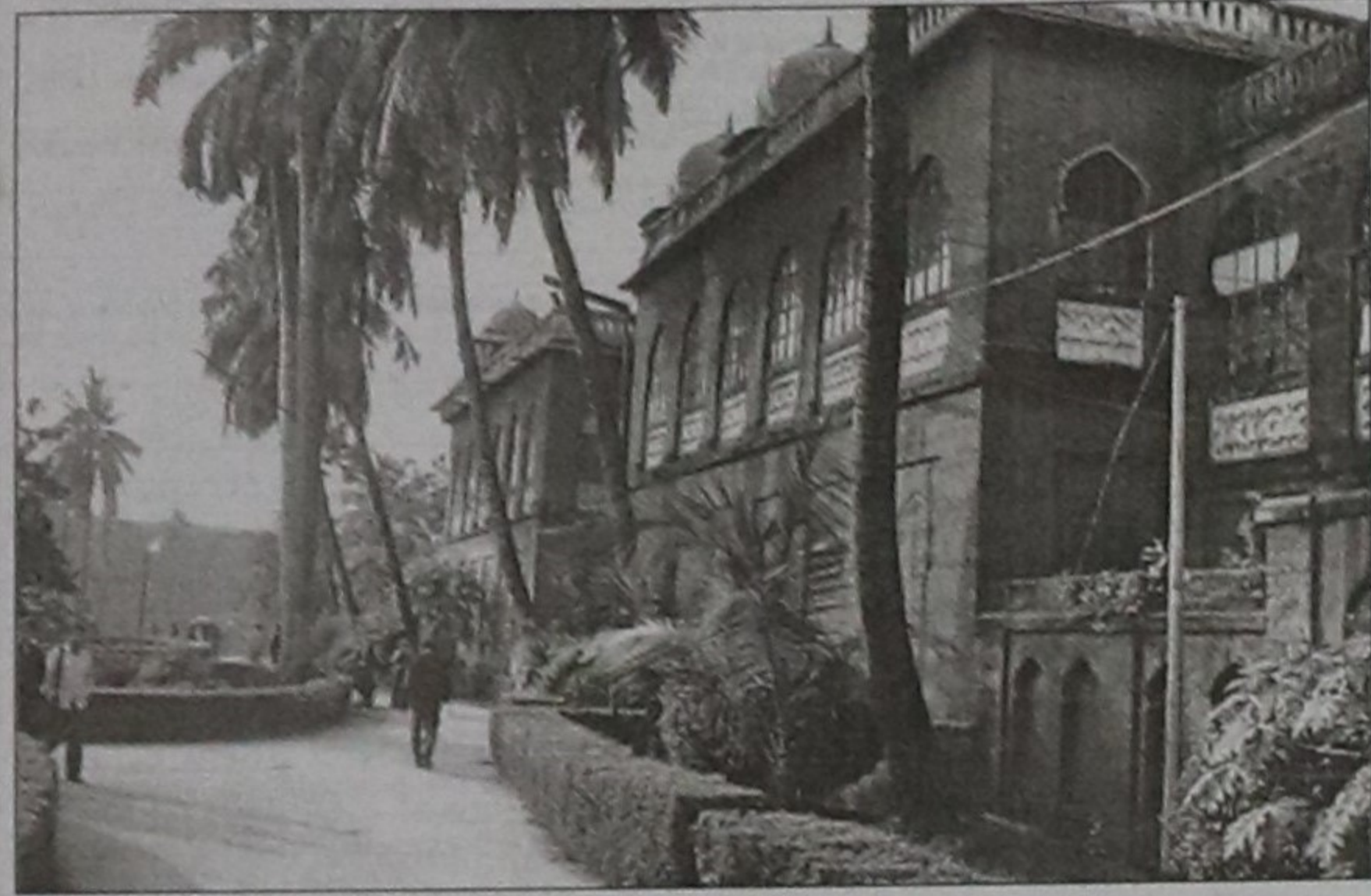


## Restoring dignity

This backdrop should be kept in view in considering the recent spate of violence in the wake of the election victory of the grand alliance. This, however, is no excuse for continuing to tolerate violence on campus by any group. The pledge to usher in an era of change and a new culture in politics demands nothing less.



MANZOOR AHMED

THE Awami League manifesto has said very little about higher education, although it has to play a critical role in implementing the "charter for change" and fulfilling the party's Vision 2021. A short sentence in the manifesto, if pursued seriously, can help set the right course for higher education.

"Educational institutions will be rid of terrorism and session backlog," announces the manifesto.

The two problems mentioned are symptoms of a cancerous disease of indiscipline that afflicts the system of higher education.

In the last three decades, criminality in many forms became rampant on campus with encouragement, acquiescence and tolerance of political and academic authorities. This was manifested in student cadres engaging in "toll-taking" in and around the campus, exercising control in contracts and employment, and influencing even academic decisions in collusion with "politicised" teachers.

A mafia-style operation was the capturing of residential halls by student organisations patronised by the ruling party. They virtually allocated seats in the halls, which they used as a base for recruiting cadres, carrying out their "political" activities, and hiding weapons.

The pseudo-mafioso activities could not have continued without the complicity of both the institutional and the gov-

ernment authorities and their political masters. To our abiding shame, some university administrators and teachers were accomplices in the crimes and many others were silent witnesses.

The roots of this disease go back to Ayub Khan and his henchman Governor Monaem Khan in the 1960s, when they created quisling student organisations by bribing them and guaranteeing protection for their misdeeds as long as they supported the regime.

The involvement of the then government in distorting normal student politics left a permanent scar on idealistic engagement of students in political issues. Branch organisations of political parties among students became customary. Military rulers in post-1975 Bangladesh copied their Pakistani predecessors to create student front organisations as a body of loyal footsoldiers.

The Jamaat-e-Islami joined the fray by establishing the Islami Chhatra Shangha, which became collaborators of the Pakistani invaders during the liberation war. The Jamaat, after gaining legitimacy in Bangladesh from the military rulers, formed the Chhatra Shibir and went about recruiting students from the secondary schools and madrassas.

The public frustration about the situation gave rise to demands for "banning student politics," which would be unconstitutional and could be enforced only with draconian measures. The Election

Commission imposed a prohibition on student front organisations of political parties. The Awami League undertook to have an "associate" organisation of students rather than a branch of the party.

This backdrop should be kept in view in considering the recent spate of violence in the wake of the election victory of the grand alliance. This, however, is no excuse for continuing to tolerate violence on campus by any group. The pledge to usher in an era of change and a new culture in politics demands nothing less.

Some immediate measures that the government must consider are:

- An urgent meeting between the education minister and the home minister along with senior academic and law-enforcement agency personnel to review the situation and decide on responses and preventive action.
- Putting all administrators of educational institutions on notice that they would be held directly accountable for indiscipline involving political cadres. In each institution, they should hold consultation with academic staff and students to work together to maintain discipline and dignity of their respective institutions.
- Putting students on notice that henceforth there would be zero tolerance of violence and serious misbehaviour on campus, which would be punishable to the fullest extent of laws and rules.
- The longer-term actions may include:
  - A policy decision within Awami League regarding its relationship with its student front to give the lead in developing a national consensus, and consider appropriate legislation in this regard so that students are not used and controlled any longer by political parties.
  - UGC, in consultation with the academic community, to formulate a code of conduct for teachers and students about political activities on campus, including mechanism for its enforcement.
  - A policy decision and firm commitment by the government to appoint academic personnel, particularly heads of institutions and senior administrators, strictly on professional merit, without regard for political connections.

An environment of discipline and dignity in academic institutions, that has become a casualty of the political culture, must be restored. Only then the measures to improve quality of education can bear fruit and higher education can begin to play its role in fulfilling the vision of change for the nation.

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed is Senior Adviser at Institute of Educational Development, Brac University.

## Hasina's roadmap

It seems Hasina is very focused on undoing wrongs done by her opposition in parliament. What did the most damage to BNP's image was the astonishing levels of corruption by office-holders of that government. Hasina has warned civil servants that she will not look at anyone's name or designation when it comes to corruption.

HANA SHAMS AHMED

IF Home Minister Shahara Khatun's confusing statements about the opposition BNP's attacks on her party made political analysts raise their eyebrows, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's address to party colleagues at a cabinet meeting seemed to strike a contrasting note of balance. Her promise to deal with irregularities severely is promising, but we must express cautious optimism.

Following the political ethos of the last two decades we are familiar with the phenomenon of initial high expectations slowly dissolving into disappointment and disillusionment at the end of a five-year tenure. Let us hope that this time will be different.

In fact, Awami League's massive win at this year's election has much to do with the disillusionment with BNP's fiasco of a second term. Not even two years of the caretaker government could erase that memory from people's mind. And from what Sheikh Hasina has stated since she took up office, it seems she is very focused on undoing wrongs done by her opposition in parliament.

What did the most damage to BNP's image was, of course, the astonishing levels of corruption by office-holders of that government. Hasina has warned civil servants at the very outset that she will not look at anyone's name or designation when it comes to corruption. Anyone caught will lose his job.

Many voters also said that one reason they voted for AL was because BNP had failed to contain the spiralling prices of essentials. AL's promise to bring down the price of rice had been a factor that played in their favour. Following up on this point, Hasina directed the top civil servants to work fearlessly to free the country of poverty by 2021.

However, such ambitious goals give the government the "feel good factor," but we are still waiting for real insight into the specifics. The word "poverty" is vague, what is needed is action. However, it is early days yet.

It is good to see that Hasina acknowledges that red tape and legal obstacles have in the past hindered many development works undertaken by governments.

She made it clear that she would not concede to stalling development work because of certain laws or regulations. If necessary, she said, new laws would be made for expediting implementation of the projects. The prime minister also described herself and the ministers and state ministers as "temporary" and bureaucrats as the "permanent" fixtures in the government system.

In the health sector, Hasina seems to have many plans to keep the government's promise of "health for all." According to the press statement, 18,000 community clinics, of which 11,000 were built and incorporated in AL's previous health policy, will be in operation to ensure nutrition, child health and maternal well-being for all. There is also a pledge of safe drinking water and sanitation by 2011 and 2013 respectively.

A big chunk of the vote bank for AL came from the young and first-time voters, many of whom have no personal memory of the War of Liberation but were eager to be part of something related to the country's birth -- the trial of the war criminals, which all governments so far have been unwilling to take up.

Jamaat's winning of only 2 seats, after 17 in the 2001 elections, shows clearly that it's not only left-progressives and secular activists, but also the people, who expect to see some progress in these promised trials. The absence of any mention of

these trials in her speech is worrying. History will not give us more second chances.

Some trouble is already brewing on the political front, and it will be interesting to see how this government deals with them. The violent take-over of residential halls of Dhaka University by Chhatra League cadres is an early symptom. It's a déjà vu replay of how corrupt student politics destroyed the educational environment of the country's biggest university.

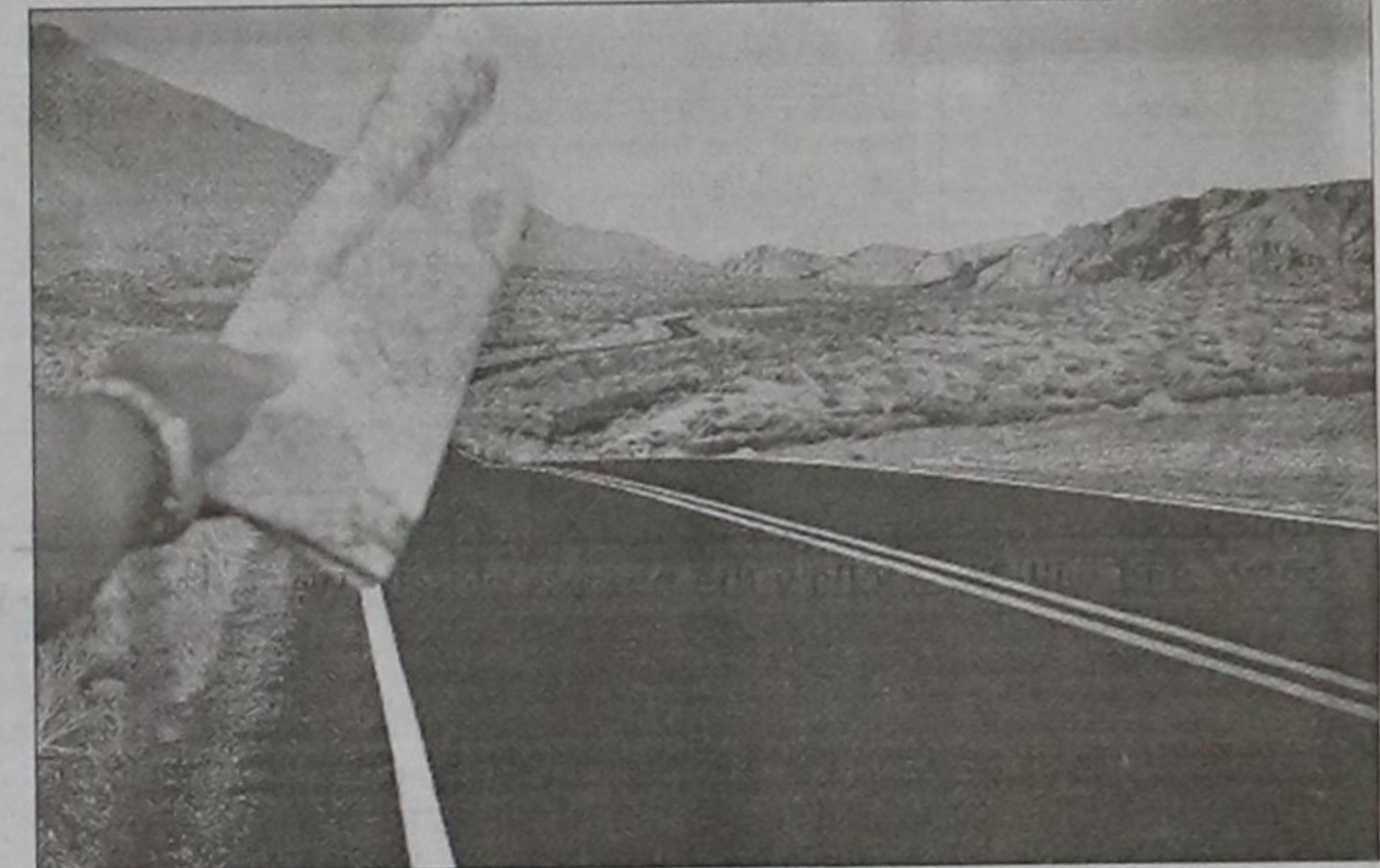
DU Vice Chancellor S.M.A. Faiz's resignation over the wrecking of the congenial atmosphere on campus by rivals JCD and BCL has only added to this worry. The shoe-throwing incident over which Khatib would lead the prayers at Baitul Mukarram mosque also indicates deep politicisation of the city's central mosque.

But it was her warning to her ministers that "heads would roll" if they failed to fulfil the election pledges that brought back memories of the previous Hasina administration, and her sometimes "undiplomatic" press statements.

We understand that she is trying to instil a deep fear of punishment and due process within her new administration. But for stability's sake, we hope that everything will go smoothly and no such drastic measures will be needed.

Bangladesh needs to move out of what Noam Chomsky describes as "spectator democracy" -- where people who vote and bring a government to power, sink back after the elections and become mere spectators, thus making the word "democracy" null. What is needed is an energised citizen body that continues to monitor and hold the government responsible for fulfilling promises. "Transparency" and "accountability" will, hopefully, not just be NGO and diplomatic jargon, but actually be practiced in the parliament and in the government's every dealing with citizens.

Hana Shams Ahmed is a staff writer for Star Magazine.



Towards peace and prosperity?

NASH PHOTOS

## 1943 Warsaw Ghetto, 2009 Gaza

The story of Warsaw Ghetto came back to haunt me this week. The parallels with Gaza today cannot be ignored. It is not true that the IDF is pursuing a policy of holocaust. Hamas is not the valiant ZZW resistance force of 1943. Hamas is an organisation that holds maximal and extreme views despite being elected into government.

ALEXANDER APOSTOLIDES

IN 1943 the Jews herded in the Warsaw Ghetto had enough. After being uprooted from their homes and forced to live in overwhelmingly crowded urban conditions, the ghetto was being strangled by a complete blockade of any food and medical supplies. At the time the true scope of the holocaust was not known; there were dark rumours what the German plan of "resettlement to the east" truly entailed, but the true horror of the Nazi

extermination plan was not yet known.

The Ghetto bravely attacked its German watchmen, firing pistols, revolvers and throwing Molotov cocktails. The Polish resistance army provided much needed weapons, smuggling them into the Ghetto through tunnels and by blowing up parts of the wall that separated the Ghetto from the rest of Warsaw. The Ghetto uprising was crushed by the German army by the use of overwhelming force. The civilian population was not spared; the German forces ignored the fact that the military



Warsaw revisited?

resistance and the civilian population were intermingled. In order to crush the uprising the Germans systematically burned and blew up all houses block by

block, ignoring civilian casualties. The result of the German policy was horrendous. Despite the Jewish fighters numbering less than 1000, 13,000

Jewish civilians perished in the Ghetto. The casualties on the German side were slim: 16 killed and 86 wounded. The story of the Ghetto is one of bravery and despair; its valiant people were my inspiration while growing up.

The story of Warsaw Ghetto came back to haunt me this week. The parallels with Gaza today cannot be ignored. It is not true that the IDF is pursuing a policy of holocaust: the mass machine of extermination set up by the Nazis does not exist today. Hamas is not the valiant ZZW resistance force of 1943. Hamas is an organisation that holds maximal and extreme views despite being elected into government. I am sure that Hamas fighters are mixing with the civilian population. However retaliatory fire is not allowed if the sanctity of civilian life is to be upheld in order for tragedies such as the Warsaw Ghetto to be avoided.

What is true is that extreme violence against civilians can take place when one does not question the use of over-

whelming force in cases that fighters and civilians mix. The disregard of civilian deaths in an effort to combat enemy fighters results in the sheer carnage we see today.

The Gaza residents are also unwilling residents of that area. The overwhelming majority of them are refugees from the 1947 war, herded into a tiny urban strip. During 2008 supplies were being systematically cut off. As a result a giant smuggling operation began which was controlled by military troops, allowing for weapons to be smuggled into Gaza. I am sure that many residents must have cheered when missiles were fired into Israel, feeling that the rockets were a way to show their frustration over their miserable existence. That does not make them legitimate targets for overwhelming IDF fire. Let us hope that lessons from the past will help stop this current butchery.

Alexander Apostolides is a Research Fellow, University of Warwick.

## Cashless society approaching

NURY VITACHI

SOMETHING weird and shocking is going on: money is going out of fashion.

It's true. A sign went up at my local car park forbidding transactions in actual cash. The small print explained that the company from now on only accepted money in non-cash forms "for your convenience."

I HATE that phrase.

Whenever I see it on a corporate sign, it always means the same thing: "We are going to inconvenience you, but we are going to claim the opposite is true, because we believe all our customers are idiots." (Guilty parties include HSBC and Standard Chartered.)

The cashless thing seriously worries me. The Paypal company has just announced it is launching junior accounts to hold pocket money. My own daughter, aged nine, started carrying a

card to use on the school vending machine.

STOP! Has anyone thought to ask: is a cashless society a good thing?

I decided to conduct an experiment to answer this question. I determined to spend one entire day without a single coin or banknote in my pockets and see how long I could survive.

The designated day dawned. I work up. I emptied my pockets. I armed myself with one stored-value card and one

credit card. I marched out of the house.

Transaction one was paying to get to work.

Hmm. Tricky. I found that smaller vehicles, such as some minibuses, taxis and aged rickshaw men, took cash only. However, big corporate forms of transport such as trains and double-decker buses accepted cards. I managed to get to work, but not in my preferred fashion.

For transaction two, I awarded myself breakfast as a reasonable reward for showing up at the office. (Well, I think that's reasonable, but maybe you'd better not tell my boss.)

Tasty smells came from several roadside stalls, especially from one woman selling sandwiches filled with freshly scrambled eggs and corn beef hash. But she had no card-reader. I had to walk to a cluster of chain-stores, including McDonald's, which accepted plastic

payment for plastic food.

Transaction three should have taken place on my way back to the office. A street musician played the erhu beautifully. But he didn't accept credit cards.

Transaction four, lunch, was the same problem as transaction two. I had to bypass a stall selling deep-fried, stuffed chillies, to go to a boring, proper restaurant.

Transaction five bought me something to read on the long ride home. A curb-side news vendor offered me an out-of-date imported magazine at a deep discount. I had to decline and walk for ten minutes until I found a 7-Eleven, where I bought, with a card, a similar magazine, at three times the price! The final verdict? Yes, the cashless society is here. And it stinks.

It prevented me doing business with

all the hardworking people who deserved it: the scrambled egg woman, the mini-bus driver, the taxi driver, the fried chili woman, the street musician and the newspaper vendor.

I was forced to give my transactions only to the big businesses: transport corporations, McDonald's and 7-Eleven.

AND I ended up spending more than usual. The buyer loses.

The vendor-on-the-street loses. The faceless corporations win. Cashless equals heartless.

Incidentally, a lawyer tells me that signs saying "no payments in cash" can be ignored.

"No court would punish a person for honestly paying a bill," he said.

Anyone want to join me to fight this trend?

Visit our columnist at: www.vitachi.com

