

Pay hike and after

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HUSAIN IMAM

THE government has decided to raise the salary and allowances of the government employees by July 2009 if possible. It has ordered a seven member committee of secretaries, headed by the cabinet secretary, to report back within 45 days with their opinion as to how best the recommendations of the Pay Commission can be implemented, keeping in mind the cost of living, inflation, and the capacity of the government exchequer to take the load of additional expenses required.

The Pay Commission has recommended a minimum basic salary of Tk.4,000 per month for the lowest rung and Tk.45,000 for the highest one together with increase in other allowances, which will mean a pay hike of almost hundred percent. The increase will raise the salary bill of government employees to Tk.33,000 crore per year,

requiring the government exchequer to provide an additional fund of Tk.8,500 crore out of taxpayer's money.

Compared to the government's revenue earning target of Tk.80,000 crore for the next fiscal year, the salary bill of government employees (Tk.33,000 crore) is certainly high. But it is true that the government servants' salary in relation to present day cost of living is too low to maintain even a modest living.

If we want good governance, we ought to have a good administrative set up manned by efficient, meritorious and reasonably honest persons. To that end, there is no alternative to increasing their salary and allowances to a reasonable level. The recommendation of the Pay Commission in that respect is, in my view, fair and reasonable.

Their proposal to address the huge wastage of money on the government transport pool is noteworthy. The pro-

posal to bring the government employees within the tax network is commendable. It was a preposterous decision in the past to keep the government employees outside the tax network. That there has been gross misuse of vehicles, incurring huge financial loss to the government exchequer, is an open secret.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has very rightly asked the review committee to see two things in particular: One is how best they can reduce the gap between the lowest and the highest rungs of the pay ladder. The other is to ensure that the prices of essential items do not go beyond the buying capacity of common men because of the pay hike. The review committee will have to seriously look into these matters and come out with a pragmatic solution.

The government employees are underpaid. This is true. But there is another side of the coin. Many of them are corrupt. Some are highly corrupt. Some of them have made fortunes by abusing state power. There is a common saying that even the tables and chairs of our government offices take bribe.

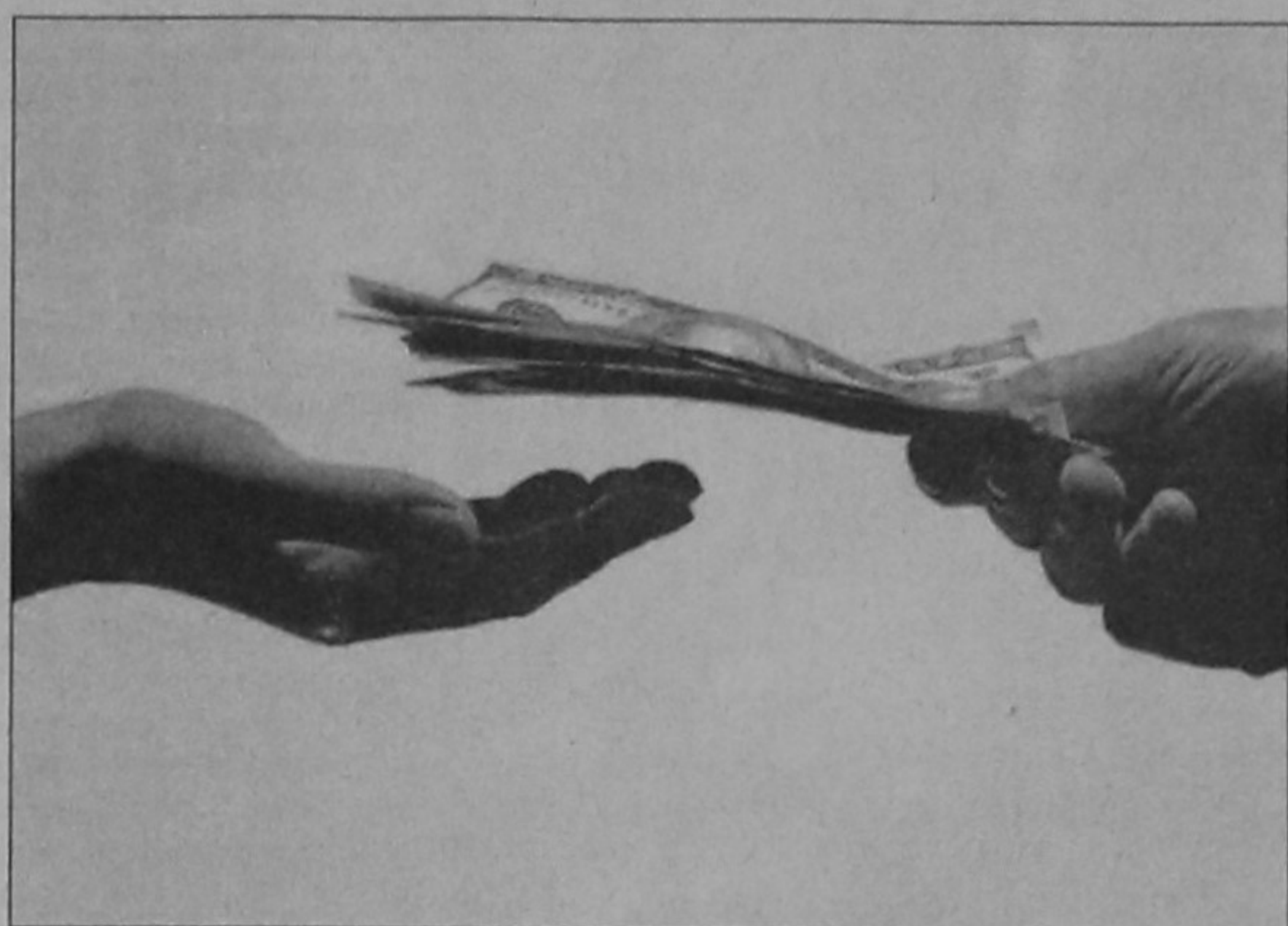
Now the question is, is it because they cannot have two meals a day after meeting their house rent bill with the meager salary they get -- not to mention children's education, health care and

other family obligations -- that they are forced to resort to corrupt practices? There could be many reasons for a person to be corrupt. Poor salary is certainly one of the main reasons.

There is another aspect of the issue -- the size of the administrative machinery. The general perception is that our government machinery is oversized and over-staffed. There are reportedly many government employees who have no job in their office except chewing paan and discussing politics.

We are not sure whether these two important issues -- corruption in government offices and size of the administration -- have been addressed by the Pay Commission. Against the backdrop of a deep global economic recession that has already started knocking at our door, it is high time that the policy makers in the government have a close look into the matter and take remedial measures, sooner rather than later.

There can be no argument on the necessity of administrative reform in the country. It is, in fact, long overdue. The immediate past caretaker government had rightly or wrongly launched a number of reform programs. True, some of them backfired, but it is also true that some proved quite productive. The reform of the Election Commission and the electoral process, for example,



Will pay rise bring better governance?

was a major success. It is not known why they did not feel the urgency of carrying out the administrative reform, which they could have probably done more efficiently than anybody else.

The government will be well advised to set up an administrative reform commission (ARC) whose main objective would be to offer the country an efficient administrative set up with a reasonably clean, image and free of

colonial legacy, that can help the political leadership fulfill its promise of becoming a middle income group country by 2021. The ARC can work in tandem with the Pay Commission, or for that matter with the review committee, to strike a balance between pay and productivity of a government employee.

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Manipulating time

Of course, we need to work more during daylight, using the free sunlight and consuming as little energy as possible. To do this, instead of manipulating time, the government can change just the working schedule during April-September; no office or industry will defy that.

M.A.S. MOLLA

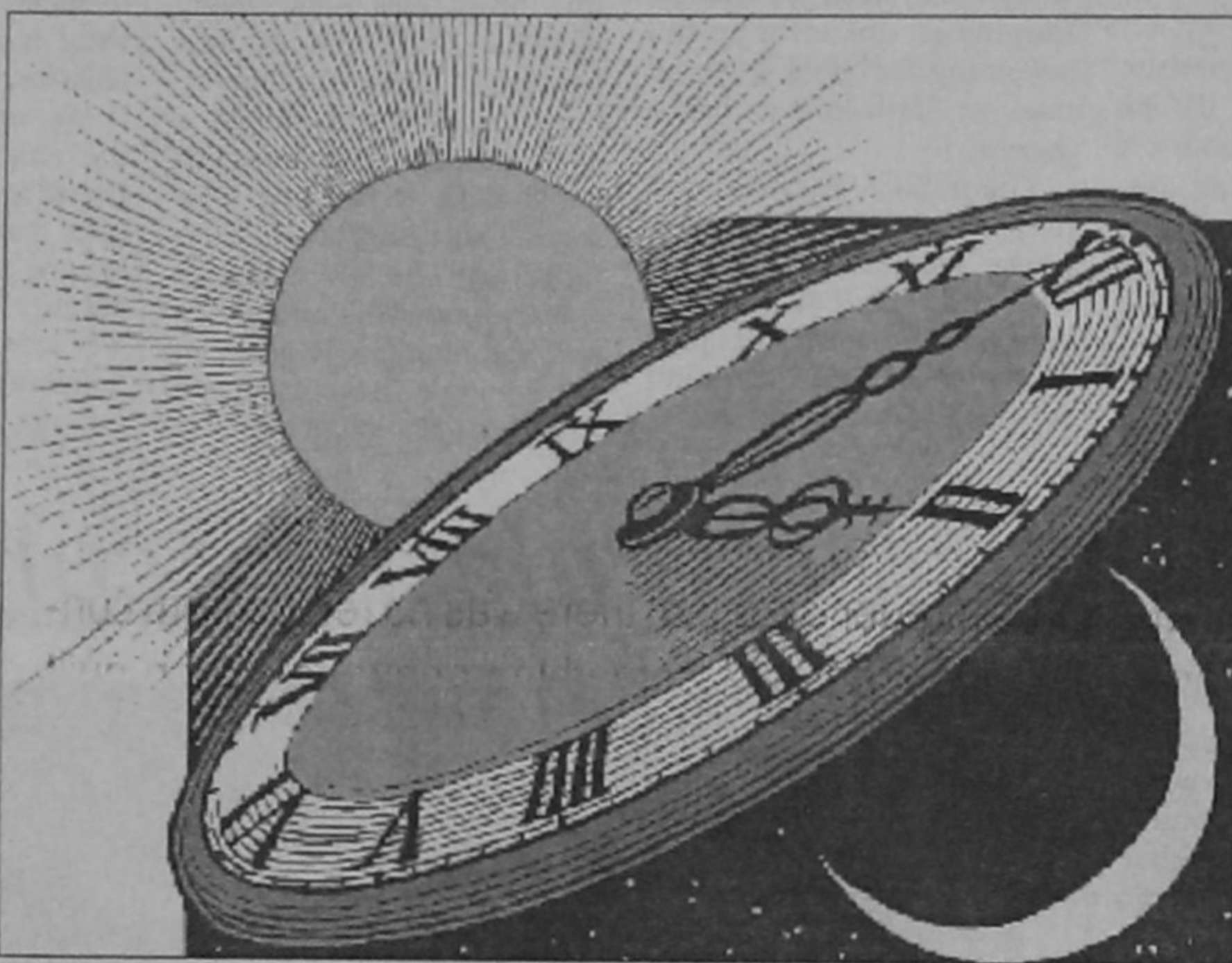
ATTITUDE determines the seasons in a country. The Tropic of Cancer runs over the middle of Bangladesh, and there is daylight for more than 12 hours during April to September. We don't change the working hours during this period although there is a provision for morning school in some areas for a few weeks or months in summer.

Against this backdrop, our energy minister declared early this year that he knew how to save a substantial portion of electricity that was being wasted during evening hours. The prescription was simple: just advance the clock one hour during the longer sunlight period of the year. The discovery of our minister is, however, not a new one. Daylight saving time (DST) has been in practice since the early 20th century in some western countries.

To understand this phenomenon, let's first see how time is set. Geographical natural time is set at 12 noon, defining that as the shortest distance from the sun when the sun

shines almost at right angles over the geographical area concerned. Thus, noon divides the morning and afternoon hours almost equally. However, every country need not calculate the position of the midday sun. Once this is done in a country, others can adjust standard time according to its longitude. Anyway, manipulating this natural standard time by advancing an hour converts noon to 1 pm, and the morning hours become artificially shorter and the afternoons longer.

A New Zealander, entomologist G.V. Hudson, thought of DST first in 1895. He needed some extra daylight period after office work to observe insect behaviour. To realise this personal need, he proposed to advance the clock by an hour during summer. But nobody was convinced of his idea then. Later, in 1905, William Willett, during his morning rides, found many Londoners still sleeping. That is, Londoners were not following the natural change in sunrise time and were wasting daylight in sleeping. So Willett published the idea of DST and lobbied throughout the UK until his death in 1915 for advancing



What time is it?

time artificially.

During WW-I, Germany and its allies took up Willett's idea and introduced on April 30, 1916, the system of advancing the clock by an hour to have longer afternoons for working in daylight, thus conserving rapidly depleting coal. A number of European countries followed suit. In Europe and America about 1.6 billion people follow this plan during the summer months -- called "summer time" in UK and "daylight saving time" in Europe and America. Malaysia and Singapore permanently

fixed the clock one hour ahead. Thus, the sun is made to rise around 7 am and set around 7 pm, though it would rise and set naturally in these tropical countries at around 6 o'clock round the year.

The DST measure helps in using sunlight after office hours in retailing, sports and other activities that would consume electricity if done during evening hours. Thus, the immediate benefit is saving some energy, as the term signifies. However, the cost of such artificial timing is high. People must remember to change their clocks; this

consumes time. As more devices contain clocks, more time is spent changing them. People who work across time zone boundaries need to keep track of multiple DST rules, as not all locations observe DST or observe it the same way.

The length of the day becomes variable. Disruption to meetings, travel, broadcasts, billing systems, and records management is common, and can be expensive. Not only that, research revealed some health problems because human bodies don't adjust to daily rhythms set artificially by clocks. Roenneberg of Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich warned: "When we implement small changes into a biological system which by themselves seem trivial, their effects, when viewed in a broader context, may have a much larger impact than we had thought."

The DST is based on the idea that a few people like politicians, administrators and scientists understand the changes in position of the sun round the year; the general mass is insensitive to seasonal changes but just obeys the time that the clocks and watches tick out. This idea disregards human knowledge and treats people as machines, or at best guinea-pigs and rats.

Londoners (and many in the colder countries) may not see the sun for quite a long time of the year due to fog, and are thus absolutely dependent on machine time. Tropical countries are seldom foggy; the people see the sun very well. So the situation that

prompted Willett to propose advancing the clock does not prevail in these countries.

Bangladesh is not only a tropical country, but is also largely rural-oriented. Most people are accustomed to following sunrise and sunset for their daily schedule of work; they don't sleep during morning light. Even many city-dwellers, who are used to following time in clocks and watches round the year, go out for a morning walk irrespective of whether it's 5, 6 or 7 o'clock. Then why should we introduce an artificial and complex system of timing? If we do that in this country with an overwhelming Muslim population, making the daily prayer, fasting, seheri and iftar calendar useless for several months, we may face some unpredictable consequences.

Of course, we need to work more during daylight, using the free sunlight and consuming as little energy as possible. To do this, instead of manipulating time, the government can change just the working schedule during April-September; no office or industry will defy that. The working people will have one hour more free time in the afternoon to shop; thus the shop-keepers would have the needed selling time during daylight. The government can opt for tampering with time only if the changed working schedule doesn't work.

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They may not want the bomb

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has quoted the regime's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who asserted that such weapons were "un-Islamic." The country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a fatwa in 2004 describing the use of nuclear weapons as immoral.

FAREED ZAKARIA

EVERYTHING you know about Iran is wrong, or at least more complicated than you think. Take the bomb. The regime wants to be a nuclear power but could well be happy with a peaceful civilian program (which could make the challenge it poses more complex). What's the evidence? Well, over the last five years, senior Iranian officials at every level have repeatedly asserted that they do not intend to build nuclear weapons.

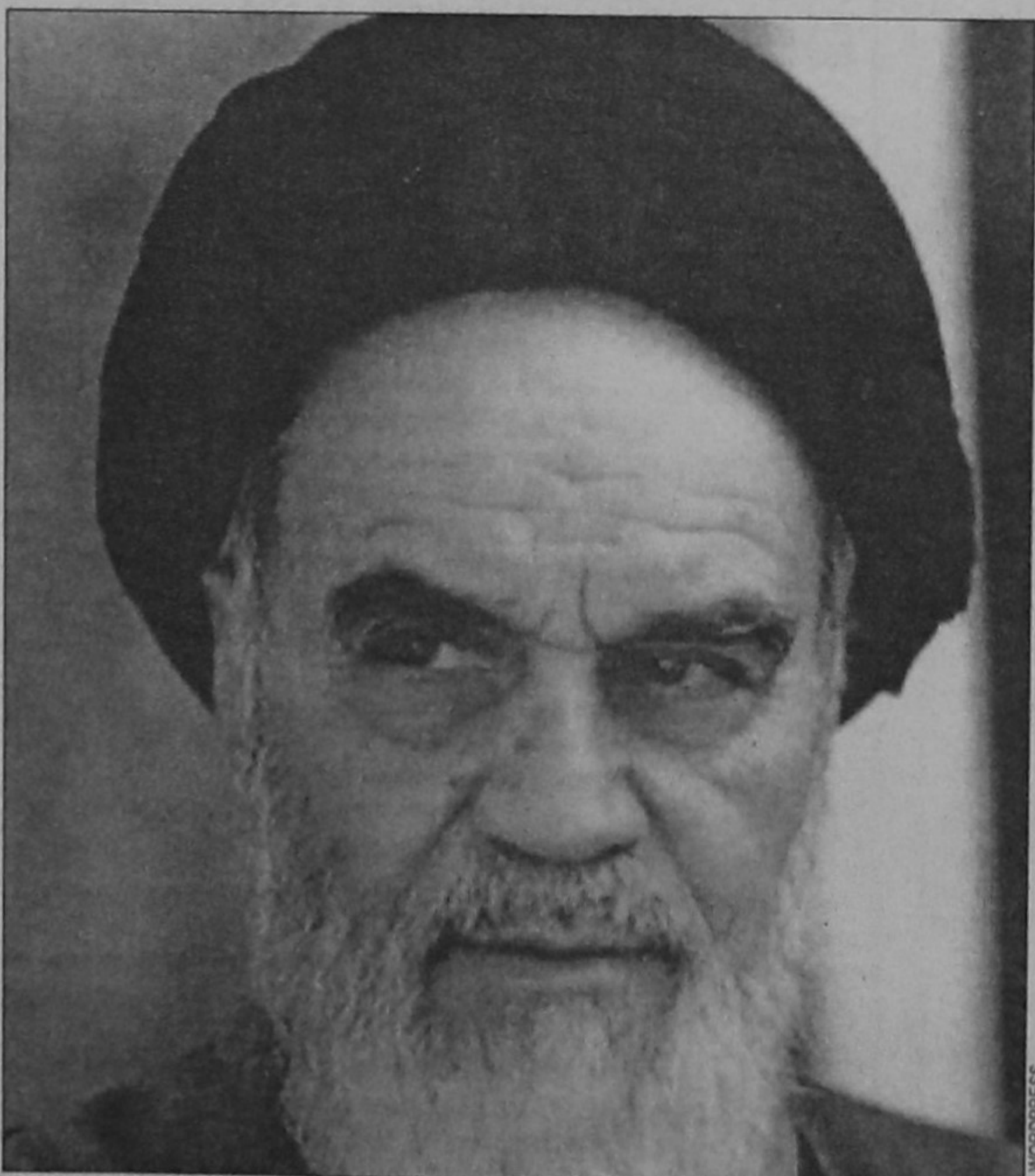
President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has quoted the regime's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who asserted that such weapons were "un-Islamic." The country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a fatwa in 2004 describing the use of nuclear weapons as immoral. In a subsequent sermon, he declared that "developing, producing or stockpiling nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam."

Last year Khamenei reiterated all these points after meeting with the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei. Now, of course, they could all be lying. But it seems odd for a regime that derives its

legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic if it intends to develop them. It would be far shrewder to stop reminding people of Khomeini's statements and stop issuing new fatwas against nukes.

Following a civilian nuclear strategy has big benefits. The country would remain within international law, simply asserting its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a position that has much support across the world. That would make comprehensive sanctions against Iran impossible. And if Tehran's aim is to expand its regional influence, it doesn't need a bomb to do so. Simply having a clear "breakout" capacity -- the ability to weaponise within a few months -- would allow it to operate with much greater latitude and impunity in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Iranians aren't suicidal. In an interview last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the Iranian regime as "a messianic, apocalyptic cult." In fact, Iran has tended to behave in a shrewd, calculating manner, advancing its interests when possible, retreating when necessary. The Iranians allied with the United States and against



"Atomic weapons are unislamic."

the Taliban in 2001, assisting in the creation of the Karzai government. They worked against the United States in Iraq, where they feared the creation of a U.S. puppet on their border. Earlier this

year, during the Gaza war, Israel warned Hizbullah not to launch rockets against it, and there is much evidence that Iran played a role in reining in their proxies.

Iran's ruling elite is obsessed with

gathering wealth and maintaining power. The argument made by those -- including many Israelis -- for coercive sanctions against Iran is that many in the regime have been squirreling away money into bank accounts in Dubai and Switzerland for their children and grandchildren. These are not actions associated with people who believe that the world is going to end soon.

One of Netanyahu's advisers said of Iran: "Think Amalek." The Bible says that the Amalekites were dedicated enemies of the Jewish people. In 1 Samuel 15, God says: "Go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." Now, were the president of Iran and his advisers to have cited a religious text that gave divine sanction for the annihilation of an entire race, they would be called, well, messianic.

Iran isn't a dictatorship. It is certainly not a democracy. The regime jails opponents, closes down magazines and tolerates few challenges to its authority. But neither is it a monolithic dictatorship. It might be best described as an oligarchy, with considerable debate and dissent within the elites. Even the so-called Supreme Leader has a constituency, the Assembly of Experts, who selected him and whom he has to keep happy.

Ahmadinejad is widely seen as the "mad mullah" who runs the country, but he is not the unquestioned chief executive and is actually a thorn in the side of the clerical establishment. He is a layman with no family connections to major ayatollahs -- which makes him a

rare figure in the ruling class. He was not initially the favoured candidate of the Supreme Leader in the 2005 election. Even now the mullahs clearly dislike him, and he, in turn, does things deliberately designed to undermine their authority.

Iran might be ready to deal. We can't know if a deal is possible since we've never tried to negotiate one, not directly. While the regime appears united in its belief that Iran has the right to a civilian nuclear program -- a position with broad popular support -- some leaders seem sensitive to the costs of the current approach. It is conceivable that these "moderates" would appreciate the potential benefits of limiting their nuclear program, including trade, technology and recognition by the United States.

The Iranians insist they must be able to enrich uranium on their own soil. One proposal is for this to take place in Iran but only under the control of an international consortium. It's not a perfect solution because the Iranians could -- if they were very creative and dedicated -- cheat. But neither is it perfect from the Iranian point of view because it would effectively mean a permanent inspections regime in their country. But both sides might get enough of what they consider crucial for it to work. Why not try this before launching the next Mideast war?

Fareed Zakaria is editor of Newsweek International.

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