

BGMEA's unjustifiable demand

Garment exporters must pay the workers their dues

WE find the BGMEA's demand seeking Taka three billion to pay their workers salaries and Eid benefits extremely unreasonable and unwarranted.

The BGMEA has gone further and demanded several other benefits and subsidies that include, benefit of Taka 10 for every dollar on 30 percent of total export costs, at least 5 percent subsidy on interest accrued on the debts in the RMG sector and, a subsidy of Taka ten for every litre of diesel till the supply of gas and power improves.

Putting the onus of the responsibility of payment workers' remuneration virtually on the government is a disingenuous tactic by the BGMEA not only to shirk its obligation but also to put on the shoulders of the government the responsibility of any dire consequence that might follow. Would thus one be wrong to conclude that the demand of the association is a pressure tactic bordering on attempted blackmail? It makes the matter more bizarre when a festival such as Eid is exploited by the BGMEA to press for their demand. The finance minister has rejected the demand outright as he should have.

The BGMEA needs to be reminded that the situation in the power and gas sector is nothing new; it has been so for a long time, and in spite of this the RMG sector had been making profit. And notwithstanding the global recession last year, the sector made an increase of around 4 percent in export; perhaps lower than the year before but increase nonetheless. It is also true that the richer countries that had suffered most due to global meltdown last year are gradually emerging from the recession. Thus, the demand for subsidy for workers' salary appears unjustified on that count.

We have been hearing about the problem in the garment sector, and about workers' unrest stemming from non-payment of their dues. Of course, there are issues of vandalism in the garments sector and close-down of factories that need to be addressed on a sustainable footing unstuck from ad-hocism. They RMG owners need hardly be reminded that the private sector, particularly the garment sector, is a strong protagonist of free market and if there is a net decrease in profit so should there be reduction in the profit margin of the owners. But the workers must be suitably remunerated for their work, if their skill and experience are to be retained with a longer range view.

We suggest that the garment factory owners devote more time to managing their enterprises more efficiently instead of waiting to be spoon-fed by the government. They should respect the tripartite agreement and share the profit with the workers in the form of better wages, better working conditions and improved safety environment.

The passing of Saifur Rahman

His influence on the economy has been far-reaching

THE death of M. Saifur Rahman in a road crash brings to an end a life that was spent largely in public service from the late 1970s onward. In the years after he joined the government of General Ziaur Rahman as commerce and then finance minister, Rahman played a pivotal role in the way Bangladesh's economy was to shape itself. He remains --- and this is to his credit --- the man who has presented the highest number of national budgets, to the country. That is testimony, in a broad sense, of his indispensability to the party and government he was part of almost to the end of his days. Saifur Rahman found himself on the national political canvas under Zia and then went on to expand his role in the two governments headed by Khaleda Zia. The economy, in a sense, came to be what he conceived it to be.

Saifur Rahman's influence in government stemmed from the bold role he played in opening up the economy, thus freeing it of the fetters it had begun to stagnate in through state control. And he did the job at the right time, in the early 1990s, when state domination of economies around the globe was coming to a speedy end with the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes in eastern Europe. Of course, Bangladesh was not part of that controlled political process. But Saifur Rahman knew that unless the country moved out of the nationalization structure that had been in place since the early 1970s and on to a free market highway, it would be unable to keep pace with the rest of the world. He moved vigorously, an act that he would continue during his last stint as finance minister in the last BNP-led government. The concept of a value added tax came from him. It is a measure of how credible and acceptable his policies have turned out to be that governments succeeding those he was part of have carried those policies forward.

For all his decisive steps in taking economic policy to a new, more dynamic direction, Saifur Rahman remained hamstrung in quite a few areas. One can mention here the constraints he faced in dealing with black money and the eventual concession he had to make through allowing such money to be whitened. It is a syndrome the country is yet to come out of. Saifur Rahman's final years, lived in the shadow of the caretaker government, were not particularly happy. The charges of corruption brought against his sons and his own brief association with the reformists in the BNP were to leave their mark on him.

All the same, Saifur Rahman was a man who did not mince words. He was outspoken in his criticism of ministries that did not perform. He was clear about his goals as a minister and went about achieving them. We mourn his passing.

Powerless in power!

With all the authority in his hand, if the poor commerce minister, and for that matter the entire government, is unable to provide succour in the price crisis one has to realise the limit of the power unless it is absolutely unadulterated and, of course, armed with morality.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

*He fought until his blood was extinguished
Only then was he worth of his people.*

-- Pablo Neruda

WHEN, early in the year, the incumbent Awami League came to power with flying colours, it was by all means a roaring time, but such experience had indeed been few and far between for the party. In its chequered history it seldom enjoyed unqualified pleasure for the victory it scored in the past. It is no ordinary power that came to be embellished with on 2009 when it got the mandate of three-fourths of the electorate. The AL was thought to have reached the summit of its post-independence success. Yet, its government started to stumble no sooner than the aura of the celebration faded.

Power is an indispensable enzyme a party has to be equipped with -- if to accomplish anything great. That's why the political parties vie with each other to come out on top, and therein lies the catch-22 of its success and survival. Yet, at times one is so helpless that power is reduced to utter insignificance. None seems to care about the authority one wields.

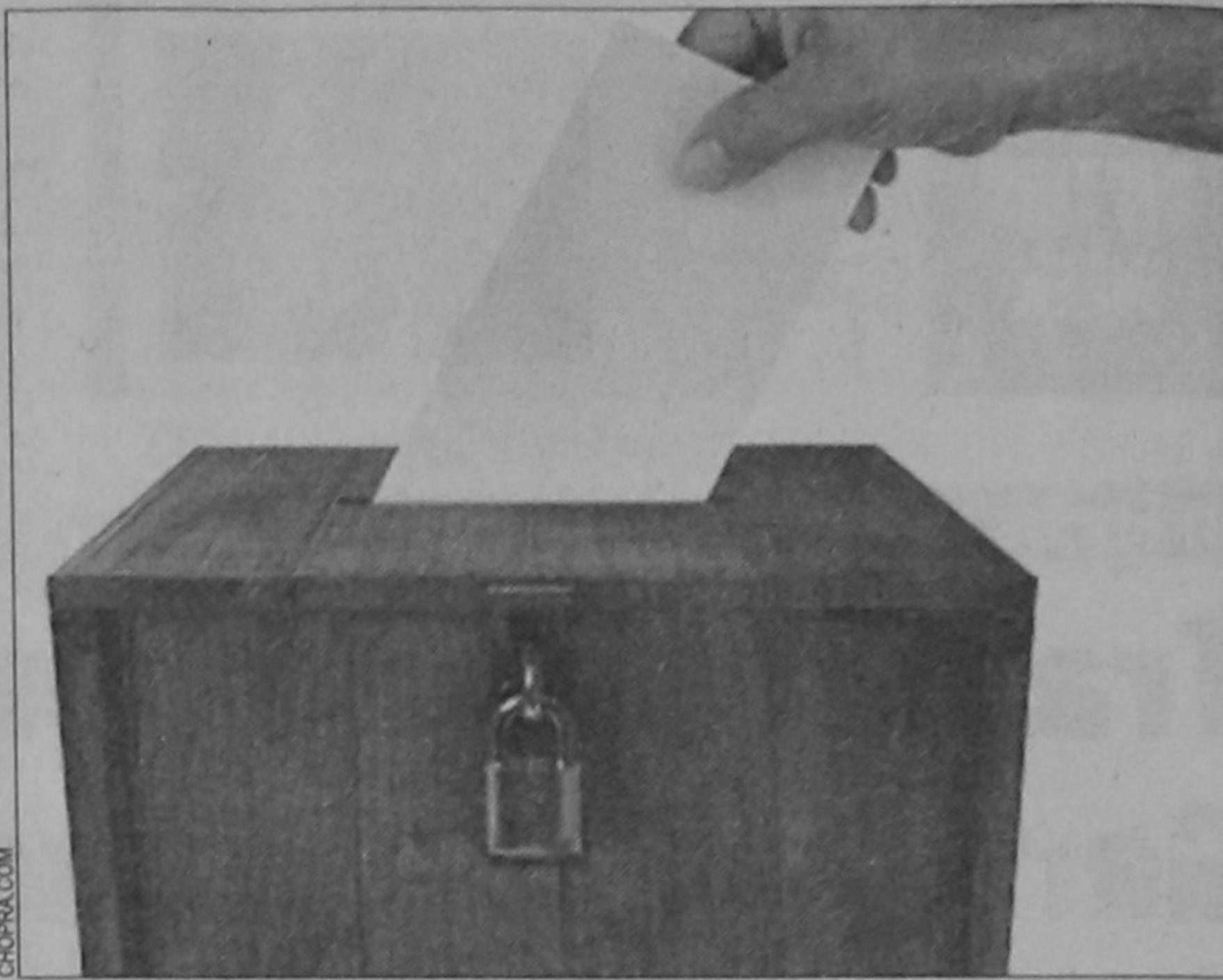
At least on two fronts -- price hike and law and order -- the government can hardly advance any explanation for its powerlessness, and has to stomach ignominy because of its inability. With all the authority in his

hand, if the poor commerce minister, and for that matter the entire government, is unable to provide succour in the price crisis one has to realise the limit of the power unless it is absolutely unadulterated and, of course, armed with morality.

In a power game there is nothing like giving up half way unless all the weapons to combat recalcitrance in the market and wider social scene have been used. The authority has to indeed use its full repertoire to strike at the monsters of price hike and social unrests, which have bared their fangs. That's what poet Naruda hinted at. The authority must also move beyond the seasons of festivity and celebration to deal with the hard part.

Power is an unknown quantity and so is its potential, which is determined by the sanctity attached to it by its practitioner. Once the sanctity of power is done away with and bartered for subterfuge power becomes a devalued coin. Its impact is lost on the hoodlums of the AL's front-organisations, which make a mockery of the country's otherwise manageable law and order situation with their reckless tendering, extortion and the infamous BNP style high-handedness.

It's not so much the problem of power and the resources of the government. It's more of the catharsis of the power -- asking point blank why one is asking for the power. Awami League -- despite its caution -- is again on a slippery slope, when law and order is dipping,



The power endowed by the vote is sacred.

the prices will keep soaring and even the "crossfires" are back. Yet the party has taken over absolute power with the strongest ever mandate after independence. Things are falling apart only after a few months.

Why are there so many challenges to its power -- which the media has been focusing on and even the government itself is concocting. The AL must, for a while, look inward to search for the moral content of its power. Unless that is done, a powerless right within the citadel of power will be haunting the authority.

Moreover, both the problems, which the government is becoming exasperated for not being able to resolve successfully, may

merit efforts at national level. Experts feel that the collective wisdom of the nation, subsuming in it the expertise of all political forces, will exorcise the undesirable elements ensconced in food syndicates.

We must be able to involve the opposition who ruled the country for long, and is aware of the cuckoos in the nest who disturb our social order. When the intention good it, is reckoned that any effort to resolve law and order at national level can reach its fruition. Or else, any half-hearted effort, and one bereft of its moral content, will fly in their face.

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The wisdom of dharma

But Gandhi's commitment to religion did not mean commitment to a single religion. In his Rama Rajya, every faith had full freedom and complete equality. His prayer meetings were not just about his beloved Gita; there was space for the Holy Quran, the Bible and the Guru Granth Sahib as well.

M.J. AKBAR

WISDOM has a great advantage over philosophy. It is simple. Philosophy is so often tortured by the human mind that its meditations become a maze. We become so enraptured by the complexities of the maze, so fascinated by its labyrinth that we forget that we once had a destination. Wisdom is a straight line; it is the shortest distance between question and answer.

Such thoughts were prompted by an email from a friend at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, who sent a verse from the Mahabharata:

*Dharmam yo badhate dharmo na sa
dharma kudharmakah;
avirodhau yo dharmah, sa dharmah
Satyavikrama.*

(Any dharma [way of life, or religion], that violates another's dharma is not true dharma. It is kudharm, or bad dharma. That dharma which flourishes without harming the interest of others is indeed the true dharma, O Satyavikrama!)

Why has this fundamental principle of *Mahabharata*, an essential text of Hinduism, been ignored by those organisations who seek a political philosophy for

the nation in the name of Hinduism? It is possible that politicians are so busy doing their politics that they remain ignorant of the faith that they so readily profess. But that would be a kind interpretation. Most politicians ignore morality because cynicism has made them amoral.

As the swirl continues over ideological and personality clashes among the titans who were born in a colonised India divided into some six hundred pieces, and won freedom with just one division, new questions are emerging from previously silent corners of memory. Incidentally, it is important for our perspective to remember that India was not a single political entity under the British, and even the creation of a federal polity after the Government of India Act of 1935, by which the Princely States sent representatives (nominated rather than elected) to the same legislature in Delhi as British India, did not make them part of a single political unit.

An old query has crept out of the historic woodwork. Mahatma Gandhi framed his concept of freedom around the dream of a Rama Rajya. How could he expect Muslims, who did not believe in Lord Rama, to relate to a Rama Rajya? Was Gandhi communal as well?

It may seem anachronistic now but

Gandhi was convinced that politics without religion was immoral. He believed that faith provided the moral compass essential for a lifetime's journey through public service. Gandhi demanded the highest virtues from his disciples, extending not only to non-violence and financial honesty but also celibacy. There were not many takers for the last; and you might have reason to ask whether he had not confused an *ashram* with a freedom movement.

But Gandhi's commitment to religion did not mean commitment to a single religion. In his Rama Rajya, every faith had full freedom and complete equality. His prayer meetings were not just about his beloved Gita; there was space for the Holy Quran, the Bible and the Guru Granth Sahib as well. He could never understand why anyone should misunderstand this; and it pained him when opponents misrepresented him, sneered at his gentle idealism and challenged his pacifism with the undisguised threat of violence.

Lord Rama was an ideal, an image that communicated easily with the majority of India. But there was no aggression in his concept of divinity, and there was always equal space for the other. The *Mahabharata* was his favourite text, from which he learnt the true meaning of *dharma*. Gandhi's Rama Rajya was a realm of harmony, not a continual battlefield.

The post-Gandhi Congress abandoned Rama Rajya for at least three reasons; the term had become a negative with Muslims; Nehru was uncomfortable with a religious idiom; and you needed to be as morally secure as Gandhi to promise a Rama Rajya. But why did the RSS and the BJP, who

wanted a "Hindu India," shy away from Gandhi's formulation? Because their ideal was different from Gandhi's.

Paradoxically, the Hindutva forces had modelled themselves on Pakistan; they wanted to treat Indian Muslims and Christians in precisely the same way that Pakistan was treating its Hindus and Christians, as second-class citizens.

Whether such politics gets you votes or not is beside the point. The relevant factor is that such thinking is antagonistic to the idea of India as a modern democracy. Discrimination on the basis of faith is what happens in a theocracy, not a democracy. You have to be extremely stupid to imitate any neighbour with suicidal tendencies.

What Gandhi understood in 1919, when he launched his first major political onslaught against the British Empire, is as valid nine decades later. India can flourish only in a spirit of conflict resolution, and not through conflict escalation, or conflict perpetuation. The young are far more clear-sighted about this than the middle aged or the old, for the young have learnt from the mistakes of their fathers.

A simulated debate has been whisked up about the takeover of the BJP by the RSS; the two were never apart. The issue is not whether BJP will shift gear towards a philosophy of conciliation, but whether the RSS will do so. They could not hope for a better starting point: the *Mahabharata*.

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Afghanistan's hour upon the stage

The only thing worse than staying and working to bring order to the chaos would be to pull back, which would guarantee the triumph of our enemies. The question is how we fight and whether we are willing to invest -- in time, treasure, and blood -- what it will take to reduce the likelihood that Afghanistan will again threaten our national security.

JON MEACHAM

THE answer came quickly, and clearly. In May, President Obama gave *Newsweek* an interview on what he had learned in his first months in office. When asked what had been his most difficult decision, Obama answered without hesitation: the order to send 21,000 more American troops to Afghanistan in this, the eighth year of the war there. Later in the conversation, Obama said that the American people, broadly defined, understand and appreciate the complexity of many of the problems facing the country. The implication was straightforward: that he, with his professorial talent for explanation, was the man for a moment when America, or at least the chunk of it that had voted for him, was willing to hear him out, often at length.

I recalled these points of the president's last week during one of Washington's periodic outbreaks of attention to the war in Afghanistan. The occasion was the sub-

mission of a report by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the new commander there, which reportedly details a grim situation that will almost certainly require, in McChrystal's view, more American force. Obama's decision will be among the most important he will ever make.

John Barry, our longtime defense correspondent, reports McChrystal told colleagues in Washington that he was "shocked" by what he found after Obama gave him the command this spring. He should not have been: the war has now lasted longer than American combat engagement in World Wars I and II combined, and anyone reading the reports out of Afghanistan and Pakistan knows that the Taliban is reconstituting itself with support from sympathizers both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. It was also more than a little surprising to hear Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, say last week that "time is not on our side" in Afghanistan. Time has never been on our side in that perennially chaotic country.

The difficulty of our task in the region is virtually impossible to overstate. But we are at war there because the aid and comfort Afghanistan gave Al Qaeda made the attacks of September 11 -- which we commemorate this week -- possible. The only thing worse than staying and working to bring order to the chaos would be to pull back, which would guarantee the triumph of our enemies. The question is how we

Ron Moreau, who covers Afghanistan and Pakistan for us, puts it this way: "In short, I think we're finding ourselves confronting the same dilemma the Soviets faced in the late 1980s: either pour in more troops for a wider occupation, or opt for a withdrawal, phased or otherwise. The counterinsurgency plan is now completely a U.S. operation. Our forces clear and hold, largely on their own, and then try to build with a combination of U.S. civilian and military elements. The Afghans simply don't factor in, as they don't have the manpower or seemingly the will to take advantage of the opportunity provided by U.S. troops. Local Afghans, of course, quickly resent our widening footprint, as it leads to frequent Taliban attacks and the planting of mines and IEDs everywhere, not to mention the insurgents' use of indiscriminate suicide bombings. The U.S. gets blamed for these, not the Taliban. The logic: if the U.S. weren't there, the Taliban wouldn't be attacking. So if the Afghans can't step up, and so far they haven't and won't, then what's the point?" That is the question the president must answer.

The difficulty of our task in the region is virtually impossible to overstate. But we are at war there because the aid and comfort Afghanistan gave Al Qaeda made the attacks of September 11 -- which we commemorate this week -- possible. The only thing worse than staying and working to bring order to the chaos would be to pull back, which would guarantee the triumph of our enemies. The question is how we

fight and whether we are willing to invest -- in time, treasure, and blood -- what it will take to reduce the likelihood that Afghanistan will again threaten our national security.

A few points may help in thinking about the debate over more forces. First, we should be clear about what kind of forces are needed. There are combat troops, there are adviser/trainers, and there are civilians who are crucial to the creation of a sustainable civil order. Which sort, and how many of each sort, should be deployed?

Second, the president has said that he wants "visible progress" by early next year. He should not feel bound by this; nor should we hold him to it, for there is no chance we can achieve it. Wars, particularly wars of the kind being waged in Afghanistan, do not lend themselves to managerial timetables.

Third, it is unhelpful to speak of Afghanistan in isolation. With its extremist sympathies and nuclear capability, Pakistan is, as we suggested on our cover a few years ago, the most dangerous country in the world. There will be ever-dwindling public support for our efforts in the entire region if the president does not undertake to explain the complexity of the situation, define success, and lay out the consequences of failure.

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