

## Force has little place in a free market

Some prudent steps needed

THE adviser for food Tapan Chowdhury has told the media that the government would seek intervention from the law enforcement agencies if its efforts to keep prices of essentials under control do not achieve the desired result. We understand the words of the adviser are directed against the hoarders of essential commodities and market manipulators. No doubt, hoarding and manipulative marketing interference must be fended off energetically. However, we would like to pronounce a cautionary note against application of force that is indiscriminatory and can prove counter-productive insofar as the demand-supply equations go, on which basically depends stability of prices.

Notwithstanding all kinds of measures taken by the caretaker government so far, the market remains erratic. There are lessons to be learnt from the experience. Despite an improvement in the law and order and the supposed elimination of rings of extortions operating in the supply link, no positive impact has been felt by way of declining prices. And then, of course, the well-knit and strong syndicates have yet to be neutralised effectively by encouraging a new breed of importers to come into play.

To keep the prices of essentials in check, the usual methods prescribed by market economists are keeping the wholesale market vibrant, maintaining an unbroken supply chain of essential commodities. The people traditionally involved in the import, stocking, distribution and retailing of essentials need to be given a free play in their day-to-day trading activities. Small kitchen markets in the localities also prove to be effective in making items available to the residents at affordable prices. Above all, the import and distribution mechanisms need to be invigorated through taking the traders in confidence and offering them various incentives like soft-term bank loan, exemption of import duty on certain items and most importantly removing fear of persecution from their minds. The persecution mentality that had developed initially still seems to remain in various guises and this should be removed.

Since we have little or no control over the external factors, such as international price index, shipment schedules and freight charges of foreign shipping lines, we should concentrate more vigorously on streamlining the internal factors that are within our powers to manage.

## Voting rights for expatriate Bangladeshis

A long-standing demand that must be met

THE Election Commission has floated the idea of giving voting rights to expatriate Bangladeshis. Sohul Hossain, one of the election commissioners, has spoken of a probable move to incorporate our citizens abroad on the voter list to be prepared prior to the next general election. If indeed such a step is taken or implemented, one will surely welcome it. The reason why it will be appreciated is that for a long number of years expatriate Bangladeshis have been demanding their right to vote as citizens. Unfortunately, the demand has always been pushed aside, despite repeated promises by successive governments that it would be looked into.

The Election Commission intends to have Bangladesh's diplomatic missions abroad set up cells with a view to identifying Bangladeshi citizens and including their names on the voter list. What the EC must also do is explain the modalities by which the expatriates will be made voters. A relevant point in this context will relate to their addresses and status abroad. As for casting their votes, the issue of whether or not the expatriates will be able to express their opinions at elections by postal ballot is important. In fact, it is necessary that once expatriate Bangladeshis become voters, they be given the right to cast their votes through such postal ballots. For them to come home all the way from abroad in order to vote will be as difficult as it will be unrealistic. There is, additionally, the matter of what the EC ought to be doing about those Bangladeshis who hold dual citizenship (which is the case about most expatriates anyway). This should not present any problem. Any individual who holds a Bangladesh passport anywhere is our citizen and therefore has the right to vote irrespective of what other nationality he or she holds concurrently.

Expatriate Bangladeshis have over the years made valuable contributions to the national economy through pumping their hard-earned money into development work back home. Abroad, they have earned a good reputation as unofficial ambassadors for their home country. It is therefore only right and proper that the country do something in return for them. Enlisting them as voters and ensuring that they vote will be one way of helping them identify with the aspirations of millions of their fellow citizens here at home.

## No quick fix



ZAFAR SOBHAN

## STRAIGHT TALK

For too long in Bangladesh we have had political conversations to the exclusion of all else, as though politics is the only thing that matters. But now is the time for each one of us to enter into a national conversation on values and morals and what kind of a country we want to be. One day, hopefully soon, we will have more functional politics. But it will mean nothing if we don't work simultaneously towards the goal of fixing our society.

or institute the rule of law or [please supply your own one-size-fits-all solution], the thinking went, everything would miraculously fall into place.

But, of course, if one thing is certain in life it is that nothing is quick and easy and nothing goes according to plan. Eliminating (or at any rate, curbing) corruption continues to prove tricky, and it will take far longer than anyone had anticipated to fix the institutions or establish anything even remotely resembling the rule of law.

Since January 11, expectations and goals for what can be accomplished under the current administration have been dialed down dramatically, in line with the realities on the ground. But it should be noted that it is not enough for those who once dreamed of a brave new world to simply redefine success more modestly and declare victory.

In other words, perhaps comprehensive political reform as once envisioned is not possible, but, in that case, the apparent fall-back option of politics without the two

main party leaders, is not going to be enough, either.

Many argue that Hasina and Khaleda's exit from the political stage is the sine qua non for meaningful reform. Perhaps. But no one can argue with the proposition that, even if such an exit is necessary, it is by no means a sufficient condition for political reform, and what might be planned for after they exit the arena remains to be seen.

What I am cautioning against here is the thinking that fixing the ailing politics of our country is as simple and straightforward as some apparently think.

Of course, the idea that what we need is a quick (or even extended) political fix to our problems is in itself part of the problem. It is this kind of hopeful, wanting-a-quick-fix, wishful thinking, that neatly avoids the real, and much more difficult to overcome, problems in our society, that has brought us to where we are today.

It should be remembered that politics does not exist in a vacuum. The reason that politics in Bangla-

desh is so problematic is that the shortcomings and dysfunctions of our polity reflect the shortcomings and dysfunctions of our greater society.

How often have we heard the lament: Our problem is leadership. If only we had a Mahathir. Newsflash: Mahathir didn't all of a sudden appear one day in Kuala Lumpur from nowhere. He was a product of Malaysian society, and that a man of his abilities was able to rise to the top is a function of the health of the Malaysian polity and the society that it is a part of.

Hasina and Khaleda didn't land in Dhaka from the planet Mars. They were drafted in as party leaders because no one else could keep their parties together. They have reigned unchallenged at the top as no one else has been able to command the kind of mass support that they have.

Now, one can argue that this is an unhealthy state of affairs for any country, and one would be right. One can argue that their continuing hold over their party workers and

the electorate is simply a reflection of the feudal mentality that still exists in too many minds, and that would also be correct.

Now, we are getting close to the heart of the problem. Hasina and Khaleda are mere symptoms of the ailment, and envisioning a future without them, indeed envisioning any kind of purely political fix, does nothing to treat the underlying illness, any more than banning chewing cures lung cancer.

The real problem is the one we have in our society.

Bangladesh remains a shockingly unequal and inequitable society that has no respect for simple human dignity, in which people at the bottom end are mistreated with impunity and have no rights to speak of, a society that remains hierarchical and elitist and feudal in its outlook, and in which there is scarcely any conception left of the common good.

If we want to fix the country, we need to look inward and start healing at the societal level. It will be a long and difficult and unpleasant process. Let us make no mistake about it. If we wish to create the good society in this green and verdant land of ours, then, ultimately, we need to change many aspects of how we think and of who we are.

So what should we do right now, at this crucial and tense moment in our nation's history. Right now is perhaps not the right time to be thinking and talking only politics. In the first place, it is forbidden (note to authorities: that's a joke). But,

more pertinently, right now politics is out of the hands of the public and, in any event, is too suspended for one to be able to predict confidently where things are going or will end up.

But in the meantime, instead of sitting idle and holding our tongues, we need to start a national conversation -- not necessarily focused on politics as it always is, and third parties, and registration requirements, and term limits, and age limits, etc.

Yes, we need those conversations, too. But we also, and much more importantly, need conversations about the country as a whole and Bangladeshis as a people. We really need to kick-start a national conversation on how to create meaningful and lasting change for the better at the societal level.

For too long in Bangladesh we have had political conversations to the exclusion of all else, as though politics is the only thing that matters. But now is the time for each one of us to enter into a national conversation on values and morals and what kind of a country we want to be.

One day, hopefully soon, we will have more functional politics. But it will mean nothing if we don't work simultaneously towards the goal of fixing our society.

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## Circle without centre



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

## CROSS TALK

Launches sank, buildings collapsed and people died in bomb explosions. One time I remember an ostensible wedding took place when half the country was submerged in water. Once again I say that may be I don't know how the world works. The law of supply and demand that applies to commodities also applies to human lives. In a country where people are dime a dozen, why cry for few lost ones?

out of stock in half hour's time. People who wrote books couldn't wait to share the good news with their readers. Political parties couldn't afford the delay in breaking the news. And the rainy season comes once in a year. How can we blame the culture vultures if they didn't want to miss that chance?

Believe me I am not trying to be finicky here. But this is not the first time, and we have repeated this insensitivity so many times in the past that, I am afraid, it is becoming the new culture.

The SSC students celebrated their success, books were launched, new political parties were floated, and we welcomed the rainy season with great fanfare. When all of these happened, the dead bodies of victims were still warm in their graves. This country didn't take time to mourn its dead.

May be I am being too sensitive. Time and tide don't wait for the living, let alone the dead. One can't blame the students for their excitement when they did so well in one of their defining exams. In some cities sweet shops did brisk business and ran

dozen, why cry for few lost ones? Still it bothered me to watch the stark contrasts. It seemed like a nation had freaked out, and its mood swung from extremes of euphoria to extremes of distress. The death looked like explosion in a chocolate factory as the bodies were being pulled out of mud.

They looked like figured cookies dipped in syrupy earth. How unwarly they must have died, clueless that the same hills where they had come for shelter were crashing down to take their lives!

I am not going to write about those who are to blame for cutting the hills and then bringing this disaster, which has taken so many lives. It is just another example of corruption whose flames have engulfed us. It doesn't excite me anymore that we have more bad people. Yes we have them, many more hiding in the nooks and corners of this nation.

But this time the good people

bother me, parents who have raised bright children, people who are enlightened enough to write books, intelligent enough to set up political parties and cultural enough to sing and dance. They baffle me because when they have all these good qualities, why couldn't they become better human beings? How couldn't deaths of others diminish them?

Probably that is the only thing that comes between good and bad. It is the capacity to feel the pain of others, which decides if someone has a conscience. People, who take lives, steal from others or put another life in danger, can qualify to be mafia bosses, hired killers or common thugs. Cruelty is two atrocious wrapped in one. It is atrocious once when the cruel act is committed and again when one doesn't feel the remorse.

Those who didn't bother to postpone their celebrations, the answer to both questions ought to be an emphatic no.

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