

01/3/03

PSC In A Serious Spot

Allegations that questions of the 24th Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations were leaked out a day ahead of the preliminary test has obviously put the Public Service Commission (PSC) in a serious spot. Never has it faced such a scandal with respect to the most important competitive examination held under its auspices—although the PSC does seem to have earned some opprobrium lately for having withheld the results of two previous BCS exams, on the grounds that both were designed to serve an insidious political agenda. Dispassionate quarters might find in this a case of the pot calling the kettle black, for it is an unfortunate fact that governments in Bangladesh have increasingly been turning into party rather than people's governments.

The number of examinees appearing for the BCS preliminary test from across the country this year is over a hundred thousand, and they are competing for less than five thousand posts. One can imagine how high the emotions can run with the news that leaked questions from one or two coaching centres were selling at as high as Taka 10,000 a set. One Dhaka University student was said to have taken the 'incriminating' evidence to the Ramna police station, but we are told, the officer in charge chose not to enter a GD on the basis of a handwritten set of questions. It merits more investigation than what is apparent, he is said to have implied. This is fair enough, and we hope the circumstances that led to the situation can be established forthwith.

Immediately after the alleged leak, the PSC Chairperson has been quoted by some papers as saying that she had received no official 'complaint' and that it might be a rumour spread with malafide intent. Saturday's press release of PSC more or less reiterated the same, but that is not enough to rule out the press reports on the leakage of question papers. Whatever the 'mystery' behind it, the PSC's nonchalance is neither responsible nor reasonable. It is not going to assuage the grievances of bona fide BCS candidates, or diminish the sense of outrage the public at large feels about the unfortunate issue. We would hope the commission handled the crisis with the utmost professionalism, not peevishness.

Needless to say, the institution is not going to come out of it unscathed, but the standard practice of blaming the scandal on 'conspiracy' and leaving it at that would be doubly scandalous and destroy the credibility of the PSC—and that of aspiring civil servants—beyond repair. A thorough and transparent investigation is therefore an imperative, with exemplary punishment awaiting foul players, be they ordinary cheats and corrupt officials within or political mercenaries and saboteurs. It might not be too difficult to unearth the circumstances if an independent investigation is allowed to proceed without hindrance.

Legally speaking, the fact that the majority of the questions on the so-called leaked set clicked, is not enough to prove guilt. Defenders of the BCS coaching centres that are being implicated in this scandal might say that, given the 'expertise' of 'knowledgeable' teachers, their 'suggestions' may very well look like leaks! Indeed, it would be well nigh impossible to establish whether or not these were the very same questions set behind closed doors—unless the 'supposed insiders' selling them were stupid enough to leak exactly worded copies.

But the fact remains that coaching centres—and there are as many categories as there are exams at all levels, academic courses, skill testing, job search and what not—thrive because they almost always 'guarantee' success. What is the basis of such guarantees, cynics ask, if not 'insider trading'? This aspect of 'coaching' is the order of the day and recipients of the handwritten suggestions/leaks could give the authorities some clue as to how and who started the brisk business at the expense of so many BCS aspirants.

The PSC is an institution considered nationally sacrosanct and it cannot afford to let a scandal like this stand without redress. We hope those at the helm, fully aware of what the stakes are and are able to handle this crisis competently.