The CPI - Corruption Perceptions Index - 2010 was released by Transparency International (TI) on October 26. Bangladesh has failed to achieve any improvement over last year. In a scale of 0-10, we have scored 2.4, the same as in 2009, and occupied 134th place among 178 countries featured in this year’s index.

Our score is the same as Azerbaijan, Honduras, Nigeria, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ukraine and Zimbabwe, all ranked in the 12th position from below. Bangladesh was last year in the 13th position from below together with Belarus, Pakistan and Philippines.

The downslide of one step from the 13th to the 12th position may not be significant, because in addition to the score of the country concerned the ranking depends also on comparative performance of other countries and the number of countries included or excluded in the particular year.

On the other hand, the score a country receives is more important. That the score of Bangladesh has remained the same as last year is significant when viewed from the perspective that in 2009 we gained 0.3 points above that of 2008. Such a gain in one year was considered to be remarkable for a country at the lower end of the list, and Bangladesh was one of the only 9 countries to have achieved so.

Therefore, we had expected that the upward trend from 2009 would continue this year, especially when we have a government that came to power with anti-corruption as one of the key top priorities in their election manifesto. But sadly, that was not to be, as the result of CPI has shown.

The CPI provides an international comparison of performance of countries in terms of perceived degree of prevalence of political and administrative corruption. It is a survey of surveys conducted by about 10 various international organizations that bring out the assessment of business people, business analysts, investors, investment analysts and country experts who may or may not be resident in the country concerned. The index is being produced by TI from 1995 when only 41 countries were included in the index. The highest number of countries included in the survey was 180 in 2009.

Somalia, having scored 1.1, remains at the bottom as they did in 2007, 2008 and 2009 implying that corruption in that country is perceived to be the highest, followed by Afghanistan and Myanmar in the 2nd position, Iraq in the 3rd, while Sudan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the 4th.

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Denmark, New Zealand and Singapore are the highest scorers with 9.3, meaning that corruption is perceived to be the lowest in these countries. Jointly in the second position are Finland and Sweden having scored 9.2, closely followed by countries like Canada, Netherlands, Australia, Switzerland and Norway.

Singapore has always been among the high-ranking countries, but for the first time this year it has reached the very top having gained from 9.2 last year. The only other Asian performer to be in the league of countries or territories that have most effectively controlled corruption is Hong Kong having scored 8.4.

As in previous years highly developed countries continue to be in the category of those where corruption has been effectively controlled, although many OECD countries like Germany, Japan, UK, USA have scored less than 8 this year. Notably also, the highest ranking countries have also received less than one hundred percent score indicating that corruption is not necessarily the monopoly of the developing countries. It is a malaise affecting every country of the world – developed or developing.

Like in previous years among the South Asian countries Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka have performed better than Bangladesh, with Bhutan scoring 5.7 which is better than countries like Italy (3.9), Thailand (3.5), China (3.5), Malaysia (4.4) and South Korea (5.4). India and Sri Lanka scored 3.3 and 3.2 respectively. Bhutan’s consistent performance indicates the importance of political will, rule of law and growing institutional capacity to control corruption, especially effectiveness of their Anti-corruption Commission.

Maldives and Pakistan have scored 2.3, whereas Nepal got 2.2. Notably, Bhutan has registered one of the highest gains from 5.0 in 2009 to 5.7 this year, whereas Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have scored 0.1 points higher than their respective score last year. The other South Asian countries – India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan have received lower than their score in 2009.

It may be recalled that Bangladesh was earlier placed at the very bottom of the list for five successive years from 2001-2005. In 2006 Bangladesh was ranked in no 3, in 2007 in no 7 and in 2008 no10.

Last year's performance was encouraging for many of us, though with the score remaining below 3, we continued to be among countries where corruption is pervasive with deep and wide impacts.

The CPI being based on 2-years rolling estimates, this year's data are from January 2009 until September 2010. Therefore, Bangladesh's performance reflects a perception of lack of progress upon that of January 2008-September 2009.

When Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) released the 2009 report, we commented that the improvement was a combination of three factors. The first was a possibility that corruption could be truly made a punishable offence. The second factor was a number of institutional and legal reforms that took place which could strengthen the capacity to effectively control corruption. The third was a perceived positive assessment of the anti-corruption electoral pledge of the government voted to power in December 2008.

We also commented last year that whether or not the improvement achieved by Bangladesh would be sustainable and whether further progress would be achieved, will depend on the government’s will and capacity to deliver on the commitments made.
Among the Government’s electoral pledges more than a dozen were specific to building and strengthening the anti-corruption institutional and policy infrastructure. After forming the Government, the commitments have continued to be reiterated, especially at the top level, which helped retain some optimism.

The Government also adopted some significant steps that could indeed strengthen its capacity to effectively control corruption. These include the adoption of the Right to Information Act in the very first session of the 9th Parliament. Another piece of legislation that could be rewardingly complementary to the RTI Act – the Whistleblower Protection Act - has been placed in the House for consideration. If adopted and enforced officials in public and non-government sectors who couldn’t disclose information on corruption or other irregularities for fear of intimidation or other forms of harassment will be protected by the law.

The Government has been moving ahead with the practice of Citizen’s Charter in public service delivery institutions which could also be helpful. All publicly funded institutions have been asked to conduct anti-corruption training programmes, which should also be viewed positively. An implementation plan of the UN Convention against corruption has been adopted, though not much of practical progress has taken place in realizing the vast range of commitments made under the Convention.

However, there have been some other developments that may have prevented any positive gains in CPI. The Government proposed a set of amendments to the Anti-corruption Act that could severely curtail the independence and effectiveness of the Anti-corruption Commission. In the face of opposition by the civil society, media and other stakeholders, especially TIB, the Government has reportedly decided to review the matter which however remains unresolved, causing concern. Any act to undermine the credibility and capacity of the Commission would be one of the easiest ways to climb down in the index.

The Parliament started very well with some unprecedented indicators. The committees have been formed in the very first session which also witnessed the Speaker play a reasonably balanced role in conduct of proceedings; the Prime Minister's question-answer sessions were lively with the participation of the opposition when they were available; the Committees have also started to function well.

But boycott of sessions by the opposition resumed soon on grounds that could be easily addressed if only our political leaderships could rise above their confrontational politics and zero-sum game. This did not send good signals in terms of the prospect of an effective parliament capable of holding the government accountable.

Many of the Standing Committees of the Parliament are also reportedly dominated by members with conflict of interest which also does not auger well for the prospect of transparent and accountable governance.

One of the key election commitments of the Government was to establish a system to disclose income and assets of ministers, public representatives and other people in position of power, which remains a far cry with the single exception of the recent disclosure by the Finance Minister. There is no indication if his colleagues will follow the suit. On the other hand provisions have been made in successive budgets to whiten the black money in one or other form, which is not conducive to fighting corruption.

The Government pushed ahead to introduce a basic change to the procurement rules, to the effect that experience and expertise would not be mandatory upto certain threshold, which has
been viewed as detrimental to ensuring transparency, efficiency and integrity in the public sector.

Equally negative message was sent by the amendments to the telecommunication act 2010 which not only curtailed the authority of the telecommunications regulatory commission, but also created the scope of unrestrained discretionary power by the Ministry in key business and investment decisions affecting the sector.

The Health Adviser’s recent statement denying the right of access to health related information coupled with the assertion that appointment of health workers shall be exclusively on the basis of partisan political consideration did not do any good to the prospect of good governance.

The increasing involvement of public representatives and their agents in various forms of influence-peddling in bidding for public contracts, procurements, recruitments, and grabbing of land and water bodies is not only against the government’s electoral commitment but also raises concern for increasing impunity and eroding capacity to control corruption.

Inspite of the above, we want to be optimistic. This year’s performance in CPI is a timely pointer that unless the government can demonstrate the genuine political will to control corruption without fear or favour, and unless they do with top urgency and priority, the capacity to control the menace will be further weakened.

What needs to be done should not be unknown to the government as long they have a close look, at least periodically, to the election manifesto of the main ruling party. The more the government will act inconsistently with the election pledges the greater will be the prospect of further loss of ground in terms of CPI in the days to come.