

Is Fuel Price Justified?

The government decision to abruptly raise prices of petroleum products has already sent shock waves all across the transport sector. Auto-rickshaw owners and employees have responded by either taking their vehicles off the road or demanding straightway double or even more fare. On its part the government has also come up with an explanation for this sudden move. It contends that fuel price has gone up in international market and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) — the country's only importing agency that is responsible for refining fuel before marketing — had long been incurring losses because of non-adjusting prices for a long time. This argument is tenable but only upto a point. Even if we accept that successive governments' populist policy prevented them from going for the much needed price hike of fuel, we cannot help questioning the 61 per cent increase at a go.

The government explanation is hardly adequate enough to clarify the whole situation. It argues that fuel prices here are still lower compared to the neighbouring countries. But neither does it give the comparative rates of fuel of those countries nor justifies the latest enhancement showing the big gap created between the international level of fuel prices and our previous rates. Did the price gap necessitate such a push at a time? Our knowledge is that fuel prices in international market have registered a fall this year from last year's level. And surprisingly the BPC turned into a losing concern for the first time last year incurring a loss of Tk 500 crore approximately.

We strongly feel that the overall impact of a fuel price hike was not considered exhaustively before taking the decision. There is going to be a chain effect of this one act. We appreciate the fact that diesel price, that touches the masses more directly has not been marked up significantly. But does the comparative rise between petrol and diesel need to be that different? While we accept the need for a price rise of fuel, we think the rise has been too steep and the government needs to rethink the matter.

This Mad Complacency

These are bewildering figures, no doubt. One may even panic over these and justifiably too. Fifty per cent of all food items manufactured here are adulterated. Sixty-five per cent of all edible oil and honey brands are also adulterated. But there is nothing to beat sweets, 99 per cent of which are adulterated. No wonder among those that partake of these it would be difficult to find one unadulterated man or woman.

In Morocco 40,000 people were either disabled for life or killed through consuming edible oil adulterated by used engine lubricant, a decade or so back.

It is possibilities like this that infests the whole gamut of the food industry. Who knows, unknown to us what slow-acting degeneration this or that adulterated food is setting in sections of our population to burst open some day with full fury.

Coming to sweets the 99 per cent mixed up case it is sad to recall that this Dhaka delicacy or those coming from points of great tradition in the interior were for centuries the pride of Bangladesh or eastern Bengal. Adulteration, in addition to making the sweets unhealthy, takes away the quality of these — quality that came to them over centuries. The cheating is done in these goodies through replacing the expensive *chhana* or casein or cottage cheese mainstay of the Bengalee sweets by things as cheap as wheat or rice powder. About our sweets the important thing to care for is the condition of their preparation. In 100 per cent cases the sweets are prepared in the most unacceptable and unhygienic condition.

The less said about the BSTI the better. It is charged with so many things and it is not manned to do a tenth of that. The IPH, the other capable body to monitor the food situation, cannot prosecute the villain. The BSTI-IPH story is indeed one of the futility of brooding over the dangerous adulteration business. The bad thing threatens the physical well being of the whole of our 120 million people. The authorities are decidedly mad to be so complacent and uncaring in this matter.

Impressive 4-decade Output

Figures again but not in percentages anymore. Nonetheless, impressive all the way. Thirty-five thousand kilometres of embankments were put up and 39 thousand kilometres of irrigation canal dug in Bangladesh — in the last four decades. Both activity, piling earth in the first and removing earth in the second, could be expressed in tons of earth-cutting work to make it into a truly astronomical figure, easier to understand and to be more impressed. Add to this four barrages, 97 pump houses, 10,336 sluice-gates, 1207 closures and 4498 bridges and culverts that the Water Development Board and its precursors made all this while and it will be difficult not to be charmed by the magnitude of output of this body. Leaving the bygones and coming to the present performance, the Board has completed 96 per cent of its targeted programme for the fiscal 96-97. Bravo.

Our congratulations to the BWDB for achieving all this keeping itself away from the glare of public notice and media hype. This high-performing agency should be a model for others. The Board has said their decades-spreading activity has resulted in reclamation of one lakh hectare of coastal polder, bringing under irrigation 11.3 lakh hectare in making 40.46 hectare land flood-free. No mean achievement if it's the real picture, and we believe all this is true.

What remains to be done to give the Board its due credit is a comprehensive evaluation of its work so far. The recognition should be such that other agencies are inspired to give their best. That evaluation should include a. The environmental price all this gigantic works might have entailed; b. The bad effects that many of the projects might have caused; c. the size of Bangladesh's need for such hydrological engineering projects; d. The overall cost effectiveness of the completed projects; e. The price of the projects that misfired, etc, etc.

Some canals were dug as part of a political campaign. Many embankments could some day prove to be not in the best hydrological interest of the nation. It has been a fantastic output, thank you. All we now need to know is: has it been all to the good and at a good price?

Charisma and the Leadership Question in Bangladesh

by Dr Abul Kalam

THE BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is in public record stating on several occasions to bring about qualitative change in the country's politics from her position as Leader of the Opposition in the *Jatiya Sangsads*. She has indeed made a momentous beginning by urging the lawmakers belonging to both the Treasury and the Opposition benches to refrain themselves from attacking each other and shun the practice of character assassination. As she has stated (12 May 1997), "We have spent much time in the past by debating on late leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman. Let's not repeat this. Rather, let's discuss how we can do good to the people." Indeed, she made a "fervent appeal to all MPs to refrain from debates on the national leaders who have passed away." It does come, as was cogently opined in *The Daily Star* Editorial (13 May 1997) as "a silver lining in the dark scenario" of mutual accusation and sense of outrage that inflame public opinion in the country.

The impact of Khaleda Zia's opinion was almost instantaneous. The pre-budget session of the parliament, which was marked by undesired behaviour by some MPs on either side has ended with a happy note of mutual restraint and some understanding. A happy coincidental outcome is the positive note taken by the Awami League Working Committee of the views on the issue by the Leader of the Opposition. And Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon the Awami League parliamentarians to mention the word "Marhoom" (the late), presumably as a token of respect to the late freedom-fighter and president Ziaur Rahman. The budget session, though had its heats, nevertheless ended with mutual compliments.

This is a welcome, sombre change; it should be seen as a noticeable departure from the last couple of decades of Bangladeshi politics. The country then witnessed a leadership contention which vitiated its political environment. It involved almost a polemic that mainly centred on two charismatic personalities, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, both of whom were major role players in the country's Liberation War and also served the country in various capacities in the post-liberation period. Both have their admirers and detractors. The contention, as developed, has two facets: one that concerns the liberation period, and the other seems to involve the issue of succession. There seems a little basis for a prolonged argument on either of this; even the debate itself would appear without any basis, if looked at from a proper perspective. The debate, looked at the pattern of its reasoning, seems based on the sole criterion of loyalty of the contending sides to the

charismatic personalities of their respective leadership. But when viewed notionally such loyalties seem contrary to the idealistic as well as practical concerns of politics of the nation.

The concept of charisma, as is explained under the Weberian terms, rests on three aspects of leadership: a magnetic appeal to a mystifying degree, traditional support and an amount of power or competence enough to translate ideas and policies into tangible programme of action. An important component of charismatic appeal is the leader's projection of vision that taps the conscious and/or unconscious needs, values, and feelings of followers, often bolstered by the use of symbols, metaphors, and dramatic styled events by such leaders, not always supplemented with rational persuasion to convince followers that the attainment of shared ideological goals is quite feasible.

History is replete with charismatic personalities of different types and order. All charismatics purposely seek to instill commitment to their strategic ideals, ideology and devotion to themselves, though

ner how he transformed from "a run-of-the-mill politician to a statesman with an increasing charismatic appeal." As the leading figure spearheading the Liberation Struggle of Bangladesh, Mujib had indeed "received unquestioned loyalty and an undying support from elites and non-elites" in the country.

In the whirlwind of Pakistani politics Mujib may appear as a "transactional leader", but he rapidly turned himself into a "transformational leader raising the consciousness of a vast majority of Bengalis to a higher level at which spontaneous mobilization of human and material resources" occurred the objective being the "realization of Bangladesh as an independent nation" through a combination of non-cooperation and civil-disobedience movement against the Pakistani ruling regimes.

The civil disobedience movement launched by Mujib was a sort of "non-violent guerrilla warfare," patterned on Subhas Bose, for realizing the demands of the Bengalis. Even though he was taken into cus-

tod by the Pakistani junta, there is little doubt that Mujib symbolized the Bengali armed struggle leading to a "full-blown war" involving both India and Pakistan.

Mujib's leadership was charismatic, for he created intricate but intimate bonds between himself and his followers at different levels, echoing the instinctive sentiments of the Bengalis, as expressed in the slogans of *Jo Bangla* (victory to Bengal), borrowed from Subhas Bose, and of *Amar Sonar Bangla*, taken from Tagore, both of which "created a centripetal effect on the people, inspiring them to strive for state rights and, later, independence." Both were popularized in the course of the struggle of the Bengalis of East Pakistan for realizing the demands of freedom and independence and remain popular ever since.

In the same vent it has to be

recognized that an independent Bangladesh was not solely his creation, as millions of others who responded to his call for struggle had to suffer and sacrifice their near and dear ones. And there were others who fought gallantly, one of the foremost being Ziaur Rahman, then a serving Major in the Pakistani Infantry, whose role included declaration of independence of Bangladesh in the aftermath of the Pakistani military crackdown on 25th of March 1971 and a call to arms against the brutalities of the

struggle and Zia was his soldier; their role was one of mutual complement, not of mutual denial. In fact, Zia did not hesitate to go back to the barracks after the liberation of Bangladesh and serve the Mujib regime; it is also widely known that Mujib maintained a very affectionate and tenderly relations with the Zia family.

However, after the 15th August 1975 tragedy, the brutal killings of Mujib and his family, and the tumultuous chain of events that followed until 7th of November, it was the destiny of Zia to take over the running of Bangladesh Government. He did not take much time to restore multiparty democracy and civilian garb of the government, despite frequent attempts to destabilize his government by rival aspirants in the barracks, but he also faced criticisms for promoting segments of the army in the civilian administration and thus politicizing the military, to which he himself fell as a victim. Nevertheless, it also needs to be emphasized that he worked incessantly to renew developmental aspirations of the teeming millions of the people, earned their confidence, with a widening horizon of the country's international contacts and repectability, overseeing the election of the country to the first ever non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council, defeating a powerful country like Japan and thus point programme, in the man-

taking the country nearer to the goals of Mujib.

The current batch of the

country's political elite and leadership should be mutually respectful of their past legacies, not unmindful that they provide source of pride as well as embarrassment for both the major parties. With a degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, conferred on her by an American institution of excellence, the Boston University, for her contribution to the cause of democracy in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina now has a positive charisma of her own, "worthy daughter of a noble father, noble servant of a worthy people", as the citation goes conferring her the degree.

Her protracted struggle and slogan "bread and ballot", for which she has earned a "rare honour" as a head of government in Bangladesh, bear an eloquent expression of the goal she has set forth for her countrymen. She was also adorned with another Doctor of Laws by Japan's Waseda University for her will-power and fierce determination in the realm of politics.

All this, together with the added glamour of the "Netaji

therefore, neither she nor her party needs to recall the Zia legend to rejuvenate her own leadership, thus expose her politics to a negative or neutral cult of past charisma.

Thus, while we have charismatic leadership on either side of the parliamentary divide who appear to shine in their own light, it seems absolutely unnecessary to recall the cult and borrow reflected light from their respective predecessors, which rather would get them bogged down over the legendary charismatic. The past legacies remain, of course, part of our common heritage. They are relevant for the purpose of learning lessons and experiences. Such legacies are meant not to create divergence between and among the current set of political elites whose task should basically be one of nation-building for rescuing the country's future, a task may well be done by reshaping and projecting a new national self-image. To this end, what is needed, above all, a consensus, not of power but of policy at the level of leadership, involving the political elite, with a perspective of the interest and opinion of the masses as a whole.

It hardly needs re-emphasizing that Bangladesh can no longer afford the protracted cripplingly elite crisis and problems of governance in the domestic front, which continue to draw her poor image. One may suggest that structurally i.e. in terms of organization and elite, as well as ideologically i.e. in terms of package of political and economic programmes, the two major parties of Bangladesh contending for the country's leadership are not very far apart. Both have their glories to claim in the liberation struggle, as the founders of both the parties had played very distinctive role in the country's independence. Against such backdrop, there is no reason why both should not be able to find common ground to work hand in hand in contributing to a new national self-image.

What one needs perhaps is to look both backward and forward — in retrospect as well as in prospect — with vision and foresight and to develop an alternative framework of policy to the one that the past order of leadership had pursued in the subcontinent and had been foredoomed to fail. The legacies of the feudalistic pattern of politics in the subcontinent, with its concomitant notions of asymmetry, negative charisma and personality cult must give way to a framework of civil society and harmony, mutual respect and symmetrical order of human relations if Bangladesh and with it the South Asia was to move ahead along new aspirations of the people in the post-Cold War era. To these ends politics must be institutionalized as fast as possible and be evolved from below, the grassroots, rather than being imposed from above in the age-old, now dated, somewhat tribal fashion of a charismatic or personality cult.

The former Prime Minister and the current Leader of the Opposition in the *Jatiya Sangsads*, Begum Khaleda Zia, has also built up a positive charisma of her own. Her meteoric rise from a simple housewife to a leader was not a case of political succession in any dynastic sense. At first, she had built her own fame through an uncompromising stance against the overthrow of an elected government by a military junta and spearheading a prolonged struggle against autocracy, and then, as a popularly elected leader under a truly neutral caretaker government saw the return to the tortuous course of parliamentary democracy.

Despite her image as an uncompromising leader, she did in fact respond to the call of the time by responding to the constitutional changes, re-introducing parliamentary democracy and institutionalizing an interim caretaker system of governments for overseeing parliamentary elections, neither of which was in the political manifesto of her party. She also proved perceptive when she had envisioned Bangladesh as "an emerging tiger," a policy destiny seems closer to Mujib's *Sonar Bangla*. All this speaks of her political sagacity and statesmanship, contributing to a positive charisma of her own to which she is well-entitled, and,

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To the Readers

Neglected Hazaribagh

Sir, the roads and drainage system in Hazaribagh area in the city are in a very miserable condition.

Hazaribagh is an industrial area from the then British period. Every year the country earns about Taka thousand crore in foreign currency and various local authorities, tax department, organisations etc. collect huge amount of revenue from the industries of this area. More than a hundred thousand people including foreigners have been working here day and night and everyday thousands of foreign buyers are moving in. Uncountable number of small scale industries, chemical producers and suppliers directly and indirectly are depending on the industries of this area.

In spite of that the importance of this area is completely disregarded and nobody can imagine that his neglected area is helping the nation so much in its march towards development by even practically watching the infrastructure of this industrial area. But everyone should admit that this is a golden area that earn gold from abroad by exporting leather and leather goods. But due to long negligence of the authority concerned the condition of road, drainage system has become worst. During maximum time of the year due to over flow of polluted water the roads become filthy and dirty. The waste and garbage of the industry create multiple problem for the passer by as well as the overall environment.

There were some interesting articles from the vendors pro-

jecting the virtues of their system. There are several areas of the operating systems which have to be clarified for public information. The technologies are changing too fast, and different systems are competing to achieve the *de facto* world standard on the basis of brand-name market share. The global or international standard is yet to be formally announced by the ITU, as some of the latest technologies are making its presence felt, therefore it is proving difficult for the UN body to arrive at a decision, as technical groups continue to come up with latest feedbacks for the plenary sessions.

The government has meanwhile advertised for some staff posts to create the Bangladesh Telecom regulatory authority. But meanwhile the government should keep the public and the media informed about the state guidelines in policy-making exercises on the outline of the forthcoming regulatory framework as seen by the ad hoc Regulatory Cell working within the Ministry. Also, as competition heats up, the BTTB chairman should be meeting the press more often for exchange of views. Get rid of the go-slow image.

A potential new subscriber should be helped to understand how to choose an operator out of the three or four cell phone providers operating in the country. This education-cum-

information service may continue on the radio and television for some time. It is not like buying a car, for example, because compatibility and interfacing problems are not understood clearly by the non-technical users.

Also, there are hidden costs, both capital and recurring, when becoming a new subscriber. To add to the confusion, shops have opened in the city selling different brands of cell phones at high prices. How to choose, and how to prepare a budget? It is all so confusing. Perhaps the Operators could participate in radio/TV shows where the public could ask questions.

The situation is too technical to be left to the naive subscribers' knowledge and judgement. Whom do we ask, the Ministry or the BTTB?

A Zabr
Dhaka

"Bus Stops"

Sir, This refers to a letter of Mr Gazi Arifur Rahman published under the caption of "Bus Stops" in your esteemed daily of July 29, 1997. I fully endorse his views.

We feel that the construction of a parallel road to the existing one in the Children's Park opposite Bangabhaban encroaching upon the land of the park has neither brought any relief to the people nor it has made the movement of the traffic easier and disciplined to and from the crowded and thickly populated south-eastern part of Dhaka city.

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The Mighty Media Who Reads What

M Tajul Islam

Financial Express is read by the people who think they should own the country.

Observer is read by the people who think once they used to run the country.

Bhorer Kagoj is read by the people who think only they should advise on running the country.

Independent is read by the people who are not sure who runs the country.

Daily Star is read by the people who think they are same enough to run the country.

Ittefaq is read by the people who think nobody can run the country.

Dinkal is read by the people who think another country is running the country.

Inqilab is read by the people who think yet another country should run the country.

Holiday is read by the people who think they alone can defend the country.

and

None of these is read by the people who are the unlettered majority of the country.

Maghbazar road Sir, Maghbazar road is a very important one, because most of the vehicles coming from districts like Gazipur, Tangail, Mymensingh etc., reach Gulistan or Sayedabad bus stop through this road. Since 90 per cent of that road are blocked by rickshaws, most of the time more than one hour time are needed to pass from Maghbazar point to Palton point.

The passengers on this road suffer a lot. I request the authority concerned to come to see the sufferings of the passengers and take some serious decisions.

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