

## High prices during Ramadan

*Govt and businessmen must apply brakes in effective manner*

**B**ARELY a day after the commerce minister announced a fixing of the prices of essentials in the market, the self-same prices shot up everywhere in the city. That says something about the stark realities citizens are faced with even as Ramadan begins today. Indeed, every experience of Ramadan for a number of years has been excruciating for people because of the abnormal rise in prices they have been put through due to a mismatch between demand and supply. However, this year the supply side has been stronger and there has been no dearth of commodities in the market. That being the case, why this rise in prices? In the first place, there is the extortion traders are subjected to as they carry their goods to their ultimate destination. In the second, there is the arbitrary fixing of prices by retail shopkeepers. Obviously, these realities raise quite a few serious questions that call for equally serious and effective answers. And they do because at this stage there is hardly any way for anyone to point the way out for citizens.

It is important that both the authorities and the business community take some urgent measures that will alleviate the sufferings of consumers. Of course, it is never good policy for governments to intervene in the market. It is important to remember that prices can never be brought under control by policing. Something of the sort was tried during the period of the last caretaker government, which turned out to be counter-productive. But the peculiarity of the situation today is that citizens of all classes have literally become hostage to the caprices of the market, all of which have led to this unbridled surge in prices. For that reason alone, it is important that the government get into a meaningful consultative dialogue with the business community, of the kind that can produce results. To be sure, such consultations have taken place earlier but without much of a fruitful result. What must now be done is for new consultations to be engaged in.

Apart from that, there is a significant role that the market committees can play through keeping tabs on demand and supply and at the same time making sure that no unscrupulous activities are indulged in by traders. They are the nodal points and a fall in prices can begin with action taken by them. The emphasis now must be on absolutely market-related factors. The yawning gap which exists between wholesale and retail prices is a situation that has to be bridged if consumers are to be given a breather.

## Phasing out unfit vehicles

*A perfunctory job will be counter-productive*

**I**T seems the government is resolute and appears to mean business with its latest initiative to bring order in city traffic. It has decided to drive out road unworthy, unlicensed and old vehicles from the streets. But it is a tall order given their swarming the city after each short-lived, failed attempt to flush them out.

Mobile courts will sit, scrutinise papers and phase out unwanted transports. There is, however, a dearth of magistrates which is a limitation. Importantly, the criteria have not been spelled out, but we understand that vehicles 15 or more years old and belching noxious gas into the air are likely to be axed. Of course, the fake fitness and other documents, thanks to the corruptibility of BRTA and lack of law enforcement, cannot help determine the real age of the buses, lorries and cars nor the proficiency of the drivers. This is at the heart of the problem of proliferation of vehicles that should have been ordered out of the streets a long ago. As for measuring the exhaust fumes for pollution level, this exercise has hardly ever been successful owing to technical shortcomings.

Unless the problems are sorted out at the owners' level, wield as they do considerable influence over the authorities, there is no way the government can ensure that only roadworthy transports will ply. The communications minister has emphatically stated that mobile courts will not spare even government officials or public representatives. We believe, this is the way to go about it, for it's the government sector which despite importing shiny transports runs a fleet of dilapidated, polluting vehicles. The government offices and corporations will have to lead the way.

Every year as the Ramadan comes a special drive gets underway to arrest the worsening traffic situation but surely ad-hoc measures cannot solve a problem that is deeply entrenched and is also multidimensional. A halfhearted measure can be worse than inaction as it strengthens the culture of impunity. It will be better for the special committee formed to ease traffic congestion to concentrate on a single agenda for the moment. If it can seize a good number of unfit and unlicensed vehicles and put them out of action, that will be quite an achievement. But this should not again hinder the mobility of the people and ought not to lead to harassment of genuine owners and operators.

## Delineating public representatives' roles

As the proverbial charity begins at home, so in the case of an elected government it should start with the elected representatives of the people, the MPs. The MPs need to know what their responsibilities are other than framing laws in the Jatiya Sangsad.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

**T**HE Members of Parliament (MPs) in a democracy are elected mainly for framing laws in parliament as well as bringing the various problems of their constituency to the notice of the government for redress. The problems may relate to the development of the area the MP in question represents or other issues that affects the lives of the electorate. In any advanced democracy such as in the United Kingdom (UK), an MP looks after such problems of the electorate. In this connection, tax related issues, for example, inland revenue, customs, excise, health service, social security issues including pension or insurance, immigration, grants for schools and so on come within the purview of an MP's areas of concern. It is important to note that in all these cases, the problems to be addressed should be within the jurisdiction of the central government, for the MP will not interfere with the issues addressed by the local government.

Bangladesh, too, has been practising parliamentary form of democracy in a more or less uninterrupted fashion since

1991, excepting the periods of the intervening unelected caretaker governments appointed for the purpose of holding general elections. But that does not mean that we are new in democracy, for even as far back in the 1950s democracy had the chance to thrive in this part of the world. Unfortunately, despite the people's love for democracy and all the sacrifices they have made, it was never allowed to flourish in an uninterrupted fashion for long. As a result, after each break, the people had to start it all over again. But still, it would be a mistake to say that it is for the first time that the people, the politicians and the intelligentsia of the country are experiencing a democratic form of government.

One may like to ask at this point: why is it then that in many cases democratic practice is conspicuous by its absence either in the sphere of governance or in the way the political parties run, especially the major ones, that are known for their glorious struggles for establishing democracy?

Interestingly though, in our discussions, oratory, political slogans and writings, we prove to be very fond of and also

conversant with democracy so far as the abstract implications of the term go. But we begin to falter as soon as the question of its implementation comes. That is because we are yet to change our attitude, which is the sine qua non for practising democracy in the practical field by a person. And it is exactly at this point that our leaders and thinkers have largely failed to make their mark.

The governments that take office through election have developed the notion that they are democratic by default for the simple reason that they have been voted into office. But in actual practice, election is not the last word, but only the precondition for a democratic government. It is therefore not surprising that though we have an elected democracy in office since 1991, we can hardly claim that with the last 19 years' experience democratic values have struck any root in the government and society.

It is therefore time, we had a serious soul searching about why we have not been able to make much headway in giving democracy an institutional shape at least during the last 19 years.

On this score, it is possible to put the argument here that two decades' time is rather short for democracy to take root. But at the same time, such contention flies in the face of the claim made earlier that the country, its people, politicians and the intelligentsia are no stranger to democracy.

As pointed out earlier, for democracy to be institutionalised, we have to be prepared for a change in our behaviour and outlook at least in the affairs of gover-

nance as well as in the political culture so far as the attitude of the leaders, workers and followers of the different political parties towards their opponents is concerned.

The incumbent government, before and after coming to power, had pledged that there would be a 'change' in the way the government would run its business. Now it is its turn to be up to that pledge through effecting a change in our outlook so that it fits into the standard norms of democracy.

As the proverbial charity begins at home, so in the case of an elected government, it should start with elected representative of the people, the MPs. The MPs need to know what their responsibilities are other than framing laws in the Jatiya Sangsad (parliament). In this context, the parties in the Jatiya Sangsad can borrow from the experience of the countries where democracy is the way of life. As narrated in the beginning, an MP of the British Parliament has a clearly defined role to play for the constituents. This helps them avoid overlapping with the area of activities of other government or elected bodies such as the local governments. In Bangladesh context, it is imperative that such delineation of the rights and responsibilities of the elected representatives is made, if only to avoid confusion or clash of interests with other government or elected bodies.

The government in office can take the initiative to take the cue from more advanced democracies in this respect.

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## The braveheart called Bangabandhu

Bangladeshis, particularly those born after 1970, must know that Bangabandhu was not one of those "boneless wonders" for whom expediency was all. He had the courage to never submit or yield and was a solid rock in the wilderness of shifting sands.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**T**HE aggravated tragedy for the Bangladeshi society is that even thirty-four years after the deplorable assassination of the iconic leader of our national emancipation, there are ludicrous and demeaning efforts to compare Bangabandhu with others who perhaps, at best, will find mention in the footnotes of our history.

For those sick minds that find justification for the tragic happenings of August 15, 1975, there is an historical necessity to tell and record the truth for the present generation as well as posterity that Bangabandhu was incomparable and will remain so for all the days to come.

Bangabandhu is incomparable because he was courageous, and it was his moral and physical courage combined that was unprecedented in the annals of our historic political struggle. Come to think of it, the man spent almost the best part of his youth in prison for the liberation of his people.

Imagine the initial years of the decade

starting 1960, when the jackboots of the military junta took upon itself the task of teaching the nation about the basics of democracy and found spineless collaborators from this part of the world; think of that time when East Bengal's political world was pathetically lackadaisical and courage was in short supply. It was in such circumstances that the Bengalis had to be awakened from their somnolence, if not deep slumber.

The sensitive and sentimental Bengalis awoke, but only after the poet of politics took charge of a fledgling party and declared the historic six points that, by all estimation, were a prelude to our total economic and political self-rule. Let any discerning mind take a look at the six points and try to understand why Bangabandhu was repeatedly incarcerated. The architect of our freedom could look beyond his times. Was there anybody in the political landscape at the relevant time who had the gift of such courage and farsightedness?

Bangladeshis, particularly those born after 1970, must know that Bangabandhu

was not one of those "boneless wonders" for whom expediency was all. He had the courage to never submit or yield and was a solid rock in the wilderness of shifting sands. He spoke loud and clear for his convictions and had the resolute courage to stand up in support of his views. His inner strength enabled him to be dignified and hold his head high despite the adversity. He faced repeated imprisonment with ease while others did not venture to wander beyond the safe provision of personal gratification.

The 1960s were a time when we were helpless and in the grip of some all-powerful autocrat; our limbs were paralysed and our minds deadened. At that time the dominant impulse in the then East Pakistan was that of pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the army, the police, the secret service, fear of the official class; fear of laws that suppress and of prison. Deliverance from such fear was possible because of the manifestly energising fire that Bangabandhu lit each time spoke.

All citizens and students of history may recollect the brave stance that Bangabandhu took to ensure the exit of the last Indian soldier from Bangladeshi soil by March 1972. It is rightly doubted whether any other leader would have succeeded in accomplishing such an onerous task. If not for anything else, at least for this supreme act of courage and statesmanship Bangabandhu's memory will remain ever

enshrined in the hearts of grateful Bangladeshis. The sector commanders of our liberation war know that better than anyone else.

The way Bangabandhu conducted himself while confronting the overbearing and scheming top Pakistani military brass in Dhaka in March 1971 spoke volumes of his courage and sense of honour. Persons who have seen the transcriptions of those historic meetings bear testimony to Bangabandhu's bravery and candidness. Both in incarceration and in facing the assassin's bullet Bangabandhu did not wilt or cower.

History has conferred on Bongobandhu such an immortal honour that even from an unpretentious tomb he exerts an authority over the nation which is unparalleled and majestic in its poignant history. No lengthened scroll or praise-encumbered stone marked his grave for a painfully long time, but it linked the poor to the hearth of its soul.

"Un-seduced by flattery, undismayed by disaster or the trumpet sounds of a doom," Bangabandhu confronted life with tight-lipped courage. His unquenchable spirit was to set sail beyond the sunset. The walls were crumbling and the fabric of a mighty state was collapsing but at the gates of dawn he stood like a heroic figure challenging the new day.

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## Will it take a war to focus on Swat's problems?

What are the odds that in 10 years the Swat valley, often called the "Kashmir of Pakistan," will be the favoured American destination in "Incredible Pakistan?" Perhaps, realism demands a reframing of that question. In 2019, will Swat be Kashmir or will Kashmir be Swat?

M.J. AKBAR

**T**HERE is a foolproof way of gauging mainstream America's interest in the rest of the world; through the New York Times crossword puzzle. On August 11, the clue for 17-Across (three letters) was "Islamabad's land: Abbr." The discovery of Pakistan has begun. India is an older, but static and occasional, story glimpsed occasionally through "Agra," routed either via the Taj Mahal or Slumdog Millionaire. Wondrously, Nehru still remains on the iconic shortlist, but the presence is fading.

Credit must go to the military obstinacy of the Taliban and the linguistic dexterity of Richard Holbrooke for widening American consciousness, in perhaps the same way that Saddam Hussein and George Bush made "Eyerag" part of the American language. It seems a bit odd that you need a war to become famous but that is the way with superpowers. Britain became a household word in Roma only after Julius Caesar dropped by to say hello. Swat will probably be the next name to worm its way into puzzles, and very useful it would be for anagrams as well.

What are the odds that in 10 years the Swat valley, often called the "Kashmir of Pakistan," will be the favoured American destination in "Incredible Pakistan?" Perhaps, realism demands a reframing of that question. In 2019, will Swat be Kashmir or will Kashmir be Swat? God knows, of course, but He is strangely uncommunicative these days.

The Pakistan army will prevail in this year's battle for Swat, but we are discussing the war. The Pak army is motivated by the most effective impulse in war, self-interest. A Taliban victory would destabilise the institutions that share power in Islamabad, and radically alter the character, objectives and strategy of the Pak armed forces. Its officers are content with the status quo. They want to use the mullahs when they need them; they have no intention of being used.

But it is already evident that Islamabad has not understood a fundamental fact of its civil war. Irrespective of the outcome of the conflict this year or the next, the ground, and therefore the battleground, has shifted. The Taliban revolt has not emerged merely out of sentiment for religion. It is also a struggle for reorientation

of the oppressive economic relations in Pakistan, the worst of which is the land-peasant equation. Muhammad Sufi and Baitullah Mehsud found support because they challenged the landlords who have enslaved the Swat valley and so much else of Pakistan.

After over six decades of independence, Pakistan still has not had land reforms. Independence has not translated into freedom for the peasant. Islamabad, like the Bourbons, seems to have forgotten nothing and learnt nothing. Now that the army has taken control of many parts of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) Islamabad is inviting back the landlords who were driven out by the Taliban.

In October 1949, Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, founder-leader of the National Conference, called a special session of his party to confirm the provisional accession of the state to the Union of India. At the top of his agenda for a "New Kashmir" was land reform. The two million-plus acres of cultivable land in the state was mainly in the possession of elitist dogras and their jagirdars. A land ceiling of 22.75 acres was established. Farmers' debt was brought down from over Rs.11 million to around Rs.2.5 million. Peasants who had been forced to mortgage their property because of high usury rates regained their rights; sharecroppers saw their share increase from half to two-thirds, while productions costs were now shared.

Jawaharlal Nehru, a Kashmiri Hindu, gave fulsome support to Sheikh Abdullah because, for him, poverty had no religion. Poverty alleviation and economic equity

were the fulcrum of his secular, modern, dynamic "New India." Nehru knew better than anyone else in Delhi that Hindus were the landlords of Kashmir. But for him the Hindu rich were no different from the Muslim rich, and the Hindu poor as deserving of positive discrimination as the Muslim poor. This is why he could force through land reform in large parts of India - although vested interests, and the inevitable compromises inbuilt into electoral democracy, sabotaged him at every step.

The Nehrus and Abdullahs have been partners four times: in 1949, in 1975, 1987 and in 2009. The political relationship has veered from exhilarating promise to unmitigated disaster, although the personal equation has sustained itself well enough. Omar Abdullah and Rahul Gandhi are the fourth set in a chain. They might consider a commemoration of the 60th anniversary of October 1949, not to recall the poisons that seeped into their politics, but the purity that gave us land reforms.

The mood of the moment is governed by self-satisfied establishments that have forgotten a basic pillar of nation-building, economic equity. Today's talent hunt throws up those who have cleared crores of rupees, not created crores of jobs. This week, Delhi and Islamabad celebrated their 62nd birthday with salvos and speeches, while a different kind of gunfire echoes in Balochistan, Swat, and the Naxalite highway that began as a corridor. Enjoy the first, but learn from the second.

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