

A fresh approach to combating extremism

Involving people is the right way to go about it

THE government's decision to fight religious extremism on the social and political fronts, instead of relying solely on the law and order approach, has a lot in it that we concur in. The realisation that extremism is but a product of a number of socio-political shortcomings or failures, and as such not easy to uproot through application of force alone, is necessary to combat the evil effectively.

We fully endorse the launching of a social campaign, with 14 agencies onboard, to eliminate extremism, the religious kind in this particular instance. The Ansar and VDP have also been included to support the campaign. In other words, the government has formulated a counter-terrorism strategy based on a much wider participation of people in general, law enforcers and all others concerned.

Now the decision makers will have to identify the roots of the evil and concentrate on removing them, involving society at large in the process. Religious extremism has assumed menacing proportions because the fanatics' misinterpretation of Islam, a religion which takes a strong position against violence, always went unchallenged in the past. It is also true that these extremist groups take advantage of poverty and vulnerability of madrasa students whose scope for employment is very limited, if not totally non-existent. The Imams or religious leaders, who have a great potential to exert a sobering influence on the extremists, need to be trained in light of our present-day priorities, so that they can play their due role in checking proliferation of extremism.

The most important part of the mission is to ensure people's direct participation. Likewise, society as a whole will have to set the goal of banishing religious extremism through creating equal opportunities for the less-privileged. So, the plan to involve the unemployed youths in development programmes should pay rich dividends. The government has to attach great importance to this aspect of the drive against extremism.

The die is cast in the right direction, but there is still no room for slackening the vigilance against outbursts of religious extremism that can be ghastly at times. There is no way we can lower our guard against the elements exploiting the religious sentiments of the masses often unable to see through their sinister designs.

Runaway price hike

Passing the blame on to the media is unfortunate

THE media has been the whipping boy, particularly of government policy planners, for whatever failure they encounter. Recently, two very senior ministers of the government, the finance and commerce ministers, have criticised the media for what they termed as the excessive media focus on the subject that has contributed to the price spiral.

We also find the observation of one of the ministers, that there is no dissatisfaction amongst the public in spite of the price rise since no adverse reaction from them is apparent, has surprised us.

There has been an apparent irreversible price escalation that has taken a quantum jump with the onset of Ramadan. The much-hyped TCB intervention has not delivered; it has, if anything, been at best a drop in the ocean.

We would like to emphasise that whatever may be the factors, external or internal, that have contributed to the price increase, it was the responsibility of the government to have anticipated those and made adequate provisions to keep the prices within reach of the poor and the middle class. It is regrettable that, in spite of the many assurances of the commerce minister, things have not turned out as he, and we the common people, had hoped they should have. Undeniably, the ultimate responsibility of keeping the prices within affordable limits rests with the government.

We must emphasise the fact that the media is merely rendering a public service, as much as the government ministries are in their own way, by keeping people informed; and prices of essentials is something that merits extensive coverage by the media, not only for the benefit of the people but also, equally importantly, to keep the government conversant with the latest market condition, as well to keep them informed about the failure or success of its policies, if any.

We would like to call upon the government to tell us what exactly we should do in this regard. Can the ministers guarantee fall in prices if the media decided to blank out the price situation of essentials for a week or two? We wonder.

We feel that the need at this time is to delve into the causes and evolve measures that would help stem price hike. For example, it should find out why is there so much of difference between the import price and the market price of goods as well as between wholesale and retail prices, and do something about it. Merely making the media scapegoat will not do. It is not a constructive approach but merely goes to expose government's lack of grip of the market and price situations.

Simple solutions for a complex problem

Talk about what you can do today. Can you breakdown houses and shops on two sides to widen the roads? If you can, then do it. Can you stop import of vehicles for the next five years? Do it. Can you take old and dilapidated trucks, buses and cars to the demolition yards? Then take them.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE traffic problem in Dhaka is a veritable absurdity, a nuisance of ignoble proportion that the hordes of ministers, MPs, mayors, engineers and bureaucrats allowed to grow over the last fifteen years or so. They sat and talked and watched as the problem turned into a vicious monster and began to slowly eat up the capital to satiate its voracious hunger. They didn't have time to read the research reports that said that city roads were not long or wide enough to accommodate so many private cars, auto-rickshaws, trucks, covered vans and cycle-rickshaws. What confusion all around!

They didn't care to read the recommendations given in seminars and workshops that the number of minibuses is too many, and instead of twenty minibuses you should have one bigger bus to carry the same number of passengers. Even a ten-year old child can guess that twenty minibuses take up that much more space than one bigger bus. And the child also knows that the city has space constraints. The suggestions by experts to make the city roads wider by breaking down structures on two sides of the roads and at the roundabouts fell flat on their ears since the houses on two sides are owned by their in-laws.

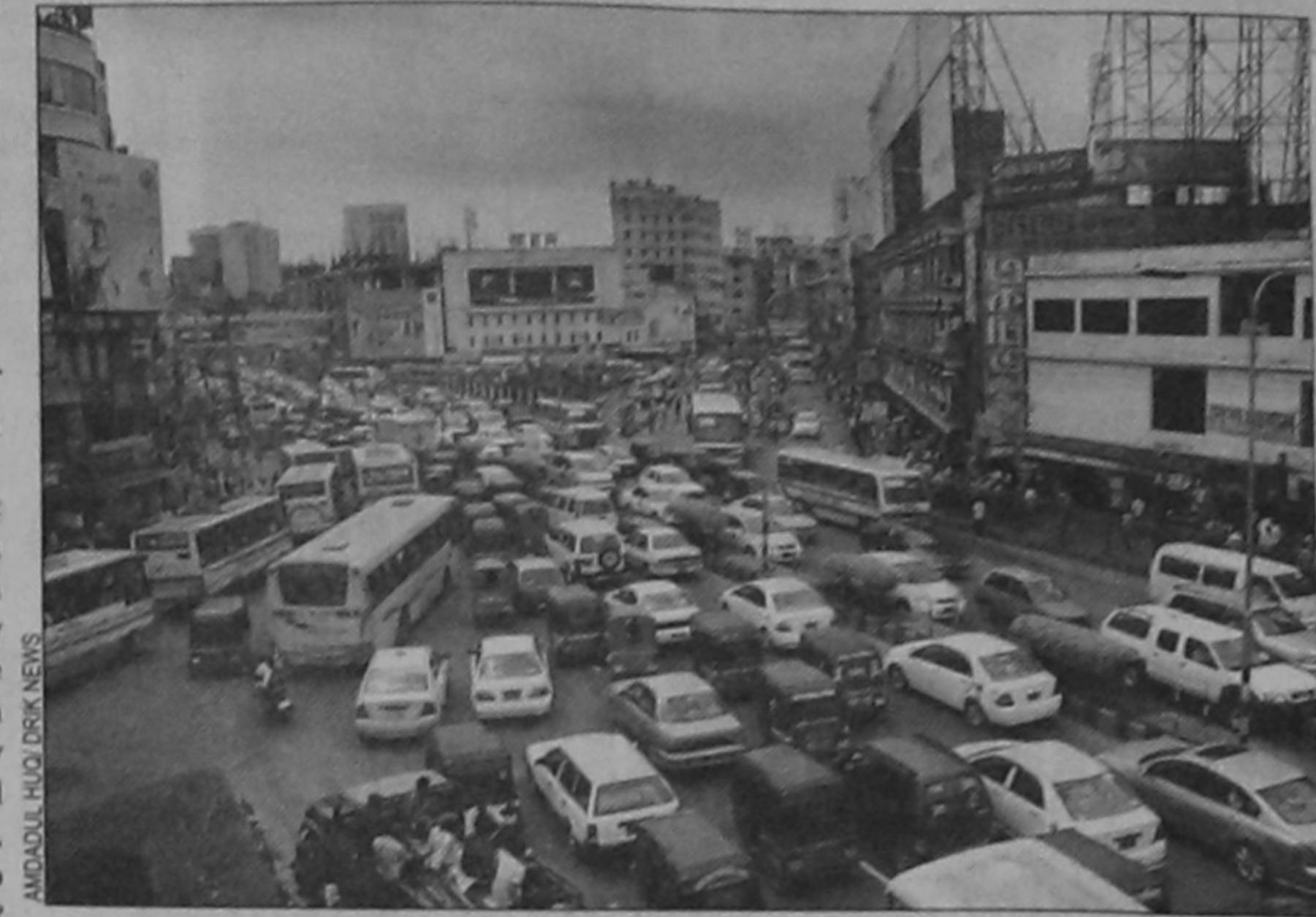
The people in power in the last fifteen plus years failed to control the endless import of second-hand vehicles, as the business is owned by their brothers-in-law. The simple reason is: you cannot make brothers-in-law unhappy and expect happiness at the home front, can you? Cars started to flood city roads along with rainwater, and the powerful watched from a

distance how the roads remained clogged throughout the day.

Now comes the issue of the historic signalling system in the capital city. It's a mind-boggling circus that goes on and on to confuse the motorists. It's also possibly unique in the world. Red we go? Green we stop? No, no, no...we go in yellow...green we stop and go at the same time...but why is the traffic policeman holding up his hand when the green light is on? There he is, gesturing wildly at us...what is he trying to say? Should we go or should we stop again? We start to go but then why is the sergeant blowing his whistle looking at us? By Jove! What confusion all around!

Want to park your car in a decent, quiet and safe place on any given road in the city? Well, no matter what time you are there, you will find the spaces already taken! So, you go up and down and finding no such place, you park it somewhere so that the sergeant won't see. But coming back you will find a goon standing near the car with the look of a conqueror. Twenty taka, he demands. For what, you ask. Parking charge, he says. By whose order, you ask. DCC, he says. You shut up and pay.

While sitting inside your car on Panthopath, you watch vehicles streaming by on the Farmgate-Shahbagh road. VIP road, they say. But the non-VIPs on Panthopath are also busy people having to attend important meetings or go to hospitals for treatment. After half an hour and after three attempts, you get the opportunity to cross over. Strangely enough, when you are on the Farmgate-Shahbagh road yourself you find that you are waiting for half an hour, as vehicles on Panthopath road are allowed to cross over. No system,



Only tough measures can remove traffic jam.

brother. No system.

Now let us talk about solutions of the complex traffic problem of the city. Please stop talking about flyovers, elevated expressway, sky-rail, underground train service etc., whenever the subject is being discussed. That is futuristic talk, only promises and a ploy to avoid the burning issue of the day. Talk about what you can do today. Can you breakdown houses and shops on two sides to widen the roads? If you can, then do it. Can you stop import of vehicles for the next five years? Do it. Can you take old and dilapidated trucks, buses and cars to the demolition yards? Then take them.

Can you "force" all commercial building owners in Motijheel, Dilkusha, Karwan Bazaar, Banani and Gulshan to vacate the ground-floors of their buildings to turn them into parking lots? That would be a worthwhile step towards taking plenty of cars off the roads. Owners can charge tenants for using the parking space.

What about turning some roads one-way from six am till twelve at night? Surely it is not an absurd idea? So, if other modern cities can have one-ways to take care of

traffic congestion, why can't we do so? Some "smart" officials of the department concerned will have to go physically and take a look at the roads and then decide which roads could be turned one-way. Before doing so, extensive publicity through print and electronic media would make the drivers/people aware of how to use the one-way road.

The government will have to construct some side-ways immediately to divert vehicles. A good example is the new road to Mirpur via prime minister's office, that was built so efficiently by the army during the caretaker government. The east-bound road from Bijoy Shoroni will help ease traffic in that area. We hope the Hatirjheel road will also do so once commissioned.

All said and done, all we need is someone who can get down to business instead of talking about high-sounding projects.

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Information blackout

There are no results, no turnout statistics, and no victor from the presidential election in Afghanistan, but there are plenty of opinions. President Hamid Karzai is declaring victory. So is his nearest rival, Abdullah Abdullah. And a third candidate, Ashraf Ghani, is claiming vote theft.

RON MOREAU and SAMI YOUSAFZAI

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The only thing everyone can agree on is that the Afghan presidential election was a success for the Afghan people. Even the Taliban, who threatened the lives and limbs of anyone who voted are claiming a victory of sorts by having kept the voter turnout to a relatively low 40 to 50%, as opposed to the enthusiastic 70% in the presidential election five years ago.

With the ballot counting still underway, Karzai campaign manager Deen Mohammad says that, based on reports from more than 21,000 of the president's polling observers, the incumbent won more than 50% of the vote, scoring him an outright victory and allowing him to skip the runoff in early October.

Abdullah's camp is spinning its own electoral scenario as well, claiming that the former foreign minister and ophthalmologist is blowing Karzai away 63% to 31% in

the preliminary count. A senior official for the Independent Electoral Commission dismissed both men's claims, saying that not all votes had been counted and that even preliminary, unofficial results won't be released until next Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Ghani, Karzai's former finance minister tells Newsweek that both Karzai's and Abdullah's electoral machines may be engaged in vote rigging on a massive scale. "That's the allegation, and it's very widespread," he says. "The incumbent corrupt government is engaged in a massive fraud [...] In the north [where Abdullah's support was strongest] allegations have also been made about the abuse of official power to favour Abdullah in some provinces, such as voting boxes being removed to other locations and then stuffed."

Ghani further charges that the indelible ink used to stain voters' fingers -- was not indelible and is easily washed off. He also cites credible allegations that some voting booths were closed by government authorities when they realised that people were not voting for the incumbent, and that ballot boxes are being stuffed with the names of nonexistent female voters, even in the suburbs of Kabul -- where 150,000 women's ballots were reportedly stuffed

into the box at one suburban polling station.

Ghani says that he doesn't endorse the allegations himself; he's only reporting what he's heard. He has, however, lodged 111 complaints with the Electoral Complaints Commission in the past two days. "I'm not making any pronouncement on the validity of these complaints," he says. But they "need to be investigated to establish the truth."

Ghani's complaints may sound like the anguished cries of a sore loser, but they are not so farfetched. The International Crisis Group issued a paper last June pointing out that the voter-registration system is seriously flawed. The report said that in some provinces the number of voter cards that were issued exceed the province's entire population, let alone the number of eligible voters, opening the way for serious rigging. Nuristan province has 443,000 registered voters but only 130,000 inhabitants. In the Panjshir Valley, Abdullah's home, there are now 190,000 registered voters among a population whose top size is thought to be 137,000.

Just as surprising, in some conservative and relatively insecure Pashtun provinces in the east and south, where women play a very modest role outside the home, female registrations often outstrip those of men.

In Logar province just south of Kabul, there are 36,000 registered women and just 14,000 registered men. In Paktika and Khost provinces, 205,000 women registered compared with 167,000 males. In a practice called "proxy voting," used in 2004, men often gather as many voting cards as possible from female members of their family, as well as fictitious cards, and

then cast multiple votes. "There are so many opportunities for fraud because of the way this election has been organised," says Candace Rondeau, the senior analyst for the International Crisis Group in Kabul. "Seventeen million voter cards have been distributed around the country, but I don't think we can honestly say there are 17 million eligible voters out there." The International Republican Institute's observers say they have heard reports of voter cards being sold.

In the meantime, the Taliban are making their own unsubstantiated claims about the election. Their view is that their terror campaign seriously undermined the election's credibility by reducing the voter turnout to half of what it was in the last cycle. Mullah Sabir, a senior Taliban commander for Wardak, Logar, and Ghazni provinces just south of Kabul, sounded pleased, even excited, by the relatively low voter turnout in his area of operations. "What is the meaning of this election?" he asked rhetorically in a telephone interview with Newsweek. "How can this election be called democratic when most voters stayed home, and it took place while foreign armies are occupying our land?"

On Election Day, he says, he crisscrossed Ghazni province by motorbike and saw few if any voters outside the district towns and Ghazni's provincial capital. "People listened to Mullah Omar and didn't vote in this fraudulent election," he says. "In 2004 we were not strong enough to stop it, but now we are everywhere."

While he may be exaggerating the Taliban's success on Election Day, the low voter turnout in the south and east could eventually give the Taliban a victory of sorts. Many Pashtuns who were afraid to vote are bound to feel even more alienated than ever from the new government if it doesn't move quickly to improve their lives and local security.

We need to make sure that we have a process so that those who couldn't vote do not feel disenfranchised for the next five years, and that their voices and grievances will be heard and addressed," says Ghani.

Ghani is afraid the new government, which will probably be formed by Karzai, will simply offer the people of the war-torn east and south five more years of the same mismanagement by corrupt and abusive administrative officials he appoints. "In an area of insurgency where the stakes are so high, you want the most credible people to represent the government," he adds. "Instead, the government has sent the most despicable people to rule there."

That will be a major challenge for the new president and his team, bringing the many Afghans who have felt abused and neglected over the past five years back over to the government's side. If he fails, then the true winner of the election will not have been Karzai or Abdullah, but the Taliban.



Who won?