

Essential prices soaring

Sustainable measures called for

DURING Ramadan, Eid and Pujā, government had intervened in the market to keep the essential prices in check under a high demand situation. The strategy was to promote import on which our market for essentials is critically dependent, keep supplies from the wholesale to the retail markets steady and oversee retail market behaviour. At the same time, open market sales (OMS) operated by BDR rather extensively with TCB sale outlets at designated places helped prevent prices spiralling out of control. But now, things appear to have changed as the 'seasonal arrangements' are being cut back.

Prices of rice, soyabean oil, onion, ata, potato, powdered milk, broiler chicken have all shot up by wide margins from before. Onion prices rose by 32.5 percent, soyabean by more than 5 percent, powdered milk by Tk 15 to 20 per kg over a month. The pressure on the rice price remains high as food import was less than in the last fiscal against the backdrop of a shortfall in production amounting to 2.93 lakh tonnes. Add to this flood-affected aus and aman crops accentuating food deficit. With some countries putting a freeze on cereals import, we have to go for diversified sources to build up adequate food security as we reinvigorate our domestic productivity against the background of alluvial deposits brought on by the floods.

The lessons learnt from this government's price control initiatives are worth recalling. The BDR operations succeeded in catering to demands of a large number of consumers in urban areas by keeping the middle men at bay. The latter's tyrannical grip over the market made things change too many hands to raise their prices at the consumer level. The growers have been the most shortchanged people in the process. The lesson we draw here is that the market mechanism should place the growers in direct contact with the traders so that both the consumers and the producers are benefited. For this, we need dispersal of wholesale market centres. Secondly, procurement of essentials cannot be left to a handful of importers wielding an absolute sway over the supply side. We need to promote a greater number of importers to come on to the scene with bank credit. There should be specific import planning, not just a policy enunciation, that will be responsive to international market variables. The government would do well to engage the private sector on a continuing basis to find sustainable solutions to the problems of imbalance in demand and supply that arise from time to time.

Youth reform programme needed

They are caught in criminality

CRIMINALITY has lately been taking a disquieting form in the capital. The recent arrest of a group of young men, all coming from well to do families, on charges of possessing such lethal drugs as yaba have only revived concerns about the damage being done to our youth largely on their own account. And possession, sale and inhalation of drugs are not all. There are also instances where youngsters appear to be veering toward increasing levels of violence and even outright murder. Quite some weeks ago, the sad story of a young man in his late teens made the rounds through the newspapers. Having gone out to buy blood for his ailing father, he was pounced upon by a group of young people of his age and soon bludgeoned to death in Uttara. Add to such grisly incidents one more, that of the young student found dead, his throat slit, on the rooftop of the building in which his family lives. He had earlier been called out by some people whom he obviously must have known.

Where criminality was earlier confined to youths from poor or underprivileged backgrounds, it is now the offspring of prosperous parents who appear to have decided to take up crime as a vocation. The bottom line is simple, which is that the young, rich as well as poor, have now turned into desperadoes inclined to committing anti-social activities which again may have roots in the twisted way in which they have emulated cultures not their own. Rackets of criminality have thereby grown, which in the long run threaten the already tattered fabric of our feeble social order.

There is, therefore, a powerful need to tackle what could soon turn into a national issue and so cannot be ignored. And one way of doing that is for the authorities to undertake a youth regeneration programme that will have as one of its responsibilities the task of steering these wayward, violent young back into a normal life through a corrective course of action. More fundamentally, such a programme calls for a concerted, well thought out plan of action, in terms of devising employment measures for the educated unemployed as well as those affected by unemployment in general. The young are additionally in need of outlets that will enhance their outlook through participation in cultural and social activities. In simple terms, the young can be held to gainful pursuits provided there is a clear strategy in this regard. Let the government directorates and NGOs focused on youth welfare and civil society leaders involve the whole community in responding to the challenge of channeling the youth power on to a constructive and creative path.

The ultimate target

During the era of the so-called parliamentary democracy the system may, in fact, be termed as autocracy as the prime minister held supreme power. It also has resemblance to totalitarianism as, during the tenure of a government, the party in power maintains complete control under the dictatorial rule of the prime minister, ignoring the role of all other parties. Change of government through election could be considered the only sign of democracy, but that too was tarnished by the losing side not accepting the victorious party by making allegations of rigging against it.

G. M. QUADER

PEOPLE live in a society basically to ensure safety and security of life and property. But to guarantee the same, society, meaning people living together, in turn needs to follow certain rules of the game, individually and collectively.

The rules are, in broader perspective, based on principals like not being harmful to others in any way, and sharing the good and bad occurring in the society more or less equally. This may lead to avoidance of oppression, discrimination and inequitable distribution of resources, and also to standing together against any external threat, or rallying in unison for solving any mishap,

and rescuing the distressed.

In short, the goal is ensuring social justice for all living together in the society. Social justice, thus, includes punishment to the bad and reward to the good in order to help develop a proper value system consistent with societal need. It also refers to equal distribution of wealth and other facilities without any discrimination based on cast, creed, religion or any other divisiveness. Leadership, individual and/or by a body, is a necessity for generation and implementation of the rules for good governance.

Social justice is the desired objective for development of a congenial social environment. Governance guided by rules to

achieve social justice may be termed good governance. People living in a society basically look for good governance.

The state may be considered a wider version of society, with government to give leadership to governance. The citizens of a country primarily expect to get good governance from the government, with safety and security of life and property being at the center of priority.

A government is defined as a "political system by which a body of people is administered and regulated (Britannica. Ready Reference Encyclopedia, vol. 4, page 191)." There are different types of governments, like autocracy (a government in which one person has supreme power),

democracy (a government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodic free elections), fascism (a government characterised by dictatorship, belligerent nationalism, racism, militarism etc.), monarchy (a government headed by a monarch), oligarchy (a government with the ruling power belonging to a few), plutocracy (a government by the wealthy), theocracy (a government by priests claiming to rule with divine authority), and totalitarianism (a government in which one political group maintains complete control under a dictatorship and bans all others).

After evaluation of the above mentioned forms of government at different times in history, and in various countries, it is now widely accepted that democracy provides the optimum level of sustainable good governance and is better from that point of view than other types of government. It is said that democracy is not a perfect system, but its imperfection is observed to be less compared to any other form.

While democracy is said to be the basis of governance for a country it is logical that there would be betterment of governance with the passage of time. Progress may be slow (not necessarily so) but would definitely be steady. In case that does not happen or, instead, the governance situation plunges from bad to worse every day, the system being followed cannot be considered democratic even if it is called so.

After the election of 1991, the constitution of Bangladesh was amended to put the form of government back to a parliamentary system, as it was in the original constitution prepared after the independence of 1971. But, while the same was practiced by the subsequent governments after the stated change, it was seen that the basis of their governance did not fit the definition of democracy.

Democracy is characterised by the fact that government would be a people's government, where it would represent the citizens in its formation and also in its actions. A government is representative in formation

when it is elected by the people in an election free from any influence of greed, fear, manipulation and forgery. A government represents the people in its actions when its activities reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people. Free and fair election and accountability of government are the prerequisites for democracy.

Bangladesh governments lacked both characteristics after 1991. Every election was worse compared to the earlier in terms of freeness and fairness. The intending candidates, taking advantages of ever-increasing inefficiency, corruption and partisan attitude of the conducting authorities, used money, muscle power, bribery, and stuffing of ballot boxes in an ascending scale in subsequent elections.

The parliament is the institution for ensuring accountability of government as per the constitution. But the governments from 1991 till 2006 took advantage of the contradiction of constitutional provisions and, under the existing political culture and environment, made the

parliament totally dysfunctional to escape accountability.

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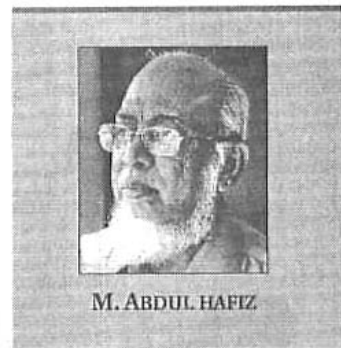
The consequences naturally led to bad governance, or lack of good governance. In general, the bad got patronage while the good received punishment. The law and order situation suffered a continuous decline, causing threat to life and property. Corruption became all-pervasive, and the rich became richer while the poor went down the ladder of poverty.

The frustration of the people was demonstrated definitely when they not only accepted, but also welcomed, the additional time of tenure and extended agenda of the present unelected caretaker government before holding of the general election to hand over power to their elected representatives. The people even showed their relief when the government promulgated a state of emergency, as it was viewed as a step toward improving the sliding governance situation.

The people of this country desire good governance. Sustainable good governance can be best achieved through practice of democracy. The country is eagerly waiting to have democracy for that. But, democracy should not be a name only democracy. The people are anxious to get an effective unadulterated democracy, which would deliver good governance. A free and fair election is the first step toward achieving that goal.

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A reality check



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN as the authorities have been attempting a Caesarean rebirth of the polity and feeding it with the syrupy promises of a bright future once the agenda it has undertaken comes to fruition, belying the prospect of any windfall, things have worsened -- at least for the present.

The recalcitrant market for essentials did not relent, neither did the country's trade and commerce get rejuvenated, despite the government considering an amende honorable for the top business entrepreneurs now incarcerated for corruption. The price hike kept skyrocketing till the end of the Ramadan, notwithstanding the establishment's sincere efforts to set up BDR's fair price shops and price monitoring

Notwithstanding these positive developments, people are showing little interest in the highly publicised pre-election preparation. Of course, a few old politicians and new hopefuls probed the changed political landscape, only to promptly recoil. As a result, there has not been a single respectable addition to our political class.

by it.

The post-Ramadan market is also expected to be scary because of the devalued currency due to unabated inflation. Now that the Ramadan is over, it is to be seen how the market, and for that matter the country's overall economy, behaves.

In the meantime, the prognoses already given out by the experts and economists are not quite comforting. While they predict a pervasive dearth and public hardship, ground reality suggests that it will be virtually impossible to rein in the economic behaviour resulting from the unpredictable and unstable political future of the country.

Almost a year through the specially empowered government of meritocracy, the country is still on the brink -- and not without reasons. The present dispensation inherited a country thoroughly

corrupted, plundered, and terrorised by BNP-Jamaat thugs, and a highly politicised administration, as well as the concomitant problems emanating from them. As the interim government was putting things in order, the existing problems were compounded by the devastating flood, and a crop failure resulting from its recurrence -- thus having lingering effects beyond a fixed time frame.

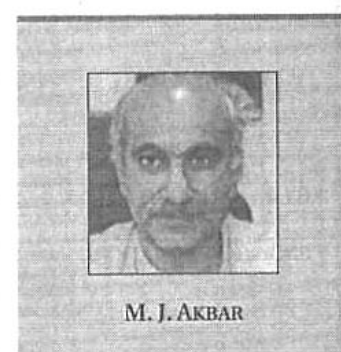
The government was also jolted by periodic eruptions of violence, at one time on university campuses and at another in the garment sector -- a legacy of the past, when they proliferated in a particular milieu but lasted as a practice also for the future. The piled-up problems show that we may not be able to totally come out of the morass anytime soon.

The shrinking job markets abroad, falling aid level, decreased investment, increasing unem-

ployment, and bureaucratic bungling in many sectors conjure up a spectacle comparable only to the one we witnessed during the closing days of the last BNP-led government. As a matter of fact, the precipitation that started at the time could never be fully checked by the present dispensation through its multi-pronged drive against corruption, terrorism and a plethora of other irregularities, so what was previously a downward slide now appears to be getting worse.

After having already increased the fuel price once, the government -- as hinted by the energy adviser -- may be considering another increase, alongside enhanced tariff for all utility services. It is mind boggling to think of its nightmarish impact on public life, particularly for those on the margins.

Item number



M. J. AKBAR

TRUST a Calcuttan to come up with the perfect political metaphor. We were chatting about the political mood of Muslims over tea and savouries on Id, and the conversation turned inevitably to the fate of Rizwan ur Rehman, the young man whose death in suspicious circumstances has set off a firestorm in Bengal.

The Muslim vote, my Calcuttan friend said bitterly, had become like an item number in Hindi films. It was used to pump up the box office, and then dumped completely from the script.

For the very, very few of you out there who still do not know what an item number is in a Hindi movie: this is the generally raunchy song that is planted into the sequence without any pretence of reason, and with absolutely no consequence on the narrative. The Muslim voter feels similarly used by the political parties he supports. As my friend pointed out, at least those in the item number get paid for their contribution.

The best way to prevent disillusionment, of course, is to avoid the trap of illusion. And yet, the Left, spearheaded by the CPI(M), has given Indian Muslims cause for

Muslim disenchantment with the Congress, the other party that received its enthusiastic vote in 2004, is more widespread and deeper. The cause is the same, a perception of injustice. Maharashtra's Muslims are still waiting for the Congress to take action against those named in the Srikrishna report for fomenting riots in the wake of the demolition of the Babri mosque. The Congress and its ally, Sharad Pawar's NCP, have been in power in the state for eight years. They have no alibis left.

some comfort. Three decades of communal peace in Bengal during the reign of the Left Front have erased memories of what Bengal once was.

Bengal is a border state that has been partitioned, and embers from 1947 raged till the mid-seventies. In a sense, the Marxist generation of Biman Bose, the present head of the party in Bengal, won its spurs during the frequent riots in Calcutta during the 1960s when it mobilised its cadre and stood on street corners, preventing hired goons from entering the city's Muslim mohallas.

Ever since the Left Front came to power in 1977, and Jyoti Basu became chief minister, a deft combination of political and administrative management has kept this particular beast out of people's lives.

But over three decades, the Left in Bengal has slipped, unconsciously perhaps, into another trap: "soft secularism." Because it has prevented riots, it tends to believe that it has done enough for the community. There is an element of patronage in this attitude, as if providing protection to the lives of Muslims is a special favour rather than a government's duty.

BYLINE

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One statistic, available in the seminal report on minorities prepared by Justice Rajender Sachar, should be enough to make the point. Muslims constitute 25.2% of the population of West Bengal, but have only 2.1% of state government jobs. Kerala, which has almost the same percentage of Muslims (24.7%), has given 10.4% of state government jobs to the community. Assam's ratio is similar: 30.9% and 11.2%. Bihar does better: it gives 7.6% of state jobs to Muslims, who add up to 16.5% of the population.

Andhra Pradesh has the best record: 9.2% of the population and 8.8% of jobs. Uttar Pradesh, despite leaders who claim to be more-secular-than-thou, has given only 5.1% of state government jobs to an 18.5% population. The situation is no better when it comes to health and education indices.

The anger in Bengal, therefore, is much greater than the appalling mismanagement of one incident would warrant.

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A second reason is the treatment of Muslim suspects by the Andhra Pradesh police after the recent blasts. Torture was pervasive. This was the finding of the Andhra Pradesh State Minorities Commission, which sent its report to the government -- which, till date, has opted for familiar silence.

The street has its own means of forming an opinion, through what it sees. It notes police indifference in the investigation of the bomb blasts at Mecca Masjid, where only Muslims died and the zeal displayed elsewhere. A voter does not make up his (and more important, her) mind in one eureka moment. It is a slow accretion of evidence that takes the voter in one direction or the other when his moment comes, on polling day.

And then, of course, there is George Bush, the omnipresent ghost hovering over Dr.

Manmohan "Hamlet" Singh. The Muslim voter may not understand the finer points of the 123 Agreement, or the hammer blows of the Hyde Act, but he can see the headlong rush of Dr Singh into the embrace of the man who has wrought unprecedented havoc on Iraq, whose record is stained with the blood of perhaps half a million Iraqis, who has turned four million Iraqis into refugees, and talks of permanent bases in a nation that wants his troops out yesterday.

Hamlet's fatal flaw was not sleaze but indecision. The iron law of public life is clear: people will accept a wrong decision, but they have no respect for indecision. Dr. Hamlet Singh's sudden waffle on the nuclear deal has done the worse possible damage. It has made him look silly, and Bush look clueless.

The latter may not cause too much damage to the American president's reputation, since this is not the first time he has looked clueless. But for the Indian prime minister to slip from Super Saviour to Hiccup Hamlet is not good electoral news for the Congress. Dr. Hamlet Singh is also probably beginning to appreciate the unpleasant fact that the admirers who basked in his kindness and favour for three years were supporters of the deal, not supporters of the prime minister.

The moment he suggested that life could go on beyond the deal, they began to demand his resignation. Hero-worship is a merciless profession.

Nor has the foreign policy story played out. Russia's snub to external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee, who was not permit-

ted the customary call on President Vladimir Putin, and defence minister A.K. Antony, who could not even get an appointment with his counterpart Sergei Lavrov, is a reminder that those who have stood by India with both military hardware and nuclear fuel have their own views on Dr. Singh's lurch towards George Bush.

It is already evident that while Muslims will still prefer Congress to the BJP in a straight contest in next year's general election, Congress governments in the states and the Centre have done enough in three years to halve their support from this crucial minority.

How badly will the Left Front be affected in Bengal? There is one important difference between the Left and the Congress: while Muslims still expect some redress from the Left, they are cynical about the Congress. The Congress has habitually been long on rhetoric and short on delivery when it comes to affirmative action. The Left has a chance to cut its losses in Bengal but it needs to get its act in place fast.

What is beyond dispute is that Muslims are tired of being the item number of a general election, flashed out for five minutes and sent back to political purgatory when the elections are over. The elections of 2008 will probably be the last time that they will stick to their traditional anchors. If the only reward for their support is indifference, the item girl will write her own script for a movie in which she will be the star.

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