

Price monitoring by FBCCI Lessons learnt should be applied without ado

THE president and other office bearers of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) have in the last few days been touring city markets and monitoring prices of essential goods. And what they have to report certainly does not make anyone happy. They have informed us that they have noticed significant differences in the prices of the same goods in retail shops at different city markets. As an instance, prices in Shyambazar vary widely from those in Karwan Bazar. The FBCCI leaders, who had earlier taken it upon themselves to help keep prices under control, are now clearly exasperated at the unbridled way in which retailers have been selling goods to already suffering consumers. They have noted that they have no network wide enough to keep markets countrywide under surveillance and therefore little influence over retailers.

Obviously, therefore, we now have a situation where a sense of desperation has come into people unable to cope with price increases, especially in the on-going month of Ramadan. It has become clear by now that none of the measures and no amount of threats or cajoling have so far been effective in curbing prices or keeping them under control. So what needs to be done now is for a mechanism-cum-vigilance system to be so devised so as to ensure a proper and regular monitoring of prices. But, of course, such monitoring will aim at plugging the depths of the price rise factor. In this connection, one can look back at the past, where the practice of putting up price lists at all markets, under the supervision of municipalities, was in vogue. At the same time, inspectors appointed by the authorities regularly made the rounds of markets as a way of keeping a check on unscrupulous market practices. Perhaps the time has arrived when such measures need to be in place once more. One way of going about the job is to ensure that wholesalers issue money receipts to those retailers they sell their goods to. Such receipts as well as the price lists must then be open to inspection in order to ensure that no manipulation or manoeuvring undermines the buying and selling of essential items.

Finally, let it be made clear that a daily inspection of urban markets has now become a necessity. Let the practice be set and there is a good chance that some good will come of it. But let us also resist the temptation of utilising the services of the joint forces in handling market prices. Such methods not only create panic but also go against the rules of business.

A big threat to public health Demolish the racket behind lagoon fish culture

DESPICABLE is the word that can partially define the practice of catching poisonous fish from waste treatment plant lagoons and selling them in the markets for human consumption. And we are appalled to learn that this heinous practice has been going on for years together in the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) lagoons in and around Pagla, Narayanganj, though officially there is a 10-year old ban on fishing in lagoon waters. According to experts, poisonous components in lagoon fish can stay in human body for 8 to 10 years, causing kidney and liver diseases including cancer. Therefore, authorities should have been doubly concerned at the health risks of the citizens. A back-page news item in this daily on Saturday spoke alleged involvement of a section of employees of WASA, local fishermen and on-duty ansars in the scam defying office orders.

The lagoon waters contain heavy metal, industrial waste and human waste, thereby forming a lethal combination for fish cultivation. To discourage fishing, as part of its yearly drive, WASA in association with the department of fisheries had applied chemicals in two of the 16 lagoons to kill the poisonous fish. The authorities also had plans to apply poison to the waters in all the other lagoons. But, before all the fish could be killed, local people in collaboration with the security guards started to catch them to sell in local kitchen markets. And it is apparent that thousands of people have already consumed the poisonous fish to their peril.

We wonder why the planned boundary walls around the lagoons have not yet been constructed as an effective solution to the problem since it is not possible to guard a huge area for twenty-four hours. At the same time we strongly feel the WASA authorities should come down heavily on the security guards and other employees who are entrusted with the responsibility of sequestering the lagoon waters. The racket has to be busted once and for all considering the hazards of eating contaminated fish to human health. This must be taken up as a priority issue by WASA and the relevant ministries.

Mobility of the masses



ABDUL BAYES

AN interesting aspect of rural livelihood system is mobility. We can take up the issue of mobility of rural households -- along occupation or land ownership scale -- to understand the dynamics that rural households are face with in response to the change of three I's: Infrastructure, Incentives, and Institutions.

In Bangladesh, and till today, research is scant on this score. Fortunately, however, the Brac-backed survey of 2010 households in 62 villages allows us to pick up the panel and observe the mobility of same households over a time period, say, 2000 to 2008.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

It appears that improvements in institutions, incentives, and infrastructure could help the poor earn a living through changes in primary occupations. In a land scarce country like Bangladesh, tenancy reforms, provisions for infrastructure, and thickness of labour market could be of immense help for poverty reduction.

Occupational mobility

First, consider the case of occupational mobility. Rural households are engaged in various types of occupations under agricultural or non-agricultural sector. Do they stick to a particular occupation forever?

Let us begin with the poorest one: agricultural and non-agricultural labour. A priori reasoning would suggest that they are likely to be less mobile and least responsive to changing I's. We observe that only one-third of rural households with agricultural labour as primary occupation in 2000 continued with the same occupation in 2008, and roughly two-thirds shifted primary occupation.

That is, majority of rural households that once relied on agricultural labour as prime source of survival have changed primary occupation between 2000 and 2008.

Where did this vast pool of the poor go? Well, about one-third left labour and adopted farming as primary occupation, 14 percent embraced non-agricultural labour, and roughly one-tenth went to services.

The fact that former agricultural labour turned into present farmer speaks of a growing tenancy market in rural areas. Large and medium farms went for non-farm pursuits, leaving land in the hands of the landless labourers. Growth of non-farm activities

pulled a portion into services and non-agricultural labour.

Consider the case of non-agricultural labour. Again, 43 percent of the non-agricultural labour of 2000 maintained the early positions found in 2008, and the rest changed primary occupation.

One-fifth of them went to farming, 15 percent served as agricultural labour, and 12 percent to services. We can possibly argue the change in primary occupations of the poor took place in response to changes in institutions (tenurial arrangements), infrastructure (roads for transport, petty trading, and services), and incentives (higher wage).

The least mobile among rural households seems to be the farm-

ers and the service holders. For example, three-fourths of farm households of 2000 continued farming in 2008 and one-fourth changed gears.

Most of the deserters went to services and very few spread out to other occupations. Like farm households, 70 percent of service households also stuck to their past occupation. A bulk of the deserters settled with farming. By and large, rural households change their primary occupation; the poor segment does it more visibly than the non-poor segment.

Mobility across land ownership

We now take up the issue of mobility across land ownership scale. From field level data, we notice that roughly 70 percent of the landless households of 2000 continued to be landless in 2008, and one-fourth of them graduated to marginal farm households, and a feeble five percent as small farms.

In other words, only 30 percent of landless households of 2000 could climb up the ladder by 2008.

This is not surprising, given the fact that there is acute scarcity of

land. Among the marginal farms of 2000, 54 percent remained marginal in 2008 and the rest changed status. For example, one-fourth of them turned into landless (deteriorated) and one-fifth became small and above farms (improved).

About three-fourths of the small farms of 2000 appeared to still be so in 2008. One-fifth deteriorated by turning into landless and marginal households. About 70 percent of medium and large farms of 2000 retained their old status in 2008, 30 percent witnessed deterioration by falling into small and other groups.

Thus, it appears that improvements in institutions, incentives, and infrastructure could help the poor earn a living through changes in primary occupations. In a land scarce country like Bangladesh, tenancy reforms, provisions for infrastructure, and thickness of labour market could be of immense help for poverty reduction.

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Islam from a Western perspective

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The West tends to forget that it took hundreds of years of reforms, counter-reforms, and wars among the Christians to arrive at a political system, which is today known as Christian democracy, in which secularism is accepted as a preferable method of organising civil societies. So given time and patience, most Muslim societies will eventually emerge as Muslim democracies with secular governments



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

IN a televised debate, the moderator asked Barack Obama for his reaction to the Internet rumours that he was a Muslim. The tone of the question, if not inquisitorial, was clearly accusatory -- as though Obama had done something heinous. Obama kept cool and simply replied that he was a Christian. Had he replied that he was a Muslim, his chances of ever becoming the president of the United States would have vanished completely.

This is a common phenomenon in the US and the rest of the West. There is an essentialist mistrust of Islam. The West seems to be engaged in an existential battle against Islam. So the obvious question, is: Why is the Western perception of Islam so negative?

Much of this negative perception is, unfortunately, due to the West's supremacist and self-aggrandising perception of itself and its propaganda machine. According to this pernicious propaganda campaign, Islam and violence go hand in hand, Islamofascism is about to destroy Western civilisation, Islam and democracy are incompatible, and in Muslim countries secular forms of government can not function.

In the wake of 9/11, Bush administration, in order to hide its own mistakes and to cover up its negligence in not taking appropriate actions to prevent the terrorist

attack, adopted fear-mongering as a political strategy, hence the rhetoric of Islamofascism, axis of evil, war on terror, etc.

In Christianity, there are examples of autocratic rulers as well. But there is no such thing called Islamofascism. Islam is a world religion and fascism is a totalitarian political ideology. It is definitely not an Islamic concept. But there have indeed been Christian fascists like Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco.

The accusation that Islam is a violent religion is not new. Western politicians tend to focus on past and present violence perpetrated by the Muslims and conveniently forget violence perpetrated by the Christians. Last year, Pope Benedict, quoting from an obscure medieval text argued that Christianity represents rationality therefore, non-violent and Islam is not rational therefore, tends to be violent. (The pope later apologised for this statement.)

Without getting into a philosophical argument over faith and rationalism, a quick look at the history of Christianity will clearly show that ever since Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, tens of millions have been killed, nations subjugated, continents conquered, and entire races nearly exterminated in the name of Christianity and Western civilisation.

Today, if one opens a newspaper or switches on a television set, one would find that this violence is still being perpetrated in the name of war on terror in many Muslim countries. In a recently published book called *A New History of the Western World*, Roger Osborne writes: "We are drawn to wonder whether Western way of thinking and organising human affairs makes us incapable of gazing on and perhaps even learning from, another culture without needing to dominate and destroy it and make it part of the Western system."

It is an indisputable fact of life that violence breeds violence and in this globalised world it tends to have ripple effects across the world with dire consequences for many innocent victims. Paraphrasing President Clinton's speech at the 2008 Democratic Party convention, one could advise the West to lead the world by the power of its example and not by the example of its power.

Islam is one of the great monotheistic religions of the world, which accepts not only Muhammad but also Abraham, Moses and Jesus as its prophets. Its core values are mercy, kindness, religious tolerance and social justice. Islamism is a term, which is often used in a derogatory sense to mean an ideology, which wants to establish an Islamic state based solely on the

Shariah (which version?).

The insinuation is that it would be an intolerant theocratic state, run by the mullahs where there will be no religious tolerance, no individual liberties, and where women will always be considered as second-class citizens.

Although in the Western press, it is often posited as a debate on the role of religion in politics, unfortunately, that is not the real issue. The real issue is Islam itself and the Western propaganda that: "Islam and democracy are simply incompatible. That Muslims are somehow intrinsically theocratic. That a party favouring Islamic values can not also favour democratic ones. That there could never be an Islamic counterpart to the countless Christian Democratic parties flourishing throughout Europe." (Reza Aslan)

This view does not take into consideration the fact that there are many predominantly Muslim countries like Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, etc where democratic system of government is functioning well. In most of these countries, the legal system, often based on core Islamic values, has been modernised, giving equal rights to all citizens.

True, in some of these countries laws governing the lives of women and children have not yet been completely modernised. The best way to change these laws would be to put social pressure on the legis-

lators to bring them up to date. In this 21st century, it is inconceivable that a society, which calls itself modern, can tolerate discrimination against its own female population. It is also economically counter-productive.

It has been proven time and again that when political movements based on Islamic values -- which often came into existence to fight Western colonialism -- are given the opportunity to operate within democratic systems as normal political actors, they generally accept them, and, in the process, moderate their positions.

But, as has happened in Algeria, Palestine and other places, Islamic movements often feel that there is no point in participating in the democratic political game because even if they win the elections, they will not be allowed to govern because the West, in order to protect its interests would manipulate its local puppets to rig the rules and impose military dictatorships.

Secularism in the strict sense of the term stands for a political system, which ensures separation of religion and state. It is not against religion. A country can be overwhelmingly Muslim or Christian but its system of government can be secular. The problem in some Muslim countries like Turkey is that the members of a minority of the electorate who call themselves secularists are openly anti-religious. They want to abolish all Islamic symbols and practices. Although Turkey's secularists describe themselves as guarantors of democracy, in recent years they have overthrown the democratically elected governments on four occasions.

In an ideal political system, an individual should have the freedom to practice his religion, no matter whether it is Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism, so long as he respects the rights of people

of other faiths and those who have no faiths at all. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the recent decision by the Constitutional Court of Turkey not to dissolve the governing Justice and Development Party, which won the last general elections by an overwhelming majority, has been welcomed by Muslims all over the world.

The West tends to forget that it took hundreds of years of reforms, counter-reforms, and wars among the Christians to arrive at a political system, which is today known as Christian democracy, in which secularism is accepted as a preferable method of organising civil societies. So given time and patience, most Muslim societies will eventually emerge as Muslim democracies with secular governments

Writing recently on American values, Prof. Anne-Marie Slaughter of Princeton University advised the US government to "support liberal democracy and governments with institutions that are accountable to their citizens" and support political systems in which "parties of any religion and any ideology can participate as long as they are committed to the democratic process, recognise the rights of the opposition and bind themselves internationally to recognising minority rights and individual rights of all citizens."

The vast majority of Muslims will gladly accept these values as their own, no matter whether they are American or not. But the fact that a politician of the calibre of Obama, whose grandfather was a Muslim, has to prove continuously that he is a Christian, does not speak very highly of the supposedly secular nature of American democracy.

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Student politics and beyond



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE demand of major political parties to hold elections to the parliament, before holding them at the upazilla level, which the caretaker interim government and the Election Commission proposed to do, has brought about an element of uncertainty in the political atmosphere of the country.

The government and the Election Commission's insistence on holding local government polls earlier is to, supposedly, free the leaders elected in the local bodies from the overriding influence of the members of parliament in administering and provide services to the people in

the basic administrative units, as parliament members now control the purse strings of these units.

Consequently, financial mismanagement and nepotism allegedly abound under the present system since no program for infrastructural development, relating to health and education, etc. can be undertaken without the explicit permission of the member of parliament who represents that area.

Naturally, political parties are reluctant to make any move that would curtail the power and influence of parliament members over the local government bodies.

The constitutional validity of the law, requiring the mayors and

chairmen of municipalities elected recently, to sever their ties with political parties, has been challenged in the court. The political parties also oppose the requirement to abolish fronts of student, labour, and professional bodies, arguing that, as students and others who had spearheaded successful political movements in the past against dictatorship and authoritarian regimes, the severance of ties with their mother political parties would not be beneficial for the country.

Besides, the political parties argue that students today are national leaders of tomorrow and student politics is their training ground. Indeed, students played,

along with freedom fighters from all walks of life, a glorious role in the war of liberation. One can also cite the example of student protests against the Vietnam War in the sixties on the campuses of American universities, which had profound effects on the US government's decision to end the Vietnam War.

Protesting against the Vietnam War in 1968, the students at Columbia University organised a takeover of several campus buildings to protest university research related to the Vietnam War that members perceived as evidence of university administrators' racism.

While never a major factor in

American political life, the students played a significant role in the 1960s movement and the anti-Vietnam war protests. Its emphasis on grassroots democratic activism strongly influenced the development of other social change movements such as the environmental and women's movements, in the 1970s.

In Britain, there exists the Young Conservatives, Young Labour, and Young Liberal Democrats such as the student bodies in US. But these are mostly debating societies or are involved with solving the problems of school and college students. Rarely do they get involved in contentious national politics.

Though the students in the developed economies do play a political role at critical moments in the life of their nations, in Bangladesh the umbilical cord that ties the students with the political parties' program often displays blind loyalty of the students to the party of choice.

The recent violent demonstration by the student front of a political party, demanding the release of a leader from deten-

tion, accused of corruption on an unprecedented scale, that resulted in the death of an innocent passerby, testifies to the extent of blind politicisation of the students.

For countries like Bangladesh to survive, let alone excel, in this age of globalisation marked by time-space compression, accelerating interdependence, and intensification of inter-regional interconnectedness, it is absolutely essential that our student community be armed with the best of skills to compete.

Though critics of globalisation have tried to portray the process as an attempt by the First World to continue its domination of the Third World, it has to be admitted that globalisation has now become an irreversible process. This struggle for excellence is more difficult than generally understood.

Professor Denis O'Hearn (University of Dublin) writes in his book *Tigers and Transnational Corporations*: "Unfortunately the real world transition of globalisation has made access to, and control over meanings of,

technologies and resources more unequal than ever. The rise of supra-national global institutions and market-oriented global networks has increased the power of core capitals to subjugate the peripheral regions in the age of 'postmodernism' and 'post developmentalism'."

This view is echoed by Professor Ziauddin Sardar (a leading Muslim author and writer) in his lament: "The real power of the West is not located in its economic muscle and technological might. Rather it resides in its power to define, for example, what freedom, progressive, and civil behaviour [...] is. The non-Western civilisations have simply to accept these definitions or be defined out of existence."

While the centre-periphery relationship may have been a matter of the past, the reluctance of the developed countries to accept free mobility of people from the developing countries, particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that has consigned Islam and Muslims as promoters of terrorism, makes it imperative for us, a Muslim least

developed country, to arm ourselves with knowledge, transforming us into skilled agents who cannot be dismissed on account of race, religion, colour, or ethnicity.

Unfortunately, the leaders in developing societies, more often than not, are politicians who can see up to the next elections and not statesmen who can see up to the next generation.

Such myopic view of the people and politics, reinforced by their greed for power, which would help them conduct public affairs for private gains, induce them, among other things, to utilise students as mules for narrow political purposes.

One hopes that the patriotic future leaders of Bangladesh would be alive to the myriad challenges that Bangladesh would have to face in the 21st century and would take great care in creating a generation of citizens capable of leading the country towards higher level of socio-economic development.

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