

Good Governance to Promote Poverty Reduction Measures in Bangladesh

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Good governance comprises such elements as fair, non-discriminatory and policy/rule based management regime, transparent, accountable, effective and predictable administration, rational and efficient resource utilisation. It also includes respect for fundamental human rights, micro-enforcement of contracts and centrally valid leakage-free delivery system. Some additional components such as participatory decision making, affirmative actions and providing for basic needs of citizens are specially relevant in poverty focused governatorial dispensation.

Bangladesh has a unitary government which implies that the central government directly assumes the responsibility of territorial administration through its field offices. It follows a Westminster type of parliamentary democracy where government is formed through constituency based electoral process. The party or the alliance commanding majority in the parliament forms the government and usually its leader is sworn in as the Prime Minister, the head of the government. The Prime Minister chooses the ministers of his/her cabinet. In this system members of the opposition party are not included in the cabinet.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has recently been approved by the government of Bangladesh. The document sets forth the strategy and framework

for carrying out the poverty reduction measures. The impact of good governance on poverty alleviation has perspicuously been high-lighted in the document. The accomplishment of poverty alleviation measures, it has been cogently expatiated, critically hinges on good governance. Lack of good governance results in wastage and leakage of programme resources thereby helping perpetuate exploitation and expropriation of resources by the rich and the powerful, much to the exacerbation of the poverty problem. Undermining the importance of good governance explains, at least partially, the inadequacy of such oft repeated models as Harrod-Domar model, Solow model, Lewis model, Fei-Ranis model or Chenery model to project the locus of development satisfactorily. There may be enough savings or foreign exchange available but they will soon be squandered away in a country afflicted by bad governance.

Bangladesh has done commendably well in its development endeavor. It logged positive growth rates for 28 consecutive years. All the indicators of development are moving in the right direction; some are moving slowly. It may not be difficult for Bangladesh to achieve MDG goals well in time. The Country has accumulated astoundingly impressive success in the field of extended programme of immunisation (EPI), safe drinking water, primary school enrolment, gender equity in primary and secondary school enrolments, population control, micro credit, average longevity and disaster management. Production of staple food-stuffs (cereal crops) increased almost 3 times since

liberation. Export has surged, remittance has increased significantly, service sector has moved forward, number of employees in the public sector plummeted in the last one decade. A large number of NGOs, ensconced in snug work environment, are contributing their mite for the welfare of the people. These are no mean achievements. It bears mentioning that the country has never defaulted on loan repayment. These indicate the basic robustness of counting's governance system, the challenges notwithstanding. The recently concluded SAARC summit has catapult the stature of the country to a higher empyrean.

Bangladesh has a well structured government. Immediately after the national elections, the leader of the majority is called upon by the President to form the government. On his/her consent he/she is sworn in as the Prime Minister, the head of the government. The Prime Minister selects the Ministers (including state and Deputy Ministers) mostly (at least 90%) from the MPs and assign them to different ministries to conduct the business of the government. Ministers, including state Ministers in-charge, are the heads of their ministries. All conceivable activities in the country are allocated to the ministries, so that every activity has a reference ministry. In that sense, nothing is outside the preview of the government. This is in conformity with people's perception in this country. Ministries are divided into Divisions, wings, branches and sections. Directorates, autonomous bodies and field offices are responsible for implementation of decisions taken by the ministries. The field offices are

complemented by local bodies which are usually (or supposed to be) headed by elected persons.

Two other independent organs of the state, namely the parliament and the judiciary ensure checks and balances in regard to transaction of business by the executive branch, i.e. the government. The parliament is a sovereign body where the elected lawmakers deliberate untrammelled on important issues and frame laws for running the country. The parliament, particularly the standing committees of the parliament, also oversee the activities of the government and hold them accountable for their deeds through parliamentary hearing in the committee meetings. The committees also institute enquiry committees to probe into specific cases of maladministration. Judiciary on the other hand is free to adjudicate matters brought before it by any citizen. It has the prerogative to interpret the constitution and judge if any action of the executive government or parliament is ultra-vires of the constitution. It can even set aside the law enacted in the parliament if such law violates the provisions of the constitution. The Supreme Court and its subordinate courts, more often than not, awards judgments against the government which the latter is obliged to comply. Smooth functioning of the three organs provides the sinews for good governance in the country. Needless to mention here that good governance is both a desideratum for promoting and a bulwark against assault on the interest of the helpless poor who constitute the king-pin of the PRSP.

Good governance is up in the agenda of the government. It has constituted a “Cabinet Committee on Administrative Reform and Good Governance” to strengthen reform measures and promote good governance in the country. This committee reviews existing administrative system, the rules-regulations, procedures and recommends for their modification or improvement to the Prime Minister. This is in addition to administrative decisions taken in the regular weekly meetings of the cabinet. The Prime Minister meets the secretaries to the government from time to time to review the governance situation and provides her insight and instructions to improve the administration, primarily in order to bolster poverty alleviation endeavors of the government.

Size of the government is an important issue in governance arena. Government of Bangladesh has consistently been striving to contain the size of the government. As a result, the size has been effectively reduced in the last few years. Number of public sector employees was 943366 in 1994, it is less than 850000 now. The process for transfer of employees from completed development projects to revenue budget has been redesigned in order to screen out unnecessary positions from creeping into the regular revenue setup of the government. Vacant posts are not readily filled up. Necessity of filling up such posts is assiduously scrutinised before the recruitment process starts.

Government has in the mean time started implementation of the recommendations presented by the 6th Pay-Commission constituted in 2004.

Remuneration of the public sector employees has been raised by 53%. It meant a marked augmentation of public sector employees' welfare and a big incentive for them to work honestly, sincerely and with commitment. This will also have a propitious effect on work environment and employee accountability.

Efforts to promote good governance must be supported by a compatible legal infrastructure. In the last four years 137 new laws or amendments to extant laws have been passed by the parliament. Through these laws and amendments new institutions have been created; convoluted procedures have been simplified, disposal of cases sped up and room for anomalies and anachronism has been downsized. A number of national policies have been approved by the cabinet in order to ensure stability, predictability and transparency in the transactions and programmes of the sectors. The policies are well publicised, these are public documents accessible by any interested citizen. Approval of Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is an über achievement of the government. PRSP will be the lodestar in our journey to reach the millennium development goals (MDG) principally by reducing the poverty significantly. PRSP not only articulates our demand in the new global perspective, it also sets forth the strategy to materialise the demand, the means to garner required resources included.

In order to curb corruption, the government has established Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and ensured its operational freedom. The inchoate commission is in its formative stage. We hope it will soon prove its

effectiveness in arresting corrupt practices. At the executive level, government has taken some commendable steps to streamline the field administration. It has restored the system of selecting the Deputy Commissioners (DCs) of the districts through a rigorous screening process. At the moment, no DC is from outside the 'fit' list. So is the case with the Upazila Nirbali officers (UNO), the CEO of the Upazila (sub District). All the Districts and the upazilas have been subject to thorough inspection by superior officers. The system of on-the-job training was relegated to oblivion. Government has re-introduced the on-the-job training after a long time. Cabinet has been apprised on the basis of inspection reports and course completion reports of the elaborately designed on-the job training programmes.

The practice of keeping senior positions in the public sector organisations persisted over years. The present government decided to full-in these positions to instill dynamism in public organisations. At the moment all the public sector organisations, except two, have regularly appointed CEOs. Because of legal constraints, adhoc arrangements had to be made in two organisations. Government recruited more than 85000 employees in the last four years to fill in strategic positions, high and low, in order to turn moribund organisations into vibrant and effective ones.

Government has demonstrated its commitment to e-governance and free-flow of information by putting fifty essential forms on website (www.forms.gov.bd) so

that they can be easily visited or down-loaded by citizens who need them. This facility will particularly help people who are looking for jobs, who intend to get some facility or who want to possess some documents essential for transaction of quotidian business,

In terms of micro enforcement of laws, the most visible spot is administration of pure food act (ordinance). Punishments awarded by the peripatetic courts in with a view to deterring adulteration of food items, drew wide acclamation from members of the public. Ensuring security for the shoppers and traders during Ramadan and during puja demonstrated government's effectiveness to curb criminal activities in the most vulnerable spots all over the country. 8484 criminals have been punished by civil courts in last four years for hijacking, criminal indiscipline, destroying public properties etc. The new law enjoining speedy trials proved to be efficacious in this regard. The speedy tribunal set up by a separate law deals with heinous crimes: murder, rape, arson etc. Cases that lingered years after years were disposed of in the shortest possible time; hundreds of criminals were awarded heavy punishments including death sentence. National monitoring committee on sensational cases played a commendable role in this regards. Both the legal and administrative instruments used in this instance are innovations par excellence.

Jail reform is another area where government has made substantial progress. New jails have been constructed easing congestion in districts; amenities for the

inmates particularly the female prisoners and children have been greatly increased and new equipment have been installed to enrich jail environment. The jail code is being revised, the work is expected to be over soon. Rights of the prisoners were at the centre of the government's actions and defined firmly the tenets of good governance in this regard.

Bangladesh can boast of affirmative actions taken in favour of women, disadvantaged groups and inhabitants of remote backward terrains. Though Bangladesh constitution enjoins equal opportunity for all, it provides for affirmative actions for above types of backward groups. Affirmative actions taken for women population include reserved seats for women in the parliament (number has been increased to 45 recently), free education for female students upto college level in addition to special female-stipends, reserved quota for appointment in public organisations, special quota for appointment of primary teachers, nurses etc, reserved seats in union parishads and pourashavas. Disadvantaged groups, tribal people and children of freedom fighters are entitled to quota benefits in appointments of public organisations. Districts in chittagong Hill-tracts enjoy much greater decentralised power through special acts framed for this region. Separate Development Board has been established for the area. Special projects are being carried out for accelerated development of chittagong hill tracts. Affirmative actions thus have a strong overtone in the governance of Bangladesh.

Challenges: now and ahead

Bangladesh follows Westminster type of parliamentary democracy where the elected lawmakers form the executive government. The ministers wield lot of executive power because they are the chief executives of the ministries. Their political colleagues, the members of the parliament, ardently believe, not without reason, that they have a right to share executive power at least in their own constituencies. This militates against the concept of elected local government. For the last 14 years the country could not introduce elected local government at District and Upazila level, the most important units of territorial administration. The inherent weakness of the classical democratic governance which transforms few elected lawmakers to executive ministers leaving out their parliamentary colleagues, the elected lawmakers, without any executive power needs to be addressed seriously at national and international levels in the interest of efficient delivery system through decentralised local bodies. The problem may be pandemic though it has been diagnosed in Bangladesh.

Constituency based electoral process is a costly game. At times it leaves room for unethical practices and trading violence. Vitiating electoral process eats into the vitals of good governance by introducing distortions in the transaction of government business. Persons wont to play costly games are prone to play cost recovery games as well. We, therefore, need to cogitate intensely in order to work out some mechanism to contain election expenditure by the candidates at the minimum possible level. Other unholy practices in elections need to be

effectively curbed for laying the foundation of good governance right from the start of building a democratic government. Not an easy task!

We have inherited the legal system from the British colony. The system has many positive aspects: the elaborate judicial outfit, emphasis on human rights, adequate appellate fora and independence of higher judiciary. The system, however, militates against speedy disposal of cases. The case management regime is anachronistic, it does not fit in with the management style of the modern cybernetic world. Development efforts are often frustrated through application of reticular legal process. Procastination runs through every turn of the labyrinthine edifice. Final disposal of a case may take years, if not a decade. The poor have a slim chance to protect their interest in such a costly and time consuming legal regime. PRSP might find it extremely difficult to match this problem. It is after all not a manifesto for a social or economic revolution. At this stage we have only to be content with this realisation.

Power elites at all levels, including donor's level, need to be pro-poor. Such structure is not easily found. We rather observe a situation to the contrary: the powerful exact what they want and the powerless grant what they must. (Dean D. Umali) Empowering the poor, the powerless, needs overhauling the system including the aid management regime. In a developing country Pareto optimality or a plus sum game is often elusive. Therefore the rich have to part with their resources if the poor have to really helped. This can be done through

fiscal instrument if it is properly honed. We are yet to orchestrate a fiscal regime that will truly countenance our efforts to empower the poor, including the working poor who are subject to unabated “Maxian exploitations”. We have to start from this point.

Globalisation too have its share in damaging the fabric of good governance. While expanded markets, revolutionary progress in real and virtual communications, seminal understanding between countries and blocs have ushered in a new and more enlightened global order, such vices as underground trading from bootlegging to nuclear smuggling, money laundering, child trafficking, arms running, planting of terrorists have posed alarming threats to many peace loving and peaceful countries like ours. “Global criminal activities are transforming the international system, upending the rules, creating new players, and reconfiguring power in international politics and economics,” writes Moises Naim in his new book “Illicit”. On the one hand, the control of governments over transborder flow of people, goods and information has drastically weakened, on the other hand global economic liberalisation amplified the rewards for international gangsters, counterfeiters, shady financiers, merchants of violence, ideological extremists, corrupt officials and unscrupulous business people who are ready to grab the spoils by breaking the rules. A developing country like Bangladesh can ill afford to stem the tide

alone, by its own resources. Being aware of the limitation is all the more frustrating at best.

We badly need generous and compassionate support from friends like you to face the above forces home and abroad.

Future plans for promoting good governance may be articulated in one concluding sentence: We should maintain, reinforce, promote and accelerate the positive trends in good governance and bushwhack the constraints and negative forces that stand on the way.