

Russia's Trial

Already in turmoil, Russia seems to be heading for an irredeemably outside socio-political tragedy. With the dissolution of parliament by President Boris Yeltsin on the one hand and the Russian Parliament, the Presidium, declaring vice-president Alexander Rutskoi as the country's acting president on the other, the Russian politics has taken a sharp turn for the worse. Indeed the feud between the president and the communist-dominated parliament had been brewing up for an agonising long period until it came to explode with a bang, sending in its wake shockwaves across the capitals of the world.

An uncompromising reformer, Yeltsin has always viewed parliament as a stumbling-block in his drive for political and economic reform. He made no attempt to conceal his intention of concentrating more power in his hands for speeding up the reform programmes. His opponents however have been complaining that the president is turning into a dictator in his attempt to bypass parliament. The bone of contention, claim the rival parties, is to save Russia from a socio-economic collapse. But the hard fact is that they have through their intransigence brought the country on to the brink. Yeltsin by violating the constitution — he has breached article 121 — and the parliamentarian deputies not making a compromise for averting a political crisis of this order.

This time Yeltsin faces the severest test of his political career as well as his popularity. He has himself admitted that he was violating the constitution by decreeing the suspension of parliament. His weakness is that he has done this without any legal authority. Armed with the constitutional rights his opponents like Ruslan Khasbulatov and Rutskoi will spare no effort to press home the advantage against their bitterest foe, Alexander Rutskoi, a veteran Afghan general, commanding respect from a large member of following in the army and once Yeltsin's running mate of the election and a political ally, is expected to offer him the toughest challenge so far. However, Yeltsin's strong points are not few. Certainly, he had taken a stock of the situation before opting for the highly risky move. Emboldened by the knowledge that the people saw him through to the referendum, he seems to have reposed his faith in the Russians' support for him. The second strong point is that he knows he can count on the army which alone can be a decisive factor in the political power game. Already the armed forces have put their weight behind him. Then Yeltsin enjoys backing from the Western powers, particularly the US, Britain and France, and the international bodies.

Considering their respective strength, therefore, it is likely that Yeltsin will once again score a win he was eagerly looking forward to. But it will not be a decisive one at any rate. At best a short-term gain, this may plunge the country into such chaos as a civil war. In his haste, Yeltsin seems to have overlooked the vital point that his move has jeopardised the very process of democracy he so avidly wanted to champion. Admitting that polls to a new two-chamber legislature were a need of the time, it is difficult to endorse his tactic of employing the leverage of extra-constitutional forces as a means for him to fight his political opponents. Through concessions and persuasion only, he could reach this same goal alright. But he has instead chosen the collision course.

Much as euphoric the reaction of the Western government to this latest development there may be, the fact remains that Russia more than ever needs a system where one person does not supervise that country's transition to democracy. A strong parliamentary system alone can see the country through the crisis. Even if a president like Yeltsin might feel the necessity to have unlimited power at his disposal to overseeing the prevailing complex affairs, this should not be made permanent law; for this will always have the potential to backfire in future. Yeltsin will have to go — today or tomorrow, but the country will endure. What we in Bangladesh have learnt at a price should not lay siege to Soviet society. With legislative support, a president can turn into a monster like Ershad at any time in any country. Russia is no exception.

A Case for Hawkers

Barrister Abdus Salam Talukder, LGRD (Local Government, Rural Development) and Co-operative Minister, told the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday that the floating vendors of the city have been rehabilitated in a number of markets and also steps are underway to construct some new — and modern too — ones for their further rehabilitation. All this is besides the provision for arranging makeshift markets on six wide roads designated for the purpose on specific days of the week. According to the minister, the move has already started showing good results in various ways.

No doubt, Dhaka city is wearing a cleaner and more refreshing look. Also true is the fact that some of the roads now witness less traffic jam but it is not all too evident to claim road accidents have fallen in number. Yet there is no point contradicting the improvements brought about by what the victims have termed as an anti-hawker measure. If figures speak for themselves then there is one the minister himself has supplied. Only 826 out of a huge army of street traders — somewhat wrongly called hawkers — could so far be allocated shops in markets. Now how are the rest faring? To get an answer to this simple question, the procession their organisation, Bangladesh Chhinnamul Hawkers Parised, brought out in the city the other day could be a strong guide.

Among others, the demand for immediate rehabilitation of the hawkers thrown out of job points to the urgency — better call it desperation — of their situation. For people to whom a day off means they and their families have to go to bed without food for that day, tall assurances for the future proves to be a cruel joke. Why the arrangements for them were not made first and then they were asked to vacate the streets where they had been vending for decades? It is not wise to put the cart before the horse. The harassment the hawkers had to suffer could be avoided if there were a plan at all. Clearly, if there was a plan, it was a bad one. Or, did the administration think continuously and systematically harassed, the poor vendors would leave the city for good? If it thought so, it certainly made a serious miscalculation.

These people have taken to the occupation not because it is so lucrative — neither on the count of lucre nor of security. Yet they are the most enterprising and above all self-employed. They deserved to be distinguished from the *mastans* and other criminals who are increasingly infesting society. If we cannot ensure their right to an independent employment, we run the risk of getting the ranks of the criminals swelled.

Only a National Consensus can Save the Jute Sector

by S Y Bakht

The Jatiya Sangsad discussion on the jute sector last week was a good start in the right direction. However, the debate consisted more of political rhetorics and less discussion on the substance of the problems being faced by the sector.

and the absence of a coherent overall jute policy.

If allowed to continue in a business as usual manner, the experts caution, the jute industry is likely to collapse in the near future, under the burden of the rising level of losses and increasing amount of outstanding debts.

Once the country's dominant export earner, the jute sector still accounts for nearly 30 per cent of the nation's export earnings. And, according to some estimates, it is the principle source of livelihood for several million people, including about three million farmers and 38 per cent of the large-scale manufacturing jobs.

Given the socio-economic importance of the sector the impact of a sick jute industrial sector would certainly have disastrous consequences and which is even difficult to contemplate.

Thus, the need of the hour is to immediately initiate reforms designed to revive the jute sector and bring back its financial viability, which is so vital for the national economy.

Reforms can only be successfully carried out if an honest attempt is made to depoliticise the issue and base the decision primarily on economic considerations. The problems of the sector, which resulted in significant losses and alarming financial distress, are perhaps not insurmountable.

But what complicates the decision-making process related to bringing about reform in the jute sector is political considerations, as it has become somewhat of a stage upon which various political interests engage in debates and vie with each other for support of the workers.

Having a visible industry and a large workforce the jute sector has traditionally been a prime

target of political parties, both opposition and ruling parties alike, seeking to exploit the trade unions to gain entry into prospective vote-banks.

Even the government is prone to unnecessarily taking economic decisions solely based on political considerations. The recent wage hike announcement for the public sector industrial workers is a case point. Although at the same time the government continues to pay lip service that any wage increase must be linked with productivity and a particular industry's ability to pay, the official announcement failed to take into

election time.

No, no reform measure in the sector can succeed without a common appreciation for the nature and severity of the problem and without the development of a national consensus on what is good for the overall sector and for the country.

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The Opposition in parliament attacked the proposed

immediate downsizing of 34 per cent of the existing loom capacity by closing the 12 worst performing mills in the public sector and immediate net retrenchment of 50,700 employees, 38,500 workers and 12,500 officers and staff.

It also suggested substantial BMR of the retained mills and restructuring and conditional write-off of Tk. 2,000 crore debt of the sector that public and private mills won't be able to pay and write-off of Tk. 1,100 crore of mostly government guaranteed debt of the Bangladesh Jute Corporation (BJC). It may be noted that the government has recently decided to wind-up the operations of BJC.

The JUMS report also suggested rescheduling the repayment schedule of the retained 'sustainable debt' of Tk. 553 million.

On reforms in policy environment, it recommended bipartite collective bargaining, commercial criteria for future industry/banking relationships and complete autonomy for the public sector mills.

Under the 'optimal performance improvement' scenario advocated in the study, it envisaged the sector becoming profitable within the second year of the reform project and enabling it to service up to four per cent of its current debt and showing net profits of Tk. 600 crore by the end of the 10 year forecast period.

Often Bangladesh's jute industry is compared to that of India, whose jute industry is significantly different than that of ours. The world's largest producer, India's annual jute goods production is nearly twice that of Bangladesh's 0.5 million tons. It also has a highly protected domestic market and exports constitute only 15 per

cent of production as against Bangladesh's 90 per cent. In India it is mandatory that 100 per cent of foodgrains, sugar and urea and 50 per cent of cement be packed in jute bags.

The jute industry in India is about 90 per cent in the private sector while it is only about 40 per cent so here. Labour productivity in India is nearly twice that of Bangladesh. And contrary to large losses in Bangladesh, jute mills in India make a reasonable profit.

India also has a market-based credit system, as opposed to a government directed one here. This ensures financial discipline and accountability. Labour and machine productivity are 100 and 30 per cent higher in India, respectively, reflecting the difference in the policy environment. As a result unit cost of hessian, sack and CBC is about 10 to 30 per cent lower in India.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for appreciating the prevailing problems in the jute sector and putting our own house in order. Inaction in this regard would perhaps automatically force us to leave the competitive advantage to India, which our politicians otherwise so rightly fear.

So, a national consensus on the issue of reforms in the jute sector is a must and the ball is squarely in the court of the policy-makers, politicians, trade unionists and all others related to the sector.

The positive response of the Jute Minister to an Opposition demand in parliament to hold a national conference on the jute sector is encouraging and would perhaps help build a national coalition on the issue.

The lawmakers should be fully briefed about the problems and the possible solutions as it not only involves taxpayers money but any substantive reform is also likely to have a social impact. But would the politicians be able to depoliticize the issue?

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

account any such considerations.

The increase in wage to a minimum basic pay of Tk. 950 per month means an average salary enhancement of 17 per cent. This translates into an additional annual expenditure of over Tk. 40 crore for the loss-making public sector jute mills under Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC).

The wage hike announcement also derailed the government initiated planned Jute Sector Restructuring Project (JSRP), which the World Bank was willing to fund.

The opposition political parties, on the other hand, are blindly opposed to any substantive reforms in the sector, particularly those requiring retrenchment and closure of badly performing mills. They normally take such a position against reforms hoping to gain support of the workers during

JSRP, which they wrongly claimed was initiated by the World Bank, and alleged that it is designed to "hand over" Bangladesh's international jute market-share to India.

The JSRP, in fact, was based on a study entitled Jute Manufacturing Study (JUMS) requested by the government and funded by the European Commission in 1992. It was carried out by International Development Ireland and included consultants both from home and abroad.

The objectives of the study, as stipulated by the government, included the development of a 'comprehensive plan' that incorporates the market, operational, manpower, managerial, policy, and institutional improvements required for attaining economic, technical and financial viability within the sector.

The study recommended the

FOCUS ON NEWSPAPER MANAGEMENT—II

An Aggressive Approach to Circulation and Advertisement would Help Print Media Resolve Present Problems

This is the second and concluding part of a draft report prepared and authored by Syed Mahboob Alam Chowdhury and Saleem Samad on behalf of the Development Features. It was commissioned by Singapore-based Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC).

As per the terms of reference of updated baseline data survey ten newspapers were selected, of whom six are Dhaka newspapers, two are regional dailies and two rural dailies. The Dhaka newspapers included four dailies and two weeklies. Also, the publications counted two English-language dailies, six vernacular dailies, one English-language political weekly and one vernacular women's weekly.

Findings

Based on interviews through a standard questionnaire, there are eight male and two female respondents.

Age-wise, two of them are below 40 years, four of them are between 41-50 years, three are above 50 years and one preferred not to state age.

In terms of education, four are post-graduates, five are graduates and one is under graduate.

Designation-wise, the respondents are: One Editor-Publisher, three Editors, five Executive Directors and one Finance Manager.

Going by newspapering experience, two respondents have more than 30 years' experience, three have 21-30 years' experience, three have 11-20 years' experience and two have up to 10 years' experience.

The respondents belong to A Grade, B Grade and C Grade newspapers of Dhaka, port city of Chittagong and Divisional HQ of Khulna, tea-growing north-eastern district of Sylhet and north-western district of Bogra.

Newspapers represented by the respondents publish varying sizes of day's issue: three dailies publish regular four pages, three publish eight pages and two publish 12 pages. As for weeklies, one publishes an eight page English-language weekly and another publishes a 24-page vernacular weekly.

FINDINGS OF INTERVIEWS: Answering a question if the newspapers have any plan to

promote circulation, all 10 respondents replied in the affirmative.

To a question about sources of the newspaper's advertisements, nine respondents identified government/semi-government organizations as source of their advertisement; all ten pointed to autonomous bodies as source of advertisement; all ten identified private parties as source of advertisement. Only 6 described 'Others' as source of advertisement. (Question admits of multiple answers).

Eight respondents said they exercise option on point of morals and good taste in the publication of advertisements. Two respondents replied in the negative.

Eight of the respondents reported difficulties in procuring Government ads. One respondent did not find any difficulty in procuring Government ad. One respondent did not say anything about it.

One respondent said mediemen were involved in the framing of the Government ad policy. Three respondents said these was no mediemen involvement in government ad policy formulation. One preferred not to say anything.

Nine respondents considered present government ad distribution policy appropriate and fair. One respondent held a different view.

Four respondents said their newspapers conducted readership survey. Six respondents reported their newspapers never carried out such a survey.

Answering a question if there was any plan to conduct a readership survey in the future, 5 respondents replied in the affirmative. Two respondents said they had no such plan. Three respondents did not know

about it.

Asked if formulation of better advertisement-getting strategy possible without a readership survey, five respondents answered in the affirmative, four of them said 'no' and one would not answer.

The respondents were asked if they had any marketing plans of their own. Nine respondents said they had marketing plans of their own. Only one respondent answered in the negative.

On the question of method of marketing used by 10 newspapers, 10 respondents said they marketed their papers through agents, one respondent told about the use of hawkers, 2 respondents identified marketing firms for the purpose and 5 respondents spoke about direct sale. (Question admitted of multiple answers).

To a question whether any sales package materials are offered by the newspapers, three respondents replied in the affirmative, six replied in the negative and one respondent would not say anything.

To a question about methods used to increase the income of the newspapers, three respondents referred to ads, three respondents referred to ad in other papers, eight referred to increased number of special supplements, and five respondents referred to 'others'. (Question admits of multiple answers).

Four respondents stated that special supplements help increase circulation, six respondents said display ads help increase circulation, 7 respondents said tender notices (for sale and purchase of goods and stores by govt, semi-govt and autonomous bodies) help increase paper's circulation, seven respondents said classified ads help increase circulation, 3 respondents said Notices (Court notices to absconding accused, bank notice to defaulting borrowers, ad notifying sale of land to legally establish that there is no adverse claim by anyone other than the prospective seller and so on) and 4 said 'others'. (Question admitted of multiple answers).

Asked if increased number of newspapers have any shrinking effect on advertisements, two respondents said increased number of newspapers affect ads. Eight respondents replied in the negative.

CONTENT ANALYSIS: For the purpose of survey a content analysis of ads in related newspapers/magazines was conducted to cover 21 issues of each daily newspapers. In the case of 2 weeklies, 14 issues of English-language weekly the Holiday, and 12 issues of vernacular weekly The Begum were subjected to content analysis. The ads were categorised into five types: Government/semi-government/autonomous bodies, private national firms, multinationals, classified and others (court notice to absconding accused, legal notice for sale of properties or to defaulting borrowers of bank loan and so on).

The content analysis of ads seeks to show various sources of advertisements, ratio of ad in relation to each other category wise, and ratio in relation to total space in the newspaper. (The vernacular weekly Begum is printed in demy 1/4 size). Incidentally, the dailies are printed in double demy newspaper, with each column measuring on an average 21 inches long and the column width measuring 11 cms roughly.

Despite best efforts, data and statistics on rural newspaper, 3 respondents said Notices (Court notices to absconding accused, bank notice to defaulting borrowers, ad notifying sale of land to legally establish that there is no adverse claim by anyone other than the prospective seller and so on) and 4 said 'others'. (Question admitted of multiple answers).

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per, the Dainik Karotoa (of Bogra) was received in Dhaka too late after the deadline for it to be included in this report. (The questionnaire — related information has, however, been used.) The date and statistics are being processed for inclusion in the final report after the workshop is over.

Interpretation of Findings

Interviews with respondents reveal a fact which will shock a Circulation/Advertising professional. Most newspapers have people to man the circulation/advertising departments mainly to deal with: a) Department of Films and Publications (DFP) which looks after all Government advertisements in the country and, b) the hawkers who monopolize newspaper distribution in the cities and towns. The Circulation/Advertising officers do not feel the need (or are not motivated by the newspapers) of developing their skill in and knowledge of the techniques and strategies of building up circulation, and attracting advertisements from various sources. The job is not taken as a challenge to build a career.

The findings point to the fact that newspapers depend chiefly on the government (DFP) for revenue. Circulation is not a good financial support for the overwhelming number of them. These attitude of over-dependence on government advertisement has already set in inertia among the advertising department officers. They fall into a rut, thus destroying initiative in them. As for circulation, with the hawkers taking over marketing of newspapers and the papers resigning to this marketing situation, the circulation officers are content with the keeping accounts of sales proceeds of day's newspapers and collection of money from the all-powerful Hawkers Association who dictates to the newspapers how big or how small the holidays will be during Eid festivals and so on.

The findings indicate 'readership survey' is not known to many who should know. Four respondents replied in the affirmative to the question on their own concept of readership survey, the method of survey consisting in views and opinions of relations, friends and acquaintances or at best appreciative letters of readers and so on. It is difficult to say if any Bangladesh paper ever conducted a standard readership survey.

The findings reflect poorly on the competence of circulation officers of newspapers in so far as sales package materials are concerned. Most circulation officers are blindly following the

conventional practice of bringing out routine supplements on national day, Eid festival, Tree Plantation Day and so on. Special Supplements specially planned and published are few and far between.

The findings indicate that newspapers concentrate on government advertisements although government ad rate is much lower than that of private parties. Also, newspapers do not attract much private sector advertisements. That would leave one wondering why.

The proliferation of newspapers in the country obviously puts new demands on the existing ad volume. The newly published newspapers stake their claims on the limited ad resources, thus further eroding the small share of newspapers who have been in business for long or for several years now.

Recommendations

• There is the imperative need for newspapers to try to diversify sources of advertisements in a more vigorous way, lessening dependence on government ads. The private sector ads must be exploited for the good of the newspapers.

• Various strategies like sales package materials, supplements and other promotional drives must be constructively planned to attract more private ads.

• Newspapers must find means of identifying reasons why private ads avoid print media. Readership Survey as a tool for this must be recognised.

• Human resources development in this particular field is a precondition for getting access to a sound economy for newspaper. A better perception of this need must be developed by the newspapers in order to be able to work out appropriate strategies for promoting circulation and advertisement.

• Newspapers need to groom staff into professionals for efficient administration and operation of circulation and advertising departments, and to that end design an appropriate recruitment policy, orientation and training to develop their potential.

• In recognition of the fact the private advertisers feel that the newspapers lack in newsprint quality, printing quality and fail to provide modern facilities to advertise their products and services in the most effective way despite print media's advantage of giving permanence to the things advertised, newspapers should make positive efforts to use better newsprint, better printing and employ improved technologies to attract private advertisers.

• Newspapers need to be alive to the fact that a newspaper must possess the quality of objective and timely coverage of events, things and ideas and must be well-edited to be attractive and useful to advertisers and readers alike.

To the Editor...

Donation for school admission

Sir, It has been observed that many schools in Dhaka seek a donation from guardians for admission of their wards.

The amount of donation varies from Tk ten thousand to Tk fifty thousand depending on the reputation of the school.

This is a serious malpractice and needs to be dealt with severely. It shows that ability of the guardians to pay donation and not the talent and merit of the students matters most for the purpose of admission. Had these schools not drawn any Govt grants and subsidies, such donations could have carried some logic. But the fact remains that all these schools are drawing eighty percent

contributions towards teachers' salary from government but charging high tuition fees from students and at the same time demanding donations from guardians. No word is strong enough to condemn this unethical practice.

It seems that DG Education and Ministry of Education are sitting as silent spectators to this heinous game while the poor guardians and students are finding themselves utterly helpless. If an enquiry is conducted into the matter by the Ministry of Education or DG Education, I believe the whole thing will be crystal clear. In the fitness of things, Government should cancel recognition of these schools who are indulging in such malpractice. Government may

also stop contribution towards teachers' salary of these schools. These schools rather appear to be purely commercial houses devoid of any ethics and morality. Even in British colonial days such things were unheard of. Will the Parliamentary Committee on Education go into it?

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Double standard in human rights

Sir, The western concept of human rights is quite different from Islamic concept of human rights. One must have full faith in the holy Quran if he is a true Muslim. Therefore a Muslim

America who is the ardent advocate of human rights is seen to keep mum in case of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Algeria, Israel and Egypt where human rights are violated very often branding the victims as 'fundamentalists'. It shows that America follows double standard in its application of human rights policy.

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