

## The politics of gas

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

EVERY human setting has a system of controls. These controls are designed to channel and uphold the particular social order to which the people and their leaders presumably are committed. These controls also express attitudes and aspirations that over time have permeated the existing institutions of the society. The controls are implemented by such power factors as organization, material, coercion and formal law etc. Although power is frequently categorised as a corrupting and restricting force, it is inherently neither good nor bad. However, to understand the main bent of the society, one must ask for what ends power is employed, and with what consequences. In Bangladesh, there is a dilemma, a confusion, about the use of power particularly in respect of the gas industry.

Theoretically, this industry is operating on the frontier of technological knowledge and economic and political organization. It serves as the springboard for raising a series of questions about power, purpose and responsibility in a changing environment. The politics of gas is a fragment of a much larger picture. It represents an overview of the political behaviour of the industry and its impact upon political process, as well as upon foreign policy and public opinion in this country. If one studies the gas business it would basically show five interesting words whose spelling starts with the English alphabet "P", such as Petroleum, Politics, People, Power and even Publishing. The illustration is that private government that is now trying to capture the driving seat in the energy car has continuously been patronised by the legal political government of Bangladesh, which is the crux of the problem. The more compelling issue, however, is the drift and distortions created in our society because of the recent debate on

gas initiated by the international oil companies and pampered by, if I may say, the honourable state minister for energy of Bangladesh.

It is perhaps true that the technological and economic achievements in transforming the nation during the span of three decades since its liberation in 1971 have not been impressive. But over the past two decades gas has passed coal and oil as the most important energy resource for the country. It now supplies a substantial amount of the nation's fuel energy requirement from almost zero percentage in 1959. This emergence of gas reflects the expansion of the needs, standards, and talents of our society that has successively used natural

2014-15 onwards. Taking the possibility of serious shortfall in-not-too-distant-a-future necessitating even "import" of gas as a last resort if no discoveries are made into consideration. The Committee Report also states, "some inescapable findings have been arrived at. First, that the IOC's share of gas that it has transformed Petrobangla from a surplus corporation into a deficit one; second, that the foreign currency outflows have already put a heavy pressure on the country's foreign currency reserves and that it is going to increase with more dependence on IOC gas; and third, that it's quite severe and that it is going to be more in future.... Under the short and mid-term demand-

sion" to convert the plain fertile hands of Bangladesh into desert much before the greenhouse effect shows its might.

This however, does not mean the end of gas in Bangladesh. Petrobangla/Bapex and the IOCs' search for new gas (a term coined by the National Gas Committee) reserves would continue. When prospects are found, they will drill deep into the earth to stake out their claims upon energy stored up over millions of years. But, it is a fact that Bapex cannot compete with the IOCs on an uneven ground. IOCs would most likely coalesce for this environment friendly energy service. These IOCs operate as political institutions, and together they

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gas as a cure-all, lighting source, fuel energy resource and a base for a fertilizer industry. It makes the transition from a simple rural society using cow-dung and fuel wood paced by speed on inclination of people and nature to an industrial society in the near future.

On a time-power scale of history, gas's reign in Bangladesh as a basic energy is relatively short based on the existing proven and recoverable reserve of less than a two-digit figure. However, when proven and probable reserves are added, the life span of use (of gas) may continue another two decades at the most. The gas utilisation committee found that there is likely to be a demand supply imbalance from

supply projections, there is a problem of short supply which militates against the issue of export of gas from the current reserve." The committee made an interesting comment: the issue of export of gas may be considered "if new discoveries" are made by the IOCs (without mentioning the amount). The sentence within the inverted commas perhaps mean that although the gas export issue is dead, the coffin with the dead body should somehow be kept on the ground for a while. Because the institutional patterns that are governed by a small number of anonymous men of power are so desperate now that they do not want to give up rather they are pleading for the "formidable deci-

take on the full nature of a government. This private government moves to bring more of the total industrial process, from the drilling of wells, into the realm of the unpredictable. At the same time it reaches beyond its economic activities to create and control a political and a social climate that will accept and encourage this economically oriented collectivisation. The global interests and jurisdictions of these companies, in turn, are part of a system of arrangements and understandings that may be called the first world government, a government that wants to control the world. Each one of these major companies are backed by financial resources greater than those now available to

many sovereign countries including Bangladesh. Consequently, it is no surprise that the IOCs function freely in the unceasing quest for profits and goods. The motivation is self-interest, irrespective of whether the Bangladesh community will be a gainer.

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To ask an oilman if he or his company is involved in politics is equivalent to asking a businessman if his practices are unethical or his associates dubious. The reaction is immediate and indignant. Indeed the oil corporation as a political institution has roots going back to the origins of the industry. The challenge is to harness imagination, intelligence, will, and political tools for guiding the society that is emerging. If such ends are to be within the realms of the attainable rather than the illusory, then, let's borrow the eminent economist Gunner Myrdal's phrase, "The world cannot be run as a company town." Whether the "owner" be an individual, a corporation, a nation, or a cartel, we must examine the premises we live by and the institutions we live with. To a common citizen the gas export issue in Bangladesh is dead. The dead body should be put into a coffin and be buried forthwith.

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## Scarred for life!

DR M ASHRAF ALI

NOBODY will question the fact that the viability of Bangladesh as a nation has been largely jeopardised due to the presence of an unwieldy population. For a small country with an area of only 55 thousand square miles, a population of 140 million no doubt creates a volatile situation. Although the authorities tend to downplay the rate of population growth, mentioning that it is only 1.2 per cent, in reality it may even be close to 3 percent, and there is yet no sign of any considerable drop in population growth. If the population keeps increasing like this an unmanageable situation is likely to surface in the near future leading to food shortage and even famine, not to mention a substantial drop in the quality of life.

But how has this situation come about? At the time of independence thirty years ago, there were only 75 million people in Bangladesh. Everybody knows that lack of education and low standard of living are the main causes of unabated population increase. Although priority is given to education in both developing and developed countries, this has not been so in Bangladesh. During Pakistan days education was nobody's business and many useless and senseless experiments were made with the education sector by those haughty generals who had no business messing with the matters in the education sector.

Now, with nearly one hundred million illiterates who are mainly non-productive and non-vocal in the decision making process in running the country, anyone can see that the democracy that we have is largely ineffective and useless, because an educated citizenry is the first condition for the functioning of a democracy. It is deplorable that currently we do not have a large programme for mass education and the few we have on the governmental level are largely mismanaged and infected with corruption. The dropout rate at the primary stage is fearfully high, although enrollment has increased substantially. The condition of secondary and college education is even worse. Last year, nearly 75 percent of students of the SSC and HSC failed in their examinations. Needless to say, such a situation would have created a crisis in other countries and the people in charge would have lost their sleep worrying about the causes of the problem and means for their solution, but no one raised an eyebrow in Bangladesh. It is unfortunate that the authorities were not at all perturbed by this situation.

The government keeps talking about a large allocation for education but never bothers about whether the allocated money is spent at all or whether it is spent properly and efficiently. If the country is going down the drain who is to blame?

One may remember that when Julius Nyerere of Tanzania came to power, he said that "we have decided to remain poor for the next twenty years, because we are going to invest 50 per cent of our resources on education". Of course, he was a Ph.D in Education. When Fidel Castro (who also has a Ph.D from USA) came to power in 1952, he closed the universities and colleges for two years, and asked the teachers to go to the villages to educate the illiterates and his peo-

ple were literate within two years.

That education and human resource development is crucial for economic progress of a country was highlighted nearly 40 years ago by Harbison and Myers in their book entitled "Education, Manpower and Economic growth". The book, although written 40 years ago, was not revised and new editions were not made because there was no need for revision as the points made in the book were still correct about the underdeveloped countries including Bangladesh. In the book at least three crucial benefits of education were identified. These are:

(1) Economically, the per capita output of an educated worker is much higher than that of an illiterate worker for the main reason that the educated worker is motivated consciously and works from a strong patriotic feeling which is totally absent in an illiterate worker.

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(2) Politically, an educated citizen is able to choose better his representative in the parliament and he can vote consciously to elect the most suitable person to be his representative thus setting the stage for a functional democracy.

(3) Socially and culturally, an educated person is likely to lead a life which is full and more satisfying and devoid of superstition than the one led by an illiterate. Besides, an educated person would strive his best to improve this economic condition by his own efforts leading to set in motion a self-propelling development process enjoining the entire nation.

According to the authors, human resource development is very crucial and a primary condition for economic development. They also emphasised that a country which has failed to develop its manpower, is doomed. Because it will not be able to make any progress in any sector of development. So, education must be given top priority and appropriate measures should be taken so that the three types of education, e.g., informal, formal and non-formal are vigorously pursued and substantial progress

made within the shortest possible time. This is not the place to spell out the details of how it can be done. However, it can be done by knowledgeable people. We have nearly 90 million illiterates in our country who are great impediment to economic development. Already we have half the population of the United States but US is 100 times larger in area and many times more resourceful than us.

Time is a crucial factor for Bangladesh. We have to undertake the task of educating a mind-boggling number of people within the shortest possible time. It is a sad corollary to our economic plight that we failed to do the first things first which has thrown us into a quagmire of inertia and lack of initiative.

It is not a wise decision to put off action in the education sector thinking that it is very tough to do anything for millions of people. No doubt the task is stupendous and foreboding, but one should put his best effort knowing that there is no alternative to or bypassing education and still make economic progress. It is simply not possible as mentioned by Harbison and Myers.

It is right that we have wasted much precious time. Thirty years is a long time in a nation's life and making a breakthrough was possible within this time. Yet the sad fact is that we have failed miserably to do the needful. But we cannot afford to despair. We have to gear our resources, give priority to where it is due and get down to work. It is hard work but there is no alternative to hard work for economic development.

I believe that our failures in the past should not work as a deterrent. Although a number of nation-wide education programmes ended in failures in the past causing wastage running to several thousand crores of taka, e.g., the mass education programme of 1978. We have to start again and do the work by taking lessons from other countries who have been successful. What is needed is a preparation on the war-footing, preparing a creative leadership which can unflinchingly guide a programme providing policy and guidance at the top, a supervisory team of experts who can control and manage the programme to make it cost-effective and lastly, dedicated terms of workers at the field level who know their work. People may think that we do not have capable manpower who can lead to success a nation-wide mass education programme involving millions. Surely, there are experts available in the country. For example, there is the Institute of Education and Research (IER) in the Dhaka University where nearly 40 specialists in education having foreign and local degrees are working. The government can tap their talents and utilize them. Inaction would lead us nowhere and we would be languishing like a mule in the mud forever.

If the authorities knowingly ignore the problem and think that everything will be all right in due course as other governments had thought in the past, then no one knows where the country will be heading. In that case, Bangladesh will be scarred for life.

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## Bali massacre -- a despicable act

DR F M MANIRUZZAMAN

ALLAH is Merciful (*al-Rahman*) and Compassionate (*al-Rahim*). He sent all His Prophets and Messengers to be generous and not as squanders; to respect the right of others; avoiding killing except for justifiable cause; to be humble and unpretentious; to deal justly and equitably and to be pure of heart and mind. True disciples of the Prophets did never deviate from these virtues.

I could not believe the news about the heinous attack in Bali on October 12 night. I have no words to condemn this sort of crime committed in this abode of peace and beauty. My wife and myself along with one of my friends' family had the privilege to visit this beautiful island just a month ago. We all were very happy during our three days of stay in Kuta not only for the scenic beauty of Bali but also for the blessed kind hearted people of this beautiful island. We visited the Kuta beach for several times and found Christians, Muslims, Hindus and other religious groups of Australia, America, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Ecuador, Indonesia and may other countries enjoying the scenic beauty all day long. Even we said our Zuhr prayer on the sunny and sandy beach. We found everybody equal and harmonious. Our hired taxi driver Wenee was a Hindu but he generously named his first daughter Fitree as she was born the day Eid-ul-Fitr was celebrated. We were very much pleased with an escort from Denpasar airport Eric by name, a Christian. During our incoming and departure trips he did never ask for *bashkis* which is almost normal in most of the South-East Asian countries.

Almost all the world leaders completely and utterly condemned

this appalling terrorist act. Not mentioning anybody's name, I would say this blind terrorism has been struck in the most heinous, cowardly and savage manner. This is a hateful crime. The world leaders including Indonesian President Sukarnoputri directly or indirectly put the blame on al-Qaida linkage. The world has the time and techniques to prove it. Anyone claiming to be a Muslim can't be involved in such an atrocious crime where so many innocent people were brutally murdered and almost a double of that are fighting for life.

Islam is never a religion of violence and intolerance. We as true Muslims follow the footsteps and instructions of our great Prophet Muhammad (Sm). His gentle disposition and his temperament rarely gave way to anger. He was endowed with high moral standards and qualities of trustworthiness to a great degree. The dignity of his personal habits, his stately and commanding stature, tact, equilibrium and self-control made him a natural leader of men. He never rejected an invitation; he disliked to say no. And he had the unique faculty of making each guest feel that he was the favorite. He exuded joy to those who were happy and tender sympathy to the afflicted and bereaved. He disputed with Jews and Christians on particulars issues. But he respected Christians' Prophet Jesus and Jews' Prophet Moses. He as a consequence, earned for himself the respect and reverence of countless people, Muslims and non Muslims, everywhere.

There are a number of traditions of the Holy Prophet asking the true believers to refrain from making distinction on the basis of caste or class, or displaying any kind of racial prejudice. The following hadith all

from one of the Sihah Sittah (six celebrated canonical works) justify this:

1. He is not one of us who incites class prejudice or fights for class interest or dies in its pursuit.
2. Seek refuge from the curses of the oppressed and innocence to whatever community he or they belong; for the portals of God are always open for the oppressed and innocent ones.

The worst type of class prejudice is to support one's community even in tyranny.

2. He who knowingly lends support to tyranny is outside the pale of Islam.

Allah Almighty says in the Qur'an: *Ya ayyuha al-nasu Innahu Khalafnakum min dhakarim wa unsa wa ja 'alnakum su'uban wa qabaila lita a-rafu, Innahu akamakum indallah alqakum, Innallahu alimun khabir.*

(O Mankind! Verily We have created you of a male and female and We have placed you in nations and tribes that you may recognise each other. Surah 49, verse 13).

Emphasis has been placed by Allah Almighty on harmonious living. The general conduct of a Muslim should be such that he lives on this earth as a peace-loving citizen, harmless to his fellow human beings, greeting one another and trying to settle disputes, if there be any, amongst quarrelling groups. Allah says in Surah 4, verse 86:

*Wajja huyyiytum bi-tahiyyatim fa hayyu bi ahsana minha ayrudduha innallah kana 'ala kulli shai in Hasaba.*

(And when you are showered with a greeting, then return it with better greeting or with its equivalent. Varily Allah is the reckoner of everything).

Muslims, therefore are expected to set the highest standard in uprightness, piety and decency for

the world. Muslims are asked to follow the example of the Holy Prophet of Allah, Muhammad (Sm). Allah moulded and fashioned him in such a way so that all his disciples follow him true to his spirit, devotion and act of life. Those who deviate from these are not Muslims. A true Muslim can't be involved in any act of terrorism or affliction. Allah says,

*Wal fitnatu ashadu minal kati.*

(Creating calamity or an affliction is worse than killing. Surah 2, verse 191). The same instruction of Allah is repeated in verse 217 of the same Surah.

A true Muslim with all these sense of knowledge can't put the present conflicting world in a state of turmoil. Even Allah Almighty cautioned the great Prophet Muhammad (Sm) in several places in the Holy Qur'an:

*Fajakkir innoma anta mujakkir: lasta alahim bemu saitarin.*

(So remind them (O Muhammad) you are only who reminds. You are not a dictator over them. Surah 88, verse 21-22)

Allah also asked Muhammad (Sm) to invite mankind to the way of his Lord with wisdom and fair praching and argue with them in a way that is better. In this respect the Qur'an says in Surah 16, verse 125:

*Ud-u'l'aila Sabili Rabbika bil-hikmati wal-maw-izati hasanati wa jaadilhum billati hiya 'ahsan.*

We can deduce from all these sayings of Prophet Muhammad (Sm) and Quranic instructions that no Muslim group or groups should involve in such an act of massacre on innocent and young people at Bali. The global community need to coordinate much more closely now in this fight against international terrorism. True and faithful Muslims would find the Sari nightclub massacre at Bali as despicable as good Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and people of other faiths do. There