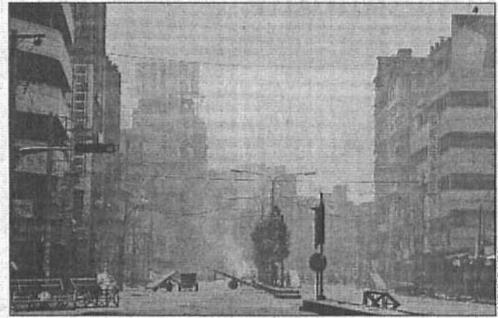


Shadows of past protest

Are we fated as a nation to repeat our past action? Rashida Ahmad asks how and why the troubles began on August 20, with photos by Amirul Rajiv

But let's step back for just a minute, to ask: What was the protest for? Was it really simply the case that students were

streets only because of the 'rising price of essentials'? Of course not, the malaise lies deeper. But how deep?



unhappy with the encampment of army troops within university campuses? And did the protest really spread from campus to the

I have a feeling we are unsure ourselves where and how deep the malaise lies. What we are sure of is we've had it

bad before, and we appear to have it bad now. We can no longer see beyond the bad. Bad has been the status quo for so long, we can't imagine anything better for the future.

Our past, present and future appears as an endless series of crushed hopes, disenchantment, and hardships. And so, unsurprisingly, we are fed up, bitter, and disillusioned. Our present hardships simply overwhelm us.

To the point where we are unwilling or unable to make judgments based on the lesser or greater good. We cannot see which way the path to good lies. We can no longer even bring ourselves to believe that short-term pains may lead to long-term gains.

All we can do is protest. After all what other choices are open to us? Hmmm, let's see...

Choosing between a corrupt government or having our political leaders in jail? Choosing whether to have our rights ignored completely or having them trampled to the

ground? Choosing between fraudulent elections with crooked candidates or free and fair elections with complete unknowns in the running? Choosing between indefinite curfews or having our heads broken by passing brickbats? Or, quite simply, having to choose between putting up or shutting up?

Well... it's hardly a mystery wrapped in a puzzle why, with such choices before us, we do protest at all!

The irony is, that protesting even a little at the utter absurdity of those choices leads too quickly to yet more impossible choices... having to choose between violence in the streets or a show of force.

So, given the choices, what do we want? What can we want? What are we allowed to want?

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

Rashida Ahmad is Contributing Editor, Forum. Amirul Rajiv is Photo Editor, Forum.

What's wrong with this picture?

Lubna Choudhury takes aim at the culture of coaching classes that has derailed education in this country

A brother and sister come home from school in the afternoon. After a short break at home, they are back to coaching classes. The classes are not close to home, and these children have to travel through the Dhaka traffic to get there. They are not tutored one on one, but are part of a huge group of boys and girls, all in it to glean the best methods to score high in their upcoming final exams. However, coaching classes start earlier for the school children, they are required to go to them at least from class nine, otherwise they may not make the grade, so to speak. Ergo, all parents who have children in public schools will enroll them in a coaching class. The child's after school time revolves around coaching classes. In a family with working parents, the parental schedule revolves around coaching classes.

As a result of this relentless pressure to make good grades, the children are robbed of a childhood. Just as the poor children who work for a living, sacrificing their childhood at the altar of family needs, so do these relatively well-off kids sacrifice their formative years at the altar of competition and good grades. What are the children who



get shunted from coaching class to coaching class missing? They are missing a chance to participate in sporting activities, interact with family and neighbours, meet friends, and, in general, having unstructured time to think, pursue hobbies, read, or maybe even volunteer for some good cause.

These activities are important to the creation of balanced individuals in any society. Therefore, we are creating a generation of youth who are dependent on computers, cell phones, and electronic gadgets for their recreation, and have no time to think and expand their horizons to become well adjusted adults. The little time these youngsters do get from their "studies," they channel mostly in the path of least resistance, i.e. in gobbling up passive entertainment from the revered sanctuary of television or electronic video games. Not all the images and role models these youth are exposed to in television are desirable or ideal for their impressionable minds.

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

Lubna Choudhury is the Principal, Bangladesh International Tutorial, and Chairperson, the Red Brick School.

Inflation and price fixing

Niaz Murshed discusses how existing legislation may be enforced by the government to ease our inflation woes

While watching the news on a cable TV channel recently, I came to know about a few arrests made by the authorities for price fixing. The questions that automatically came to mind were: How may these arrested persons be brought to justice? What legislation in Bangladesh deals with price syndicates?

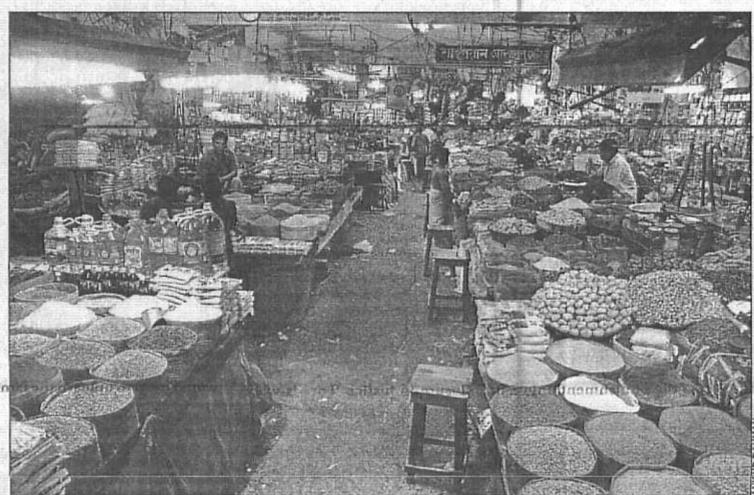
Price fixing
Price fixing entails collusive behaviour among competitors. If the reader is not familiar with it, all he has to do is wonder why all the fruit vendors ask for exactly the same price when he goes to market to buy a kilo of apples. The same practice adopted on a larger scale, and in an organised manner, often leads to price levels much higher than desired by the market.

This article looks at the relationship between price fixing and inflation. In particular, it sheds light on the legislation relevant to the issue.

What exactly is this legislation?

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as "price fixing legislation." It only works within the broader framework of a competition policy. It is competition that the law protects. The way it works is as follows: if you make a collusive agreement regarding price, then no further proof is required that you have affected competition in a way that is detrimental to the well-being of the consumers.

The law refers to it as a "deeming" provision. Under such clauses price fixing is prohibited per se, that is, no matter what.



The obsolete law

Although there is much debate in the media regarding the issue of price syndicates, existing legislations or their enforcement are hardly ever discussed in any of the newspaper articles or in the television talk shows. In most cases, the focus tends to move tangentially, leaving the listener or reader rather uncertain regarding appropriate action. In fact, the piece of legislation relevant to price fixing in Bangladesh is quite difficult to get hold of, and even after I had discovered it in the law indices, it was not clear if it was still operational.

The MKIP Ordinance 1970 (PC

vol17 pp.508-523) was written under martial law 37 years ago, and some of the clauses make no sense in today's context. As it stands today, the ordinance is as good as obsolete.

Interestingly, the price fixing under collusive agreements between competitors was prohibited even in that ordinance. If the ordinance is still operational, price fixing is theoretically still prohibited under it:

"Unreasonably restrictive trade practices shall be deemed... If there is any agreement between actual or potential competitors for... fixing the purchase or selling prices or imposing... with regard to the sale or distribution of any goods or services."

However, it is limited by a few

exclusion clauses drafted in old US anti-trust metaphors. If it were a part of any comprehensive national competition legislation today, as mentioned earlier, the exclusion clauses would not have been there.

As we can see, the concept of a competition policy is no stranger to us. We just need to revisit it and put things into perspective, in particular, with regard to its relationship with the current situation.

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

Niaz Murshed is a graduate in Economics, University of Pennsylvania and the first chess grandmaster of the sub-continent.

Let's go to the videotape

Jyoti Rahman compares the development track records of democracy and dictatorship in Bangladesh

In its recently-released annual economic report for Bangladesh, the IMF notes that "the destructive political rivalry of the past three decades, together with weak accountability and rule of law, has squandered a good portion of available resources" and "Bangladesh needs political stability to restore investor confidence." As general principles, one cannot argue with these statements. But quite often, these sentiments morph into a denouncement of political governments and an endorsement of prolonged rule by unelected technocratic regimes.

The argument that "democracy is not conducive to economic development" and "a period of disciplined rule is needed" has been doing the rounds among the chattering classes for a while now. Do elected governments perform worse than unelected regimes when it comes to the economy?

There is no clear answer to this question. All rich countries, with the possible exceptions of Hong

Kong, Singapore, and Israel, are thriving multi-party democracies. But is democracy the cause of development, or its result? Europe had very limited forms of democracy during its development phase in the 19th century. None of the East Asian countries were democracies during their rapid growth era of the 1960s to the 1980s. In most cases, democratic politics followed economic development.

But a lack of democracy is no guarantee for development either. Latin America languished under dictatorships of socialist left and fascist right. The entire continent of Africa slipped into an abyss under undemocratic regimes. Closer to home, India managed to transform its socialist-leaning economy into a dynamic market-oriented one without sacrificing its democracy, while successive military dictatorships have not brought much prosperity to Pakistan. But then again, China's communist dictatorship transformed its socialist economy into a market one, pulling millions out of poverty



in the process.

It seems that there is no clear link between democracy and development. As a recent World Bank study finds: "Elected governments do not exhibit a systematic advantage in achieving economic development." That is, cross-country data are not going to help us answer the question in the

second paragraph. Instead, we need to consider our own experience in Bangladesh?

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

Jyoti Rahman is a macroeconomist and a contributor to the Dristipat Writer's Collective.

Of wars and generals

Renowned columnist Megasthenes returns with a penetrating and provocative analysis of the military mind

GENERAL of the Army, Bradley, in his memoirs, was emphatic that a general should never aspire to the presidency. I do not know if a similar inhibition weighed down General Colin Powell -- his successor several times removed as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- who declined to run for president in 1996, notwithstanding that successive polls showed him to be easily the strongest Republican candidate. An

American friend attributed Powell's reluctance to Mrs. Powell's distaste for the hustings and, perhaps, also a shrewd assessment that one could not realistically hope to be the first black president of the US without the wholehearted endorsement of the major black organisations.

Generals, more than any other breed or category of people, are primed for, and are often the products of, war. With very few exceptions -- like possibly Patton -- they

are not as a class "war lovers" because, again more than any other class of people, they know what war is about. General Sherman (West Point, 1840), next only to Grant (West Point 1843) in fame and renown among the Union generals during the US Civil War, characterised war at different times very succinctly and aptly as "cruelty" that cannot be "refined," as "at best barbarism," its glory being "all moonshine," and as "hell."

Generals assuredly need to be professional and realistic, ready for whatever task they may be called upon to do. For as General Marshall put it so wryly in his Biennial Report to the US Congress as Chief of Army Staff in 1945: "If man does find the solution for world peace, it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever known."

In 1945, Unesco was set up, as its preamble puts it, to construct the defences of peace in the minds of men. It has had only limited and unspectacular success. Former UN Secretary General Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his seminal report, Agenda for Peace, wrote in 1992 that since 1945 there had been over 100 major conflicts around the world resulting in over 20 million deaths. In the intervening

years since the report was written, these numbers could only have increased. Lester Pearson, the Nobel Laureate for Peace, once made the startling, or not so startling, admission that men liked war: "We like the excitement of it, its thrill and glamour, its freedom from restraint... And we like taking chances with death." Another Nobel Laureate -- for literature -- and also a pacifist and philosopher, Bertrand Russell wrote in 1967 of having discovered to his amazement that "average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war."

Is there then to be no answer to the threat of war? US philosopher William James, writing in 1902, offered a plausible if abstract prescription which almost anticipates the preamble of Unesco and supplements Dulles' observation to which referred earlier. James wrote: "What we need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war. Something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible."

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

Megasthenes is an eminent Bangladeshi columnist.

Islam now, China then: Any parallels?

M. Shahid Alam unearths similarities between how Islam is portrayed in the West today and how China was viewed in the middle of the 19th century

ON some days, a glance at the leading stories in the Western media strongly suggests that Muslims everywhere, of all stripes, have gone berserk. It appears that Muslims have lost their minds.

In any week, we are confronted with reports of Islamic suicide attacks against Western targets in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Western countries themselves; terrorists foiled before they could act; terrorist attacks gone awry; terrorists indicted; terrorists convicted; terrorists tortured; terrorist suspects kidnapped by CIA; or warnings of new terrorist attacks against Western targets.

Unprovoked, without cause -- we are repeatedly told -- Muslims everywhere, even those living in the West, are lashing out against the civilised West. Many in the Western world -- especially in the US -- are beginning to believe that the entire Islamic world is on the warpath against civilisation itself.

Expert commentators in the Western media want us to believe



that the Muslims have lost their minds. They tell us that Muslims are inherently, innately, perverse; that never before has violence been used in this way, against innocent civilians. It's always "innocent" civilians.

Other peoples, too, have endured colonisation, slavery, expulsions, extermination at the hands of Western powers, but none have responded with violence on this scale against the West.

Certainly not with violence against civilians. Never have Aborigines, Africans, indigenous Americans, Hindus, Jews, or the Chinese targeted civilians. They never attacked Westerners indiscriminately. They never targeted "innocent" Western civilians.

Is this "insanity" slowly raising its head across the Islamic world really unique? Is this "insanity" a uniquely Islamic phenomenon? Is this a

uniquely contemporary phenomenon? Is this "insanity" unprovoked?

We cannot, of course, expect any history from the corporate US media on this Islamic "insanity." In order to take the moral high ground, to claim innocence, the rich and powerful -- the oppressor classes -- prefer not to talk about history, or invent the history that serves their interest.

What is surprising, however, is that few writers, even on the left, bring much history to their analysis of unfolding events. Not being a historian -- of Islam, China or Britain -- I can only thank serendipity for the little bit of history that I will invoke to provide some background to the "malaise" unfolding in the Islamic world. A little history to connect Islam today to China in the middle of the nineteenth century.

[For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum available with The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.]

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FORUM
A monthly publication of The Daily Star
SEPTEMBER 2007

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Niaz Murshed

For the full text of the excerpted articles and more, please read the September issue of Forum, available free with your copy of The Daily Star on Monday, September 3.