

Consumer rights draft law 13 years of shameful foot dragging

DESPITE a growing feeling among the people that there should have been a law to protect the rights of consumers, the chances of such a law being enacted during the present government's tenure appear to be remote.

The draft to enact a law to protect the rights of consumers saw the light of day in 1994, but it has not made much headway since then. The draft had made its tortuous journey through different ministries, before ending up in the commerce ministry for their so-called final scrutiny. But this ministry has also failed to address the issue with due haste.

Consumers' rights, unfortunately, have never been a matter of high priority in our context of a seller dominant market. The poor consumers are there to be only swindled and exploited. They have to buy adulterated food and below standard commodities and are shortchanged in weights and measures; yet they do not know who they should turn to for getting a fair deal. The seasonal mobile courts are definitely not enough to uproot the well-entrenched culture of producing and marketing substandard foodstuffs. And there are many areas where the consumers are exposed to highly immoral and unethical business practices.

It is a welcome development that a section of the businessmen wants a consumers' rights protection law to be in place, so that they can follow the right kind of business practices. Besides, they too are consumers, equally vulnerable to being cheated. Obviously, such a law will be as much a deterrent to illegal activities as it will be a guideline for the manufacturers to follow.

The problem has been aggravated by the fact that the Bangladesh Standards & Testing Institution (BSTI) is a body with responsibility but no power nor adequate equipment. The government should beef up the BSTI so that it can play an assertive role in safeguarding the rights of consumers.

The vigil against illegal business practices must be strengthened at several points. For example, the quality of both imported and locally manufactured goods has to be ensured without drawing any demarcation line between them.

Protection of consumers' rights is an essential feature of any pro-people system of governance. But successive governments have neglected the issue, thus allowing the business culture to be vitiated by the profiteering of unscrupulous elements. We believe the law to protect consumers' rights must be enacted as a matter of top priority, without wasting any more time.

An eye opener verdict Innocent man saved from gallows

THE other day the High Court ordered stripping of the judicial powers of a lower court judge for wrongfully awarding death sentence to an innocent man. The court also ordered stern action against the concerned Investigation Officer, an OC, for charging the wrong person in place of the actual one. Shah Alam Babu was amongst the three awarded death penalty in August, 2004 for murdering one Gazi Liaquat Hossain in March 1998. Interestingly enough, none other than the widow and two other eyewitnesses had categorically told the court that it was Sunder Babu who was involved in the murder and not Shah Alam Babu. The High Court finally released Shah Alam Babu having found him not being the right person. Shah Alam Babu is still in the Gazipur jail awaiting his release from 'illegal' confinement.

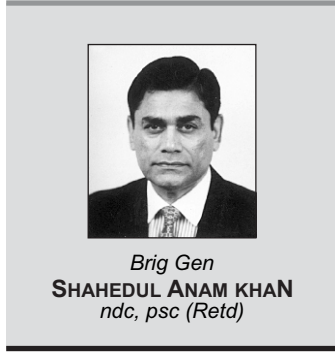
We are extremely pleased to see the triumph of justice, though belated. This verdict of the High Court will go a long way in enhancing people's confidence in judicial intervention and activism.

This verdict has also exposed the inherent weakness and wilful negligence on the part of the investigating officer. While on the subject, we also hope that the administration will now wake up and move to resolve any other similar case of wrongful and unjust confinement there may be. Besides, it must be understood that incidents like these are serious matters of gross human rights violation. It not only brings misery and misfortune to the victims and their families but also leads to tarnishing of image of the government and the country as a whole.

The dignity and the strength of the judiciary including the lower judiciary must be upheld at any cost. No instrument of the administration should stand in its way of functioning. After all, judiciary is the most important instrument in protecting the rights of people as enshrined in the constitution.

'Are western foreign policies responsible for global terrorism?'

A response to Dr. Kim Howells



THE question has been posed by a member of the British cabinet in charge of steering the foreign policy of his country, Dr. Kim Howells, UK Minister of State at the FCO, in a recent article of the above title, in which he tries to make out a case to justify the British stand on the Middle East and terrorism.

One cannot think that there is any more appropriate answer to his question than a most emphatic: YES.

But before I explain why, it needs to be said that while the question is pegged on "western policy," what the minister does is dwell entirely on the British policy. One might ask whether these policies are representative of those of the other western countries, who, in certain exceptional cases, have broken away from the US and British positions, to assert their freedom of action, not always successfully though. Therefore one should rather read "British and US" in place of "western" policies.

In fact the British policy, as much it relates to the Middle East

and the US war on terror, is considered by many as merely an appendage of the US policy, or as some prefer to characterise, Americanization of British foreign policy. Thus, there is every need to look at the tenor of the British and US foreign policies if Mr. Howells inquires, as to what motivates someone to perpetrate acts of violence, is to be satisfactorily answered.

Mr. Howell so proudly announces his belief in democracy and its centrality in the existence of his country but cannot convince his country's greatest ally to accord the same benefits to others. That is why the Palestinians have to suffer both economically and physically for choosing, democratically, a party they feel would deliver their future to them. The US would have nothing to do with a government made up of terrorists, yet feels no compunction in arming a state to the teeth whose main strategy for achieving their own independence from the British was terrorist violence. All the talks by Mr. Howells of rejection of oppression sound hollow under these circumstances.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Your policy on Iraq has been an unmitigated disaster, and no amount of literature can justify the very wrong steps in Iraq. Is your optimism in Iraq borne out by facts on ground? Why is it that local Iraqis rejoice when British forces abandon their bases? There is a Vietnam in the offing in Iraq. And yet you continue to "passionately" believe that it was the right course of action. It is like passionately believing that the world is flat.

Mr. Howells, you "watch with horror the violence that has caused such terrible sufferings to both Israel and Lebanon" while the rest of the world, or at least those that are moved by sensate feelings, watch with consternation your inclination to equate the sufferings of the peoples of the two countries. Although death of one civilian is one too many, yet you and your ally allowed Israel to continue with their destruction of Lebanon, because to you, time was not propitious enough to call for a ceasefire!

You rightly say that violence shall never solve issues like this, only engender militancy, yet your greatest ally sees only the violence of Hamas and Hezbollah, ignoring the violence that Israel perpetrates on a daily basis on the people of Gaza and other occupied territories. Your country broke ranks with the US on the recent Lebanon issue, but you still feel that Israel was justified in killing more than a thousand civilians for the two Israeli soldiers captured (you call it kidnap) by the Hezbollah.

No doubt your government has

tried to treat the Hamas as it should any other political party, notwithstanding its seminal background, but nonetheless could not prevent the EU from withholding its contribution to the PLA.

Your double standards in the Middle East are perceived as anti-Muslim, primarily because you equate the illegal occupier with the people of the occupied territories, and in some ways condone not only the occupation but also the violence perpetrated by Israel when you say that Israeli violence can end only when suicide bombings stop.

The common view is that the British attempt to play the honest broker in the Middle East has turned out to be a myth, trying to appear to be even-handed yet supporting Israel in its offensive strategy in the region.

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abandon their bases? There is a Vietnam in the offing in Iraq. And yet you continue to "passionately" believe that it was the right course of action. It is like passionately believing that the world is flat.

You are correct in asserting that extremists offer no real alternatives to the Iraqi people, but have you ever paused to ponder why extremists have emerged in a country where there were none before you and your ally cooked up excuses to invade? And you are trying to "rebuild" and "re-energize" Iraq after having destroyed and enervated the society, and the country is now facing the very real prospect of breaking up into three parts. Suits your strategic interest!

The usual condescending tone of the West is noticeable in your remarks about the innate message of Islam and what it stands for. Yet the Muslims in your part of the world cannot escape racial profiling. For Muslims it has become problematic to speak in their mother tongue in a public place lest they be taken to be involved in conspiracy, or remonstrated to the aircraft cabin crew without the risk of the aircraft being diverted and the Muslim passengers taken to custody for questioning.

Your double standards become even more blatant by your position on Iran's nuclear policy. Your diplomatic efforts to stop Iran's uranium enrichment program while turning a blind eye to Israel's nearly 200 nuclear warhead arsenal does not surprise us since its nuclear weapons development owes much to the support your country gave to the

Israelis through the supply of twenty tons of heavy water. Even if one were to accept that Iran was going for the bomb why is it that you consider them undeserving of pursuing a policy to protect their national interests?

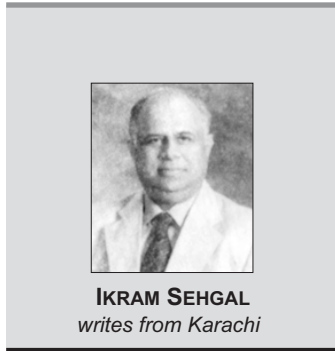
If, as you say, the Muslims in Britain have a point in blaming their government's policy, that deserves the attention and response of those given the charge of governing the country, one is hard put to find any response that might assuage the apprehensions of the British Muslims. If anything, your policies have reinforced the misgivings of the Muslims in Britain as it indeed has many in the Muslim world, that it is Islam that has replaced the communist threat of the Cold War era. Utterances like Islamic fascism do nothing to allay their fears.

Violence and terrorism are to be abhorred. But only those that are wronged and feel aggrieved but find no other remedial means resort to it. It is also a defensive mechanism employed to resist and end illegal occupation. Can you really expect to see the Hezbollah exit the scene when the Lebanese see them as a symbol of their resistance that has shattered the myth of Israeli invincibility?

Mr. Howells, no policy that is not based on principled stand can pass the test of time. The US and British policies on Iraq and the Middle East suffer from double standards and deceit which have validated terrorism: let there be no doubt about it.

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Handling Balochistan



NO death in the world is a cause for celebration. Given the present geo-political and domestic circumstances, Nawab Akbar Bugti's reported demise is a moment of extreme concern for the nation.

Riding a camel, he left Dera Bugti holding aloft a rifle as symbolic of his revolt, it was pure showmanship and he well knew how to exploit the media. He exchanged the camel for a 4 by 4 jeep a mile or so down the metalled road.

Akbar Bugti's followers were certainly targeted, he was scrupulously left alone to avoid his being killed, this has now come to pass more by accident than by any design. The location of the caves he was residing in was well known to the authorities, Frontier Corps (FC) Balochistan could have got him anytime during the past year or so.

In the emotive circumstances availing, announcement of such deaths at the hands of security forces has to be carefully crafted. Indeed what was the need to do so without recovering his body?

AS I SEE IT

The government has to take its share of the blame of allowing this present situation to come to pass, it must get involved in constructive engagement on an urgent basis, viz: (1) to defuse the situation and thereafter, and (2) to alleviate the grievances of the Baloch on a long-term and lasting basis. The government has to be sensitive to the intricacies of nationalistic emotions. We have been thrust into another national crisis, mostly because of a newly created "martyr," but also partly due to the shortcomings of our rulers in not being sensitive to the needs of a small but vibrant section of our population. Have we learnt nothing from 1971?

Mohammad Ali Durrani can grandstand for his two bosses, what he says as federal minister for information cannot be delivered like a speech in Nishtar Park. The national forum is not a "Pasban" pulpit, Durrani's display of his more loyal than the king posture can adversely affect the destiny of the nation.

Educated by Baloch standards (though certainly not at Oxford), Akbar Bugti lived a dual personality Dr Jekyll-Mr Hyde existence. An urbane autocrat in the drawing rooms of the elite and sophisticated, he was an absolute despot for his tribe, not tolerating dissent and doling out death as easily as one gives out sweets.

A self-confessed murderer at the age of 12, he boasted killing over a 100 of the recalcitrant Kalpar sub-tribe in one gory period alone. Twice convicted under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) for murder, the first time in 1961 for slaying a close

relative, he was shrewd and cunning, his immediate family was all that he really cared for.

He was cruel to even his dedicated followers, many more hated him than those who loved him. Bugti commanded fear among the Baloch, an irony of fate is that he may well become in death what he tried but could not be in life, a cult hero for the Baloch. His demise will be held up as martyrdom by the ignorant and/or the motivated.

Would any country in the world permit his private army, the arsenal putting many third world armies to shame? Among the weapons recovered by FC over the year, 25 surface-to-air missiles, 65 RPG-7 rocket launchers, thousands of small arms and over a million rounds of ammunition, over 2 tons of explosives (with 2,000 detonators) and nearly 750 land-mines.

Are we to condone acts of sabotage and terrorism against the economic infra-structure of the

country, approximately 600 bomb blasts, 4,000 rockets fired, 130 land mine blasts, 75 or so attacks against gas plants, more than 50 against railway installations?

The economic lifeline for industry, Sui gas is used in 60% of the kitchens in Pakistan. Besides the sufferings of tens of millions, successful sabotage of the plant would have put Pakistan on its economic knees. Whether a government is democratic or dictatorial, they cannot appease the blackmail of one man. From time to time giant-stature aberrations like Akbar Bugti do come along on the national stage, one has to cope with them in the greater national interest.

No one can have any satisfaction in the manner he died but Akbar Bugti had gone beyond the pale of civilized behaviour. In open rebellion by his own choice, he revealed publicly in the casualties inflicted on the FC and army personnel, 43 killed and 100 injured to

date, not counting 101 civilian dead and 142 injured. Will some of our politicians shed a stray tear for them?

The casualty figures are officer-heavy as they should be in any special operations, officers must lead from the front. Two army helicopters on routine patrol were fired upon on August 23, one was severely damaged but managed to return to base. Another helicopter sent to survey the area also sustained damage due to heavy firing.

As opposed to only FC responding, a search and apprehend operation was then launched by a Special Services Group (SSG) unit with FC in support. Four officers, including the CO (Col Amir Hameed and an FC officer), paid the ultimate price for their country.

Bugti's followers died out of their love (or fear) of Akbar Bugti, what about the precious lives of those who had no personal grievance with Bugti or his followers, but died for the cause of Pakistan? What about their adherence to duty even to the peril of (their) lives?

The tragedy is that they died trying to get Bugti out alive! On the receiving end of ambushes, bomb blasts, land-mine explosions and bomb/rocket attacks on infrastructure installations, etc, would our politicians deny FC Balochistan the right of self-defence? Akbar Bugti and his followers thought they were on a turkey shoot for the last 18 months, it was inevitable that the turkeys would shoot back one day and eventually get him.

Most Baloch areas (as opposed to the more populated Pakhtoon

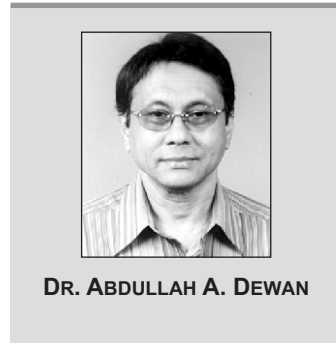
areas) of Balochistan reacted badly to Akbar Bugti's demise. Kalpar sub-tribe (and others) opposed to him celebrated in Bugti's hometown in Dera Bugti. One cannot (and should not) dismiss the violent protests out of hand as a knee-jerk reaction. He did strike a chord for the grievances of the Baloch, the government would do well to exercise maturity and handle the situation with care. Akbar Bugti's contemptuous treatment of most Baloch chieftains (other than Marri and Mengal) has been conveniently glossed over.

A dialogue did begin after Ch Shujaat Hussain and Mushahid Hussain's meetings with Bugti in 2005. Why did it become a dialogue of the deaf thereafter? The government has to take its share of the blame of allowing this present situation to come to pass, it must get involved in constructive engagement on an urgent basis, viz: (1) to defuse the situation and thereafter, and (2) to alleviate the grievances of the Baloch on a long-term and lasting basis.

The government has to be sensitive to the intricacies of nationalistic emotions. We have been thrust into another national crisis, mostly because of a newly created "martyr," but also partly due to the shortcomings of our rulers in not being sensitive to the needs of a small but vibrant section of our population. Have we learnt nothing from 1971?

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Recycling Ershad



ALL indications are that deposed dictator HM Ershad may be a born-again president of Bangladesh. How is that possible?

The fact that "love makes strange bedfellows" does not preclude the realization that politics makes strange bedfellows as well. This means that political interests can draw together people who otherwise have little in common. This proverbial saying is adapted and politicized from a line in the play, The Tempest, by William Shakespeare: "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." It is spoken by a man who has been shipwrecked and finds himself seeking shelter next to a sleeping monster.

After being deposed from power in disgrace, serving time for criminality, and having sixteen or so

NO NONSENSE

Back in high school, many of us learned a few proverbs, such as "a man is judged by the company he keeps." Khaleda may not realize that this proverb is gender neutral. Since the proverb does not say "a woman is judged by the company she keeps," she probably thinks it is OK to join hands in politics with Ershad-type characters. A second proverb: "birds of a feather flock together" is also worth noting. Who could have thought that both of these proverbial statements would match so perfectly with the demeanours and profiles of two leaders in Bangladesh's politics?

cases hanging around his neck, Ershad has been in more predicaments than the fellow from the wrecked ship in Shakespeare's Tempest. He is now in the process of being accorded shelter, although not next to a monster, but in the company of the prime minister.

Politics being the art of compromise, it is not hard to see how Khaleda and the anti-liberation and anti-democratic forces formed an alliance, despite having diametrically opposite ideological orientations and beliefs.

Hasina also gathered thirteen other parties in an alliance, but they have many common ideological fronts. Admittedly, nothing is quite as deplorable as Khaleda's move to

join hands with a former deposed dictator who is widely perceived to be an unpredictable character. In fact, he is a man who has no character.

Referring to the possibility of the fourteen party alliance boycotting the election, he started hallucinating that he had become the prime minister or president. I guess, anything is possible in the world's most corrupt country.

Surfing the Internet, I found four models which conjecture why politics makes strange bedfellows:

- Both BNP and JP were created by two army generals who commandeered the presidency to perpetuate their position in power. They did not have by any ideological roots whatsoever. Both parties gathered apolitical tabadders (courtiers) looking for milk and honey. Some of them were politicians from either the extreme right and the extreme left and the others were numerous unwanted discards from other parties.
- Both BNP and JP are crowded with a privileged class of business people who benefit from the state's patronage through multiple import-export licenses, unsecured bank loans, and black money.
- Leaders of both parties have high-handed demeanour. For

- Considering their early backgrounds the first model fits the profiles of both Khaleda and Ershad. Khaleda wants the alliance with JP to secure her position and protect the wealth her family and party people are alleged to have amassed. Ershad pleaded that his inclination to join the Khaleda-Nizami cartel is based on the ideological similarities between BNP and JP. So, what are these similarities?
- After successive acquittals from graft charges, Ershad declared: "I am getting justice as the government is not interfering with the trials of the cases. I will be acquitted in all the cases if the trials are conducted neutrally." Really? Who is he kidding? Are not the acquittals part of his quid pro quo deal? Thus, it seems that neither leader is much burdened by moral inhibitions.
- Ershad has been incarcerated for corruption and also heftily fined. Khaleda and her family members, and most BNP ministers and lawmakers, are alleged to have amassed wealth illegally.
- Khaleda formed an alliance with religious extremists. Ershad declared Islam as the state religion only to grab votes of the religious parties.

- example, Khaleda recently warned her party leaders and workers to refrain from disobeying decisions on candidature or face expulsion. The BNP standing committee had no role in party activities since the 2002 meeting until last week. Ershad has unilaterally decided to join the Khaleda-Nizami alliance, and in a meeting on August 23 declared that: "Negotiations are on and I'm doing that alone."
- With these shared attributes, one may characterize the potential alliance as being openly desperate, publicly deplorable, and internationally embarrassing.
- While the country's think-tanks are working hard for the nomination of honest and competent candidates, BNP's leadership is netting corrupt and convicted felons to recycle them into their political cartel. What a party leader! What a prime minister of a so-called democratic country!
- Back in high school, many of us learned a few proverbs, such as "a man is judged by the company he keeps." Khaleda may not realize that this proverb is gender neutral. Since the proverb does not say "a woman is judged by the company she keeps," she probably thinks it is OK to join hands in politics with Ershad-type characters.
- A second proverb: "birds of a feather flock together" is also worth noting. Who could have thought that both of these proverbial statements would match so perfectly with the demeanours and profiles of two leaders in Bangladesh's politics?
- An intriguing question is what can Ershad contribute to the country's welfare. If, by recycling Ershad into politics, the BNP-Jamaat political cartel wins the majority again, three people will benefit while the country

- will lose big time. Khaleda will be re-elected as prime minister for another term and the country will sink further into corruption and absence of rule of law.
- Ershad will gain the most. By becoming president he will enjoy a high life in the presidential palace amid all the pomp and grandeur. With his heart condition, he might even have to go to Bangkok or Singapore for health at the state's cost. Why not? The cost of the incumbent president's recent heart surgery was picked up by the taxpayers.
- The last one to benefit is this writer. I will stop being a columnist and spend my time on fishing expeditions. What shall I write if Khaleda returns to power? She is not known to read newspapers too closely, let alone the English dailies. Besides, who in the world would read my recycled commentaries all over again?

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