

Holier than thou

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SYED MAQSUUD JAMIL

THE business bodies of the country are voicing their demand for doing away with the two-day holiday, and making Sunday the weekly holiday. It is the boldness of the caretaker government that is inspiring people to bring into the open the long shelved issues of the country. There is no doubt that the issue in question has the economy of the country at the heart of it. If we are to believe that the business of the government is business then this issue merits attention.

A holiday is a basic human need. There is broad agreement among the three religions of the book that God Almighty created the world in

six days. The differences start after that. Judaism and Christianity agree that the creator of the world then took a day off for rest. It is the Sabbath. Accordingly, Saturday is the Sabbath of the Jews and Sunday is that of the Christians. Islam's Holy Quran, however, tells the faithful that the effort did not tire our creator in the least. The whole process was so profound and fluent that He did not have to exert Himself -- Qun Faiyyaqun, He says "be" and it becomes.

Islam does not speak of the Sabbath in the nature of Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, it tells the faithful to take rest everyday. That they should retire after the Essa, or the evening, prayer. The Quran also speaks of a brief nap at noon. At least

I have not come across any instruction in the Holy Quran that categorically speaks of a particular day as the weekly holiday.

There is a revered place for Friday, or the day of Jum'ah, in the holy Quran. It is regarded as the day of congregational prayer. Sura Jum'ah speaks of the flighty nature of the devotional steadfastness of the faithful, and its vulnerability to worldly attractions and inclinations.

The last ayat of the Sura says: "But when they spy some merchandise or pastime they break way to it and leave thee standing. Say: That which Allah hath is better than pastime and than merchandise, and Allah is the best of providers." (The Meaning of Glorious Quran, an explanatory translation by

Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall).

In the preceding two ayats the Sura says: "O ye who believe! When the call is heard for the prayer of the day of congregation, hasten unto your remembrance of Allah and leave your trading. That is better for you if ye did but know. And when the prayer is ended, then disperse in the land and seek of Allah's bounty, and remember Allah much, that ye may be successful." It does not speak of a Sabbath or weekly holiday.

The exercise of all this is to dwell on the theological aspect of having a particular day, for that matter, Friday, as a weekly holiday. It is equally important to explore the facts of divine ordination behind such an edict. Interpretation is, however, a different field populated by the clerics. It is now the economy we are concerned about.

In the Quran and Sunnah, business is lawful. Trade and commerce traveled with the advent of Islam. Our prophet (pbuh) started as a businessman, and proved his merit and integrity in the vocation. Understandably, the business considerations of a country should receive importance as long as they do not violate the fundamental

tenets of the religion.

The global economy has accepted Sunday as a weekly holiday. A large number of developing and advanced economies have adopted a two-day holiday system with Saturday added. There is visibly no religion in it. They represent a wide range of races, colours, faiths, social systems, and levels of advancement.

Our large Asian trading partners -- China, India, South Korea, and Japan, having 2.5 billion people -- have Sunday as the weekly holiday. India is predominantly Hindu with only 2.5% Christian population. The Chinese, with a communist legacy, do not show fondness for any particular religion. These countries, having their own faiths and social systems, do not feel threatened by adopting Sunday as a weekly holiday.

Pakistan was created on the basis of its Islamic faith. The blood and toil that brought it into being did not rise in angst when Sunday was adopted as weekly holiday. It continued through three wars with India, till Ziaul Haq and those that followed him adopted Friday as a weekly holiday. President Pervez

Musharraf, with his practical wisdom, returned his country to a Sunday weekly holiday. Pakistan is still an Islamic republic, and it is no less Islamic than it was. The economy is also doing well.

We should do well to remember that economic wisdom is a major pillar of good governance. Bangladesh is at an economic turning point. The political doomsday ride has been averted. All the economic parameters are showing encouraging signs. Our economy is growing by 7% as reported by Time magazine. It has registered an increase in export earning by 16.5% and is ranked behind China, India, Korea and Vietnam. Foreign remittance crossed 6 billion dollars. Foreign Direct Investment has increased by 50%. Export profile is getting more diverse. Private sector initiative is benefiting from bold and dynamic leadership.

This entire favourable outlook needs correct policies and good governance to further gain in momentum. Most of the countries we do business with, from America and EU countries to China and Korea, are closed on Saturday and Sunday. The business community,

particularly the export sector, has good reasons to fret about being cut off from the business world for three days. It will, therefore, be an appropriate confidence building decision to revert to Sunday as the weekly holiday, and a half-day working schedule for Saturday. On Friday there should be a one and a half hour break for Jum'ah prayer.

The issue of Friday weekly holiday is, in reality, a potent political card. It was not the decision of an elected government. General Ershad, in his wily bid to ingratiate himself with the people, declared Friday as a weekly holiday. It was the time of sunshine days of bi-polar world and funds were pouring in to prop up his 92% foreign aid dependent economy. As a military dictator, it suited him most to look holier than thou.

Since then, it has become a political card. The religion-based parties have made it a matter of looking holier than thou. This applies to both, the BNP and the Awami League. They are handicapped. Even the Awami League, an apparently secular party, has a compact that it signed with the clerics to honour. They will not, and

they cannot, do it for the fear of being mauled by the other side on the grounds of sacrilege.

The caretaker government, on the other hand, is not burdened with a political agenda. Neither has it any reason to recoil from the task for fear of electoral backlash. It did not gatecrash into power. Rather it responded to the call for bringing the country to sanity from the brink of a catastrophe.

It is evident that Bangladesh needs a free, fair and useful national poll that serves good governance and honest initiative. This cannot take place unless it is rid of venal and errant politics. It is a challenge that demands a clear intent, an upright approach and a bold initiative. Since it is traveling a corridor of time dithering can rob the initiative and can become calamitous.

This is the time to revert to Sunday weekly holiday. When it is time for the polls, let the political parties take the stand. We will have a chance to know how sensible the political parties are.

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Stemming the rot in education

MANZOOR AHMED

THE spectacle of warehouses and barges belonging to major traders and importers full of rotten grains unsuitable for human or animal consumption being seized in Dhaka, Khulna, Chittagong, Narayanganj and elsewhere is symbolic of the tragic state of the country.

Dysfunctional politics has dragged the country down to a state of degeneration and decay in every sphere of life. The education system is no exception.

The rot that has spread in education must be stemmed and the system must be set back on a path to recovery.

Analyses are almost always imperfect, but often they provide revealing insights.

The rot in the education system, as in the food trading chain, is pervasive, has developed over the years, has been protected and tolerated by officials with the connivance and support of their political masters in the government, and the short-term and long-term effects for the people and the country are equally pernicious.

The big picture of the state of education is well-known and can be sketched in broad brushstrokes. A kind of quantitative gain has been achieved which are often noted, but it does not reveal the whole picture.

Initial entry into primary education has reached close to hundred percent, but only about a half complete the cycle (as Directorate of Primary Education's own data indicate). Of those who complete primary education, a third have not acquired functional literacy.

Since the large majority of children do not cross the threshold of primary education, only 45 percent of the age group enroll in secondary education.

But of those who enter grade six, eighty percent do not pass the SSC examination. Of the small minority passing SSC, the large majority pass with grade points 1-3, which does not equip them either for higher education or the employment market.

A major multi-donor "sector-wide" approach called Primary



Education Development Program II was initiated in 2004 to address the 'problems of primary' education.

Already approaching mid-point of its life, it can be best described as limping along without demonstrable progress in key areas of quality improvement and making schools responsible and accountable for improved learning performance by students.

At the secondary stage, the reform efforts have been more fragmented and with largely unsatisfactory results. The abortive attempt to introduce a "uni-track" curriculum last year is symptomatic of poor planning and weak management.

The on-going attempt to initiate "school-based assessment," without adapting it to prevailing realities and preparing for it in a professional way, is likely to land the authorities in the same quandary as it faced with the uni-track fiasco.

Under three percent of the students in secondary and other post-primary education are enrolled in vocational education.

The irony is that there is demand for workers with diverse skills in the employment market which is no longer only domestic; but, the majority of even the small proportion entering the formal vocational-technical education do not get jobs in their own area of training or wait for a considerable time for any employment.

The problem is the poor quality

of teaching, rigidity of centralized management, and lack of interaction with the employing bodies.

A contrast to public sector vocational/technical training is UCEP institutions whose graduates are in great demand in the employment market.

At the tertiary level, there has been a burgeoning growth of institutions both in the public and the private sector, but especially in the private sector colleges and universities; unfortunately, without the application and enforcement of government's own legal criteria and standards for quality.

Free reign of partisan politics has vitiated the atmosphere on the campus; it has instilled corruption and partisanship into appointments of every kind including those of Vice Chancellors, academic management and accountability, procurement, and even conducting examinations and giving out results.

Political involvement of students and teachers has aided and abetted worst forms of criminality including murders, physical violence and extortion on the campus.

Political influence, mainly in the form of many MPs behaving like local Godfathers, had turned all types of educational institutions and their management into personal fiefdoms of politicians.

Are there no redeeming features in the education system? The expansion of the system and infrastructure has been noted.

There has been a closing of the gender gap at the primary and secondary levels, which is commendable; however, both boys and girls now suffer equally from the poor quality of education and fail to complete the primary and secondary stages.

The widespread practice of cribbing and copying in public examinations has been contained by the previous administration with vigorous drives against such practices, which had turned public examination into public circus.

There are individual institutions and teachers and managing committees who manage to buck the system and perform well. They indicate the potential of the system, if right strategic choices are made to address the malaise of the system.

As this writer noted on this page earlier ("CTG mission: Not back to square one," Jan 28), the Auegan stable cannot be totally cleaned by the CTG, nor should it harbour such an aim.

But, given the circumstances of its incumbency, it owes to the nation at least a beginning of the process to reverse the decay that has set in.

There are examples of good practices, in NGOs and the private sector, but also in the public sector; and there are human and technical resources in the country that can support well-conceived strategies and priorities actions.

All that is needed is that the government functionaries begin to look upon the goals and tasks in education as national responsibilities in which all major stakeholders and actors must be called upon to participate in setting the agenda and to contribute to solving the problems.

It is opportune that one adviser in the CTG is in charge of the entire education sector.

He can begin by holding roundtables for each of the major sub-sectors of education, which will help identify the key obstacles as well as "doable" actions in the short-term within the life of the CTG, and those in the longer term, for which the ground can be prepared.

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Reclaiming Dhaka?

ISHRAT ZAKIA SULTANA

ARE we getting our beloved Dhaka back in its own form? Living long with the idea "hope for the best, prepare for the worst," subconsciously we have been accustomed to coping with all sorts of unexpected and abnormal practices which have made us sick and tired. It is shocking that we have even almost lost the ability to feel that we are getting sick and tired.

It is ridiculous how easily we take it that there should be posters, slogans and all types of advertisements on the walls beside the roads, although it looks dirty, and that there should be a crowd of hawkers and vendors shouting on every footpath although they obstruct the movement of the passers by. Lets not make the list longer. Anyways, perhaps we are not going to fall into as bad a situation now (as we might have fallen into) if some steps are taken in the meantime.

We didn't forget the peaceful, calm and quiet "poripatti" Dhaka during the decade of the 60s and the 70s, and even a couple of years of the 80s, which are just memories to tell our children and grandchildren. Gradually, a "Dhaka," which we did not want at all, has been made by ourselves. Today's eviction of hawkers and demolition of illegal establishments are nothing but the hard consequence. It's a worrying matter that 100,000 hawkers and street-vendors of the city are now in a terrible situation after the government's recent drive to evict them from the streets and footpaths.

Critics have already started commenting against this step by saying that it has been done just to ease the life of the urban people, without consideration for the lives of so many vulnerable people who had been on the streets with their businesses since the last ten or fifteen years. It's true that the sudden eviction has made their lives difficult. But, have we deeply perceived the matter at all? And isn't this the time to do something sustainable to resolve the crises?

Lets try to focus on three steps through which something reasonable and stable could be done to



alleviate the problems of today's sufferers, and bring back the organized and disciplined capital we dream of.

The previous governments spent enough money in the name of beautification of the capital, which has been found to be useless in many cases. Cutting down old trees which were giving abundant shade and supplying oxygen, building expensive decorated squares and circles which allow less space for vehicular movement on the roads, and planting a few bushes on the traffic islands which remain uncared for later on, cannot be the indicators of beautification of a city. But we did the same.

We tried to beautify the city leaving many problems like traffic jams, noise and air pollution, piles of dirt or open dustbins, and various other environmental hazards, unresolved. The issue of street-people, hawkers and vendors has also never been addressed due to many known and unknown reasons. We must not forget that most of these temporary dwellers either migrated, or somehow left their villages, in search of work in the capital.

However, keeping "better late than never" in mind, we can start to bring some positive changes the city.

The illusion needs to be changed

Naturally, the capital city will attract the rural people for many reasons,

through push factors and pull factors, whatever they are. Rushing to and settling in the capital city could be the best solution for finding a livelihood, and it has been increasing rapidly. Steps can be taken to reduce the flow of people towards the city through some effective ways, like providing or allotting khas/char land to the landless rural people.

We talk about erosion, or land grabbing, by flood, but don't talk about the rise of char or new land in other parts, (the reason may be that those new lands are grabbed by influential people or musclemen). With a view to providing land or work to the landless and jobless, wouldn't it be wiser to evict those people who occupied char or khas land illegally?

This initiative in the rural areas could be helpful in terms of supporting the evicted hawkers and vendors, who are already semi-settled here and there in the city, and thereby saving the city from being overburdened and crowded.

Decentralization of business activities

Centralization of business activities in urban areas is one of the significant pull factors that work for the migration of the rural people. For example: initiative for setting up dairy farms, fish farms, and such other efforts, can be taken in the rural areas to get the jobless people involved.

It's important to develop a good communication and transportation system between the rural areas and

the city because there is no alternative to good communication, particularly by road, for better transportation of rural products. Such initiative could enhance the gradual development of the rural areas indeed, but that development should also be done keeping the intrinsic features of the villages unspoiled.

Anyways, that's another chapter. On the other hand, improved communication systems can quicken the coming and going of many people living in the outskirts and working in Dhaka. We know that in Kolkata a large number of people come from outside the city by train and bus, and go back home in the evening. It could be a good strategy to reduce the pressure of too many people in the city, and would simultaneously ensure employment of rural people.

Revival of old businesses in new fashion

The closing down of Adamjee jute mill is strong evidence of our apathy to keeping a huge income generating area. We have become so naïve that we didn't even bother with it much. However, employment of jobless poor people can be possible through reviving such industries, specially handicraft related ones, at the rural level. Moreover, the demand for such products in the international market can also be fulfilled through exporting.

None of the mentioned tasks can be accomplished in one night. But, lets at least start before its too late. Instead of wasting time through uttering silly, sentimental words for the evicted people, lets be realistic and think about rehabilitating them, and stopping the inflow of people from rural areas in a more effective way.

We can cry and be sympathetic towards them, we can allow holiday markets for them and we can take some ambiguous steps; but nothing will work for long until and unless steps are taken considering the sustainability factors of these processes, and the tendency for tasting the urban flavour is transformed into doing something in one's own village for self-reliance and sustainability.

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Liar's poker

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

EVER since I read an article last year by poker historian (and poet and novelist) James McManus about the Iranian art of bluffing, I've been re-thinking the confrontation between Tehran and Washington.

McManus argues, most recently in the current issue of Card Player Magazine, that the Iranians actually invented poker, or a game quite close to it, which over the centuries made its way to France, across the Atlantic to New Orleans, then up the Mississippi with riverboat gamblers. His basic point is that chess, where all the pieces are visible on the board, is not a very useful metaphor for Middle Eastern politics the way the Persians play the game. It's what's hidden--what your opponents don't see, and the way you make your bets on that--which gives you strength.

President George W Bush, with his instinct for throwing all the cards

up in the air, appears to have been persuaded of this principle, only very slowly. In 2003 he passed up a "grand bargain" offered by the mullahs, when they still feared America's wrath. If Washington would drop sanctions and quit pushing for regime change in Tehran, they said they'd open up their nuclear program completely and help Bush stabilize the region. The White House took a pass.

Almost four years later, now that we've been bled white in Baghdad, the limits of American patience and endurance are as obvious as a stack of hand-scribbled IOUs in a pot where brightly colored chips used to be, and the grand bargain is no longer on the table. So Washington is trying the Big Bluff. Having demonstrated its weakness, it wants to talk up its strength. As missile batteries and aircraft carriers are deployed near Iran's frontiers, anonymous administration officials fuel speculation that a military attack is all but inevitable.

It's not. Neither the United States nor Israel (the wild card) wants an open, all-out war. But in this bluffing game it's useful to create what McManus calls a "narrative" to keep the mullahs guessing. Washington wants Tehran to believe that at some point, like gunslingers in an old Western, the Americans might sweep away the cards and chips, throw over the table, draw their Colt .45s and start shooting, just as, well... just as they did in Iraq.

In the meantime, there are many more cards to be dealt, and we aren't even close to the nuclear no-limit climax.

The hand we're watching right now is focused more on roadside bombs than weapons of mass destruction. Over the last several years, the Iranians, along with their allies in Lebanon and among the Palestinians, have perfected explosive devices that are very effective at penetrating the armor on most modern military vehicles. A focused blast melts and compresses a piece of

metal, driving it forward at phenomenal speeds.

According to the widely consulted Global Security Web site, the most sophisticated versions launch a projectile at a velocity that would approach "the speed of light, were this possible, in around 1.5 seconds." In fact, it starts to slow down after 40 millionths of a second, but according to Global Security, a Northern Virginia-based clearing house for defense information, "it is difficult to think of any other terrestrial event as fast."

The technology is not exactly rare, however. Sophisticated "shaped charges" or "explosively formed projectiles" (EFPs) of this sort have been part of modern arsenals since World War I, and similar devices are commonly used in oil drilling to blast away rock. The Iranian innovation, presumably, was to adapt relatively crude but effective EFPs to guerrilla warfare. Why Iraqis couldn't have done this, too, has not yet been explained. They are, after all, veter-

ans of many wars and a great deal of oil drilling.

What's clear is that EFPs have been employed with increasing frequency in Iraq against both American and British forces, at least since 2004. Precisely how many coalition lives have been lost to these devices has not been divulged, but commanders on the ground have been worried, and their superiors in Washington are, too. If even heavy armor becomes vulnerable, and increasing numbers of helicopters are being downed by other insurgent weapons, then it becomes dangerous for allied forces to move anywhere in the country at any time and they will be even more tied down in their concrete-walled compounds.

So Washington is pushing back, striking out at alleged Iranian agents. Five were arrested in the Iraqi Kurdish city of Erbil last month. (Some of the computers captured purportedly showed links to the supply of shaped charges.)

According to The Washington Post, American troops are authorized to kill Iranians in Iraq deemed to be a threat, although how their nationality or their threat would be identified is far from obvious. And, of course, officials are speaking out on Capitol Hill. "The EFPs are coming from Iran," CIA Director General Michael V Hayden testified flatly earlier this month. "They are being used against our forces. They are capable of defeating some of our heaviest armor, and incident for incident cause significantly more casualties than any other improvised explosive devices do."

But then, as if in passing, Hayden added the most salient fact: "They are provided to Shi'a militia." And those forces are in many cases allied to members of the Baghdad government that the United States helped install. The alleged Iranian agents who were picked up in Erbil were in contact with US-backed Kurds. Others arrested in the past were in the offices of the Supreme Council

for the Islamic Revolution on Iraq (SCIRI), on which Washington increasingly relies for political support.

The inherent contradictions are such that the administration is reduced to the same kind of speculation about skirmishes and ambushes in Iraq that it once employed to explain nuclear programs and biological weapons. Curiously, some of the press buys into it. Thus a widely publicized story in The New York Times reported that unnamed "investigators" said they "believe" that attackers using American uniforms and weapons to infiltrate what was supposed to be a secure compound and murder five Americans in the Shiite stronghold of Karbala on January 20 "may have been trained and financed by Iranian agents, according to American and Iraqi officials knowledgeable about the inquiry."

Wow.

In fact, whatever role Iranians

played in Karbala, or not, according to whomever you care to quote anonymously, Iranian influence in Iraq is pervasive. There are agents, sure, and there are also millions of pilgrims visiting religious shrines. There are old families with deep roots on both sides of the border; there is overt Iranian government aid, and there are political, military and terrorist ties (including with our present Iraqi allies) that go back decades.

So, yes, the Bush administration is developing its complicated and frightening bluffs. It may actually have figured out the basic rules of Middle Eastern high-stakes poker--and the Iranians do have vulnerabilities, which we'll look at in future articles. But when the United States antes up in Iraq, it had better remember it's playing in Iran's casino.

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