

Gas tariff raise

It could have been less exacting on the consumer

THE government has decided to increase the price of gas for the first time in more than 4 years. However, it is the timing of the increase in particular, among other things, which cause us concern. We feel too that the percentage of increase is rather high, and the sector affected too wide which is bound to have an effect on the consumer's cost of living index, particularly those at the lower rung of the income groups.

In all honesty, the public could have done without a price increase in the first place, who are finding it hard, as it is, to make both ends meet with the prices of almost all essentials going through the roof. That, along with the impending Ramadan, when, given our experience of the past, price of everything is bound to go up notwithstanding the commitment of the government to keep the prices in check, the increase couldn't have come at a worst time.

The price rise, we are told, is to create a fund for the development of the gas sector where the performance of the entire system is to be overhauled with the more than seven hundred fifty crore taka that the increase will fetch.

But given that all the sectors except the CNG will have to pay around 11 percent more from next September, inevitably it will be the consumer who will have to bear the brunt of the increase. Predictably, with the increase in gas price, the cost of production of electricity and as a consequence of all consumer goods will go up. Likewise, we fear that the cost of fertilizer would go up too with the prospect of the farmers being put under severe strain unless the government intervenes through subsidising this and other agricultural inputs.

While there is nothing wrong with idea of a gas development fund, one wonders whether that could not be done without taxing the public. And whether the gas sector could not have gone for increasing its efficiency, reducing its wasteful expenditure and, above all, cutting down the system loss to help generate funds for development of the sector.

We would like to suggest that the rate of increase be reconsidered. At the same time we believe that the government should feel obliged to ensure enhanced efficiency of the sector as well as the uninterrupted and adequate supply of gas to the private consumers as well as the industries now that the price of gas has been increased.

The passing of Corazon Aquino

Her People Power revolution changed her country

THE death of Corazon Aquino from colon cancer brings an end to a remarkable saga in Philippine history. The quiet, unassuming woman who found herself thrust into an epic struggle against the dictatorial Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 would go on to emerge triumphant and take charge of the country. It was her determination to have Marcos voted out of office --- and she did that through pitting herself against him at the elections, though he attempted to repudiate the results --- that was to open the door to a new future for her people. A glimpse of that future came through the People Power revolution she spearheaded and then translated into a political process that was fundamentally a reinvention of democracy.

The irony is that Corazon Aquino was not supposed to be where she found herself, that is, in politics. But when her husband, the relentless crusader for democracy named Benigno Aquino, was gunned down as he stepped on Philippine soil after returning home from exile in 1983, it was she to whom a disoriented opposition turned for leadership. She soon transformed that popular confidence in her leadership into a moral crusade, a phase that was to lead to her assumption of office as president. She spent altogether six years in office, resolutely trying to steer the country towards a new beginning even as her government investigated corruption charges against the Marcos clan. It was not all smooth sailing for her because of the repeated coup attempts made against her government, seven in all. And yet Aquino remained unswayed. She was fortunate that individuals like Fidel Ramos stood behind her; that the nation was with her. Most significantly, it was her faith in democracy that sustained her in her moments of crisis.

The Philippines is today a better, safer place because of the pivotal role Corazon Aquino played at a decisive moment in its history. A woman of huge self-esteem, Ms. Aquino made sure that similar self-esteem was restored in the lives of her people after the long kleptocracy of the Marcoses. And she succeeded.

We remember Corazon Aquino for the voice of democracy she was and always will be in history.

The worldwide land grab

With gloomy prospects for recovery from the environmental degradation and its concomitant negative impact on human life, another menace in the form of the acquisition of farm land from the world's poor by rich countries and international corporations is accelerating at an alarming rate.

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THE 1972 UN Convention on Human Environment held in Stockholm, the 1987 Brundtland report on our "common future," and the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro -- dubbed the Earth Summit -- debated the looming danger of an incipient conflict between Nature and man's unsustainable developmental activities. They all were summarily dismissed as scientists' fantasy or overestimation of the danger, if any. The world lent a deaf ear even to the Dahomey Declaration adopted at the 38th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs in 1981, which made a clarion call to expand concern to a broader set of interrelated dangers, the destruction of the environment on a global scale and what could be seen as denial of basic needs for a growing majority of people.

But it's not so anymore. The genie has been unleashed and is on rampage -- thanks to the irresponsible industrialisation and unrestricted use of fossil fuels.

Indeed, many of today's ecological problems -- i.e. the generation of as high as 85% of greenhouse gases, resulting in the depletion of ozone layer, global warming and sea-level rise destroying the ecological equilibrium that sustains nature's life support system -- emanate from unsustainable development, the human greed to over-exploit nature, and profligate lifestyle in the rich advanced countries.

As climate change is a stark reality today, adversely affecting the poor who have nowhere to go and nothing to cling to when displaced by drought, famine and desertification, large swaths of farm land and habitat in the coastal areas of the affected countries are being swallowed by swelling seas and salinity.

Greenhouse-induced deforestation, soil erosion and acidification have engendered, directly or indirectly, an alarming environmental imbalance.

In this milieu, man faces an existential problem because the degrading environment and its principal syndromes are linked directly to the future of all nations and threaten the lives of the billions by

drying up their water resources, turning their cropland into dustbowls and subsequently causing agricultural decline. I wrote in this space a couple of months ago about how much of the food producing areas are now in disuse because of greenhouse effects. No wonder, the phenomenon couldn't but cause a worldwide food shortage.

With gloomy prospects for recovery from the environmental degradation and its concomitant negative impact on human life, another menace in the form of the acquisition of farm land from the world's poor by rich countries and international corporations is accelerating at an alarming rate. UN officials and agricultural experts say that an area half the size of Europe's farm lands has been targeted in the last six months. According to another report by the UN and analysts in Washington and London, an estimated 30 million hectares are being acquired to grow food for countries that cannot produce enough for their populations.

Such land grabbing is being blamed on wealthy countries.

According to the UN, the trend is accelerating and could severely impair the ability of the poor countries to feed themselves. The issue was recently mooted in the G8 conference, which described the practice as "land grabbing" or "neo-colonialism." A spokesman for Japan's ministry of foreign affairs' feels that there should be a code of conduct for investment in farmlands abroad, ensuring a win-win

situation for both the producing and the consuming countries.

Some of the largest deals include South Korea's acquisition of 700,000 hectares in Sudan and Saudi Arabia's purchase of 500,000 hectares in Tanzania. India has lent money to 80 companies to buy 350,000 hectares in Africa. At least six countries are known to have bought large land holdings in Sudan -- one of the least food-secure countries. Other countries that have acquired land in the last year include the Gulf states, Sweden, China and Libya. Those targeted include not only fertile countries such as Brazil, Russia and Ukraine but also poor countries like Cameroon, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Zambia.

Investors in foreign farmlands took lessons from the food crisis of 2008, when food imports hit their balance of payments. The craze for land grabbing grows out of speculation on future prices. What has, however, been clear is that the countries have lost trust in the international market and are scared of its volatility. Also, some of the world's largest food, financial and car companies have invested in land, the price of which is, in any case, steadily rising. Therefore, only the poor whose lands were sold or leased out are the net losers. On a bigger plane, both the rich and the poor are losing to the monster we have let loose in the form of greenhouse gases.

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Local-national power relations

The MPs, of course, are supposed to play by the rules they themselves devise at the national level. The locally elected representatives, as in upazila, union parishad, municipalities etc., should be allowed to play at local level.

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THE Awami League (AL) government's effort to make law-makers advisers to the Upazila Parishads will disempower local government and further aggravate the already skewed power relations. This will create new debates, analyses and sharp criticism. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyse the debate concerning local-national relations and appeal for a strengthening of local bodies.

In the 2008 election, people voted in favour of the "charter of change" in the election manifesto of the AL, which unequivocally emphasised strengthening of local government (LG) institutions -- as envisioned by Articles 9, 11, 59 and 60 of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

Soon after the government was formed, it reversed its position by disempowering the LG. It made ineffective the initiatives of the immediate-past caretaker government. The Local Government Commission, created to work as a buffer institution between national and local government, is now defunct; the Upazila Parishad Ordinance 2008 has been revoked.

Why does the AL not want to decentralise power and strengthen LG as promised in its election manifesto? Why do the political elites not want to relinquish power to

the local bodies? Why do the law-makers want to distribute public resources to their constituents, something that is not part of their job description? With regards to these questions we will refer to some theoretical and academic perspectives supported by empirical evidence.

Theoretically, the job of the members of parliament (MPs) is to make "the rules of the game," to be played out both at national and at local levels. The MPs, of course, are supposed to play by the rules they themselves devise at the national level. The locally elected representatives (as in upazila, union parishad, municipalities etc.) should be allowed to play at local level.

The MP's involvement in development activities at the local level is not only a breach of the rules they set out but also a blatant violation of the spirit of the Constitution of Bangladesh (there is a court verdict as well). The MPs often claim that (1) they have certain commitments to their constituents, and (2) if they do not implement development projects the people will not recognise them.

Referring to the first issue, may I humbly ask: what is that commitment? If you have a separate commitment to your electorate then what does your party manifesto stand for? The second proposition only refers to an attitude, mindset and box-type thinking; something not

It was low inflation, affordable commodity

based on facts and causality per se.

The MPs, in fact, want to create a power base by using public resources to get elected in the next election. Richard C. Crook, a professor from the London School of Economics who did extensive research in Bangladesh, rightly termed the situation as "draw-down of public resources to bolster power-base (Crook 2003, page 78)." They have legitimate power in the social, administrative and political spheres. However, they want power over local institutions, which will not only hinder efforts for eradication of poverty but also the setting up of good governance. This is unconstitutional.

This article will provide empirical evidence drawn from the results of the 7th and 8th parliamentary elections in the constituency of Jhenaidah-1, parliamentary seat number 81 (Sailkupa). Soon after the 7th parliamentary election (2001) the MP belonging to AL was evicted from Sailkupa.

Throughout the 5 years of BNP-Jamaat regime he was forced away from his own constituency, depriving him of the right to implement so-called development projects. In reality, huge infrastructural development projects were implemented in the latter part of the regime.

However, in the 8th parliamentary election, the same AL candidate was victorious instead of the BNP.

The question logically arises: why did the people of Sailkupa vote for a person who was not at all involved in the development of Sailkupa? In my view, the answer to the question lies with the macro-economic success of the AL government in the late 1990s.

It was low inflation, affordable commodity

ity prices, sustainable economic growth, together with a less corrupt image as compared to the BNP that brought the AL to power, and not the construction of bridges and culverts by a potential parliamentary candidate. Does the lesson from Sailkupa guide any political direction?

The current government is committed to reducing poverty. However, poverty can be defined as something more than just the absence of material means. It is a product of unequal power relations between the haves and have-nots. The successive electoral victories of the Left-front in West Bengal, India, are an example of poverty reduction by creating a synergic power relationship between central and local governments through devolution.

Unfortunately, however, we have not learnt anything, while a wave of democratic decentralisation has been sweeping over the developing countries, because strengthening of local government is anathema for the political elites.

To conclude, we will argue that Bangladesh needs synergistic, harmonious, win-win power relations rather than the highly skewed existing one to effectuate the "Charter of Change." It may be mentioned that Bangabandhu tried to introduce a radical local governance program like the district governor system in 1975. This system was adopted only to break the elite-capture of political power and bring it back to the local level. By devolving power to the local government, the prime minister can place herself next to Bangabandhu.

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On Iran, do nothing. Yet

The best strategy is to do nothing. Hillary Clinton implied as much when she put off the question of negotiating with Iran. In fact, the ball is in Tehran's court anyway. In April, the West presented Iran with an offer of talks that is serious and generous.

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WHAT is happening in Iran? On the surface, the country has returned to normalcy. Demonstrations have become infrequent, and have been quickly dispersed. But underneath the calm, there is intense activity and the beginnings of a political opposition.

In the past week, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the candidate who officially lost last month's presidential election, announced his intention to create a "large-scale social movement" to oppose the government and press for a more open political system. Mohammad Khatami, the reformist former president, has called for a referendum on the government. Another powerful former president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has criticised the regime's handling of the election and post-election "crisis."

All three have demanded the release of politicians and journalists imprisoned over the past month and held without charges. (Those prisoners include Maziar Bahari, Newsweek's Tehran correspondent, a Canadian citizen, and an internationally

recognised documentary filmmaker.) These are not dissidents in the wilderness. Between them, the three men have been at the pinnacle of power for most of the Islamic Republic's existence.

More striking has been the revolt of the clerics. Iran has only a score or so grand ayatollahs, the highest rank in the Shi'ite clerical order. Few have publicly supported President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. At the same time, according to the indispensable Tehran Bureau Web site, six grand ayatollahs have publicly criticised the regime.

Last week one of them issued a fatwa (a religious ruling) declaring that it was appropriate to boycott Ahmadinejad's inauguration as president. He also directly criticised the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The clerics' actions highlight a shift in power in Iran away from the religious establishment and toward the military. Ahmadinejad represents this change, being a layman, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, and a man with close ties to the Revolutionary Guards, the parallel military

corps. While in office, Ahmadinejad has directed state funds away from the religious foundations dominated by clerics and toward the military and the Guards.

The tilt from mullahs to the military has been somewhat obscured by the role that Khamenei has played as part of both camps. He is, of course, a cleric, but he has always been close to the Revolutionary Guards and cultivated their support. Ahmadinejad, however, is clearly not of the clerical establishment. He's even defied Khamenei, his key backer, by initially refusing to withdraw his choice for first vice president despite the Supreme Leader's objections. While it is difficult to know exactly what the dispute between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad reflects, it is surely a sign of an increasingly divided ruling elite.

The hyperbole in America and Israel about apocalyptic mullahs with nukes missed the big story in Iran, which was that the mullahs were not apocalyptic, and they were fading in influence anyway. One might have said that the Islamic Republic of Iran is losing its distinct religious basis of power and becoming another Middle Eastern dictatorship -- except that it now has an opposition movement that does not seem ready to quiet down.

What does this turmoil mean for Washington and the world's dealings with Iran? Obviously it makes negotiating with Tehran close to impossible right now. Any talks with Ahmadinejad would confer

legitimacy on a regime that has lost it at home. And any gains agreed to in talks with a regime that is searching tactically for legitimacy might well prove to be temporary.

The best strategy is to do nothing. Hillary Clinton implied as much when she put off the question of negotiating with Iran. In fact, the ball is in Tehran's court anyway. In April, the West presented Iran with an offer of talks that is serious and generous. Let Khamenei and Ahmadinejad figure out how to respond, as they keep claiming they will. The West faces constraints, but they face many more.

Some argue that this allows Iran to inch closer to a bomb. But the best way to blunt that threat -- which is still not imminent -- has always been deterrence and containment, a policy that worked against Stalin and Mao and works against North Korea, a far more unstable and bizarre regime. Again, Secretary Clinton correctly outlined such a policy last week. (On being offered a nuclear umbrella, Israel criticised the United States, which is a sign of the current Israeli government's poor relations with Washington.)

Time is not on the current Iranian regime's side. Amid all this confusion, we have a clear answer to a crucial puzzle. We always wondered, are there moderates in Iran? Yes, it turns out -- millions of them.

Fareed Zakaria is the editor of NEWSWEEK International. © Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.