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Lack of commitment, crisis of credibility stunt reforms

Prothom Alo Roundtable told

By Special Correspondent

The need for a national consensus to reform the administration has been stressed by ministers, politicians, business leaders, bankers, academics, former civil servants and bureaucrats to make it service oriented, dynamic, accountable and committed to strengthening the foundations of democracy.

Speaking at a Roundtable on the State of Public Administration Reform, organised by the daily Prothom Alo at a city hotel yesterday, they said a strong political commitment was needed to downsize the bureaucracy to tailor it to serve the people better.

Devolution of the centralised and compartmentalised administration is essential to keep pace with the rise in population and developments in a democratic society, they said.

Police and intelligence services should come under the command of public representatives to free the people from unnecessary harassment and oppression, the Betar and BTV should be freed from all sorts of state control and the right to information act should be enacted to help growth of a civil society, the participants observed.

They also stressed that the pervasive influence of black money and muscle power and illegal weapons at their com-

mand was also hindering people's participation expected in a democratic culture. A modus operandi should be evolved to finance the political parties and keep them accountable.

To ensure neutrality of the administration, a set of political appointees could help the political government keep track of implementation of its policy, they said.

The participants suggested that civil servants and military officers not be allowed to join politics within five years of retirement.

Parliamentary committees should be activated and administration made accountable before public representatives to make democracy function better, they said.

Since independence, there have been 20 reports identifying the need to reform the bureaucracy, including four major studies, two of them carried out by the UNDP and the World Bank. But not much progress has been achieved, they lamented, underlying the need for political commitment to make it.

Moderated by Prothom Alo editor Matjur Rahman, the Roundtable participants included Finance Minister S.A.M.S. Kibria, Education Minister AHSK Sadique, BNP leader and former commerce minister Shamsul Islam MP,

chairman of Public Accounts Committee in Parliament S.M. Akram MP, JP whip Fazle Rabbi, MP, chairman of Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC) A.T.M. Shamsul Huq, Gana Forum chief Dr Kamal Hossain, The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam, former finance minister A.M.A. Muhith, Left Front leader Rashed Khan Menon, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister Dr S.A. Samad, President of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Mahbub Jamil, IRD secretary and NBR chairman Abdul Mueyed Choudhury, Prof Mohabbat Khan of Dhaka University, former secretary Nurunnabi Choudhury, deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank Ibrahim Khaled, Prof Dr Muntasir Mamun of Dhaka University, Khurshid Alam and Subroto Dhar of the World Bank.

Muhith presented the summary of discussions.

Winding up the discussions S.A.M.S. Kibria said the government had given due importance to the need for administrative reforms which had been lacking under the previous regime. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has emphasised the need for it, he added. He also said that the development partners of Bangladesh also wanted

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the government to speed up the pace of reforms.

Referring to the banking sector, the culture of loan default, influence of associations and trade unions, the finance minister observed that "the nation cannot progress without a sound banking system".

"We have public opinion against the loan defaulters. Necessary laws have been enacted. I can say that since 1996 the recovery rate has been much higher than the previous rate. Banking supervision has also been made more effective and borrowers have received the message that they have to pay back," the finance minister said.

Similarly, the minister said, public opinion should also be built up for bringing about administrative reforms. He noted that associations and unions were against reforms.

He also emphasised downsizing and decentralising the administration.

The minister said there had been "back door" entry of 16,000 people on the payroll of the government through project appointments. Such practices are telling upon the quality of the government as they are not recruited through the PSC, he added.

Initiating the discussions, editor Matjur Rahman said public administration is a legacy of the British Raj and is yet to adapt itself to the needs of a democracy.

The allegations against the bureaucracy are that it is anti-people, ridden with omnipresent corruption and red tapism. It gained fat to maintain its presence. Some 47,000 people are said to be surplus in the state sector, he said quoting a government appointed committee report prepared by former civil servant Nurunnabi Choudhury. But the bureaucracy is yet to become accountable despite the return of parliamentary democracy, Matjur Rahman added.

He said red tape and corruption have been wasting people's money and time and infringing on their fundamental rights, eating into the national resources prompting prime minister to remark that "files do not move without fuel".

PARC chairman Shamsul Huq said the commission is going ahead with its programme, trying to help the administration reach the services to the people. The summary of the discussions will be analysed and a report given to the government, he added.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate an international workshop on March 14-16 when she would make a policy speech, he said.

Earlier, minister Sadique said lack of political consensus has obstructed effective and good governance. On the current political stand-off, he said "if necessary we shall talk".

But resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, which is a constitutional office, could not be a subject of discussion between the government and opposition.

Shamsul Islam MP of BNP observed that reform process did not address the main issues. "The biggest need is to reach the

services to people who are living in the thana and district levels, streamlining the administration of land ownership. The administration is suffering because of indiscipline and corruption. Law and order has become a big problem because of the culture of 'maastans'. We all have to think about the vicious circle and avoid the path of dividing the nation."

S.M. Akram MP of Awami League said the fact that government wants reforms is reflected in the formation of the commission. There should be a consensus in and outside parliament on what should the agenda of reforms in the next two decades, he added.

Fazle Rabbi MP of Jatiya Party said effective parliamentary committees would help reduce the gap between the ministers and the bureaucrats.

Dr Kamal Hossain, a former foreign and law minister, observed there is a need for efficient and neutral bureaucracy in a multiparty democracy and gave a 12-point outline for reforms.

He called for improving the quality of civil service including the Public Service Commission, downsizing the government, decentralising administration, abolishing LGRD, applying law impartially, establishing a neutral prosecuting agency, abolishing official secrecy act and ensuring promotions on merit.

Menon stressed that the reforms should include everything including the election process and politics, not only the administration.

Prof Mohabbat Khan said reforms initiated by PARC are yet to be implemented because "our leaders cannot see beyond their nose. They lack vision and strategic thinking. At higher echelons of bureaucracy, there is no change in their thinking which has its bearings upon the reforms. Even the civil society has also failed to take a strong stand for the reform."

Mueyed Choudhury called for changing the culture of "our man" in the administration and improving the quality of the civil service through proper recruitment.

Nurunnabi Choudhury who headed the reforms committee in 1993-96 suggested reforms in magistracy and police to improve law and order.

In a multi-party democracy, administration is part of it, said Dr S.A. Samad. He agreed with the suggestions for freedom of information excepting security matters.

Mahfuz Anam said effectiveness of reform depends on the credibility of the government that initiates it. When a new government takes over, he said, it begins with high expectations but subsequently starts compromising on its determination and commitment.

The shelved report of the commission for autonomy for the Betar and BTV highlighted the crisis of credibility in the government, he said. "We would have felt encouraged if the judiciary was separated (from the executive) and Radio and TV were given autonomy."

Anam commended media support to the PARC and the government if they wanted reforms sincerely.



Education Minister AHSK Sadique (second from right) speaks at the Roundtable while (from left) PARC chairman A T M Shamsul Huq, Prothom Alo editor Matjur Rahman (moderator) and former finance minister A M A Muhith listen. The minister said the government is willing to talk to end the current political crisis but cannot discuss CEC's resignation.

— Star photo