Change the Debate

Farid Bakht discusses the politics of food and farmers

MENTION the name Henry Kissinger in Bangladesh, and you are likely to get a swift elbow in the ribs for that comment. I bring his name up because of another gem, shared with lesser mortals in 1970:

"Control oil and you control nations; control food and you control the people."

The seventies were characterised by the use of food as a political weapon and Dhaka suffered the worst in 1974, at the hands of Kissinger

That lesson was forgotten in the nineties as the new aspirational middle classes thought food was "passé," agriculture backward, and the action was in "services." Today, food and commodities in general have returned to centre stage, both politically and economically. With rice prices doubling, how could it be otherwise when over 70% poor families' incomes goes towards buying food?

For a generation, it has been trite to mention famine, near famine (monga) or the economic disenfranchisement of the landless in Bangladesh. Small farmers were to be counted for Election Day only.

Large poultry farms and agribusiness were to be the way forward, until the scandal of bird flu stopped that in its tracks. Contract farming was the other panacea as farmers were to be reduced to quasi-bonded labourers -- all the risk, none of the gain. Agriculture on this heavily

