

## Remove the middlemen

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M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE government has fixed the price of *boro* to be purchased by it this year. Effective from May, it will be Tk.14 per kg for paddy and Tk.22 per kg for rice. The procurement target has been set at 1.2 million tons in terms of rice.

Fixation of prices for procurement of domestic food grain by the government has always been a difficult task. "The price of rice is too high" is the complaint of the consumers. They would like the price of rice to be lower. "Rice price is too low" is the outcry of the farmers. They would like their rice price to be higher to provide them greater return for their effort and investment.

Why does the government go for domestic procurement of rice? It is mainly to provide price incentives to the growers by arresting the fall of prices during the

harvesting seasons, and to build up government food security stocks in order to implement the targeted programs for food grain distribution under public food distribution system (PFDS).

The government financed food programs can be classified into three major groups. The first group includes Food For Work (FFW), Test Relief (TR), and Gratuitous Relief (GR), and is designed with the dual objectives of development and relief, the second one is grain price stabilisation program (OMS), and the third is for supplies for the priority groups in emergency jobs.

Recent newspaper reports suggest that farmers, economists and experts have expressed mixed reactions to the government procurement price of *boro*. Farmers, particularly the small and marginal farmers, tilling leased lands, are unhappy with the government procurement rate(s). They

say that they will not make any profit as the production cost is high.

While some economists and experts hold the view that the government procurement price will benefit the farmers by arresting the further fall of rice price in the market as well as serve the interest of the consumers, others feel that the government procurement drive will hardly benefit the farmers in the absence of a proper procurement mechanism. This is because the government buys rice from the rice-millers and not from the growers, which is a big weakness in the procurement system. Rice-millers, who enter into contracts with the food directorate to supply rice, reap the benefit instead of the growers.

They also say that the *boro* procurement drive may not arrest the falling price of rice in the local market in view of the fact that the government targeted amount of procurement is not more than seven percent of the projected output of more than 170 million tons. As a result, the farmers will lose interest in growing rice in the future because of low price prices and little profit. The consequence may well be "fatal" as the country will have to increase its dependence on imported rice.

What influences the fixation of prices of

domestic food grain procured by the government? The factor that mostly influences the fixation of prices of such food grain is the cost of production. In the year 2001-2002, when the author was the secretary of the food ministry, the procurement prices of *boro* paddy and rice were Tk.8.40 and Tk.13.25 per kg respectively. The production costs of paddy and rice were calculated at Tk.6.65 and Tk.10.23 per kg respectively. The rising cost of production during the last six years has led to an increase in the procurement prices of *boro* paddy and rice this season by 66 percent compared to the prices of 2001-2002. The other factors that also influence the fixation of prices are domestic production, stock position of food grain in the government godowns, international prices of food grain, import of food grain by the private sector, food aid, etc.

To conclude, the prices for government purchase of *boro* from domestic production this year seem to be reasonable. There is, however, the need for devising the procurement mechanism in such a way that the growers, not the middleman or the rice-millers, are benefitted most from the government procurement drive. The farmers would have remained satisfied even with lower prices if per acre yield of was higher.



Their share is taken away by middlemen.

Available information suggests that Bangladesh has got the lowest productivity among the world's rice producing countries. She can produce a maximum of 0.7 tons of paddy (not rice) per acre, against the global average of two tons per acre. The interests of the farmers and the nation can be protected by substantially

increasing the per acre yield of food grain, particularly rice which meets more than 90 percent of the country's total cereal intake and more than 70 percent of calorie intake. Here the government has to play the major role.

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## Reforming BNP

The party, in line with popular demand, should also oppose issues such as the recently passed local government act, tax free car imports for MPs, dismissal of corruption cases against politicians by short-circuiting the legal process, and so on.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

A common trend has emerged between the American Republican party (GOP) and BNP in Bangladesh -- both are in disarray. The former is greatly weakened while the latter is nearly irrelevant as influential opposition voices in each country's policy shaping.

GOP lawmakers have turned their party into a party of "no" by opposing nearly everything President Obama proposes and, in the process, have alienated many moderate Americans. In Bangladesh, BNP sees politicking and conspiracy in everything the ruling party plans to achieve.

Isn't it laughable that the opposition party is asking the ruling party -- one that formed the government only four months ago -- to quit governance for its failure to deliver on its election pledges?

After its whopping loss in the November election, the GOP elected former Maryland Lt. Governor Michael Steele as the first ever African American to be the party's national committee chairman. He was expected to revamp the party and expand the base, hoping to improve its standing in both Houses of the Congress in the 2010 mid-term election.

Because of inching increasingly into extreme conservative ideologies, the GOP has lost its clout as a centrist party. In last

week's nationwide poll, only 21% Americans identified themselves as Republicans. The exodus from GOP to Independents and Democrats started from President Bush's false pretenses for the Iraq war, which compromised personal freedom in the name of national security (e.g. wiretapping of US citizens), caused unprecedented deficit spending, and pushed many domestic issues further to the right, thus estranging moderate Republicans. A shocking fallout of this is the defection of Senator Arlene Specter of Pennsylvania to the Democratic Party.

This defection strengthened the Senate Democrats closer to a sweeping power in Washington while preventing the remaining 40 GOP lawmakers from being a strong influential force in the Senate. What has all this got to do with Bangladesh politics? Learning how to realign, reform and regroup the party in light of evolving political realities.

While GOP's political setback has resulted from its ideological push to the far

right, BNP's downfall was caused by its politicians' reckless indulgence in mis-governance, mischief, and political repression. GOP think tanks are advising the party stalwarts to realign its ideological tenets so as to make it more inclusive to regain its glorious days. The article by David Frum, "How to build GOP," listed in [politicconomy.com](http://politicconomy.com), may be instructive for BNP as well.

My only rationale for wishing that BNP rebuilds is to see it as an effective political opposition so as to stop AL from drifting into BNP's 2001 -- 2006 misrule era. Organising a month-long countrywide protest and brouhaha for revocation of lease termination notice of Khaleda's house isn't a political strategy -- it's a dumb strategy. Also, organising mammoth gatherings in Paltan Maidan similar to pre-election rallies is good only for show and tell unless the grassroots supporters are rejuvenated. BNP leadership must realize that political kerfuffle outside the parliament on flimsy issues will only hurt the

people's causes and the party's own standing.

Given BNP's thrashing in the last election and AL's governance being much too short to dissect for political advantage, it seems as though BNP leaders are somewhat befuddled as to what issue to raise for energising the downcast base and transforming that into a countrywide agitation. Not surprisingly, even the BNP's alleged "corrupticians" who have resurfaced on bails are also apparently loathe to join the eviction notice revocation movement for various reasons.

Many BNP politicians, instead of actively reorganising the party, are now engaged in internal power struggle to the consternation of grassroots party activists. For example, the rift between Sadeque Hossain Khoka and Mirza Abbas about Dhaka city BNP leadership, allegedly insinuated by Delwar Hossain, couldn't have come at a worse time.

Although over 1100 politicians have applied for dismissal of their corruption

charges as being politically motivated, by my last review not too many of BNP's corrupticians would qualify for dismissal of their cases. Therefore, BNP would be well advised to boot out all its corrupt politicians from the party and replace them with young and well qualified ones for rebuilding the party.

Gaining the people's confidence in the party will require repeated, unqualified apology to the people about the Zia family and BNP politicians' indiscretions. The party, in line with popular demand, should also oppose issues such as the recently passed local government act, tax free car imports for MPs, dismissal of corruption cases against politicians by short-circuiting the legal process, and so on. All these measures may help in rebranding the party and save it from its increasing isolation, irrelevance and slow extinction.

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## BJP succumbs to Moditva

A campaign was launched even before the Supreme Court order to promote Mr. Modi as the BJP's prime minister-in-waiting post-L.K. Advani. It was initiated by two senior BJP leaders, Arun Shourie and Arun Jaitly.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

HAS the Bharatiya Janata Party abandoned all pretence of playing by democratic rules and decided to stoop to the lowest level on the Gujarat carnage issue? Going by its reaction to the Supreme Court's order that the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe Chief Minister Narendra Modi, his ministers and officials for abetting the communal violence of 2002, it seems so.

The Court's directive shows that even seven years after the butchery of 2,000 Muslims, the Gujarat pogrom continues to haunt India.

The Court's order is in line with its directions to transfer major legal cases in the carnage out of Gujarat. It expresses scepticism about the state's inclination to do justice to the pogrom's victims.

Instead of recognising its gravity, the BJP has maligned the Court order as politically motivated and timed to coincide with polling in the general election in Gujarat. Mr. Modi has melodramatically pledged to go to jail if found guilty, and be "reborn to serve Gujarat."

The BJP's self-styled legal luminaries have declared that "there's no evidence" to indict Gujarat's Slobodan Milosevic, who

will turn the "secular brigade's" attack "to his advantage" in the Gujarat elections.

The SIT cannot be accused of secularist zeal. Since it was created by the Supreme Court in 2008, it has only filed one new chargesheet in the 10 cases investigated.

The present petition by Zakia, widow of former MP Ehsan Jafri, names Mr. Modi and 62 other state functionaries, including 11 cabinet ministers, three MLAs and 38 bureaucrats. Among the latter are the then state chief secretary and police chief.

Based on a senior police official's diaries, eyewitness accounts and media reports, the petition alleges that Mr. Modi's cabinet met after the Godhra incident of February 27, and ordered top civil servants to allow "Hindus" (read, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, RSS and Bajrang Dal thugs) "to vent their anger."

This mirrors the findings of over 30 independent reports by national and international citizens' initiatives, former bureaucrats, scholars, feminists and human rights groups.

These show that Gujarat's government machinery refused to restrain armed mobs from killing Muslims, raping and sexually humiliating Muslim women, burning homes, destroying mosques, and pillaging property worth Rs 4,000 crores.

Two ministers (Ashok Bhatt and IK Jadeja) positioned themselves in police control rooms or chambers and prevented personnel from being sent to rescue people under mob attack. State police chief Chakravarthi and Ahmedabad Police Commissioner Pandey delayed imposing curfew and failed to prevent the butchery.

What followed was India's worst communal carnage conducted with state backing, elaborate planning, and later, an extensive cover-up.

These facts are too well-established to need substantiation. But the Modi government erased them from police diaries and First Information Reports and distorted them through "rolling FIRs," which name no suspects.

It also rigged the Nanavati Commission's inquiries and sabotaged the CBI's investigations by destroying records, abducting witnesses, and leading false evidence. This compounded the original offence. By April 2002, the groundwork had been laid for the charades of inquiry that shielded or exculpated the culprits.

This systematic seven-year-long sabotage of justice could have been preempted had the BJP-led central government dismissed Mr. Modi in early March 2002 and imposed President's Rule on Gujarat for violating the Constitution.

But beyond appealing for restraint -- as if there were two sides to blame for the violence -- the government did nothing.

Gujarat's second tragedy was that secular parties failed to mount sustained pressure on the centre to impose President's

Rule. Had all the non-NDA parties taken extraordinary actions, they could have generated irresistible pressure -- actions like *dharnas* in state capitals, and a collective fast-unto-death in Gandhinagar.

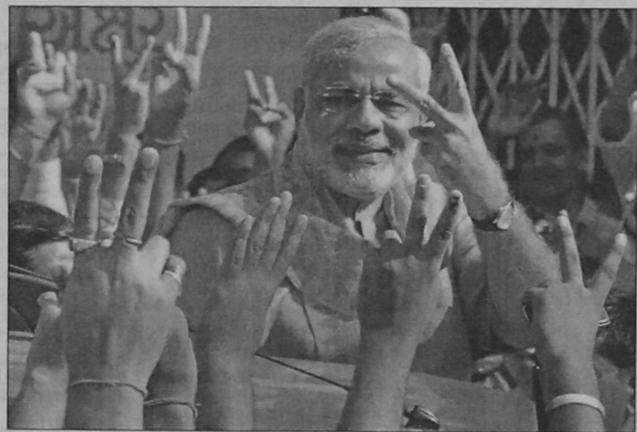
In 1974, Morarji Desai secured the dismissal of the Chimanbhai Patel government through a hunger-strike for mere corruption.

Gujarat's third tragedy was that the state-level opposition didn't even try to mobilise powerful protests. Mr. Modi tyrannised Gujarat, mocked the Constitution, and politically disempowered both Muslims, 12 percent of Gujarat's population, and a larger chunk of secular non-Muslims.

Then followed the fourth tragedy: Assembly elections, when lakhs of victims lived in makeshift camps amidst a breakdown of law and order. By late 2002, communal polarisation grew into near-apartheid. Conducting elections amidst such conditions is mocking democracy.

The BJP, and the man who presided over the butchery of 2002, deserves to be politically punished, even if some criminal cases against the culprits cannot be brought to completion soon. Assuming that the SIT conducts an honest job, it will still take years for the 63 people named for instigating the riots in Ms. Zakia Ahsan's petition to be brought to justice.

However, some minimal justice will be done if the public rebuffs Mr. Modi and his ideology of *Moditva* (bloodsoaked *Hindutva*, coupled with ruthlessness, machismo and disregard for democratic norms) by overwhelmingly voting against the BJP.



Prime Minister in waiting?

By the time these lines appear in print, polling in Gujarat will have ended. But people in other states can still express their disgust with the BJP's divisive, exclusionist and hate-filled politics.

This is not a call for vindictiveness. The Congress has at least apologised for the 1984 anti-Sikh violence and withdrawn Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar's candidature in Delhi.

The BJP continues to be in denial of the Gujarat pogrom. It must be punished more severely than in 2004 because it is embracing *Moditva* today.

A campaign was launched even before the Supreme Court order to promote Mr.

Modi as the BJP's prime minister-in-waiting post-L.K. Advani. It was initiated by two senior BJP leaders, Arun Shourie and Arun Jaitly.

In part, this campaign is explained by the BJP's disenchantment with Mr. Advani, who has failed to impress its members. In part, it's meant to promote a new concept of tough leadership, which delights in cruelty, undemocratic elitism and "getting things done" for the privileged -- like the huge subsidies given to Tata Motors by Modi.

The BJP's capitulation to *Moditva* will be an even greater disgrace than its humiliation at the hustings.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## A dip into the postbag



If you think about it, readers of any publication or website have more brains than the people who actually write it. That's because there are more of you than there are of us.

Last week I wrote about Eddie and Sam

Antar, whose US retail chain Crazy Eddie collapsed with debts and jail sentences. I got a letter from Sam Antar, saying: "I enjoyed reading your article. One small correction, I am Eddie's cousin and not his brother." The reformed fraudster now runs a website worth visiting: [whitecollarfraud.com](http://whitecollarfraud.com). Yes, you get all sorts reading this, and everyone's welcome.

Reader Gerry Pieris took issue with this column in the shape of a lengthy editorial feature in *The Island* newspaper of Sri Lanka. Why? Because I sniggered over a tourist brochure which described Sri

Lanka as "a place where different ethnic groups live together in perfect peace and harmony."

Most of the people on the island do live together peacefully, he argued. Only a minority are engaged in fighting. Gerry is absolutely right, of course. All I was really saying is that if you want a "poster-child" for the concept of harmony between ethnic groups, Sri Lanka may not be the obvious choice. There are sandy beaches in Alaska, but that doesn't make it the Sahara.

Reader Vince A, a Filipino-Australian,

wrote to comment on a posting about dinosaurs: "Outside Asia, people believe the dinosaurs became extinct because of strange phenomena like a global ice age or because an asteroid from outer space wiped them out. Yeah, right. We Asians know dinosaurs became extinct because they made for great barbecues. Recent excavations show many fossils have traces of charsiu sauce."

Also in the news: Jackie Chan's silly remarks that Chinese people should not have freedom were spoken at the Boao Forum, a Chinese economic conference. A

reader named Jon asked: "How does being an action star qualify one to be a delegate for such a conference? It's like inviting Susan Boyle to discuss problems in the Middle East."

Actually, singer Ms Boyle, having become world famous for being spectacularly unattractive, has already achieved the impossible once, so we should let her try sorting out the Palestine/Israel problem.

There has been lots of appreciation for domestic helpers in these columns of late. I particularly enjoyed a line from Christian Fardel in the Caribbean, who wrote that

when he lost his domestic helper his home became so untidy that he had to cut his way into it "with a machete." So I guess my apartment is not so bad.

I close with a note from Wendy Tong in Hong Kong: "Your column is rude, obnoxious, cheeky, politically incorrect and impolite. Thank God. Keep up the good work."

This column could not be half as cheeky without the gang, so thanks to all of you.

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