

The power puzzle



ANM NURUL HAQUE

Aspectre of a greater power crisis looms large as 19 out of 61 power generation units went out of order and the nation experienced load shedding that hovered around 2,200 megawatts (mw) on September 18, the highest power shortage in the country ever.

According to the Power Development Board (PDB), as many as 19 units remained shut down, either for serious technical glitches or for maintenance reasons, slashing the electricity generating capacity by 867 mw.

The whole country has been reeling in a perennial power crisis with a daily power supply shortfall of around 1,100 mw on an average for months now. The people are now experiencing frequent power outages that in some places last for twelve hours a day. Frequent power disruptions have been a constant source of misery for the people while they expected uninterrupted power supply to avoid further ordeal during their fasting. The situation is even grimmer in the rural areas where the consumers hardly get a few hours of electric supply a day.

The protests against power outage are now turning more violent. Recurring power failures have long crossed the people's tolerance level and their frustration is now

giving way to anger. They took to the street and fought pitched battles with the police in many parts of the city. Police opened fire on the power-hungry people, attacking a number of power stations, injuring 200 people. The present severity of power outage may be leading the way to an anarchic situation across the country.

The high-sounding promises of the BNP-led government on power sector appear to be mere political gimmick as the government has been able to add only a meager 80 mw of electricity during its tenure. It failed to install any new power projects in the last five years except the 80 mw Tongi power plant which remains shut down most of the times due to its sub-standard quality. In view of the vulnerable situation, the government at the last moment has approved different power distribution projects worth Tk 2,745 crores, but none of the projects are even related to power generation.

The government at last has decided to suspend electricity supply to big shopping malls and less important small industries during peak hours in the evening to and cut power supply to billboards. Rationing of electricity and proper management of load dispatch centre can help to overcome the crisis to some extent. The lack of coordination among the officials of Power Division, PDB, Power Grid Co, DESA, and DESCO has aggravated the power outage situation.

Many important cities in the world, including Paris and Amsterdam, have electricity rationing where all shopping malls excluding the bars and restaurants remain closed after evening. All shops in New Delhi remain closed at seven in the evening. Why don't we follow

BY THE NUMBERS

Bangladesh spent \$1,784,485,892 (equivalent to Tk 12,000 crores) for expatriate experts in power sector in the last 15 years. This is quite a puzzle. This amount was spent on 148 foreign experts in six state-run power plants, excluding the expenses for their accommodation, cars, medical facilities, airfares, and insurance. This amount, spent in the name of technology transformation, was quite enough for setting up at least five 1000 mw capacity power plants in the country.

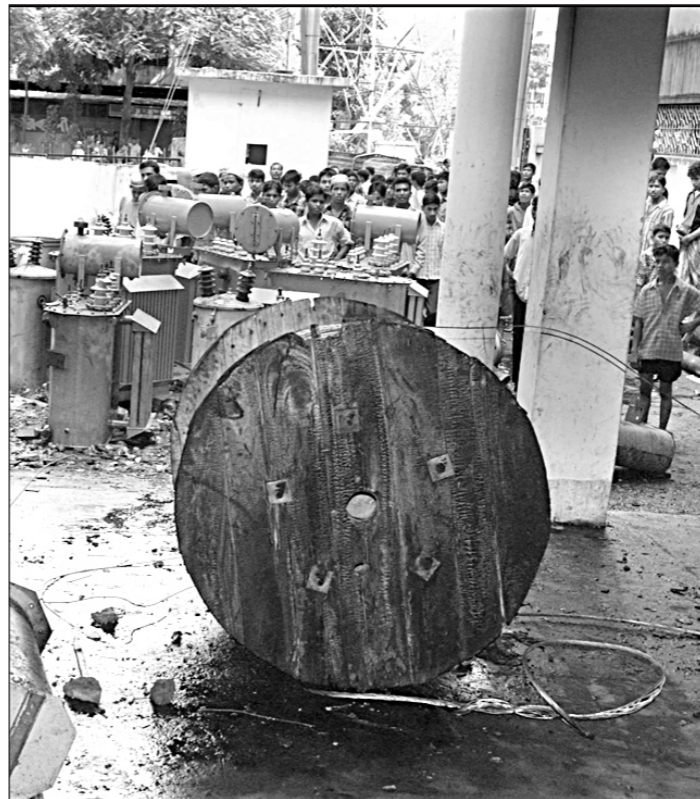


this practice? If the big shopping malls in the city are closed at dusk, it would help to save about 75 mw of power which could be diverted to other needy areas.

Surely the economy will not be badly hurt if the shopping centres in the city are closed down after the

evening. It may affect the sale for a few days, but eventually people would adjust and finish their shopping during the day. They would be happy to have a few more hours of electricity at home rather than in the extravagantly-lit shopping malls.

The shop owners' association



has rejected the government's decision to suspend power supply to the big shopping malls. The government has no other alternative but to drastically reduce power consumption in the less important sectors of the economy to overcome the crisis.

There has been a huge allocation

in the national budget for the power sector every year since the beginning of the BNP-led four-party rule, but only 80 mw of new power was generated. The government allocated some Tk 16,409 crores for development of the power sector. The allocations were Tk 2,358

crores in 2002-03, Tk 4,067 crores in 2003-04, Tk 3,308 crores in 2004-05, and Tk 3,270 crores in 2005-06. The allocation in the current fiscal is Tk 3,405.86 crores.

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According to a UNB report, the power generation went down to 3,000 mw against the countrywide demand of about 5,000 mw, accounting for a shortfall of 2,000 mw. Currently the country has about 8.5 million power connections covering nearly fifty million people. The number of connections was five million five years ago. The country generated 3,100 mw power in 2002 and stayed even with a demand of 3,100 mw. Now in 2006, the country generates only 3,300 mw power while the number of connections has almost doubled.

There is a puzzle here as well. Increasing number of power connections has brought huge fortune for the ruling party men who were involved in supply and installation of poles. On the other hand, it helped the local MPs to claim cheap applause for bringing power to their areas.

The long-standing and stubborn problems in the power sector, which are without any remedy, are another puzzle. This is not really a political issue but a systemic failure of the

government to deal squarely with its power sector. Bangladesh is a country that is hungry for more energy but has failed to develop and deliver the necessary power. The 15 years of its democracy saw so many unrealistic programs for energy development but little has come out of them. These power puzzles must now be solved with utmost sincerity and determined efforts. Otherwise the country will never be able to get out to the power crisis.

Whatever the acclaimed successes of the government may be, all the successes have been eclipsed by serious failures in three major areas — improving power supply, curbing massive corruption and unbridled price hike. It is a particular malady for the nation that the government instead of facing the facts, is repeatedly denying the truth. The anguished people find their denial to be a cruel prank. The acute power shortage is not a consequence of the tempo of development as claimed by the prime minister, but an outcome of the total failure of the government to keep the chaotic situation under check and curb corruption in the sector.

The recent power crisis has not befallen the nation all of a sudden, but is the natural consequence of years of negligence. The efforts of this government to increase power generation capacity have been quiet negligible although Tk 16,409 crores were spent in the last five years. The present power crisis has exposed the avarice and weakness of the government. Such a situation is bound to happen when lack of competence is complemented by greed for money.

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Quality of democracy

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THERE are different standards and strands of democracy. Democracy, minimally defined, is a form of government that guarantees political liberties based on the principles of equality and justice. The right to vote, right to contest for public office, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, liberty of conscience, freedom of thought, right to hold private property, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and equal treatment under the rule of law are the characteristics and the requirements of democracy.

This definition can be found both in the writings of American philosopher John Rawls and in the Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh. It is widely agreed that the full realization of the goals of democracy may be utopian and as long as nations make a serious attempt to realize these goals they can be called democratic. In other words, the countries of the world can be placed on a democratic scale where some would score high points and others would score low.

There is a consensus among researchers that democracy is on the march. More and more people and surely, more countries can now be called democratic. Huntington called it the "third wave" of democracy. Yet what is not often publicized is that in recent years, several studies have shown that with the expansion of democracy, violence has also become widespread. Democracy has also been used as a slogan by disingenuous politicians. When George Bush uses the argument of spreading democracy he diminishes the value of democracy.

There are many views on democracy in the world today. To make matters simple let's classify the various views on democracy into four types. First view holds that democracy is the best form of government and therefore it is sacred. No one should criticize democracy. Second view says democracy is the best of the worst forms of government, a view that is often attributed to former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The third view suggests that democracy is different in different countries, democracy with a Chinese flavour as the Chinese leaders would like to call it. Some Asian intellectuals used to espouse what they called, unsurprisingly, "Asian democracy" or "liberal democracy." This view accepts democracy as a goal but keeps arguing that because of differences in culture there cannot be just one form of democracy. The fourth view, disagrees with the view that democracy is an ideal form of government. This view was held by Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who once remarked

that discipline is more important than democracy. And he made that remark in the Philippines where people like Bangladeshis love democracy often to a fault.

In Bangladesh a popular view posits: "democracy is a practice." As if it is an exotic plant that needs care and nurturing before it bears fruits. Mutual respect for each other, decency, integrity, and tolerance are the ingredients (soil, water, fertilizer, etc) that will nurture it. This view does not criticize the idea of democracy but takes an evolutionary view that with time democracy will deepen. The gangster-dominated democracy based on lack of goodwill and mutual tolerance and respect between leaders will wear off with time.

There are examples of this in the local politics of Chicago which in the 1930s and 40s was dominated by "mastans" or what in Bangladesh is now called "godfathers." With time the godfathers in Chicago have been elbowed out by decent and reasonable politicians. Putnam, a Harvard Political Scientist, found a similar pattern in his study of Italian politics, especially in the south, which in the 1970s was dominated by mafia-linked leaders where leaders displayed high degree of mutual intolerance, suspicion, and ill-will. After two decades, the situation improved remarkably. So the "time will fix the problem" is a reasonable position to take.

But let me alert you that a do-nothing "let history take its course" approach will not lead to automatic improvement in the quality of democracy in Bangladesh. International organizations talk about unbridled corruption in Bangladesh which sometimes makes many patriotic Bangladeshis unhappy. What should be looked at with more interest is the corruption of our institutions. And here we find plenty of examples. Let's look at the question of independence of judiciary. I think the issue is more than just independence; it is about the integrity of judiciary. The integrity of judiciary has been undermined by arbitrary appointments and interference by politicians who do not value the importance of rule of law.

One of the preconditions for the functioning democracy is separation of power. The undermining of judiciary has been a crime against the nation. A great institution that functioned reasonably well has been corrupted. It was the trust in the integrity of judiciary that made the framers of care taker government to propose that the most recently retired chief justice of Supreme Court should become the head of the CTG. In principle the idea of caretaker government was a great and innovative idea so much so that we wanted to export it to US after George Bush's dubious first election. Now this great innovation

has been corrupted by the tunnel-visioned politicians whose only horizon is winning the next election by any means even if that means destroying the vital institutions of the country. It is not just a matter of reform; you cannot ask people who have destroyed an institution to amend it.

How you can talk about rule of law when you see law is being abused everyday. Is there any law in the law book that says opposition politicians can be beaten in full public view? Where are the laws that say you can arrest someone on suspicion of wrong-doing and have him killed in "cross-fire." Here the lack of criticism from the outside world is not a sign of approval but indifference in disgust. Which laws allow carrying out murders, rapes, and intimidation of the Hindus prior to and in the aftermath of elections?

Some writers often proudly present the case that Bangladesh has sustained peaceful change of governments through three reasonably fair national elections since 1991. That is surely a good sign. But I don't think the people involved in politics over time have become more tolerant and decent. Let's not forget that the electoral process itself has been corrupted in the process.

Democracy is not just about holding elections. Do not forget that Hitler (and why forget George Bush's victory in 2000 and 2004) who rose to position of power via democratic elections. A respected and now retired Awami League leader (yes, Awami League) once told me that our Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has never lost an election in her life, an achievement unrivalled by even Mr. Nehru or any other politician in the sub-continent. My reply was that popularity does not mean quality. Democracy is more than majoritarian rule. Populism often feeds authoritarianism and fascism.

When I see a serving Prime Minister spending tax-payers money, using official helicopter and security flying around the country giving meaningless, propagandist harangues to the tumultuous and huge audience, I am not impressed by the prospect of deepening democracy. Please tell me which democratic country will allow that.

The US is often presented as an example of a bad democracy and even a failed or dysfunctional state, (sounds familiar) in the words of Noam Chomsky. So a comparison between Bangladesh and US may not be too far-fetched. Both countries have popularly elected incompetent leaders. The recent report brought out by the National Intelligence Estimate in US criticized Bush's claim that Iraq war made the world safer. The report suggested that Iraq has been the breeding ground of new terror, a view

that seriously undermines President Bush's claims of gain in Iraq. Imagine a government department criticizing the Khaleda Zia government on her handling the crime situation or inability to provide electricity. Ok, so ours is even worse than the American democracy.

Bangladesh cannot be compared with other countries. We are unique and we cannot use another standard, we are our own standard. How many opposition politicians were murdered during the Awami League government? Just by using the number of political murders and lack of credible investigations it can be concluded that democracy for Bangladesh has been a road to perdition.

But why blame democracy and not BNP? BNP should be soundly criticized and voted out to rescue democracy for Bangladesh. Yes, that is one opinion. I won't be surprised if that opinion gains ground in the coming months. But will that change of government solve the problem? The problem may be deeper and lies in the very nature of democracy Bangladesh-style which has become diseased and corrupt. The corruption of democracy in Bangladesh which I have called "authoritarian democracy" has been the greatest tragedy for the people of Bangladesh who sacrificed so much to achieve a democratic Bangladesh.

If we value democracy, we should save it from those politicians who nurture a culture of indecency, intimidation and corrupt the entire nation through lying, cheating, and dishonesty. Democracy demands a political culture based on the values of truth, fairness, and justice. Democratic values should be institutionalized in the political system that secures the rights of the citizens regardless of class, gender, religion, and party-affiliation who can live with honesty and dignity and not in fear. Let's remember what Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of America once said: "When the government fears the people, there is liberty, when the people fear the government, there is tyranny." Now you good readers, tell me who fears who in Bangladesh today?

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MAMUN RASHID

FOR quite a while now, we Bangladeshis have a common grievance that the country "Bangladesh" is not portrayed properly in the international forum. Bangladesh is known as a country of flood, disaster, unpredictable political situation, corruption, and of many other negative attributes.

Whatever bad happens to the country and its people is blown out of proportion and all the positive things that happen go unnoticed. To a global citizen, Bangladesh is always viewed and judged by all these negative attributes.

The tremendous will, courage, resilience, commitment, and innovation of the people to enhance the fate of the country against all adversities remain surprisingly unheralded. The international community is noticeably hesitant to acknowledge our various achievements in the last few decades even while these achievements are considerably better than many other countries which the world views much favourably.

There is a general tendency among the international community to think, talk about Bangladesh, or compare it with many African and other dysfunctional countries while they tend to ignore that Bangladesh with all its backwardness and structural deficiencies has made significant progress in many fields that would make many emerging countries envious.

It would be self-defeating for us to act like a cry-baby and blame the international community for this unfair treatment. We have to admit that we have a problem in projecting the country and the true spirit of its people. This incapability of ours creates the necessity to focus on the brand building of Bangladesh.

Recently an organization arranged a seminar on "Branding Bangladesh." Though some of the discussions there were irrelevant or even confusing in understanding the subject "branding," I think it was a very timely effort and want to give the organizers my heartiest congratulations for taking this initiative.

However, I think in approaching the problem and to formulate an effective strategy to resolve the issue we need to be systematic rather than adopting sporadic efforts. We need to carefully study the well-established principles of marketing management and effectively use them for our particular case.

In developing a brand identity of

Bangladesh, we must understand what really we understand by "branding." Commercial brand management is basically a process of marketing management by the seller of a product to enhance the value of the product or create differentiation with the competitors. Marketing guru Philip Kotler defined brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." He explained that a brand is basically a seller's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits, and services consistently to the buyers. The best brands convey a warranty of quality. It can convey up to six levels of meanings: Attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality, and user. A brand can grow stronger by emphasizing any one of the meaning or with all of them. The branding challenge is to develop a deep set of positive associations for the brand. A marketer must decide at which level or levels of meaning to anchor the brand identity.

Nation branding is basically a derivative from the commercial brand management process. It is a field of theory and practice, which aim to measure, build, and manage the reputation of countries. It applies some approaches from commercial brand management practice to countries, in an effort to build, change, or protect their international reputations or external perception at the minimum.

It is based on the observation that the "brand images" of countries are just as important to their success in the global market place as those of products and services. Simon Anholt is normally credited as a pioneer in the field. Nation branding appears to be practiced by many states, including US and UK (where it is officially referred to as Public Diplomacy) and most West European countries.

There is increasing interest in the concept from less developed countries on the grounds that an enhanced image might create more favorable conditions for foreign direct investment, tourism, trade, and even political relations with other countries.

We can often hear and read slogans like: "Malaysia: Truly Asia," "Dubai: The Jewel in the Desert," "China: The Factory of the World," "Sri Lanka: The Pearl of the Indian Ocean," etc. When we open *Newsweek*, *Time*, or *The Economist*, we get to see that some

of the Latin American countries are also doing the same.

Though "Shining India" could not bring in enough votes for BJP, the respect for the "India" brand with its continuous institutional reforms, quality of education, industrial innovations, IT revolution, and the "Indian Knowledge Bank," with its ability to deliver, did reach to all the important target markets. These countries have willingly created these slogans and brand propositions that people can experience or feel both externally and internally.

Setting aside all the theories, we must now think about how we can develop our own brand. What factors should drive the case of our branding and how should it be driven?

In developing our brand proposition, we must identify our experiences, uniqueness, behaviour and inherent qualities of the people, obstacles and achievement from both positive and negative aspects.

The key to attaining an effective brand identity is to activate adequate positive association with all these experiences, good or bad. For an example, we are known all over the world for the sufferings and destruction we face due to natural calamities year after year. However the same incident could have been transformed into a major brand identity if we could have positively associated the courage, commitment, and resilience of our people who even after all these natural disasters have continued to develop the country with some remarkable achievements.

We have invented micro-credit to fight our own poverty and are willing enough to share it with the rest of the world. We are competing with the giants of the world in ready-made garments market and successfully growing each year. Our nation had been created out of a dream of equal justice and opportunity to everyone, tolerance and a commitment to change the fate of downtrodden and deprived. Our ancestors have made their highest sacrifice, so that their future descendants can enjoy these universally human attributes.

We have continuously faced obstacles, but we have not removed ourselves from our destination. Thousand years of culture and civilization has given our people the humility, perseverance, resilience, and ability to dream with which we fight against all adversities.

We are truly a "nation-state" with almost the same culture, spirit, religious tolerance, and social

values. In developing a brand, we must not lie or promise something which we believe we cannot deliver. We must be open to our drawbacks, weaknesses, and backwardness, and try to find positive association by establishing linkage with all our achievements.

Driving the process of building brand for a country is a much bigger effort than any other commercial product. It requires a true common representation of the aspiration of the people of the country. People of the country must be able to have belief in the image projected by the brand proposition. If they do not have the confidence to believe in the brand proposition, the brand identity will be meaningless to the rest of the world and will disappear in no time.

That is why building brand for Bangladesh will have to be driven from various forums — the government, the political parties, civil society, especially media, professionals, private sector, cultural world, workers and farmers, urban and rural people, etc. When all of us can share the common minimum identity, we shall be able to establish Bangladesh as a rejuvenated brand equity that the world will respect and treat accordingly.

All the stakeholders in a transition economy like Bangladesh must be clear about the destination they are driving at and this can't be different from other neighbouring or similar countries who have transitioned to the next trajectory of growth or development.

We all must be very aware that the effort to develop an energetic brand for Bangladesh should not remove ourselves from our original fight. We must not suffer from self-denial that believe that believing in vibrant Bangladesh resolves our all problem. We would still have to work hard to remove corruption from our society, create enough economic activities to eradicate poverty and create enough trust among people to have faith in Bangladesh.

We need to send a message to the international community that we mean business, there is policy continuity despite change of the government, democracy means the same thing here as elsewhere, and we are continuously striving to build respectable institutions. All these will be our continuous battle, just as creating a vibrant brand for "Bangladesh" is one.

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