

BOOK REVIEW

Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh: Fifty Unpleasant Essays by Kamal Siddiqui, Dhaka: University Press Limited. 1996, XV+179 pp, price Tk. 250.00

... a caste of guardians who had been amateur despots-expert in nothing or everything, answerable in practice mainly to themselves, foreign to the country they ruled.....

-Philip Woodruff

In his latest book, *Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh : Fifty Unpleasant Essays*, Dr. Kamal Siddiqui explores the problematique of governance in Bangladesh and offers policy measures towards inventing goods governance in the country.

This is a difficult book to review, to begin with. Different essays address different issues and offer piecemeal policy suggestions which are difficult to summarize. Secondly, it should be pointed out at the outset that it is the civil bureaucracy component of governance - *albeit* the vital one - that constitutes the subject matter of the book. Good governance, therefore, has been used in a specific senses of administering the country with an efficient civil bureaucracy. The author strongly feels that there is an escalating fragmentation and decline of standard in the civil service of Bangladesh. Major reforms of the civil service are necessary for good governance of the country.

The author covers a broad range of problems associated with bureaucratic dysfunction of the country and provides concrete policy measures to eliminate them. The essays range from colonial hangover to tips for *tadbir* management, eating and drinking on duty, and

shingara committee. Some of these essays address major issues and some minor ones. Some of these write-ups are stimulating and some of the policy suggestions are very useful as well.

The author correctly points out that the reforms of the civil service should not be donor-driven. The necessary reforms should be carried out in view of the socio-economic reality of the country. It is because the characteristics of Bangladesh civil service are historically created and sustained by the under-development of the society. Two of its most striking characteristics are, to paraphrase Siddiqui's expression, ritualism and hierarchy. It is also fragmented by pervasive factionalism and widespread corruption and its efficiency is lowered through *tadbir* or patron-clientelism.

The civil service of Bangladesh, as Siddiqui describes, is a conglomerate of cliques. A major split is between generalists and specialists. Other cleavages which run across the system are conflicts between political appointees and the meritocracy, freedom fighters and non-freedom fighters, civil servants and praetorians in the civil service, and elite members of the former civil service of Pakistan and the rest. Many of the civil servants are influenced by ties of locality (districtism) and kinship and divided along political cleavages of the country.

However, this book is more like a manual which offers concrete policy measures to be adopted for achieving good governance in Bangladesh. Obviously a crucial aspect of good governance is an effective policy for recruitment, promotion and transfer of government officials. The author is in favour of doing away with district quotas and retaining quotas only for women and ethnic minorities. The criteria for promotion at all levels should be merit and seniority. Promotion should be given on the basis of merit once officials have served a specific number of years in each grade. The officials up to the level of joint secretary should be evaluated on the basis of annual confidential reports (ACRs), and written and oral examinations.

The author also favours a consistent set of rules for promotion to be effected through rationally organized bodies of civil servants and not through committees headed by ministers. Lateral entry should be made open for all for a specified period of time to improve governance in the short run. Violation of service rules should be strictly dealt with and politicized civil service, trade unionism done away. The existing code of conduct and discipline is to be streamlined to achieve effective implementation. The author gives a great deal of emphasis on civil service training. He also offers suggestions for improved routine operation of the civil service, institutional strengthening of various services and interagency liaison.

Siddiqui argues forcefully for a small and efficient government machinery. He also suggests measures through which it can be done. He advocates public education, strengthening of the Bureau of Anti-Corruption and so on to reduce corruption in the civil service. He is also in favour of modifying the University Act of 1973 to give more power to the Chancellor in appointing key posts of the university. He also advocates strong local government and thinks that abolition of the *upazila* system was a major blunder.

The strangers, as Franz Kafka puts it in an eloquent paragraph in *The Castle*, are not supposed to know 'official communications'. As an outsider I have a completely different view of the major issues addressed by Siddiqui. My fundamental disagreement with Siddiqui is epistemological. First, the author of these essays - an acknowledged authority on local government in South Asia - is a civil servant rather than a social scientist. Siddiqui does not employ here the perspective of social science. Secondly, institutional structures cannot be analyzed or reforms implemented in a piecemeal empiricist way. Take, for example, the problem of downsizing the government. You can not do it without creating alternative employment or entrepreneurial opportunities which again can not be achieved without rapid economic development. An increasingly forgotten man called Karl Marx saw it clearly about a century and a half ago. "For the unemployed surplus population" [of France], he wrote, " ... there is no place either on the

land or in the towns, and which accordingly reaches out for state offices as a sort of respectable alms, and provokes the creation of state posts" (Marx, 1978:131). If you have an overgrown state with fiscal crisis and can not pay decent salary to officials, you are unlikely to be successful in curbing corruption. Expensive overseas training of civil servants which Siddiqui suggests may be counterproductive because it will create expensive life-styles, which in turn, will fuel increasing corruption. The training of civil servants is extremely important. But I would like to give more emphasis to on the job training. The dated views of Dharma Vir of the Indian civil service should not be dismissed lightly :

There was not much in the formal training of the I.C.S. The training lay in being given a job and being told to get on with it. But because we were given that trust and responsibility we soon found ourselves ready to tackle any thing (cited in Woodruff, 1954:257).

One reason that the earlier civil servants were more efficient was that they had a decent education. Siddiqui rightly deplores the serious decline in the standard of higher education in the country. He partly puts the blame on the University Act of 1973 which, according to many, has led to politics of patronage and factionalism among the faculty members. Siddiqui wants to vest the power of appointing the Vice-Chancellor to the Chancellor and that of the Deans to the Vice-Chancellor. If the bureaucracy is characterized by factionalism and districtism as Siddiqui finds it, and if the organizational culture of political parties is marked by the same characteristics, it is very unlikely that the coveted posts of the university would go to better academics rather than better clients. Acts and policy measures may not have intended consequences in the absence of complementary measures or due to system properties.

Our Universities have not emerged as communities of scholars inspite of the presence of many reputed scholars. Our bureaucracy is inefficient inspite of many highly skilled and efficient civil servants.

Both are strategic institutions locked into the systemic properties of underdevelopment of the society and we have only superficial knowledge of the both. For sound and effective policies, we need to explore what anthropologist Clifford Geertz once called 'deep play'—an unfashionable expression today. I shall only point at a single critical factor here. The reward structure has been distorted in both these institutions. The reward structure of the university is biased towards administrative positions (provosts get more benefits than those who hold chairs and chairs are very few) and distorted through political interventions. In the university one can reach such great heights through political patronage that even a Lucky Jim would not dare dream. The politicization of the bureaucracy is also a very important factor in its increasing fragmentation. After all it is foolhardy to earn the displeasure of the powerful. Herein lie the problematiques of both the university and the civil service and both are interlinked.

The bureaucratic phenomenon, as Crozier pointed out, is often characterized by extremely complex vicious circles. Recent developments in social theory suggest that consequences of policy interventions are context-bound and system-bound. Policies which appear to be very good on the surface fail because other elements subvert them. Most often reforms are implemented in a piecemeal way. But they must be done with a broader vision. To be effective, they must be pragmatic and synergic.

Siddiqui has set the agenda of the discourse and provided important insights and suggested broad ranging policy measures from an insider's perspective. It remains the task for others to carry the debate forward.

Good governance is vital for our survival in the twenty first century. This book will be very important for those who are interested in this crucial problematique. The University Press Limited has maintained its high standard of publication for this book as well.

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