

Tightening the belt

Adhocism has little chance succeeding

FROM oil price hike the government is moving towards austerity. The consumers, destined to be hard-hit by the big leap in fuel prices, not sparing even diesel and kerosene, wish our government had reversed the order: cost-cutting first and, then it could have gone for a reasonable increase in the price of petroleum products, if need be.

It is edifying to note that the recent Indian raise in fuel price, thoughtfully keeping out of diesel and kerosene, to note, was minimal in contrast to the steep climb we have effected in one go. But, of course, India had raised it at a high notch beforehand.

It is well and good, the government is seriously thinking of introducing some cost-cutting measures aiming to tide over the difficulties posed by the prospect of an increased oil import bill. The finance minister is proposing to halve entertainment and fuel allowances of government functionaries including ministers before the Prime Minister for her approval. In addition, a cutback on foreign trips by ministers and high government officials seems to be in the offing.

Whatever amount of money the government can save under any wasteful head is to be welcomed, because it adds, it does not subtract.

Nevertheless, there are so many other obvious heads of expenditure where the government can be spendthrift with still bigger amounts saved from going down the drain. There are, for example, redundancies in the government and corporations, and many employees without any job description, let alone overlapping functions and operations between departments and directorates. Excessive government is baneful not merely in terms of efficiency but also expenditure.

On the bill collection front, telephone and utility usages by MPs and government offices are not paid for regularly resulting in huge revenue shortfalls. DESA owes big sums to state sector electricity users, so that it has, in turn, outstanding dues with the Power Development Board. It is a vicious cycle of default and draining out of money. On top, an overwhelming majority of state run corporations are losing concerns feeding on government borrowings from the banking sector.

The issue is basically one of waste control, efficiency, better management and responsible conduct of affairs at all government levels. It is thus that we need to take a deeper look into the way we run our affairs. The high international oil price may be a boon in disguise provided we can use it as an opportunity to adopt a comprehensive approach to the culture of waste.

Backing from finance ministry imperative

BJMC initiative to reopen jute mills

CASH-strapped Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) which saw 12 out of the 22 mills under its wings going into forced hibernation for lack of funds to purchase raw jute has taken a bold initiative to rerun them. The BJMC seems to be latching on to a 'directive', given purportedly to banks for grant of advances to the closed mills, according to Jute Minister Shajahan Siraj.

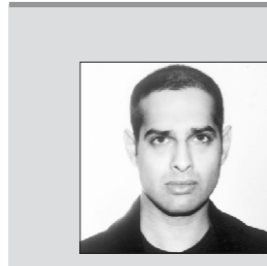
Bank loans worth Tk 200 crore are required to let the state-owned jute enterprises go into full production. At this stage, only Sonali Bank has released funds while Janata, Agrani and Rupali banks are expected to follow suit in the near future.

The need for uninterrupted and timely cash flows to the jute mills can hardly be overemphasised. We are already into the jute purchase season comprising September, October, November and December. The time is running out for the manufacture of jute items to tie up with the export orders that are already in hand. The BJMC is hard put to give performance guarantees to the intending importers because of dearth of finances to buy the raw material, which is jute fibre.

The demand for hessian, sacking and CBC stands at 500 thousand tonnes, according to FAO estimates. Bangladesh's total production capacity is around 200 thousand tonnes. Due to low prioritisation of the jute sector in Bangladesh over time, we have slid notches down the ladder as exporter of finished items, thereby yielding ground to other competing countries. Unsurprisingly, India has turned out to be the largest buyer of our raw jute.

The established truth is that our raw jute being of the finest quality in the world is correspondingly capable of turning out jute products of the highest competitive quality. To take the fullest advantage of the potential, the finance ministry must persuade the banks to immediately release all the funds that the jute mills need to go into full production.

Business as usual



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONE would have hoped that the bomb blasts of August 17 would, at the very least, have had the effect of encouraging the political parties to rethink their approach to politics as usual. But the government's unilateral decision to raise the price of fuel and the hartal called for September 18 by the opposition in response shows that nothing too much has changed in the political landscape.

The opposition continues to resist the notion that calling hartals makes them unpopular with the voting public. It is true that the public is unhappy with the recent decision of the government to raise fuel prices and that some kind of programme to oppose the price hike was called for and would be met with general approval, but calling a hartal will only succeed in adding to the woes of those who will be the hardest hit by the price rise in the first place, and is surely not what the people had in mind.

The continued reliance on hartals, apart from being poor politics, seems to indicate, on the one hand, a lack of imagination on the part of the opposition, and on the other, an indifference to

the wishes of the public. Neither is an encouraging or attractive trait.

One interesting factor is that Dr. Kamal Hossain's Gono Forum has taken the decision to disassociate itself from the hartal and is not supporting it. This difference of opinion within the opposition coalition is in and of itself noteworthy, but there is more to the story than a mere difference of opinion with respect to the calling of the hartal.

generation, where the government has conspicuously failed to deliver.

The bomb blasts of August 17 would have provided the perfect backdrop for demanding a hearing. Basically, Sheikh Hasina had the opportunity to place the PM in the dock, so to speak, and act as the prosecuting attorney in front of the entire nation. The decision not to use August 17 as an occasion to try to force debate in parliament must count as

frame the national debate according to the opposition's terms.

Incidentally, if the opposition were still adamant that they wished to call a hartal, then that would have been the time to do so. Hartals will never appear to be thoughtful public policy and they will never be popular with the general public, but the best time to call one would be in the immediate aftermath of being denied democratic space in

failings of the current administration, and are a useful synecdoche for how the government has fallen short of expectations. On the other hand, the bomb blasts also increased the public's sense of insecurity, and created an opening for the opposition to project itself as statesmanlike and reassuring.

The public is searching desperately for leadership in these anxious times, and the opposition, had it correctly understood

made -- seems to be so uniformly poor that one wonders whether it is mere incompetence on the part of her advisers or whether something more sinister is at work.

There are so many issues for the opposition to take to the people that they do not need further enumeration here. If the opposition ever actually put together a document pointing out the government's failings, demanding an answer as to how such a state of affairs could have come about, and outlining what it would do differently, it would make for potent politics.

The rallies and sit-in demonstrations that have been organised in the run-up to the hartal are a good idea that will help to keep the government's shortcomings in the public eye. But the hartal itself will only be a distraction from the message that the opposition needs to be formulating.

The opposition needs to put together in simple and straightforward language a platform that is easily understood, persuasive, and credible. It needs to put the issues on posters and leaflets and continue to hold rallies and town hall meetings to create awareness around these issues.

Will the opposition ever learn? It is not often that a political party or parties get dealt the kind of hand that the government has generously dropped into the opposition's lap. But by reverting to business as usual, the opposition seems determined to squander the opportunity that it has been given. In other words, nothing much seems to have changed.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

The opposition needs to put together in simple and straightforward language a platform that is easily understood, persuasive, and credible. It needs to put the issues on posters and leaflets and continue to hold rallies and town hall meetings to create awareness around these issues. But by reverting to business as usual, the opposition seems determined to squander the opportunity that it has been given. Nothing much seems to have changed.

Dr. Hossain has for some time been trying to convince the AL to return to parliament, at least for Thursday's opening of the 18th session. The thinking behind this idea is that parliament would be the appropriate place for voicing recriminations with respect to August 17, and would provide a platform for the opposition to be heard and demand answers from the PM.

The opposition returning to parliament would have made for great political theatre. The leader of the opposition could have taken with her a list of questions for the PM and demanded answers. The questions could have encompassed not only the government's failure on August 17, but also the recent fuel price hike, and any number of other issues from inflation to power

another in a long line of missed opportunities on the part of the main opposition.

Had such an approach been decided on and the return to parliament been built up and publicised sufficiently before hand, it would have led the news, not only in Bangladesh, but perhaps all across the region, and might even have been a lead story on BBC world service.

If the opposition were denied the opportunity to speak, or their microphones were cut off, then that would have been headline news too. Hasina could then have held an impromptu press conference on the steps of the JS and read out her questions there. With no one from the government to answer them, her questions would have had the effect of a prosecutorial brief and helped to

parliament in front of the eyes of the world.

It could have been a public relations coup that would have harnessed the dissatisfaction of the general public with the current state of affairs into a potent weapon against the administration, and put them squarely on the defensive.

But more than merely an opportunity to score political points, the opposition has missed a real opportunity to build on the government failures that culminated in August 17, and the resultant sense of insecurity among the public, to seize the initiative and take control of the national discourse.

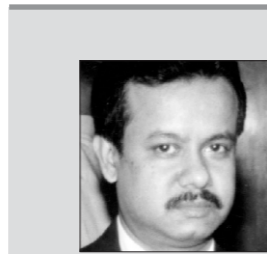
The events of August 17 were the perfect opportunity to change direction. On the one hand, the bomb blasts crystallised the

mood of the nation, could have stepped authoritatively into the void.

One corner-stone of this new approach could have been calling a hartal cease-fire. Perhaps until the end of the year. Since hartals are more or less ineffective -- when they are not counter-productive -- this would have been a no-lose proposition. The opposition would have looked statesmanlike, open to compromise, and responsive to public opinion, and it could have leveraged maximum political advantage from the decision.

The decision to continue like before, epitomised by the calling of the hartal on September 18, makes one wonder who exactly is advising Hasina. The advice she seems to be getting -- based on the decisions that she has

Drop a dime on them



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WE curse other people, but don't criticise them enough. First it was a cultural thing, now it's a cult. Anybody we like, we overlook his vices. Anybody we hate, he is dirt. First it was a social thing. If a man didn't conform to moral standards, we pounded on him. Now it is individual. If a man doesn't fit one's style, he is good for nothing. Hold those eggs, don't throw them yet. I haven't finished.

We talk about others, but seldom speak to them. We spend more time bitching, but rarely tell them what is wrong. We don't like those who aren't like us. We find no fault with those who follow us. From polity to personality, it affects us--in all walks of life.

We don't do constructive criticism. We settle scores when we take up on an adversary, not because what he does is morally reprehensible but because it makes us personally unhappy. We forget that those who give more must have taken more as well. Yet we praise those who give, more the merrier, like fools who can't tell a trick from treat.

We like to be taken up the alley and then sent down the river. We

admire people who are cunning, people who are street smart and deceptive, people who sell us nightmares wrapped in dreams. Arup Maharatna wrote in the *Economic and Political Weekly* on 31 July 2004 that Bengal is the region that "...seems to be famous (globally) as much for the Royal Bengal tigers as for its pervasive predilection for 'dreaming'". He then defined dreaming as an act of 'looking without eyes'.

Everything about us is piping dream. We elect dishonest men

to the mosque. We snatch from others and talk about generosity. Our definition of success is screwed up by all means. Nothing succeeds like success. Everything is made in its image. We worship success like a deity.

So what matters is going to the top, ends always justifying the means. But then blobs of faeces float in the water, while heavier stuffs sink. Considerate men are weighed down by conscience, as they must consider consequences before they act. But then there are those who will do

anguish. We forgive as quickly as we forget. We misunderstand more than we understand. Hold those eggs again! I am talking about us, the fortunate folks, not about those who are busy keeping the wolves from their doors. Poor people can't criticise, because the rumbles of hunger drown their voices. What they do is make lots of noise so that others will know where it hurts them.

It is folks like us, who eat well, sleep well and got the time to think well as well. We have the educa-

we compromise, but all subsumed within our predilection for contention, our ambition to succeed, our lips sealed in a bizarre code of silence. There is a brotherhood of crooks sheltered in that silence as if we are members of some secret society engaged in a hush-hush business. Our complicity is staggered, the level of secrecy varying with the level of hypocrisy, our hearts connected like daisy's chain, dishonestly heaved upon dishonesty.

We fill the air with slogans, political processions and protest

and doesn't do to others what he wouldn't like others to do to him. At the root of everything is our silence, our inability or unwillingness to speak up and criticise people who flout these rules.

Throw your eggs if you like. I would say one who fails most is also most successful amongst us. Leaders must rise through layers of failure to drive the aspirations of common men. They need to understand what it feels like to fail if they must serve their people. This is the only thing that got us in the bind. This is the only thing that keeps us bottled up with a tight cork.

While I wipe the egg on my face, I ask you to think. If you could only look at success from a new angle, and learn not to get hung up on it, it would help you open up again. You will be able to criticise people for the right reasons, and your mind will fling open many doors and windows. Harboursing a criminal is crime itself. You know what I mean! There is egg on your face too!

In the American underworld, 'drop a dime' is an expression to mean that it takes one dime to make a call to the police to inform on someone. Talk about criminals amongst us who are hiding in the underworld of our hesitation and our fear. This will be your success. Drop a dime on them. Never mind they have grown successful. Wild grass grows faster than them.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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to public office, and expect them to serve us with honesty. We teach our children to grow up as good human beings, but then expect them to make loads of money. We want the best in this life, yet our eyes are fixed on the next. We turn blind eyes and deaf ears to what suits us and feel bitter if we don't like it. We are an eclectically eccentric people. Now we see it, now we don't. We are a riddle of contradictions. First we defame ourselves to make money in unscrupulous manners, and then we go after fame giving in charity.

We hold it back, and don't give it to them. We simmer, we smoulder, we hiss, we grumble. We go through psychosis, we go through neurosis. We moan, we groan, we suffer in quiet

anything to go to the top. They run our institutions, our business, they run our politics.

They steal, lie, womanise, conspire, kill and cheat, their success coming after many moral failings. But we idolize them no matter what, oblivious to the fact that their gain is our loss. We are taught as children not to disrespect the elderly, not to argue with them or criticise them, keeping secret what could embarrass them. We are a nation condemned to condone contemptible and contemptuous people.

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tion, we have the knowledge. We have the freedom, we have the choice. Yet we brown nose, we grease the palms, we suck up to the rich and the powerful, hoping to thrive in the vicious cycle of favours creating favours.

We are a conundrum, as a nation, as a people. Wait a minute. I know your hands are itching. But hold those eggs a little longer, don't throw them yet. We cover up for allies, dig up for enemies, and our conscience is driven by the clever agenda of convenience. We hold truth as a hostage, seeking ransom for it, blackmailing it, using it and abusing it like a widow who has no protection.

We don't speak up lest it got difficult, lest it got dangerous. We concede, we condone, and

rallies turning our streets into great scenes of public uproar. We talk about decency, rectitude, honesty, duty and responsibility. We are perfect in our living rooms, in our intellectual discussions, in our propensity for punditry. We understand the situation, we blame it on others, show our concerns about the future of the country. We are our biggest contradictions. Everybody knows the problem, nobody knows the solution. Much is wrong, none is guilty.

Now let me sock it to you. Success is at the root of all our failures. It's not success as an objective that is wrong. It is success as an obsession that is spoiling the sport. A person is successful only if he gets to become a better human being,

OPINION

Weekly holidays

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

FROM 1982 onwards there have occurred a number of changes in weekly holidays. It was in that year the country broke away from the century old tradition of weekly holiday on Sunday and introduced five days week with Friday and Saturday as weekly holiday although there was no demand in the country for a holiday on Friday even from the religious rights groups. This destabilized a situation upon which there was no conflict and difference of opinion in the country. In March 1984, in view of disaffection among the government employees against the then prevailing weekend system followed by their open protest, the weekend was reduced to one day and that was on Friday. The Awami League government reintroduced two days weekend,

Friday and Saturday, in 1997. But the BNP, immediately after coming to power, restored one day weekend. So never before 1982 this country, even when it was a part of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, observed Friday as a weekly holiday. And a discord was unnecessarily created in the society.

But the government, imitating Ershad and Awami League, has declared Friday and Saturday as weekly holiday, a couple of days back, based on the argument that this will result in reducing cost of fuel and thus saving public expenditure. It appears that the calculation of savings that will accrue from curtailing the number of working days was a one-sided exercise without taking into account how much money will be lost due to extending the weekend by one day and consequently closing or at least slowing down

From the point of view of religion as well as from the point of view of keeping uniformity with the world order government should think of declaring Sunday instead of Friday as the weekend for Bangladesh. In case government decides to continue with two days weekend, which if considered desirable, then it should be Saturday and Sunday and not Friday and Saturday.

many economic, trade and commercial activities in the private as well as in the public sector. Also the big question raised by the business community as to how much it will affect international trade due to one of the weekend holiday falling on Friday which is a working day all over the world excepting, perhaps, Saudi Arabia remains to be examined.

About cutting down government expenditure is this measure of declaring two days weekend an adequate one? Certainly not. If the government sincerely wants to tighten its belt then it should

consult the report of the Public Expenditure Review Commission which is currently gathering dust in the Ministry of Finance. The report has succinctly examined the quality of public expenditure, pointed out areas where serious wastages and misuse of public money are taking place and suggested how wasteful and unproductive public expenditure could be curtailed and diverted to more productive activities of the government which will be more beneficial for the economy and the people. It is strongly felt that resorting to the measures sug-

gested in the report will do away with the necessity of saving public money by introducing two days weekend.

Then comes the question as to why Friday should be enjoyed as a holiday. Is it because Islam enjoins that Friday should be observed as a holiday and the Muslim community should abstain from work on that day? In this connection the English translation of Section 2 'Sura Zumah, Ayat 9 and 10' wherein Zumah prayer was prescribed as Farz on all Muslims is quoted below: "Ye who believe!

When the call is proclaimed To prayer on Friday (The day of Assembly) Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance

Of God, and leave off Business (and traffic); That is best for you If ye but knew And when the prayer Is finished, then may ye Disperse through the land And seek of the Bounty Of God and celebrate The Praises of God Often (and without stint) That ye may prosper.

(Translation by Allama Yusuf Ali, page 1547-48)

The above verses of the Holy Quran clearly and unambiguously say that on hearing the call for prayer on Fridays the Muslims should give up trading and rush for performing prayer but immediately after Zumah prayer they should spread out in search of livelihood. These orders of Allah as revealed in the Holy Quran should be treated as obligatory on all Muslims implying thereby that Friday should be observed as a working day and not a holiday. And Friday was all through a working day until 1982 when Hussain Mohammad Ershad usurped power and, perhaps, wanted to do something spectacular to show that he was a great Muslim. It is pertinent to mention here that in most of the Muslim countries Sunday, not Friday, is observed as week-

end. Since the verses of the Holly Quran have not enjoined upon the Muslims to abstain from the work rather the verses have asked them to work for earning livelihood throughout the whole of Friday except the Zumah prayer time it is necessary that Friday should not be enjoyed as holiday. So from the point of view of religion as well as from the point of view of keeping uniformity with the world order government should think of declaring Sunday instead of Friday as the weekend for Bangladesh. In case government decides to continue with two days weekend, which if considered desirable, then it should be Saturday and Sunday and not Friday and Saturday.

M. Hafizuddin Khan is ex-Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh.