

## Prices need coming down

### Regular consultation with traders needed

**W**ITH the coming of Ramadan, the shopper's list has expanded with the addition of fast-breaking items. The daily essentials were on a price-spiral already, and now the exorbitant prices of Ramadan victuals are adding up to a hugely burdensome cost of living.

The current prices are easily all-time high, and let's not forget, affecting by far the largest segment of our population whose purchasing power has terribly dwindled over time through an inflationary denudation which the rich could jolly well cushion off. In fact, the rich-poor gap having increased, the brunt of higher prices has to be borne by the poor entirely.

The whole approach of the government to higher prices has been more academic than pro-active. Either it is citing all sorts of reasons for them, or at best trading of blame between ministries. But where is the action?

There is much talk about the VGF programme and open market sale of rice and a few other essentials, but in spite of all these the prices are yet to stabilise even at their unprecedented high level.

The speculators and hoarders continue to manipulate the market at will. The scourge of toll collection may have apparently lessened, but the suspicion is that extortion has taken newer, invisible forms marking up the prices anyway in the end. Had the import of consumer essentials been properly planned and timely, speculative trade, to that extent, would have been reduced.

We are aware of the existence of an inter-ministerial price oversight committee. It ought to feel mandated to do something by way of 'intervening' in a free market economy which is being unduly taken advantage of by market players who are largely given to speculative stocking and trading. The committee must constantly keep a tab on the supply side and take steps to strengthen the distribution mechanisms, both in the private and public sectors. All of these can be done reasonably effectively in regular consultation with the business and trade leaders.

## Teacher appointment mess

### Clarification from VC due

**T**HE report that five teachers have been appointed by the DU authorities in violation of the principle, that merit should be the sole criterion for such appointments, is something that cannot escape public scrutiny, particularly when things are expected to be conducted strictly according to the rules in the country's highest seat of learning.

The news is worrying for a host of reasons. First, it seems that not the best available candidates were recruited to the vacant posts. Secondly, it smacks of favouritism bordering on attempted politicisation. It is indeed surprising that the eligibility of a candidate is being judged by his perceived political identity, or, to put it precisely, political affiliation is getting precedence over merit. Thirdly, the whole process has been lacking in transparency. And we have learnt at a great cost to higher education the price of politically-induced backdoor appointments to the higher academia.

The university authorities should carry out the review of the appointments they have finally decided upon and put the right man in the right place thereby marking a departure from the culture of appointing teachers on the basis of political connections, once and for all.

The DU teachers themselves have been critical of the way the latest appointments were made. The credibility of the university that must have academic integrity as an article of faith is once again on the line. We think it is essential that the vice-chancellor comes out with an explanation for the appointment mess.

Let us emphasise once again that if Dhaka University fails to ensure transparency in the recruitment of its manpower what chance other institutions have to do it for themselves?

# My party, right or wrong!

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**"M**Y country, right or wrong, said an American patriot and your honour this is no less true for the Germans". If memory serves me alright then this was one of the memorable line of the defence attorney in the now famous Hollywood film 'Judgement at Nuremberg'. Needless to mention that the defence lawyer was arguing for the Nazi war criminals that included some of the best German legal brains in a trial arranged by the allied forces, notably the Americans. I saw this film in mid-sixties when I was a student and in line with the anti-Americanism which was the prestigious hallmark of the so-called progressive students of those heady days; I experienced a satisfying sensation, at least for quite some time at the delivery of the above-quoted line.

Not very long thereafter, I started realising the immorality, arrogance and the ominous portents of disaster associated with the utterance of such a line as above. It did not take much time to appreciate that such utterance smacked of blind patriotism and ran counter to the values of a democratic world order seeking to remove the last vestiges of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Much water has flown between now and those eventful years of the sixties. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world is the present reality. Whether the leadership of the so-called free and civilised world are on a high moral ground is very hotly debatable. In the same vein one may wonder whether the arrogance coupled with the immoral and unilateral action of the lone superpower and its ally are proving to be obstacles in the flowering of emerging democracies? Do leaders of the nascent democracies get encouragement from the rash and ill-judged actions of the superpower to consolidate their grip on the levers of power? Do they feel tempted to only promote their partisan interests even at the cost of destroying those very institutions on

whose effectiveness and resilience depend the sustainability of a democratic polity? It is in the background of the aforementioned premonitions that the right thinking Bangladeshi citizens may like to look deeper into the health of our body politic to know if much of our present predicament follows from the precariously partisan behaviour and activities of the dominant political masters. If indeed our political leaders have been influenced by the great American patriot referred to at the onset of this piece and have deliberately adopted a 'My party, right or wrong' policy in all matters pertaining

constituted government of whatever political complexion, in formulating policies of government, carrying out decisions of the government and in administering public services for which the government is responsible". They are also required to conduct themselves in such a manner as to "deserve and retain the confidence of Ministers and to be able to establish the same relationship with those whom they may be required to serve in some future administration". The above code also states that civil servants must not misuse their official position to further their own, or another's interests.

the civil servants. Somehow, wily-nilly, we have reached a situation wherein the discomfort of civil servants, however unjust, is mostly a gleeful sight. Little do we realise that the nation will be paying heavily for such unhealthy attitude.

We need to know that in UK, in practical terms the civil servants enjoy a high degree of security under the royal prerogative and the politicians in Bangladesh should know that the constitutional significance of permanency, as it obtains in UK lies in the development of expertise and the natural growth of a civil service 'ethos'. Most importantly, permanency

between the political masters and the agencies. In such a scenario professionalism becomes the worst casualty, sense of direction is lost, the organisation dips into a lachrymose environment and interests of the state take a back seat giving greater space to partisan considerations.

The present situation is perhaps illustrative of what happens when vital regulatory institutions remain significantly preoccupied with inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interests and how the same affects the crisis management scenario. We are unfortunately passing through a sad time when doubts are

**We will do well to remember that modern state is a political contrivance for civilised people to lead a lawful life and the impartial and dispassionate performance of some vital state institutions, made possible by political wisdom, ensure the success of such an existence. Prominent among these institutions are the judiciary, the education system, the Election Commission, the public service, the media --whose lively and positive role guarantees the fulfilment of societal goals. The state must not be stripped of its benevolent character and the government should not appear less than representative by reason of tragic partisan action.**

to governance and issues thereto. If in the conduction of affairs of the state there is a 'Carry on regardless' attitude.

### Civil service and partisan culture

The civil service owes its loyalty to the government of the day, irrespective of political party, and it is imperative that the civil service avoids creating the impression of political bias. The anonymity and political neutrality of civil servants is reinforced by the conduct rules restricting political activity. As the civil service has to serve governments of all political persuasions, it is essential that civil servants whatever their private political views, should not be seen to be politically active in a manner which would inevitably compromise their neutrality under one political party or another.

The civil service management code of UK states that: "The constitutional and practical role of the civil service is, with integrity, honesty, impartiality and objectivity, to assist the duly

The above may be the ideal but ground reality in Bangladesh now is sadly indicative of the rapid erosion of the bureaucratic culture and politicisation of the services has acquired an ominous dimension. Professionalism, competence and honesty, which are the hallmarks of a hallowed system has started giving way to cronyism, pliability and dishonesty - both intellectual and financial. The political leadership is dangling favours to create so-called loyal and partisan officers who would go to any length to please their superiors in order to remain near the seat of power. In such a situation, the self-respect and honour is taking leave and the frustrating process is quickly trapping the junior functionaries who find it difficult to remain unaffected by the all-pervasive malady.

The unfortunate reality in Bangladesh is that our politicians love to score the civil servants with regard to their tenure and the system does not provide the desirable high degree of security to

ensures the availability of such expertise to governments of differing political persuasions. Are not these practices worth emulating for our supposedly democratic society?

### Partisanship in regulatory body and implications

While ensuring internal security for maintenance of public order in state interests is the statutory task of the agencies, in reality the interests of the state often get diluted and mixed up with interests of the party in power. The situation is marked by an unfortunate lack of understanding and appreciation of the requirements of the state and the government in a democratic and pluralist society like ours. The unpleasant truth is that agencies maintain life and shadow the leaders of pronouncedly constitutional politics-oriented parties of the opposition who are recognised partners in the business of politics. At some point of time when such opposition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship

being expressed publicly about the neutrality and honesty of some vital organs of the state whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatised. The compounding tragedy is that such criticisms by supposedly responsible leaders of our polity cannot be summarily dismissed by discerning observers, both internal and external, of our socio-political scene.

### Social dimension of partisanship

The unfortunate reality in Bangladesh today is that to lead an honourable life one perhaps to be partisan. To retain one's proprietary right over land, secure contract for development work or to even safely build a house on one's own property, one may need quite often the support of the local powerful group or coterie and barring some fortunate exceptions this powerful group enjoys the active patronage and blessings of the political power that be.

Newspaper accounts tell us about the plight of the workers of the defeated

political party following the national election. Such accounts depict the pathetic fugitive existence of the hapless workers who, in the absence of their litigation-stricken leaders are forced to live a miserable life. Their misery is further compounded by the institution of allegedly politically motivated criminal cases with a view to psychologically and socially crippling the opponents. Consequently, political identity is often becoming a hazard for many individuals and groups and politics is turning into a dangerous business where annihilation of the adversary appears a preferred objective. Under such circumstances, there is a desperate and perverted bid to amass wealth without caring for the legality of such acquisition. Politicians of different descriptions make the pragmatic assessment that such ill-gotten possessions would be handy for self-protection during the likely event of being out of power in the not-too-distant future. The trend, to say the least, is deplorable.

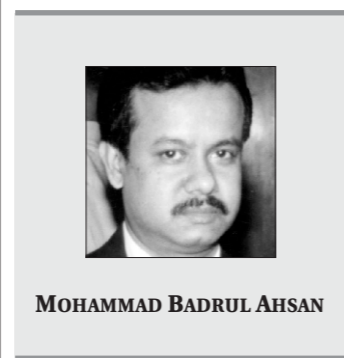
### The desired course

We will do well to remember that modern state is a political contrivance for civilised people to lead a lawful life and the impartial and dispassionate performance of some vital state institutions, made possible by political wisdom, ensure the success of such an existence. Prominent among these institutions are the judiciary, the education system, the Election Commission, the public service, the media --whose lively and positive role guarantees the fulfilment of societal goals. The state must not be stripped of its benevolent character and the government should not appear less than representative by reason of tragic partisan action.

Those in charge of the affairs of the state should look beyond their nose and be on a high moral ground in order to be the true guardian. Let us make sincere efforts in creating the proper political ethos befitting a democracy.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Secretary and IGP.

# What we eat is eating us away



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**I** must admit I have been slow to react, because I failed to pick up the story earlier in the frenzy of things. But it got my goat ever since I learned that a tough legislation has been passed at the national parliament against production and sale of adulterated food, which is injurious to public health. The Bangladesh Pure Food (Amendment) Act, 2005 provides for a fine of 75,000 taka and one-year rigorous imprisonment for such offences for the first time. For return offenders, the stake goes higher. The fine will be 300,000 taka and three years in prison with forfeiture of the shop or the factory. Frankly speaking, I am disappointed that our lawmakers couldn't get any tougher.

So what does it mean? Millions of people will eat contaminated food and fall sick, some of them developing early symptoms of what can turn into deadly disease. What happens to the schmuck out there who does it? He gets off with a fine and, may be, do small time in prison. That would have been okay for someone who takes bribe or steals from my house. But not for someone who hurts my health and kills me

slowly.

One might want to argue this. The new legislation is tougher than the previous one, which was passed in 1959 when there was fear of God in people's heart and the adulteration of food was mostly confined to mixing cheaper quality food with higher quality ones, so that the unscrupulous trader could increase his cut. It was dishonest business practice, which was frowned upon by society, with the exception of the milkman. We learned to accept that

steal from one source it's plagiarism but if you steal from many it's called research. You see the point? If you poison one person, you might get death or life sentence. But if you poison millions, it is a walk in the park.

I say it again. I don't like that our lawmakers couldn't see the difference. I mean we need stronger antibiotics now than we needed in 1959, don't we? Then why do we want to handle dangerous criminals with kid gloves? What is so tough about the new regulation? If

the quickest way is to cut cost by under-cutting ethics.

What about people who use harmful things, toxic colours in sweetmeats, or banned chemicals in juices and drinks? What about them? Are they adulterating or are they poisoning. I mean, think it like this. If I put cyanide in the coffee of our honourable lawmakers, would they call it adulteration or poisoning? I know the answer, you know the answer. How come they don't know it? Perhaps they do but don't want to

someone comes to threaten us in our homes. Why should we tolerate those who threaten us in the food we put on our plates?

There are countries where stern measures have been either taken or are being considered. In 2003, Pakistani senate tabled a bill to sentence anyone guilty of food adulteration to 25 years in prison if it led to deaths. In April 2005 India introduced new food adulteration laws. It starts from a year's imprisonment and 100,000 rupee fine

quickest way to a man's heart is going through his stomach. Food is important in life, and adulteration brings chaos to order through contamination of body and soul. Healthy body keeps healthy mind and healthy mind makes healthy people. This is where the crux of the matter lies. You can eat a lot of adulterated food, yet draw more harm than good. The same thing is true in other walks of life, our society, politics and economics. People are growing rich, but the country is going down the tube. People are becoming educated, but ignorance is becoming more pervasive than before. In our adulterated everything, we have lost sight of the pure.

Charity begins at home, and likewise, sanity begins in food. What we digest is what we ingest, the ingredients absorbed in our blood stream like fumes mixing in the wind. We have become what we eat, our minds aggravated, souls contaminated and bodies wasted. There is a definite connection between stomach and brain which is processed in the mind. What we eat interferes with what we think which affects the way we feel.

The new legislation against adulteration of food has proven that perpetrators are also victims. Those who are adulterating food also brew up eating adulterated food. It's a vicious cycle that perpetuates in the bizarre ritual of dog-eat-dog delusion. That we don't care if people might die eating adulterated food comes as its natural conclusion. What we eat is eating us away. Aw, that is so silly!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

**Charity begins at home, and likewise, sanity begins in food. What we digest is what we ingest, the ingredients absorbed in our blood stream like fumes mixing in the wind. We have become what we eat, our minds aggravated, souls contaminated and bodies wasted. There is a definite connection between stomach and brain which is processed in the mind. What we eat interferes with what we think which affects the way we feel.**

the milkman would put water in the milk, so long as it was clean.

The definition of adulteration can vary from time to time. In the USA, a chemical study of grape juice for winemaking dealt with, among other topics, the question whether adding sugar to increase the alcohol content would constitute "adulteration." It was concluded that the practice was legitimate, only to be reversed 46 years later, when a court ruling announced that cider made harder by adding sugar was adulteration.

But we are dealing with killers now, people who play with ingredients, which seriously undermine hygiene, and turn our food into poison. This is where I find the paradox. Let me tell you a joke from my student days: If you

someone makes millions by producing and selling adulterated food, not paying taxes on his real income, what is 75,000 taka to him? And consider the actuarial science of crime. What is the chance of his getting caught and going to jail? It took almost 35 years to have the political will for the first drive against adulteration of food. Who knows when we are going to see the next one?

I don't know about you, but I am not satisfied with the new legislation. It's not simply tough enough. Okay, I could accept that kind of legislation to punish people, who violate health regulations, using dirty kitchens, unwashed pots and the same cooking oil for days on. That is part of misguided economics. Lower cost means higher profit, and

admit it. Forgive my cynical mind, but the composition of the parliament might allow business interests to take the front seat. Our parliament is dominated by businessmen who have taken politics as a second hobby. So, they know where it hurts the business first, that ethical standards are injurious to greed. They know it's not easy to make money if you worry too much about right and wrong when making it.

Maybe, there are other reasons as well. May be, we are a soft-hearted nation, treating offenders with leniency because we believe they will finally get their comeuppance on the Day of Judgment. But still we must judge every situation every day to keep this world safe for us in what we eat and where we live. We don't tolerate if

in the cases in which unsafe food does not result in illness and a life imprisonment and 1,000,000 rupee fine when it leads to death.

In some countries, possession of drugs is punishable by death. Although food and drugs are different ballgames, the underlying concern is the same. Both are injurious to health and both are slow killers, one borne out of addiction and another borne out of deception. But in the end both cause harm to human bodies, both are life-threatening, both corrosive of vitality beyond normal wears and tears. No matter how one looks at it, it's a deadly crime and must be punished commensurate with the harm it brings.

The old saying goes that a man is what he eats. Another saying is that the

## OPINION

# Uni-track system: Is it necessary?

ANWARUL HAQUE

**T**HE Government of Bangladesh, or rather its Ministry of Education (MoE) has taken an initiative to introduce uni-track system at the pre-SSC level of secondary education from January 01, 2006. It is debatable whether such a move is a wise one. For various practical reasons already strong voices of protest have been raised against it. Dr. Jafar Iqbal, the respected academic and columnist of the daily "Prothom Alo", has written quite convincingly and eloquently against it in his column a few weeks back. Here he has questioned the need and justification for such a momentous decision. Moreover, Zainul Abedin, the vice-president of Secondary School Teachers Association of Bangladesh, in a separate article in "Prothom Alo" has

very aptly described the move as a "clever deception", hiding behind high sounding rhetoric of producing 'balanced' students as opposed to fragmented ones under the existing multi-track system.

Now the question is: apart from this high flying platitude what has really motivated the ministry to take such a momentous decision which will vitally affect not only millions of students but also teachers, parents and guardians? Has there been any specific recommendation regarding this matter from any Education Commission constituted by the government? If the answer is "No", then what prompted the MoE to go for such drastic reform measures? It has been reported that a sort of Coordination Council formed by the ministry has recommended the so-called reform measures. We would

**By pursuing such a short-sighted myopic policy, are we not courting educational disaster? In whose interest are we unsettling a settled and tested system? Has the existing multi-track system been proved worthless beyond any shadow of doubt?**

like to know who were the members of this council.

The reason for raising these pertinent questions is that the general public has largely been kept in the dark about it. Even now a vast majority of students, teachers, parents and guardians both in the rural and urban areas has remained ignorant about the kind of changes that are being imposed from the top virtually without their knowledge. Who are really to blame for such glaring lapses? Is it really enough to hold an informal BTV discussion with the concerned ministers and their high level ministry officials in atten-

dance? Did anybody from among the discussants had the guts to speak against the reforms or give a note of dissent. Apart from such isolated 'official' forum, why has there not been any public debate over this vital issue of national importance? In a democratic society, the general public has every legitimate right to know the truth. They certainly cannot be taken for a ride at their expense.

Already the MoE has reportedly spent a hefty amount of Tk. 500.00 crore in foreign consultancy, local consultancy, expensive foreign trips for ministry officials, new textbook

preparation and writing, and God knows, what else? This colossal amount of money might well have been spent if it went into secondary school teachers' orientation and training. A poor country like ours can ill-afford such monumental wastage in the name of so-called reforms.

**New textbooks and curriculum:** Any new system implies new curriculum and new syllabus requiring new textbooks which need to be printed and published in millions of copies. This means mega bucks for mega profits for a handful of hand-picked publishers. It is difficult to imagine

such windfall profits will not be shared with the benefactors.

Previously, the responsibility for printing, publishing and countrywide distribution of textbooks used to be given to the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). Now, we are being told that this huge task of printing, publishing and distribution has been privatised. Has there been any public tendering for this project? We already know what happened when during Awami League regime BEXIMCO was entrusted with textbook printing and publishing and what a big mess they made of it. Hope-

fully, similar thing is not going to happen again.

There is going to be several textbooks for each subject. In that event who is going to standardise question-setting, then testing and evaluation for this kind of multiple textbooks for each subject? Who is going to guarantee the quality and for that matter the flawlessness of such privately-produced textbooks? There may be exceptions, but exceptions are not the rule. We wonder who are going to take responsibility for such lapses which are inevitable in a mega-business venture like this. In our examination-oriented system, this testing and evaluation is going to be a key complicating factor which will contain seeds for future disaster or debacle.

**Allocation of Super-inflated marks for internal evaluation:** Another complicating factor that we can fore-

see is the reported allotment of 30 marks out of 100 in each subject for the internal evaluation of each examinee. In an ideal situation, this is all very good and well-intentioned. But our educational situation is far from the ideal. Even without trying to question the integrity of the teachers, this will inevitably result in inflated subjective marking distorting and further lowering the existing standard. Moreover, teachers may have to face political and other undue local pressure to raise internal marks. By pursuing such a short-sighted myopic policy, are we not courting educational disaster? In whose interest are we unsettling a settled and tested system? Has the existing multi-track system been proved worthless beyond any shadow of doubt?

Anwarul Haque is an academic.