

'Let them eat cake'

The message is that the government does not have any leverage to control the combine. A government is a contract with the people, and it has to ensure that they have access to the basic needs. Food is most basic of all needs. Here the role of the government is a matter of the highest importance.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE other evening I had been to a wedding ceremony at a 5-star city hotel. It was a large turnout. The costliest dish kachchi biriyani was served. For making kachchi the finest quality of rice is used, which costs around Taka 80.00 per kilo.

Rice, these days, is headline news because of the confounding

per kilo -- is quite a blight in a land famed for its bountiful harvest. The price of the finer varieties like nizershail and miniket is a staggering Taka 42.00 per kilo. This is the land where fortune seekers from the west used to come in the olden times for its bountiful and low priced agriculture produce. Sonar Bangla was not a fable it was a reality, and we have heard that during Shaista Khan's rule one taka fetched 8

down. Then what went wrong, and where, after 2001? This has to be addressed if the country does not want to slide into further crisis. West Bengal, that in the past used to get rice from the hinterlands of this part, is managing its agriculture market quite efficiently. CPM rule has been remarkably successful in building a buoyant agrarian sector with the help of cooperatives. Round the year, fresh produce

Marie Antoinette's remark, "let them eat cake."

I accept the plea of inflationary pressure. I accept that the rise in remittance earning has contributed to greater spending and has spurred money supply. There has also been a perceptible rise in the social and human index all over Bangladesh. But these, in no way, justify the bewildering rise in the price of rice.

Indeed, the cost of producing rice has increased. Prices of agriculture inputs have steeply risen over the years. Rice production all over Bangladesh has become more and more dependent on surface water in the absence of a system to preserve excess mon-

ported by bridges over the river Jamuna, Meghna and Padma (Paksey-Bheramara). This has facilitated transportation of goods all over the country. The devil also stalks them. A combine of political predators, unscrupulous traders and transportation thugs add their toll to the price of rice.

The combine has countrywide clout, and operates from the growers level up to the marketing outlets. It controls the supply and the eventual price of rice. It is everywhere. It is, therefore, difficult to isolate the pathogen and rid the network of the devil. The government cannot roll them back. It will only aggravate the crisis. Such is its might that the government had to permit them to use the spaces under the approach spans of Babubazar bridge for stacking the wholesale rice bags. The plea being that withdrawal of such facilities would add to the storage problem and cause eventual rise of price. Still, the price kept on rising.

The message is that the government does not have any leverage to control the combine. A government is a contract with the people, and it has to ensure that they have access to the basic needs. Food is most basic of all needs. Here the role of the government is a matter of highest importance.

It is national honour that works behind Japan's subsidy of rice production. The mantras of the World Bank and IMF will not be in the interest of Bangladesh. Even United States of America protects its dairy products, and France protects its agriculture produce. If subsidy is the recipe for stabilising the price of rice let it be. The support has to be given at the growers level.

The foremost thing the government has to do is to outsmart the private sector combine. The advantage lies with the government because it has greater experience. It is necessary that government measures should put a cap on the price. Rationing, in the past, had kept the price of rice stable, and it can be reintroduced in limited form.

Coscor, run on the profit motive, can be revived in metropolitan centres. The ways for the government are many. To say that the government can't do anything about bringing down the price of rice is a capitulation of national interest. Bangladesh is far more capable than that.

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The constitution, democracy and corruption in Bangladesh

Ways and means should be devised to ensure the entry of persons without political attachments, and any blemish, into the bureaucracy by disallowing any individual with a criminal record from sitting for the BCS or any public service examination. Besides, a social boycott movement against all vices and corruption at all levels in the society must be launched all over the country. A movement for moral re-armament for the people at large is also very necessary, which can be done most effectively through their school curriculum.

AMINUDDIN CHOWDHURY

LOD Acton said: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." So not dictatorship, but democracy -- a government of not one man but of all people -- is now the norm in almost all the developed and developing countries of the world.

Bangladesh is a democratic country, but the quality of democracy obtaining here is abysmally low. The reasons are not far to seek. Corruption has eroded the vitals of democratic institutions all over the country. A large segment of Parliamentarians, who make laws and frame the guiding principles of governance, and the bureaucrats who implement the same, barring a few, indulge in corruption.

So the government's ability and efficiency in providing service to the people suffer significantly. In spite of factors like absence of academic maturity and political education of the people etc., the Constitution of the country plays a vital role, but it also bears the seeds of corruption in that it tacitly encourages corruption to germinate and perpetuate.

Article 66 (2)(d) of the Constitution says: "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of Parliament, who has been convicted for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, or sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release."

This provision in the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, implies

"That a person convicted for corruption and sentenced to imprisonment for a term of less than two years is not disqualified for election."

A person convicted of corruption and sentenced to imprisonment for a term of two years or more may contest elections to become an MP, or even the presi-

dent, on the expiry of five years after his release from jail.

A corrupt politician washes off his criminal character and becomes a perfect, innocent man on expiry of seven years after going to jail for corruption and moral turpitude.

On the contrary, there is a proverb "black will take no other hue" and a common saying, "character once lost is lost for good," and a natural experience, "a river after it dries, leaves a trace of itself."

The citizen's view is that a person once convicted for criminal offence and suffering imprisonment, in most cases, turns into a hardened criminal. Any leader or MP convicted for corruption, if re-elected, is likely to indulge in more corrupt practices to make good the loss sustained by him during the period of his absence from politics or the parliament.

General Moyeen, recently said in Boston, USA: "Corruption devours democracy." Not only that, corruption destroys all democratic, social and moral values of human beings. So, a person once proved corrupt in a competent court of law should not be allowed to re-appear in parliament, except to the peril of our society.

Hence, we feel that the above provision in our Constitution (Article 66(2)(d)) is a stigma to the political culture in Bangladesh. This provision should be discarded, or so suitably amended as to debar all corrupt politicians from all elections, national or regional, for good.

Such action only may be compatible with the move of the present caretaker government to contain the demon of corruption pervading all over Bangladesh.

We may now turn to the other side of the coin, the bureaucracy, or all the cadres of civil service including the executive and the judiciary, along with the supporting ministerial services of the government.

In the late fifties, late Ataur Rahman Khan, the then chief

minister of the then East Pakistan, made an observation, specially relating to the ministerial service, in his book "Jarir Dui Bochor," that "they attend office for pay and work in the office for money."

This, though not an axiom, has percolated over the years to even the highest echelons of the bureaucracy in Bangladesh. Of course, not all bureaucrats and not all politicians are corrupt.

Corrupt political leaders or ministers at the helm of government until recently, added fuel to the fire. Corrupt practices of many a politician, matched ably by that of the bureaucrats (with a few exceptions), has plunged the whole country into an abyss of unparalleled economic ruin and moral degradation.

Preventive and curative measures need to be taken immediately to arrest the present trend of corruption and salvage whatever has remained of the body politic of Bangladesh from impending ruin.

Constitutional provisions to eliminate corrupt persons from government, both legislative and executive, as well as the judiciary, should be the first step in this direction. This should be followed by all-out legal actions (which the present government had initiated) to award deterrent punishment to the corrupt elements.

Ways and means should be devised to ensure the entry of persons without political attachments, and any blemish, into the bureaucracy by disallowing any individual found to have a criminal record from sitting for the BCS or any public service examination.

Besides, a social boycott movement against all vices and corruption at all levels in the society must be launched all over the country. A movement for moral re-armament for the people at large is also very necessary, which can be done most effectively through their school curriculum.

Aminuddin Chowdhury is a retired Divisional Commissioner.



Don't drop any! It is very expensive!

price hike. I am not in any way suggesting that kachchi should not be served to a limited number of guests because the price of rice is high. It is the contrast between the price of every day rice, paizam or Irri, and the price of the rice used for kachchi that is uppermost in my mind.

Indeed, everyday life for the common man has become difficult with the price hike going out of control. The high price of ordinary variety of rice -- Taka 36.00

maunds of rice.

I will readily accept that the price of soybean oil has gone up in the international market. Even the price of flour, Taka 38.00 per kilo, is acceptable because we don't produce much wheat. But what has happened to rice? During Awami League's 1996-2001 tenure rice price was stable.

During BNP's first term in 1993 the price of rice plunged to Taka 6.00 per kilo. There was hue and cry that farmers had been let

arrive at Kolkata with the first light of the dawn, and price hikes of our kind 'never' rock the Kolkatans.

One may take an insouciant stand by saying that rice price hike should not be a matter of concern since nobody is dying of starvation. It may, furthermore, be argued that it is an indication of the rising purchasing power of the common man owing to greater money supply in the market. The logic reminds one of

soon water. The water system of Bangladesh is also in a state of decline. Canals, even rivers, have been lost, and we have been profligate in using our water. Japan has no river, yet the Japanese toil so hard to produce rice. Farm hands have also become costlier, and though it is a minor factor it, nonetheless, adds to the rise in the price of rice.

There has been a considerable expansion in the road network of Bangladesh over the years, sup-

STAR

Gangs of Nairobi

Fears about the Mungiki seem well founded. In an interview with Newsweek last summer, Hezekiah Ndura Waruinge, co-founder and former national coordinator of the sect -- its name means multitude in Kikuyu -- said the sect had changed drastically from its original conception as freedom fighters modeled on the Mau Mau rebels who fought for independence from Kenya's British colonizers.

ANDREW EHRENKRANZ AND SCOTT JOHNSON

LAST July, Washington made some brief, if mostly unexamined, news in East Africa when it announced a \$15 million grant to the Kenyan government to help with "law and order" issues. The funding came a full six months before last December's disputed Kenyan election and the subsequent wave of violence that is now flowing, amoebalike, across the country. For outside observers the cash injection may have seemed odd, given Kenya's positive political and economic track record.

But the African nation's nicely lettered signposts of progress and development masked a jarring problem. Throughout much of last spring, in part because of the run-up to the elections but also for a host of other reasons, huge swaths of Kenya were succumbing to a particularly undulant, brutal kind of gangsterism.

In episode after episode, many of which were documented by Kenyan reporters, innocent people were beheaded, skinned, raped, murdered and tortured by members of a secretive outlawed sect called Mungiki. In response the Kenyan police and domestic security services began to jail thousands of youngsters.

Human rights organisations began calling attention to the apparent "disappearances" of several of them. The "Mungiki threat" became a national, if not an international, obsession.

Kenyan fears were not misplaced. The dynamics of the Mungiki sect were as compelling as they were appalling. Mungiki had deep and

growing political influence. Its 1.5 million members were drawn from Kenya's largest and most powerful tribe, the Kikuyu, who controlled much of Kenya's economy. The sect was said to have as much pull with the police as it did with senior ministers.

And yet for all the suspicion, the government, led by Kikuyu President Mwai Kibaki, appeared to be fighting back against the destructive creep of criminal violence by stepping up police raids in cities like Nairobi, a Mungiki stronghold and long the center of a major crime problem.

And then the elections happened. Over the last several days the world has begun to focus its attention on the particularly complex web of factors -- tribal, economic and historical -- that have thrown Kenya into its worst political crisis of the last half century. US Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer has been in talks with Kibaki and his opposition rival, Raila Odinga, to find a solution to the political stalemate.

On Monday both figures agreed to meet to discuss ways out of the impasse, but on Tuesday there were fresh outbreaks of violence after Odinga pulled out of direct talks. His withdrawal was in protest of Kibaki's unilaterally making some key cabinet appointments ahead of the arrival of African Union chairman John E. Kufuor, who arrived in Nairobi Tuesday to mediate the talks. Meanwhile, the Law Society of Kenya, citing the Kenyan constitution, announced Tuesday that Kibaki was in office "illegally" and called for fresh elections within 90 days.

It could be weeks or months before a viable political solution is

hammered out, however, and as that process wears on, the subterranean forces in the ghettos and slums of Nairobi have begun to reassess

machetes, axes -- anything they can find to protect themselves from one another and from the swelling tide of resentment that the election and its handling have cast over the city. In its crudest form the gangsterism has taken on tribal overtones.

On one side are the Mungiki, the self-proclaimed protectors of the Kikuyu, but also of the disenfranchised, the poor and the outcast. On another are crowds of enraged Luo tribesmen, whose anger over the

In one such slum, known as Area 3 -- a sprawl of tin-roofed shacks, supermarkets and community centers that have been burned to the ground over the last two weeks -- a lumbering Luo man wearing a New York baseball cap and carrying a 10-inch machete tucked into his jeans, escorted a Newsweek reporter into a Luo safehouse. "Don't worry," he said, "it's safe here."

The man, who called himself Titus, was a security escort for this

ways.

Taliban members see themselves as providing security and justice. They first became active the day after the elections. Their men, typically tall and built like heavyweight boxers, light fires and sleep with groups of unaffiliated volunteers outside apartment buildings and shanty towns at night, trying to allay the fears of restless women and children.

Last Saturday night Taliban members tried unsuccessfully to

borhood called Stage 2930.

Moses believed the killers were Mungiki disguised as policemen. Without the protection of the Taliban, Moses said, the Luo are in danger. Moses claimed to have seen four people butchered and said he had had to use his own panga machete in self-defense on three of the last four nights.

As the incursions and counterattacks have increased in this desperately poor section of Nairobi, many have been left without food or water. Food prices have skyrocketed. Three small potatoes stacked on a vendor's mat used to cost less than a nickel; today they are an unaffordable 50 shillings, about 55 cents. Moses said he thought the violence elsewhere in Kenya among similar groups of armed men was simply a long-suppressed desire for revenge. "If you are Luo, they chop you," he said ruefully. "So what do you think we do?"

Fears about the Mungiki seem well founded. In an interview with Newsweek last summer, Hezekiah Ndura Waruinge, co-founder and former national coordinator of the sect -- its name means multitude in Kikuyu -- said the sect had changed drastically from its original conception as freedom fighters modeled on the Mau Mau rebels who fought for independence from Kenya's British colonizers.

"Mungiki no longer exists," warned Waruinge, adding that the new gangs are dangerous because "there is no more central control. There is no leadership to negotiate with, just a bunch of rogue groups taking money from the highest bidder." While much of the Mungiki's ritual and history is shrouded in secrecy, their attacks have tended to follow distinct patterns.

Prior to attacking they make a bonfire and roll their pantlegs up to alert fellow members in the area. They believe that women should be circumcised -- and sometimes force the procedure on them. In other cases Mungiki behead and circumcise their victims, usually scattering



their strength. This time, though, the gangsterism of the spring is quickly morphing into an ethnic war -- a radicalisation of the tribal politics that has garnered so many headlines and cast the unity of the country into doubt.

The poison is manifesting itself through what could be called the gangs of Nairobi, the swarming multitudes of young men who have begun patrolling the slums with

disputed election results that kept their candidate, Odinga, from taking office, have contributed to the looting, burning and killing across the country.

The result, at least in the hives of Nairobi's ghettos, places like Kibera and Mathare, is a tense standoff between groups of armed men and a pervasive sense of unease about the ability or willingness of either side to back off.

group of Luo vigilantes, who have taken to calling themselves "Taliban," partially in emulation of the draconian tactics of the Afghan tribesmen who enforced law and order through the barrels of their AK-47s. Looking out onto the street, these Luo Taliban searched the area for the men they now perceive as their sworn enemies: the Kikuyu Mungiki gangs who have taken up positions at intersections and alleys

dynamite a small bridge that links a Kikuyu area to a smaller Luo area where a now vacant tenement building had been attacked.

"Those are them," whispered one Taliban member named Moses, pointing at a group of armed men down the street manning a fruit stand. He believed they were Mungiki. Earlier that morning two non-Taliban Luo had been killed walking across an adjacent neigh-

body parts in different public locations. No outsiders know what all their initiation rituals are for certain, but some are said to involve drinking or bathing in blood.

With postelection Kenya becoming increasingly volatile, many residents fear a brutal boost to Mungiki power. Many Luo slum residents, like 29-year-old Rachel -- who was afraid to give her surname -- are planning to flee Mathare. "We don't even talk in our own language because of Mungiki," Rachel says. "We can't sleep here, so we are staying with a relative in a Taliban area."

Many others, seen filling up the backs of old pickup trucks and steering their belongings on wooden carts, are following suit, heading toward the displacement camps that are growing in number outside churches, police stations, and military bases. Hustling out toward a safer haven on Sunday afternoon, Louis Etiyang sported thick bandages on his head and machete gashes on his arms. On Dec. 30 he was walking alone through a Kikuyu area when someone shouted "Luo!" and a group attacked him. "If a KTN (Kenyan Television Network) truck had not passed, I'm dead."

The conflict has pitted tribes, voting blocs and even best friends against one another. The majority Kikuyu and the Kamba tribes are together. Kenya's third- and fourth-largest tribes, the Kalenjin and the Luo, as well as a hodgepodge of many of the country's 40-odd tribes, have also forged an alliance. "Everything is different now. It's all tribes and partisans," said Rogers Wanyonyi, a 35-year-old teller at a currency exchange bureau who was hovering near a group of Luo men clutching makeshift weapons outside a barricaded restaurant in Taliban stronghold Area 4-A. "What I see isn't Kenya; it's like war." Given the tensions between the Taliban and the Mungiki, that war isn't likely to end anytime soon.