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Commentary

The PSC scandal demands judicial probe

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Integrity in public life and national institutions has been going down over the years. Every development in different government bodies is for the worse. The latest episode, when question papers for the 24th Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) preliminary examinations were leaked, has taken the country to an unprecedented low. The chairperson of the Public Service Commission (PSC), a constitutional body, had earlier denied that there was any leakage of question papers. But by cancelling the controversial examination under widespread protest, demonstrations and condemnation she is admitting the charges.

The chairperson had earlier thrown down the gauntlet when she brushed aside the allegations and press reports. She did not bother to admit the charges when they were first made. Instead she tried to suppress the allegations without ordering an inquiry. She not only felt any obligation to be ashamed of the lapses by her institution but also tried to defend the leakage. The PSC chairperson Professor Tahmida Begum told newsmen that only 5 per cent of the examinees may get the question papers after the leakage for which there is no reason why the examination should be scrapped. As if that does not

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not mar the fairness of examination. Do we need to remind her that it is a question of principle not the numbers that matter. Any single leakage demands cancellation of my test!

Assuming for argument's sake that her contention is correct then 5 percent amounts to about six thousand candidates. Much higher than the number of openings this year. The number of posts stands at 4500, leaving no chance for those who did not get the question papers to compete for any of the posts.

There is also increasing debate about the objectivity of viva voce tests by the PSC. There were allegations of bribe taking at the PSC. But these seem to pale before the massive degradation of the institution that happened this time following the leakage of question papers. Many believe it is a systematic effort on the part of the government to politicise the process of examinations and recruitment by PSC. By being an accessory to such crimes the chairperson has undermined the dignity of her position. She is oath-bound to protect the fairness and image of the constitutional body which she has failed miserably. What she has done by trying to suppress the leakage is unacceptable and unethical from her position.

The PSC has been compelled to cancel the controversial examination but that is not enough. There should be an impartial probe into the leakage of question papers. The country's constitutional body cannot be allowed to rot. It is not only in the interest of the candidates but also in the interest of the nation. As the status of chairperson and PSC is constitutional, therefore the probe should also be judicial and the inquiry report should be made public.

For too long the administration of Bangladesh has been kept under wraps under the Official Secrecy Act of 1935. This is just not working. Government officials and other functionaries of the state have taken the opportunity to deviate from universally accepted

norms. The government should take a more open-door policy allowing transparency in its functioning to prove good governance.

Increasingly, persons and partisan loyalty is becoming more important than institutions. If the state has to function, institutions must survive and surpass individuals. If this is not done we will soon enter a stage where the state will no longer function and factionalism will dominate.

Many also feel that the recent scandal in the PSC is only the tip of the iceberg. If a thorough investigation is held many more irregularities will surface. This needs to be done to regain the PSC's lost image and also to restore public confidence, which has gone down significantly over the years by the politicisation, corruption and irregularities by the politically appointed chairman and members in PSC.

The government leaders must realise that they too cannot go beyond some well-defined norms. Their powers are not unlimited just because they enjoy absolute majority in parliament. They are accountable and not only at the end of their five-year term but also for every and each of their actions in office.