

Using army during hartal Do not trivialise their good name

THE hartal on Thursday passed off relatively peacefully except for a few stray incidences of picketers causing damage to some vehicles. Therefore it beats all reasons why despite having no indication of widespread anarchy and vandalism on the streets the caretaker government decided to deploy the army to handle the hartal on Thursday. Questions cloud our minds as to whether the situation had gone beyond the control of the police that it necessitated deployment of the army and thereby break the norms in this regard. On the basis of the reports coming from different parts of the city we can say with conviction that it did not. All reports indicate that nothing extraordinary had happened and the situation was well under control of the police.

Hartal is not a new phenomenon in this country and in many past occasions when situation was far worse, contingents of police were sufficient to bring mob frenzy under control. No matter how violent some of the past hartals had been, on no occasion civil law enforcers had to call in the army to help quell the political unrest. On a few extreme cases we have noticed contingents of the BDR patrolling the streets alongside the police forces.

The last known case of deploying the army to handle a hartal took place 16 years ago during the military rule of HM Ershad. But, as said, it was done by a military ruler and not by a civilian government, and then again not by a caretaker government. Pressing the army into action on Thursday to tackle a rather insipid hartal thereby was ill-advised. By exposing the army to a confrontational situation with the public cannot be called a good decision. It remains to be seen what were the processes of taking such a decision.

After a decade and half military and autocratic rule, the armed forces have taken great pains to rebuild their image and they have done it successfully to everyone's satisfaction. Now our armed forces are recognised all over the world as a disciplined professional body worth the name. Since then they have stayed out of politics even though oftentimes they have been victimised by unfavourable political decisions. It is therefore unfortunate that when our armed forces continue to earn good name abroad for themselves as a disciplined peace keeping force, at home the name is being trivialised by certain quarters seemingly to fulfil partisan political objectives. The armed forces are there to defend the sovereignty of the country, therefore they should be kept above all controversies.

Rohingyas in voter list

Stop violation of law

AT a time when the whole nation is looking forward to correction of the voter list that was universally branded as flawed, a report from Cox's Bazar has cast doubts on the local election officials' ability to perform their duties honestly or efficiently. The inclusion of a huge number of Rohingyas (refugees from Myanmar) in the "corrected list" is not easy to comprehend or explain. The country offered them shelter on purely humanitarian grounds when they were facing repression in their homeland and were forced to enter into Bangladesh but it should not be mixed up with the parliamentary elections which only permit bona fide citizens of the country to have voting right.

By including the Rohingyas in the electoral roll, the officials have clearly violated the law. Worse still, reports indicate that the officials are being influenced by a political party eager to broaden its support base. The parties and individuals must go by the law when it comes to electioneering of any kind. Foreign nationals cannot be included in the voter list, regardless of where they are living now. The ill motive behind the move becomes all the more clear when we come to learn that many genuine voters in the area have been left out of the list. And if that be true, the "correction" of the voter list is still a distant goal.

The officials and political elements responsible for further bungling of the voter list are actually doing a great disservice to the cause of free and fair election. The Election Commission is expected to act quickly and stop the activities that stand in the way of correcting the list. Already, prospects of holding a free and fair election are badly threatened by the absence of a voter list acceptable to all the parties. Now, the inclusion of Rohingyas, and exclusion of genuine voters, in the electoral roll will create further confusion and doubts in the minds of people and greatly undermine the acceptability of what is being called the "corrected list".

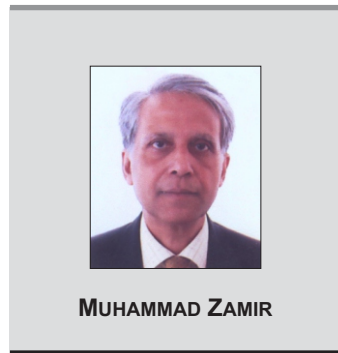
ABMS ZAHUR

If corruption is lubricant of political machine how can we run our politics without corruption? When we say corruption-free politics we mean corruption within limit. It does not mean domination of money power or outright purchase of votes in election. A contestant who uses money to purchase votes also uses muscle power if money does not serve purpose. Muscle power, however, needs money. So muscle power and money power go together. The most critical components of muscle power of late are small fire arms (illegally acquired) and hand grenades. Even though somewhat crude these items can be manufactured within the country. More sophisticated are obtained from neighbouring countries. Thus

people's genuine support is no longer a must for winning election in Bangladesh. In fact if we cannot control use of monetary strength in politics we cannot hope for the success of candidates without the capability to spend huge (say, not less than Tk 10 million) amount in the election. We are not sure about the rate of success of honest and competent candidates (with modest means) against a wealthy and powerful opponent. Never in the past we were so convinced of the great power of money in such matters.

In a corrupt society like Bangladesh it is unrealistic to think about clean politics. Corruption is so powerful in Bangladesh that even eminent leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman often considered themselves helpless against corrupt

Islam, Muslims and the European media



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RECENT statements by Pope Benedict XVI, Mr J Straw, a former senior member of the British Cabinet, and current British Communities Minister Phil Woolas have all reflected a common thread of thought — anxiety about the growing presence of Islam within the body-fabric of Europe. Their comments have highlighted not only the sociological impact of Muslims within Europe but also questioned whether fundamental values, part of the Islamic faith, have any relevance for the host community.

The Western media, for obvious reasons, have followed this growing debate with great interest. This in turn has created and determined public perceptions about Islam and Muslims. It has also generated its own fall-out in local politics. Evidence of this has already become apparent in Netherlands and France. The latest local elections in Belgium have also been tarred with the same brush. One of the political parties in this election has gone to the extent of stating in its manifesto that examination is required as to whether Islam is to be treated as a recognised religion.

This view appears to have coincided with the media trend that Islam, as a religion is not only political in character but violent in its manifestations. As expected, this has fuelled anti-Muslim sentiment and racist incidents.

The media, both electronic and print, have an indispensable place in the West. They modulate and

create brands by which group-images are enhanced or destroyed. Unfortunately, in recent years, there has been a noticeable and gradual shift in the tone of media coverage with regard to Islam and Muslims. In this context, the media appears to have found a limited agenda. It is rarely positive and focuses almost exclusively on the involvement of Islam in politics and violence. Human interest articles which reflect everyday life in Islam and in Muslim countries have

but Woolas more specific, questioning whether 'Muslim women wear the veil as an expression of their faith or because they are compelled to do so.' In doing so, both ministers reflected the unease of British politicians over the issue of integrating Britain's 1.65 million Muslims (which has been high on the domestic political agenda since the bombings of July, 2005).

The British media have loved these comments from the two senior politicians. They tended to display a

succeed.

One thing is however very clear. There is consensus among Muslim community leaders all over Europe that journalists need to understand the complexity of community issues and also take steps to present not only a more positive image of Muslim communities in Europe but also a basic knowledge of the issues central to Islam. There is also general agreement that journalists should not attribute individual acts to the collective Muslim

calling the glass half-empty when it could have been called half-full. This has often affected the perception of the true situation. In this context, Reckmann has suggested that the key role for journalists should be to explain the changes in Europe, and seek to understand them, in a critical, yet unbiased way. I agree with him. There is bound to be media distortion and absence of balance unless this takes place.

Another factor is also beginning to affect media perception. It is the

Gradual erosion of self-confidence within the Muslim communities is dangerous. The political leadership and European civil society have a difficult task ahead. They have to take the initiative to persuade the media not to lump together Islam's cultural and religious aspects with political issues. One way out would be to urge the media to focus more on human-interest stories to counter-balance the association of religion with violence and conflict.

practically disappeared from the scene. Nowadays, in general, little attention is paid by the western media to the history and centuries-old relationship between the Middle East and Europe. I find this very disappointing.

It would appear that one of the major barriers to 'realistic' reporting has arisen out of the superficial media misconception that Islam is a political rather than a religious ideology. What started after the Iranian Revolution in 1978 has now grown more intense after the events of 11 September, 2001.

Today, most of the issues concerning Muslims within Europe relate to their integration as well as their cultural values. There is also the tendency to portray Muslims as a problem group which needs to be integrated into broader society. The media, in general, play an important role in this regard. Consequently, it was not surprising that the comments of Straw and Woolas created such a storm. Both of them touched a sensitive chord. Straw was slightly general in his observation,

form of dual track "enlightened Islamophobia." Subsequent observations have tried to emphasise that European Muslim communities should not be confused with radical Islam. The benefit of such comments has however been lost and undermined through politicised reporting of Islamic issues in other articles.

One can only observe that in such situations, journalists instead of practising self-regulation are often ending up with oversimplification of complex political and cultural issues.

Inaccurate media representations are also beginning to create mistrust between Muslim communities and journalists. An example in this regard was the relentless media coverage of one radical cleric in the UK. This created the unfortunate impression that most Muslim clerics might be associated with terrorists. Such unfounded assumptions even prompted proposals for laws to close down mosques in the UK. Fortunately, Great Britain is a functioning democracy and such moves did not

community, but should differentiate between acts associated with Muslim culture and those related to the Islamic religion.

Jörg Reckmann, Brussels correspondent for the 'Frankfurter Rundschau', has recently made some interesting comments with regard to Islam, Muslims and the media. He has pointed out that before 9/11 few people cared about Islam in Europe. This changed after the terrorist attacks in the USA and on European soil. After this, Islam and the Middle East were no longer romantic or remote. They were factors that affected security and stability in daily lives.

Mr. Reckmann has analysed this scenario and reflected that this development has been treated differently by quality and tabloid media. The former has been capable of putting forward a nuanced and representative perspective. Tabloids, on the other hand, by their very nature (arousing curiosity among mass readers) and also because of popular journalism, have tended to be less hesitant in

use of controversial terms by the political leadership. An example of this has been the recent use of the phrase 'Islamic fascism'. This immediately influenced media coverage of Islamic issues and events related to the Muslim community. I think that linking Islam with fascism is as reprehensible as using the term 'Christian terrorism' or 'Jewish terrorism' to describe violence by other fundamentalist groups.

To this can also be added the pressure generated by 24-hour news channels. Need for new stories and 'breaking events' on a continuous basis often lead to a blurring of the distinction between tabloid and quality news. Fiction and subjectivity creep in and negative images of Muslims continue to haunt the air-waves for hours. A theft or a robbery by an Asian Muslim is then no longer just another incident. It becomes a societal and ethnic indictment.

The other emerging elements are online blogs and discussion

Price spiral: When will this nightmare end?

GHULAM RAHMAN

THE price spiral is continuing unabated. It all started during the immediate past government's tenure. The then prime minister Khaleda Zia propagated the view that during her tenure income of the common man was on the rise, and because they could afford more goods the increase in demand propelled the price-hike. However, now that she is out of office the former PM has changed her stand and declared that there was no rise in prices during her time — it was all propaganda of journalists. Possibly she is banking on the maxim that "public memory is short."

Several factors contributed to the price spiral during the BNP led four-party alliance (FPA) reign — of which the rise of an importers' syndicate allegedly with Hawa Bhaban's patronage was most talked about. There were other reasons — the rise in value of the dollar, from Tk. 53.96 a dollar in Fiscal Year (FY) 2000 to over Tk. 70.00 when the FPA government relinquished power; the increase in export of vegetables and other agricultural products, from \$ 18.00 million in 2000 to \$ 82.00 million in 2004; and without a corresponding increase in production; stagnation/slower growth and set-back in food grains production, etc.

Bangladesh Economic Survey, 2006, a publication of the Ministry of Finance, reveals that food grains import reached an all time high in 2004-2005, to 3.37 million tons since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The all-pervasive corruption, and toll collection by the party goons as well as officials of various government departments including the law enforcers, shortage of and rising cost of seeds, fertilizer, electricity and diesel oil, as well as transportation cost, also aggravated the price situation.

Matching demand with adequate supply is the key to ensure price stability. The liberal import regime

pursued in the 1990s helped the country in meeting the supply shortages. Even in the face of dwindling foreign exchange reserves the AL government allowed free import and did not impose any ban. Competition among importers kept the prices low. Khaleda Zia's government, from the very beginning of its rule made accumulation of foreign exchange the corner-stone of its macro-economic policy, and on several occasions import restrictions of one kind or another were imposed to build up reserves. Many small importers went out of busi-

ness, and a group of large importers-cum-processors-packers emerged. Forming oligopolistic cartels they monopolised trade in every item of daily necessity — edible oil, sugar, milk powder, etc. — and pushed the prices sky high.

In an oligopoly a few large firms dominate the market. Unlike perfect competition or monopoly there is no single theory of oligopoly. The behaviour of oligopolistic firms is determined by the reaction and behaviour of their rivals, and the assumptions they make about those reactions. There are several theories. Augustin Cournot assumed that each firm sets its output and price assuming that its rival does not react at all. In this scenario, each firm will leap-frog past the other, lowering price and increasing output to gain a larger market share. The result is, however, a market in which prices are higher and output lower they would be in a perfectly competitive environment.

A second theory is that of Bertrand competition, in which intense price competition drives

production and productivity in the agricultural sector. The ministries of finance, commerce, agriculture, industry, and food and disaster management ensured adequate and timely supply of agricultural credits and inputs to the farmers throughout the country. Further, duty free import of food grains and agricultural machinery was allowed. As a result not only a disaster was averted, but the country achieved food autarky soon after.

The next elected government should draw a programme, similar to the one drawn after the 1998

programmes to educate the farmers on improved methods of agricultural production, and use of the right inputs and equipment should be undertaken to raise farm productivity.

Fifth, the "subsistence agriculture" should be transformed into "commercial agriculture" through the spread of "contract" growing, particularly for export of vegetables, flowers, etc. "Export Subsidy" should be disbursed to growers directly. Export expansion without corresponding increase in farm output should not be allowed. Sixth, the private sector

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ernment patronises business syndicates. It was alleged that Hawa Bhaban, the BNP chairperson's Banani office, promoted "cronyism" and protected these collusive oligopolies. As the caretaker government is not in a position to initiate policy changes it would not be possible for it to mend the scenario. The onus to create a competitive market environment once again will fall on the shoulders of the next government.

Most items of our daily necessities — rice, wheat, edible oil, pulses, vegetables, salt, etc. — are produced in the country. In agriculture, crop cycles are short. Further, with policy support, fiscal incentives and technological innovations it is possible to raise farm output and productivity quickly. During AL rule, in the aftermath of 1998 devastating flood, the apprehension was ripe that the country would experience serious food shortages, and donor agencies predicted that impending famine may claim as many as 200,000 lives. The government immediately drew a plan to raise

flood, for helping the farmers to augment supplies of agricultural produce, fish and meat. The farmers' response would be quick if they get financial and technological support, along with supplies of inputs and credits in time. First, for facilitating credit disbursement, Krishi Bank branches should be established in each and every union of the country. Second, the agricultural subsidy should be paid directly to the farmers. The FPA government spent Tk. 1200.00 core a year as agricultural subsidy, but as the amount was paid to input suppliers the farmers were hardly benefited. In fact, they had to purchase seeds, fertiliser and diesel oil at exorbitant prices due to supply shortages. It is possible to develop procedures linking agricultural production, use of inputs and credits and subsidy payment direct to the farmers through the banking system. Third, inputs such as fertiliser, seeds, diesel oil should be made available in abundance in village bazaars, like salt and rice, at non-subsidised prices. Fourth, massive

should be encouraged to invest more in agriculture, and the ceiling on landholding may be relaxed for commercial production of seeds, vegetables, flowers, etc. Seventh, use of agricultural implements and equipment should be encouraged. This list is indicative, not exhaustive.

In an article captioned "Continuing price spiral: How to tame it" appeared in The Daily Star on May 22, I inferred that "The prices have not gone up in a day and there is no quick fix either. There are, however, measures which may give results quickly. Of them, freeing retail and wholesale markets as well as movement of goods by land and water across the country from illegal collection of tolls by party cadres, organised goons and members of governmental agencies would reduce the prices by a few percentage points." Raising the efficiency at sea and land ports, and reducing cost of doing business while dealing with custom authorities would also help.

Since the early 1990s, with increased private sector participation, there has been acceleration in the GDP growth. However, in the

forums. This indirect expansion of media 'space' is also generating in its own way, influence with western communities.

I feel that this gradual erosion of self-confidence within the Muslim communities is dangerous. The political leadership and European civil society have a difficult task ahead. They have to take the initiative to persuade the media not to lump together Islam's cultural and religious aspects with political issues. One way out would be to urge the media to focus more on human-interest stories to counter-balance the association of religion with violence and conflict.

Although media is totally free in the West, pressure could still be applied in this regard on editors rather than on the journalists to broaden the Muslim agenda.

A good way to tackle this problem might be to emulate the manner in which China is positively reflected in the media. Few news stories today focus on China's authoritarian government. More than 50 per cent of stories justifiably highlight its new-found economic power.

However, tackling the boon or being the bane of media attention also rests with the Muslim communities in Europe and in other western countries. Being emotional will not solve the problem.

Improving the image of Islam and Muslims could also be helped through introspection within the Muslim community. Muslims have to act and speak responsibly, reflecting and upholding their values and professionalism in an informed way. Dialogues between Muslim representatives and journalists and other stake-holders could also be helpful in removing prejudice, combating stereotyping and promoting mutual understanding.

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process, distributive justice has taken a back seat. About 50 percent of the 140 million citizens of the country are languishing in abject poverty, at less than a dollar income per day. The income inequality between the rich and the poor has increased manifold. The income of the top 5 percent of the population compared to the bottom 5 percent is 84 times higher now, compared to less than 20 times in 1990.

Bangladesh was indexed as the most corrupt country under the sun by the Berlin based Transparency International for five consecutive years since 2001. However, it's ranking, but not the corruption scenario, has slightly improved last year. Its political system has become a handy tool for personal aggrandisement and enrichment. Profit motive has taken over as the guiding principle for the ruling elite. As the poor and disadvantaged were further marginalised in the society, the country witnessed unprecedented rise in religious fundamentalism and terrorism. The pro-rich, hands-off, laissez-faire approach of the government of Khaleda Zia pursued in the country's economic management was at the root of most of these malaises, including the price spiral.

The next government should not only take measures to augment supplies of essential commodities but should also intervene judiciously to protect ordinary citizens' interests, in preference to narrow business interests of a few, combat corruption and bring accountability and transparency in its own dealings. Only then it would be possible to bring down prices within the ordinary citizens' reach. The price situation might go from bad to worse if the policies remain in place after election in January 2007. The people might expect a fairer deal only with a change of guard in the prime minister's office.

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Election 2007: How competent will be the candidates?

people's genuine support is no longer a must for winning election in Bangladesh. In fact if we cannot control use of monetary strength in politics we cannot hope for the success of candidates without the capability to spend huge (say, not less than Tk 10 million) amount in the election. We are not sure about the rate of success of honest and competent candidates (with modest means) against a wealthy and powerful opponent. Never in the past we were so convinced of the great power of money in such matters.

In a corrupt society like Bangladesh it is unrealistic to think about clean politics. Corruption is so powerful in Bangladesh that even eminent leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman often considered themselves helpless against corrupt

politicians and bureaucrats. President Ershad had enough power and opportunity to reduce corruption drastically. But he decided for peaceful coexistence with an appreciable number of corrupt senior officers who gathered round him as sycophants to obtain favour. Later on, we see that Ershad himself became controversial and was abdicated with a number of charges for corruption.

After the restoration of democracy Khaleda Zia started very well and controlled her ministers with almost iron hand. (They were even not permitted to make any recommendations for people of their own constituencies for any favour). Within three years of her regime (1991-96) she became conversant with various designs and tricks of politics. She apparently converted

herself into a politician who must know the limits and limitations of truth, honesty and straight forwardness. Continuous pressure by the then Awami League, perhaps, compelled her to pick up the intricacies of politics quickly. Thus we see somewhat a different Khaleda Zia in the later part of her first term. However, we must not hesitate to state that her first term was far better so far as spread of corruption is concerned.

Initially Sheikh Hasina also was strict with her party's activists and senior members. However, degeneration among some of her politicians started within a short time of her assumption of office of PM and thus Bangladesh became the most corrupted country. It would not be correct to say that majority of AL candidates who contested in the 8th parliamentary election were

honest, straight forward and competent. On the other hand candidates from BNP, though not of better background than the candidates of the AL, had two advantages over their competitors: (a) The performance of the BNP regime (1991-96) was better than that of AL regime of 1973-75; (b) The BNP regime of 1991-96 was considered less corrupt than the regime of Ershad (1982-90). However, the BNP led regime of 2001-2006 has surpassed any regime of Bangladesh in corruption by ministers, politicisation of bureaucracy and a part of lower judiciary.

It has finally been decided by the Election Commission that national election 2007 will be held on 22 January 2007 and 4-party alliance has already started the preparation for the election, though voters' list

has not yet been completed and printed. For a free, fair and credible election the parties other than 4-party alliance feel that it is necessary to shift the date of election by one month. This needs issue of an ordinance in consultation with the Supreme Court. Another snag is to send Mr. Zakaria, an Election Commissioner on leave (forced) to accommodate the proposal of AL. Both these have been in the process of consultation among CTG, 4-party and 14-party alliances. Of late it seems that Mr Zakaria may be sent on leave.

We see that a number of seminars are being held to find out ways and means to stop contestants who believe more on the strength of money (black money) and muscle and less on the love and respect of the voters. BNP has already started the process of selecting the candi-

dates for the contest. The high command of BNP finds it difficult to select the candidates. Only time will say as to how much they have been able to satisfy the contestants and their constituencies. Similar problem will have to be faced by the AL though in much lesser magnitude. We do not think that either BNP or AL will bring any change in their criteria for selection.

The image of Jamaat-e-Islami has been tarnished due to JMB activities. However, people consider them as less corrupt and more disciplined. But not beyond perhaps.

As there is no scope for change in selection criteria of the major political parties and as a huge amount of black money has been whitened there is hardly any possibility for induction of better candidates in the contest. However, let

us not give up our hope for better days in future. Democracy is going to survive in Bangladesh because during the last thirty-five years (1971-2006) and particularly during the last 15 years (1991-2006) the common people of Bangladesh have changed a lot (due to activities of NGOs and ever widening media coverage).

They have become more mature, less glib and more critical about politicians. Thus days are not far when truly honest, sincere, dedicated and competent contestants may be able to overcome the present hurdles with the support of the more educated and knowledgeable common people. And then the dreams of our Freedom Fighters to establish peace and prosperity will certainly be realised.

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