's inordinate undue interferences and reckless politicization. Moreover, mud-slinging is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Though the leaders relish in this repulsive activity, the general people have utter abhorrence for the same. But, the leaders were just not to mend themselves (Quddusi, June 28, 2006).

Perennial instability in our political arena is rightly attributed to power orientation of our leaders. They traditionally have only one political agenda and that is power. And to gain and regain power, they have a tendency to go to any length. People's views about our political leaders are thus anything other than positive, and rightly so (Quddusi, March 20, 2006).

Painfully, though, the leaders have little concern to endear themselves to the people. It does reflect leaders' utter indifference for the people's opinions and desires. Though a change in their attitude was envisaged following 1/11, the real scenario might not be that rosy as sustainable political reforms are far away in the political parties

The Monster of Corruption

Who does not know that corruption had brought us the accolade of topmost corrupt nation in the world for some consecutive years? During the previous 4-party alliance government, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) tried, or rather, pretended to get down to business with rather an innovative mission named “Trap Case Drive”. The objective was to catch the corrupt officials red-handed with the help of prospective bribe givers as traps.

It sounded good as the ACC seemed to have become rather free from its internal squabbles that plagued it for a protracted period. Independent Anti-Corruption Commission was formed replacing Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC) which was famous more for its officials’ corruption than for curbing the same and, moreover, had to function at the beck and call of the Prime Minister’s office (*The Daily Star*, April 14, 2006).

A good number of our ministers had a tendency to express dissatisfaction with the findings as well as the eligibility of the Transparency International. This is not to claim that Transparency International is impeccable. But, was it producing the corruption index every year to tarnish the image of the countries or to dissuade them from being increasingly corrupt? Was it really liable for exaggeration of our corruption scenario?

Which public services could and can be obtained in Bangladesh without offering something in the form of bribes, speed money, donation and so on? Can we really get even our fair things done without greasing the incumbents? Corruption had become a national malady to say the least and continues to be so. It has become rather cancerous. People are indulging in corruption for variety of reasons such as, meeting both ends meet; keeping pace with the time; maintaining social status and so on. Some are even being forced into it against their will.

Though many in the country are thoroughly immersed in corruption and corruption by anybody - believer or non-believer - cannot be justified by any stretch of the imagination, some people are resorting to it while being masqueraded as religious

and thus denigrating the religion. To me, however, religion can deter corrupt practices to a degree provided that the religious values are adhered to in spirit, not in words only.

To check corruption, however, we had a - as mentioned earlier - Bureau of Anti-corruption which was Anti-Corruption Commission towards the last period of 4-party alliance regime. This old wine in new bottle, however, failed to win the judgment of the foreign dignitaries and they did not mince words, but derided it as a sheer joke. Barrage of complaints had run against our ministers and official incumbents in every corner of the country (*The New Nation*, June 2, 2006).

One example was, perhaps, sufficient to explain the severity and imprudence of corruption in present day Bangladesh. Yes, taka 14000 crore had reportedly been spent for the power sector in the previous 4-party alliance rule and electricity production was only 80 megawatt though that was also missing for long with the net result a big zero. What to make of it? Where had so much money gone? Reportedly, many projects were undertaken for bettering the power sector but they did not see the light of the day (*The New Nation*, June 2, 2006).

Vice-president of the World Bank for South Asia Praful C. Patel, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asia Richard Boucher, Chief Justice JR Mudassar Husain and others reminded us of the monster that had engulfed us. They at the same time tried from their perspectives to strike at the root of the problem. While Patel and Boucher referred to lack of integrity on the part of our leadership, the Chief Justice had delved deeper into the problem unmasking many disguises and exposing bankruptcy of our elites (*The Bangladesh Observer*, June 2, 2006).

Richard Boucher while giving a statement before the House Committee in International Relations very rightly commented that corruption and poor governance were the main obstacles facing Bangladesh. He did not fail to add - echoing many in the country - that these vices are indeed a drag on Bangladesh's economy resulting in non-realization of expected

levels of growth hindering reduction of poverty (*The Bangladesh Observer*, June 2, 2006).

Yes, corruption has by now become a serious social malady. Unfortunately, it has attained sort of benumbed social acceptance as well (Khan, 1998). People with wealth are honored these days even if they have attained that wealth through dubious means. Our political leaders and official incumbents have already become so greedy and unscrupulous that they are always predisposed to turning deaf ears to the call of shunning corruption.

Meanwhile, Justice Habibur Rahman Khan, chairman of Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC), said corruption has been deeply rooted in the society over the years with its worst phase occurring during the tenure of BNP-Jamaat-led four-party rule. And, referring to confessions by government officials, he said it appears that civil servants are involved in corruption more than any other professionals in the society (*The Daily Star*, November 6, 2008).

DEVELOPMENTS AFTER JANUARY 11, 2007

Abortive Minus-two Formula

Reform is, no doubt, most popular buzzword these days. Never before had calls for reforms gathered such a momentum. While there is no qualm in any quarter as to urgency of reform, the unfolding of drama revolving it has not always been wholesome - though you might disagree - since 1/11.

Truly, the two ladies enjoyed unqualified freedom since 1991. However, Khaleda Zia enjoyed the luxury of power more with her last stint in power being an absolute debacle in terms of quality of governance. Though these two ladies played significant role in dislodging military dictator Ershad in 1990, these very two ladies and their attitude to each other have been identified by many as a stumbling blocks to our nascent democracy (Quddusi, June 22, 2007).

Both of them, thus, deserve their shares of criticisms. However, to single them out is, I think, a rough justice. Such a

rating might please many quarters but the very essence of 'truth' suffers in the process. I mean to say that party leaders in both the camps - if they really were intent on - could have dissuaded them from being that despotic. However, they were more focused on ensuring their shares of the booty rather than serving either the country or the party.

However unsavory it might sound, most of them became champion opportunists at that time only to curry favor with the party chiefs and their kith and kin. In this military dictated environment, however, some leaders of both the camps were once behaving as if they had to suffer a lot at the hands of AL and BNP chiefs for their 'reformist' attitude.

Many such leaders in both the camps had long cried hoarse for reforms in their parties. One has, however, little confidence in those leaders bringing anything good to our political culture. One's doubt was reinforced by the fact that these leaders seemed to have been little interested in reforms of their own volition. But, presumably, pressure and only pressure - you know from which direction - had brought them to their knees. Before long, however, this minus-two formula turned into a manage-two formula.

Fear of Failure

Erstwhile Law Adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain expressed the apprehension that the current Caretaker Government (CTG) might even fail and the consequences would be inconceivable in that case. He also opined that the nation would have to share the blame should the current government fail and that this was thus the duty of the nation to shore up the government (Quddusi, August 7, 2007).

The adviser also blamed the media and the intellectuals for not playing due role and for non-cooperation with the government. This observation of the adviser seemed to be totally out of context as the media were the prime supporters and promoters of the government since its inception and the intellectuals did not play a less important role.

Meanwhile, did the government really pay heed to media and intellectuals suggestions? Rather, their suggestions were treated cheap and thus ignored in many cases. Truly, the influential people in the government seemed more interested in being obliged to donors' suggestions, or rather prescriptions for which even the businessmen expressed frustration.

The government continued for long to proceed with its agenda. Ironically, however, the 'public' concern of the current government seemed to be falling off gradually. Perceived decline in the people's initial euphoria is, of course, indicative of such a trend where thoroughly optimistic ones were becoming increasingly fatalistic.

Real and comprehensive reform was indeed a pill that the people were more than ready to swallow no matter how bitter it was for the criminalized politicians. However, the attempt to nourish the reform 'sapling' in the 'tub' caused a fair amount of boredom in the people. While crucial issues such as unabated price hike and crime rise continued to seriously hurt the people, the government efforts to combat the menaces seemed to be falling short of requirements.

The Dhaka University Message

It has been repeatedly claimed that the army installed this caretaker government to bring back peace in the country by averting an impending civil war in the wake of unprecedented confrontations among political parties. It, however, did not give them the license to steer the government as per their whims. Our armed forces had received worldwide accolades for their role in bringing peace in many war-torn countries.

Thus, it would be doubly painful if their injudicious activities turn their own country into a war field as had been seen in Dhaka University and adjoining areas following unacceptable behaviors of a few soldiers of the army camp installed on the Dhaka University campus. The role of police in further aggravating the situation should also have been seriously looked into for the greater interest of our otherwise disciplined army.

Anyway, however, students and, subsequently, teachers demand to withdraw army camp from the campus was more than justified. Its installation on the campus was a motivated design in the first place. Truly, our army did not intend to come into the scene. Miserable failure of our politicians forced them in to do so.

At one stage, a group of people severely criticised Dhaka University teachers for protesting against the treatment of Hasina and Khaleda. I believe those people utterly failed to comprehend the implicit message of that protest. Surely, the teachers' point was not to spare Hasina and Khaldea for their past misdeeds (Quddusi, August 27, 2007). .

Rather, their message was to the people in uniform not to take over state power which is not their ideal job in context of Bangladesh. Military rule is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh and people hardly forgot the tormenting days of military rule in 1975-1990. Thus, spontaneous protest of students, though vandalism is deplorable, across the country following the Dhaka University incident was not to be taken to be a gut reaction or an isolated event (Quddusi, August 27, 2007).

In a recent study titled 'The Daily Star- Nielson Election Opinion Poll', most respondents very strongly pinpointed democratic system to be the best option for Bangladesh despite rather dismal performance of democratic leaders in giving a solid shape to democratic values in Bangladesh

Table 1
Which system of government is the best?

| Remarks | Respondent (percentage) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Democratically elected | 81 |
| Islamic | 7 |
| Caretaker | 6 |
| Presidential | 3 |
| Martial Law | 3 |

Source: The Daily Star, November 21, 2008.

It was indeed a clear message that ploys to further downgrade Bangladesh politics in the name of making the political culture refurbished would just boomerang. Truly, Bangladesh politics reached the crossroads before 1/11. The way the government dealt with Dhaka University unrest and its subsequent spread in Rajshahi and Chitagong universities must have negatively impacted the image of the government (Rahman, 2008:35).

Fate of Anti-corruption Drive

Corruption-control is neither easy nor rapid in a country that has a long tradition of nurturing corruption. No quick-fix will serve the purpose of containing corruption. Corruption is like a multi-headed monster that cannot be countered with isolated and one-shot remedies (Khan, 2008: 11). Of late, the anti-corruption campaign seems to have been put on hold by the current government.

However, the experiment extravaganza remains, creating boredom among the citizenry. I am more than convinced that the move to bring the two most powerful leaders of the country to the negotiating table is the latest experiment. Though one wishes all the best to this move, we have every reason to be sceptical if

we look back to the secretary-level "circus" dialogue between Abdul Mannan and Abdul Jalil.

I do not believe the propaganda that the two women are the crux of the problems facing the country. I rather think that this scenario has been brought to the fore quite intentionally so that people stop asking about the fate of the anti-corruption drive and forget about the more overriding problems such as political reforms, price-spiral, economic depression, law and order situation and so on.

This does not mean that the government has failed miserably in these sectors, but is a reminder of the fact that it has been half-hearted or misdirected in its initiatives for too long. If we look at the anti-corruption drive, it can be stated quite convincingly that the government has just let the prime suspects off the hook after being quite successful in netting them. However, the recent statements of the anti-corruption chairman and the home adviser regarding the slowing down of anti-corruption cases are cogent proofs that the much-vaunted anti-corruption drive has already lost steam and is about to fizzle out (Quddusi, September 22, 2008).

Following findings are an indication of the necessity of the drive:

Table 2
Should ACC's anti-corruption drive continue?

| Remarks | Respondent (percentage) |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Continue | 96 |
| Discontinue | 2 |
| No response | 2 |

Source: *The Daily Star*, November 21, 2008.

The social costs of this anti-corruption fiasco might, however, be all the more awful. The fear is, then, not at all

unfounded that an impression might become deep-rooted in the citizenry that none in the country is interested in reining in the wayward horse of corruption. The anti-corruption slogan sounds like a platitude only to dupe the common people, thereby creating a craving for corrupt practices even among the people who have so far opted to remain aloof from corruption despite facing hardships.

Was not the so-called jihad against corruption a disservice to the nation? Will the current anti-corruption failure not accentuate the feeling that corruption is quite appreciated in the country, and that to get rid of all sorts of corruption charges one just needs to use guiles and political pressure on the ones who are bent on fighting against this ill?

Bureaucracy is called a necessary evil. Does our apparent anti-corruption fiasco, then, confirm the apprehension that corruption too has become a necessary evil in Bangladesh? Whatever might be the outcome of the current anti-corruption drive, the majority of the people have the guts to say no to corruption. The paradox is, however, that whoever took up the anti-corruption rein in the country failed, and, in doing so, augmented the social costs of corruption every time (Quddusi, September 22, 2008).

EPILOGUE

There is no alternative to going back to basics, that is, establishing accountability and transparency in every sphere of our political and social life and ensuring social justice rather than rule of law if we are to get ourselves freed from the curse of long-standing socio-political problems (Quddusi, 2008). Courageous steps of the government constantly reinforced the people's expectations.

Good governance, since ancient times, has been conceptualized as an ideal state. This notion endures even now, as good governance is seen to bring in happiness and welfare of the people. It is also associated with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework (Vayunandan,

2003:16). The government and the major political parties should be able to put things in proper perspective and perform better and better for the greater interest of the nation and for furtherance of democracy in the country.

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