

MP car privilege on sale!

We demand a thorough investigation

THE matter stems from a recent report in a leading Bangla daily centring around alleged gross misuse of the privilege of importing duty-free cars by MPs. Whilst such cars are provided to them for personal use, most of the beneficiaries have disposed them of in return for a huge profit, a gross misuse of their entitlement.

While it begs a question as to whether such a privilege should at all be provided to MPs, which some have termed as discriminatory and against the norm of social justice, it is pertinent to bring up two issues. One is that of morality and probity of those who represent us in parliament, while the other disconcerting aspect is the apparent unwillingness of the NBR to pursue and take action on the allegations.

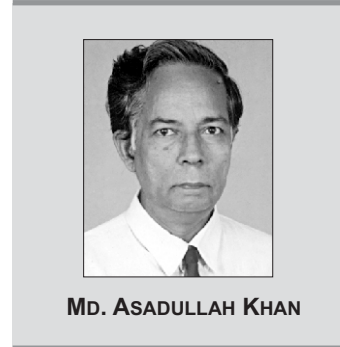
It is a bad example that our parliamentarians set for the people they represent, that a high office, of that of the MP, is being used so blatantly for commercial gains. And to see the many newly elected women MPs last year clamouring against a two-year caveat in the rules for duty free import, gave one the impression that the be all and the end all of getting elected to the parliament is to exploit the perks provided by the state. Can we not expect the elected lawmakers to set better examples?

As for the unwillingness of the NBR to probe the matter because of the fear of a perceived fallout, this may expose a certain helplessness when it comes to dealing with parliamentarians and politicians, but it is unacceptable as it amounts to abdicating a bounden duty entrusted upon the NBR to go into matters of infringement of relevant rules regarding import of duty-free cars.

Since the Anti-corruption Commission deems it appropriate to take cognisance of the allegations and investigate them, NBR should extend all cooperation to the ACC so that the matter is thoroughly probed and action taken on those MPs found guilty of misfeasance.

Violations of rules must be probed without fear or favour. Let us not forget that nobody is above the law, certainly not those that legislate.

When excesses by law enforcers heighten a crisis



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

The most disturbing revelation is that there are officers who have misgivings about the concept of human rights or, for that matter, even democracy. The looming question is how does this happen? Whatever their training inputs, the organizational sub-culture takes over and whoever talks of human rights is considered soft or worse unpatriotic or disloyal to the government he is serving.

WITH the controversial Election Commission in place and the reforms in the Caretaker Government still a far cry, the country's political fever has heated up again. Despite a brief lull in the terrorist bombing now revealed to be the handiwork of JMB, a faction of the radical Islamist group that venture to establish Sharia law in the country, tensions have gripped the length and breadth of the country because of hard stance taken by the ruling alliance in going ahead with their blueprint for the next parliamentary election due in about eight months from now.

The streets of the capital city and other rural places are again turning to theatre of violent outbursts, clashes and conflicts on different issues like power shortage, fertilizer crisis and spiraling price hike of essentials.

In curbing such protests and agitations, the law enforcement agency, eager to please their masters, sometimes carry things to excess and resort to brutal tortures on innocent persons.

Shahin Sultana Shanta, an innocent house wife in her thirties while on her way back home after leaving her son in a school in the Dhanmondi area became a victim of such unusual police atrocities on the Mirpur Road close to Road No. 27 crossing.

Primary investigations of a judicial enquiry commission as revealed in the press on April 4 last

found evidence of beating up Shanta by the police on March 12 during a protest program by the 14-party opposition alliance.

In the aftermath of Shanta's filing a case against some police personnel under Women's and Children Repression Prevention Act with the court of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, the one member judicial commission said in the report, that the law enforcers taking her for a picket could arrest her and send her to the court but could not resort to any sort of torture.

Clearly, as people think, such brazen violations could not have taken place without the connivance of senior officers on duty at the torture site. What fuels suspicion in the manner in which key officials tried to stonewall a probe in the first place.

Street agitations and protest marches are not anything new in this country. People might recall the attack on the Janakantha office in 1999 by the present ruling party men then belonging to opposition that resulted in the property damage worth over Tk 50 lakh, as experts told at that time, as well as a bullet injury sustained by an engineer of the Janakantha press. No untoward incident of police excesses came to notice at that time possibly because of the fact the masters didn't want it that way.

The police in the country, presumably, have all manner of extracting confessions. But fastening a woman's belly with ropes for testing a woman's pregnancy because she told the perpetrators in that vein to escape torture, unheard of in medical science, took that ingenuity to

new heights.

That should not be surprising because there is no dearth of people in the police service willing to junk the concept of human rights. Even a section of police officers hold the view that they should be empowered to punish the citizens and some of them believe in extorting confessions through torture.

The finest among them have confirmed some of the gravest allegations: that a lot of senior police officers are cynical of the rule of law, that they have little regard for the efficiency of the courts and Human Rights Commission, that they believe in greater freedom to resort to extra-legal methods. These hardliners are in a minority on a lot of issues raised in an unofficial survey. But experts point out that their capacity to do damage is incalculable because of the vital positions these officers occupy in the law enforcement machinery.

The most disturbing revelation is that there are officers who have misgivings about the concept of human rights or, for that matter, even democracy. The looming question is how does this happen? Whatever their training inputs, the organizational sub-culture takes over and whoever talks of human rights is considered soft or worse unpatriotic or disloyal to the government he is serving.

A good many of them believe that the police should silence those who oppose the government and that it's not practical to observe human rights in situations of protest, gheraos, agitations, and hartals. They also resent any legal regulation of law enforcement. As a natural

corollary they want no legal accountability of their excesses.

More worrisome, the hard-liners are attuned to a mindset that defies any sort of rationality and human consideration and as an expression of allegiance to the party government they are serving are unfazed by the increasing frequency and variety of violence either in custody or on the streets.

A good many members, occupying even higher positions are opposed to the idea of initiating legal action against any member for custodial deaths. The disturbing incidents now rocking the country about deaths in police encounter reinforce people's suggestion that the National Police Service should do a psychological profile of the police officers or any other personnel held guilty by either probes or when such reports are made public through media to locate and cure sadistic tendencies and proclivity to violence.

The looming spectre of terrorism in the country is now an excuse to throw civil liberties to the winds. Many police officers, although they don't admit publicly, but believe that in hostile situations the police are justified in resorting to extra-legal methods or in denying fundamental rights to such groups or individuals.

Ironically true, sometimes these methods are resorted to overtly to either please the superiors or political masters in a bid to get quick promotions or rewarding postings. But as an expert in legal matters in the country says: "No policeman is obliged to carry out illegal orders, even if it comes from his superior."

But the stark fact is that standing

up to the orders from the political masters isn't as easy as it sounds. Other than this large section of officers are disillusioned with the courts. They say that judicial delays are more to blame for human rights violations than their own excesses.

To be more precise, the problem is not lack of sensitivity among certain police personnel but also the circumstances that brutalize them. Evidently the law enforcement agency in the country has failed to work impartially in almost all bomb blast incidents and important political murder cases, namely Jamaluddin murder case in Chittagong and Kibria murder case at Habiganj in Sylhet, to name only a few among a staggering number of cases.

Those belonging to the RAB showed remarkable bravery, agility and neutrality in identifying the culprits and unearthing the skeleton of Jamaluddin, killed in 2004 after abduction. But by and large, police work in the country remains shoddy, amateur and biased.

Shockingly true, beginning with the Bangla Bhai case to all other sensitive political murder cases, police intervention and investigation have been thoroughly flawed and corrupt and the judicial system has been highly insensitive, prompting aggrieved citizens to jump into action.

While under trial prisoners await justice for years, those who seek justice from the court in personal disputes or against executive or police inaction or excesses, are finding the system twisted, narrowed, or full of sharks. Thanks to the inefficiency or capriciousness of the investigating agencies, only about five percent of the registered cases in any year lead to conviction. Sadly true, the police are much better at catching innocent citizens than terrorists and hardened criminals and their godfathers.

Undeniably true, the sector suffered from lack of confidence and

credibility gap in the rank and file and in consequence few are willing to accept that the picture is as rosy as the alliance leaders paint it.

According to some senior retired bureaucrats, the drift had begun with the politicization of administrative machinery. Key bureaucratic posts went to officers who were loyal to the ruling alliance, with merit being given the go-by. Naturally, few are willing to be as daring as they were in the yester years. This is bound to happen when bureaucracy becomes corrupt, demoralized, and directionless.

In recent years, Bangladesh has not exactly been held up as a shining example of great governance. But even by its pathetic standards the last two years have been a nightmare. Paradoxically true, blind ambition of some high-ups in the higher echelon in the administration and political myopia of the alliance leaders have led the nation to the brink of chaos and left the people in total bewilderment.

When hardly any investigation was carried out and facts revealed after the arrest of Shaekh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqui Islam Bangla Bhai about their wheeling and dealing, their connection with terror financing, there came a startling revelation from some high-up in the police administration, brushing aside any link of the Jehadis with foreign mentors.

But the reports appearing in the press these days prove the opposite. Precisely true, high-ups in the administration, in their bid to demonstrate their loyalty to a party government, seem bent on proving that in Bangladesh that only untruth triumphs.

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The strike at CMCH

Height of irresponsibility

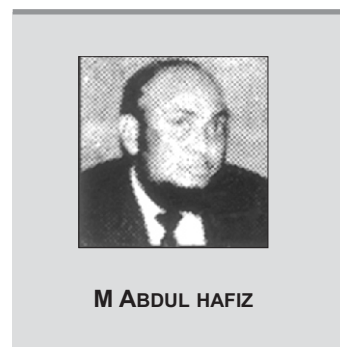
INTERNEE doctors went on work abstention at Chittagong Medical College Hospital demanding, among a few other things, higher payment in allowances. The strike into its fifth day, patients face untold miseries; in fact, many of them have already left hospital premises frustrated by lack of treatment and attention. It is also alarming to note that in some wards doctors were seen using the services of inexperienced medical students to carry out surgeries on patients. In addition, many scheduled surgeries have had to be abandoned for lack of helping hands.

It certainly appears that the young internee doctors have ignored their moral and ethical commitment to a very noble profession they have embraced under oath. Being an internee doctor is the first step towards becoming a full-fledged doctor. We expect a much better turn from them.

Amidst this miserable state of affairs, much remains to be said, however, about the slack in hospital administration. What should have been a matter of grave concern for them, has been left in the hands of people who could either care less or did not have any authority to do anything to arrest the deteriorating state of affairs.

It was shocking to note that when asked to comment on the situation the Acting Director of the hospital responded by saying that things have to wait till the return of the Director Brigadier General Abdur Rahman who is currently in Malaysia. He is not expected back on duty before 13 April. Does it mean that the patients will have to suffer till then and that there is no mechanism in place to end the deadlock? What is the health directorate or the ministry doing? Let there be an immediate intervention from a high level to sort out the doctors' problems and bring an end to the enormous public hardship.

US dilemma in engaging political Islam



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

However, a full-scale assault on political Islam was resisted in the aftermath of the US failure to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead the Bush administration announced a "Greater Middle East initiative" and carefully re-examined its policy towards the Islamists. In some part of the Muslim world it chose to collaborate with Islamists and in others the US opted to minimize their participation in government.

HAMAS'S stunning success in the recent Palestinian election has brought afresh to the fore the question of political Islam in the context of America's war on terror. The electoral gains of the Islamists are in no way a solitary instance of the Islamists ascendancy through the ballot boxes where their opponents, the modernist secularist Islamic forces, are indeed marginalized.

Obviously it has pertended a period of serious debate in the western media, where questions are asked as to the merit of Bush's Middle East Policy, particularly his democracy projects in a region where the Islamist forces could claim spectacular success in all Palestine, Egypt, and other countries.

But the most significant discourse on the subject is underway rather privately within America's foreign policy establishment which has since been intensely debating the US's relations with political

Islam. The views are expectedly divergent about America's reliance on the Islamists as principal partners in its efforts for transforming the Arab Islamic world into an oasis of democracy and liberal values.

Oddly enough, it is amongst some segments of the neo-conservative cabal that the controversies are the most strident. Last year, two of the neo-conservatives -- Daniel Pipes, the director of Middle East Forum and Marc Gerecht, a resident fellow of American Enterprise Institute -- entered into a crucial debate entitled: "Should the US support the Islamists?"

Gerecht is a strong proponent of using political Islam to buttress the US interests in the Muslim world. Here follows his argument: The US must support the participation of the Islamists in democratic elections. Since the authoritarian regimes currently in power will not permit the development of democratic institution, the open election should be the first step in the reform process. Islamist political parties must be included in these elections due to

their significant popular support because a ban on their participation would only discredit the electoral process, robbing it of its legitimacy.

Gerecht, however recognized that as the Middle East becomes more democratic it will be more anti-US and anti-zionist and the US would be able to do precious little to arrest the trend. Gerecht did not, however, view a support for moderates as a viable alternative due to their lack of popular support base.

Daniel Pipes, on the other hand, argues that facilitating the immediate political participation of the Islamists is tantamount to helping the enemy. He insists that their blind devotion to Sharia, rejection of Western influence, and their totalitarian ideology render them anathema to democratic society. Pipes held that both violent and non-violent Islamists share these characteristics.

He, therefore, concluded that it was preferable to have in powers the western oriented dictators rather than an archaic band of Islamists.

Such opposing views on the subject are not new to US foreign

policy making; they are rather product of long standing efforts to formulate a viable and coherent policy towards the Islamic world. At present there are two schools of thought dominating the US attitude towards the problem.

The first school led by Bernard Lewis and his disciple, Samuel Huntington, as well as an arch neo-conservative, Richard Perle, maintain that the political Islam is by definition anti-democratic and anti-West. This school believes that any co-existence even with Islam is simply not possible unless it changes its basic tenets, considered articles of faith by any Muslim, a "clash of civilization" is thus inevitable.

Incidentally, it was Bernard Lewis who first came up with the theory, and not Huntington as is widely believed, as early as in 1964, when Lewis wrote in his book *The Middle East and the West* that: "We must view the present discontent in the Middle East not as conflict between the states and nations but as a clash of civilization." The idea gained currency.

The confrontationalists, led by Daniel Pipes, advocate that America can never trust Islamists and must do more to assist the modernists (a euphemism for opportunists) to take power in Muslim countries.

Yet another school of thought led by Prof John Esposito espouses that the West has nothing to fear from political Islam and those Islamists shunning violence can be accommodated.

These accommodationists insist that through the inclusion of Islamists in the government the Muslims will quickly lose confidence in their ability to rule by Islam and will tend to turn secular or moderate. Thus the US will be able to cultivate a healthy relationship with the Islamic world.

Both the confrontationalists and accommodationists however recognize that the US's continued supports for Middle East's authoritarian rulers breed anti-West sentiments and are incubators for the Islamic radicalism.

For decades these divergent school of thought competed for influence amongst the policy makers and government officials. For the most part, the successive US government adopted a balanced approach and used political Islam to bolster the US's client states and support Jihad against the communists.

But the demise of the communist empire ushered in a period where the US officials began to search for

a new enemy and many ended up subscribing to the two dominant views on political Islam. By sifting through the arguments put forward by different schools of thought, a policy on political Islam was reached in 1992 with the accommodationists prevailing.

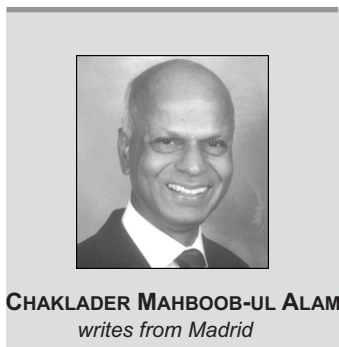
The Clinton administration continued to traverse the path followed by previous administrations. The exploitation of political Islam to stabilize dictatorships and protect the US interests throughout the Muslim world became the mainstay of the Clinton era. This was the case till September 11, 2001. There after the new found support for the "clash of civilizations" theory resurfaced and gained momentum in the US with the hawks of the administration embracing it forthwith.

However, a full-scale assault on political Islam was resisted in the aftermath of the US failure to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead the Bush administration announced a "Greater Middle East initiative" and carefully re-examined its policy towards the Islamists. In some part of the Muslim world it chose to collaborate with Islamists and in others the US opted to minimize their participation in government.

This flexible approach of America towards political Islam leaves the US open to exercise of hypocrisy and reveals its inability to decide on the modalities of permanent engagement with the Islamists.

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French labour protests and globalisation



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

LETTER FROM EUROPE

As far as the effects of globalization are concerned, it is imperative that the government, the employers and the unions understand that globalization is here to stay. The important thing is to learn how to take advantage of globalization, which after all, is a product of capitalism, to achieve economic growth. If a country is not competitive in the international market, it is highly unlikely that it can have economic growth and if the economy does not grow, it cannot create more jobs.

current French society, which has been caused by several long-unresolved issues of great economic and social importance.

Unfortunately, today France has become an economically stagnant country. Everybody accepts the status quo. No one, except perhaps the prime minister, seems to have the courage to make the much-needed structural changes.

Yet, in order to move forward in this changing world, decisions on important issues such as which model of capitalism is best suited

for France, how to make the labour market more flexible and how to deal with the effects of globalization must be taken sooner than later.

Ever since Adam Smith formulated the theory of classical capitalism in 1776, according to which economic decisions should be left to the free play of self-regulating market forces, the debate over the most appropriate form of capitalism that a given country should implement has not stopped.

What is the central purpose of an economic activity? Is it to enrich the community, to pay wages to the workers, to pay taxes to the government, to satisfy the consumers or simply to provide a return on the capital invested? The stakeholder model of capitalism says that a corporation has a longer-term responsibility to not only the shareholders but also to its employees, managers, customers and indeed to the whole community. It is in favour of a social contract that distributes the fruits

and woes of a free enterprise economy equitably among all the stakeholders.

On the other hand, the emphasis in the fundamentalist model is on creating short-term gains for the investors. The pressure is so great on the managers to show short-term gains- their own compensation packages are tied to these results- on a monthly, quarterly and yearly basis that they are often prepared to fiddle the books as we have seen so many times in the recent past. This has also created a constant downward pressure on wages and benefits for workers and upward pressure on income from capital.

Globalization has complicated the labour market in highly industrialised countries like France even further. Outsourcing has not only added downward pressure on wages in France but also contributed to demands for protectionism, job insecurity and

higher unemployment in low-wage sectors of the labour force, especially among the least privileged.

The rigidity in France's labour market is partially due to a situation, which has been aptly described by The Economist as an insider-outsider situation. Most insiders hold permanent jobs with high wages, guaranteed annual increases and full social benefits. Many of them work in the public sector, enjoy complete job security and are protected from any outside competition. The outsiders have no jobs or at best unprotected short-term ones. Because of strict labour laws, most employers are afraid to create new jobs. This stagnant situation has led to an inefficient labour market, high unemployment and rising unit labour costs, which in turn, have made the French products less competitive in the world market. All this has contributed to poor economic performance in recent times.

So, the question is: How can the French maintain their social model of capitalism and at the same time remain competitive?

First of all, the government must tell the people that an advanced welfare state can only be sustained if the economy keeps growing at a steady rate for which major reforms, including a complete overhaul of France's stagnant economic system are necessary. Labour laws regarding the overprotected segment of the labour market will have to be changed.

This new labour law is only a small step in the right direction. The prime minister should have involved the students and the unions in this venture. In France, where there is a crisis of confidence between the ruling elite and the working class, it was naive on the part of the prime minister to think that he could push through such a sensitive piece of legislation by decree

without the prior consent of the interested parties.

As far as the effects of globalization are concerned, it is imperative that the government, the employers and the unions understand that globalization is here to stay. The important thing is to learn how to take advantage of globalization, which after all, is a product of capitalism, to achieve economic growth. If a country is not competitive in the international market, it is highly unlikely that it can have economic growth and if the economy does not grow, it cannot create more jobs.

One way of taking advantage of globalization would be to outsource the low-tech jobs and concentrate on high-tech segment of the market where France still has an edge over the foreigners. This measure is likely to keep prices down at home, increase consumption and create new job opportunities.