

# Recipe for political disaster

Dear prime minister, time is running out fast. So, please act expeditiously to save the people and the government, no matter whose heads shall roll for being incompetent, indecisive and not proactive. Please assert that you mean business to overcome the crisis and your leadership can deliver it.



A.K.M.A QUADER

THE on-going crisis in the energy sector because of a shortfall between demand and supply of both natural gas and electricity, though inherited from the 2001-2008 regimes, has now become a nightmare for the grand-alliance government under Sheikh Hasina.

A blame game is not the solution, and the people at large are unwilling to buy it. They want to see the government assertive and proactive in overcoming the crisis once and for all.

The sector has lost its inertia and initiative to think, plan and implement programs that would overcome the crisis because the sycophants manning the concerned ministries and organisations have no clue about what to do and how to do it.

They lack professional expertise and quality leadership. The ministry, the boom-boom experts and the finance minister himself have come out with prescriptions such as price hike for power, gas and CNG, and rationing of gas or shutting down of the urea plants. These are acts of despair that reflect the disregard for overcoming the problems.

Can these people guarantee the supply of gas at one dollar per thousand cubic foot or electricity at one dollar per kilowatt hour to meet the consumers' demand? No matter what price is attached to these utilities, the demand of electricity and gas cannot be met with-

out raising production capacities by building new power plants, drilling new production wells for gas, undertaking exploration and increasing gas transmission capacities by installing new pipelines.

The prescriptions mentioned are an unadulterated recipe for political disaster for the government.

The waves of suggestions for utilising renewable energies have been resurfacing with the price hike of crude oil and energy crisis every two decades, and when the oil market stabilises the waves subside.

Renewable energy sources like wind, solar, wave etc. for power generation are highly capital intensive. For orbiting satellites and space stations, solar power panels are technologically sound but for the office of the governor of Bangladesh Bank the installation of a 20-kWh solar power panel along with related ancillaries at a cost of Tk.13.40 million is financially unsound.

When government organisations are unable to pay the bills for utilities such as electricity, water, gas and phones how on earth could they be advised to install solar power panels? Whose money is it anyway? The governor of Bangladesh Bank is probably overheat by seeing the foreign currency reserves crossing the \$10 billion dollar mark without realising the stark truth that it has been created by the remittances of our sweating expatriate labourers and not by any banks or industries or the finance minis-

try. If all of the \$10 billion dollar reserves are spent for installing solar power panels, only 1,015 MW can be generated and a shortfall of 1,000 MW power shall still remain.

It has been a pastime for decades for the ministry of energy and Petrobangla to arrange road shows/expos in London, New York, Houston, Singapore and elsewhere to attract foreign direct investment. But they produced no tangible investment. Now Bangladesh Bank has joined this bandwagon. Please take no offence for requesting them to join the carnival in Rio with all vigour to entice the investors!

Let me humbly place the following points before our prime minister to understand and appreciate what could be done for overcoming the energy crisis. Let these be made public by publishing them in the dailies and by having them on the government website:

- Pre-election homework of the grand-alliance for the energy sector;
- Post-election homework of the government for the energy sector;
- Let the concerned advisors, ministers, secretaries, chairmen, directors and managing directors open their briefcases and reveal to the nation their secrets for overcoming the energy crisis;
- Who are the members of the "Energy Think Tank" advising the government and what is their homework?
- Who are the workhorses behind implementing projects to overcome the crisis?

For God's sake, dear prime minister, please do not accept the idea of price hike to price out the disadvantaged consumers. It will not yield the desired result. It will be a political disaster.

The finance minister and the governor of Bangladesh Bank are heading on a wrong course by not utilising the foreign currency reserves available for funding the public sector projects/works required for building new power plants, for exploration and production of gas and for building necessary infrastructure to transmit and distribute gas and power. Their priority is not to make provisions for making black money white or commuting the interests of the loan defaulters or of the so-called sick industries to patronise them to be diners in the 5-star hotels.

Their body language suggests that they are suffering from the chair-syndrome like their predecessors.

Dear prime minister, time is running out fast. So, please act expeditiously to save the people and the government, no matter whose heads shall roll for being incompetent, indecisive and not proactive. Please assert that you mean business to overcome the crisis and your leadership can deliver it.

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# A moderate Muslim country!

People of all faiths in Bangladesh are proud of the fact that they belong to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, a secular country that sprouted from the blood of three million martyrs who died for the cause of liberalism, pluralism and tolerance.

GOLAM SARWAR CHOWDHURY

MANY western politicians refer to Bangladesh as a moderate "Muslim" country. Some of my British and American friends also think that as a "Muslim" country Bangladesh is more tolerant than many other Muslim populated countries they have been to.

Politicians choose their lexicon for a variety of reasons and intentions, and as ordinary citizens we can hardly do anything to influence their choice of words. For my friends, however, I would beg to differ with their description of Bangladesh. On a few occasions I have asked them how a country could have a religion. A country comprises humans, flora and fauna, and other living beings. Religion is a code of life that only humans adhere to; for the faithful religion is sacred and important, and in Bangladesh people of different faiths have practiced their religions freely for centuries.

Bangladesh is a land where people of many religions have lived close to each other in love and harmony. Before the Sufis began to preach Islam, Hindus and Buddhists far outnumbered the indigenous people of the soil, who had their own faiths too.

In agrarian Bengal people accepted Islam because of its stress on equality for all human beings. In a caste ridden hierarchical society, people of the lower castes converted in order to gain respect and earn recognition in the larger domain. Historians have written extensively on this, and I won't take on the historian's burden of analysing the reasons behind the conversion in Bengal. I am merely interested in asserting that Bengalis have lived with their own identity in pride and dignity even when their land was invaded by foreigners and finally colonised.

During the colonial period, with Calcutta as the capital of undivided India, newer opportunities triggered off competition among the people of Bengal to rise up the ladder. The English language emerged as a tool for those who wanted power and wealth. The peasantry in East Bengal, unfortunately, showed comparatively little interest in getting the best out of a fast transforming society, where the colonisers needed natives to work in different jobs that were inferior to their positions but were nonetheless important for running the administration and doing business.

This lack of enthusiasm was one reason why East Bengal was relegated to a hinterland from where crops and raw materials

were supplied to Calcutta. In education, too, people of East Bengal fell behind the inhabitants of West Bengal, who became the forerunners in creating an educated middle-class in the society.

When Bengal was divided in 1905, and Dhaka became its capital, an opportunity opened up for the people of East Bengal to advance economically and socially. However, with the annulment of the division of Bengal in 1911, there were genuine reasons for the people to be aggrieved as they could understand that



A country does not have a religion.

socio-cultural emancipation would be difficult to achieve as a result of this return to unified Bengal.

It was not until 1921, when Dhaka University was established, that the people of East Bengal got another chance to create a conscious middle-class. Centering on this new university, the people of East Bengal aspired for a future that would help them to improve their standard of living and thinking.

Interestingly, in spite of the bifurcation and subsequent reunification of Bengal, the vast majority of the East Bengali peasantry never veered away from their Bengali identity. The Bengali ethos grew out of a myriad of factors including recognition of the ancient history of pre-Islamic Bengal, a respect for the festivals marking the sowing and harvesting of crops, and faith of the different religious communities -- Muslims, Hindus,

Buddhists and Christians.

Much later, after East Bengal was tagged to the state of Pakistan, Dhaka University found itself as the hub of Bengali nationalism based on the linguistic and cultural identity of the people that transcended faith, caste and creed. The language movement in 1952 helped in focusing a clear political vision that culminated in the establishment of secular Bangladesh following the historic war of liberation in 1971.

If my American friend never refers to the US as a Christian country and when my British friend is proud of the UK as a multicultural country, why then should Bangladesh be labeled as a Muslim country? In these days of political correctness in the use of language what can be more politically incorrect? In the developed West, the US is perhaps the most religious country even today, given the large

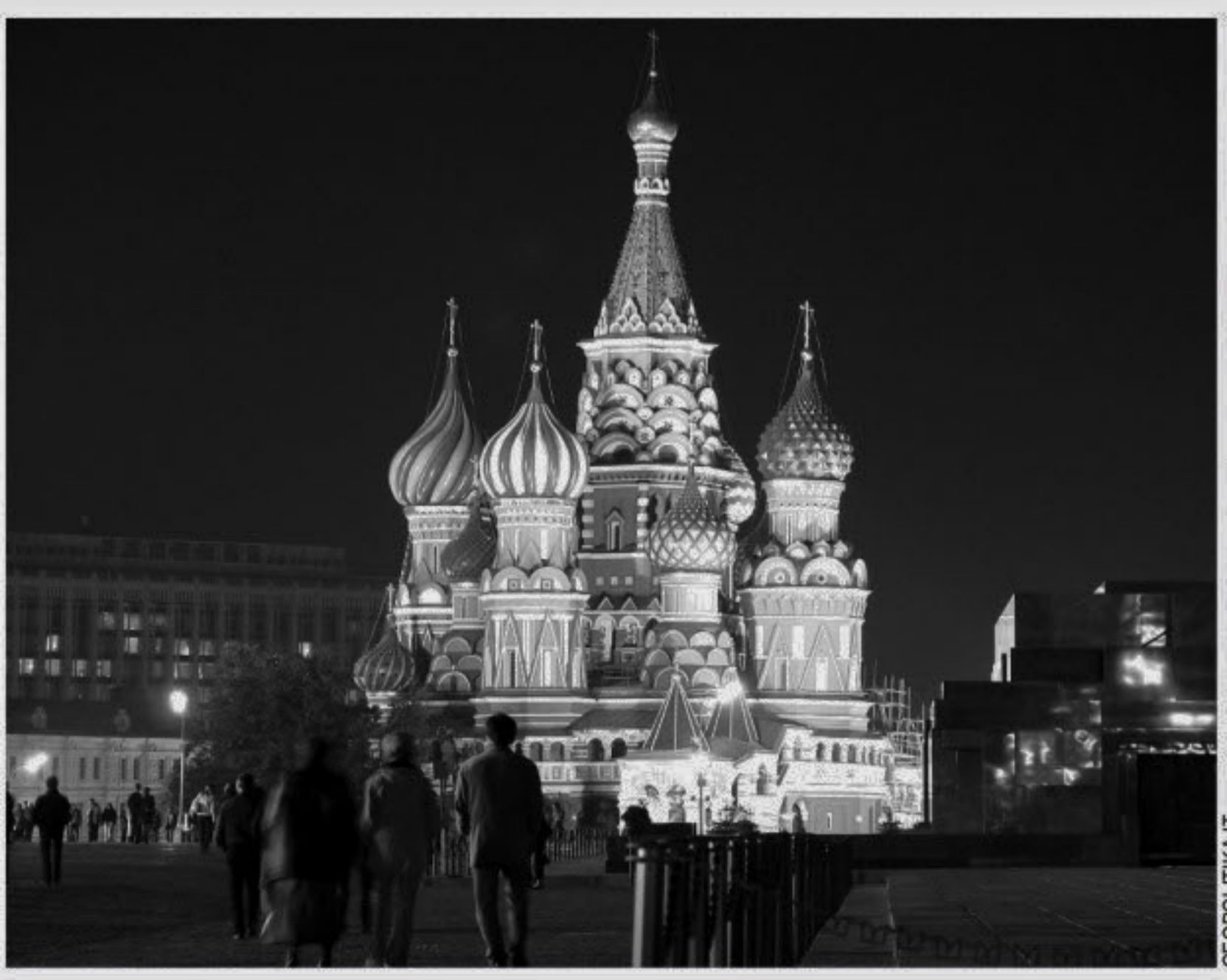


church attendance and the huge number of people who believe in creation instead of evolution. Even then the ultra-right supporters of KKK pride themselves more as white Americans rather than Christians.

The Bengali Hindus, the Bengali Christians, the Bengali Buddhists and the thousands of indigenous Bangladeshis are deeply hurt when their presence is erased by this politically incorrect naming of their country. People of all faiths in Bangladesh are proud of the fact that they belong to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, a secular country that sprouted from the blood of three million martyrs who died for the cause of liberalism, pluralism and tolerance.

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# The Black Widows' global roots



The Kremlin needs to avoid a harsh response that could produce counterproductive results, enhancing the militants' appeal within the global Islamic community, despite their latest atrocity.

RICHARD WEITZ

AFTER a period of relative calm, the recent Moscow Metro and Dagestan attacks remind us that, despite its tough policies, Russia remains vulnerable to the terrorism affecting other countries. In fact, the perceived success of Moscow's repressive policies in Chechnya may have led Muslim-majority North Caucasus region militants to seek targets in Russia's heartland to revive global Islamic support. If the April 1 video, in which Chechen Islamist leader Doku Umarov claimed he ordered the Moscow

Metro bombings, is accurate, then the suicide bombers could have been the Black Widows -- the female relatives of men killed in Russia's counterterrorist operation. Importantly, if radical Islamists were responsible, then we should ask: to what extent has the global Islamist movement exacerbated these national grievances?

The roots of Russian-Muslim antagonism go back to Czarist times, when Russian imperialists conquered previously independent Muslim peoples and forcibly incorporated them into the Russian Empire. Tolstoy and others

provided graphic accounts of how this process unfolded in 19th century North Caucasus.

Russian-Muslim antagonism deepened under the Soviet Union. One of the Bolsheviks' first steps taken after seizing power in 1917 was attacking the country's religious establishments and urging foreign communists to do the same. Islam and other religions were seen as sustaining archaic value systems that impeded the triumph of Marxist-Leninism, which its proponents saw as based on scientific truth rather than false religious consciousness.

Under Stalin, this antagonism towards religion in the Soviet republics, whether European Russia's Orthodox Christianity or the Sunni Muslim faith practiced in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, reached its height. Stalin amplified Muslim hatred when he deported the Chechens to Siberia and Kazakhstan during World War II, accusing them of Nazi collaboration. Most survivors did not return until 1957.

The Soviet Union unwittingly further alienated the world's Muslims when Moscow made the disastrous decision to impose its secular socialist template on neighbouring Afghanistan. The Soviet government encouraged Kabul's pro-Moscow groups to seize power and introduce measures to move Afghanistan away from traditional Muslim beliefs. After these misguided efforts provoked local Muslims to arm themselves, the Kremlin assumed a direct role by invading the country in December 1979.

One hundred thousand Soviet troops and their local allies could not pacify rural Afghanistan. They faced a resistance movement, the Mujahedeen, supported by much of the Islamic world. Many of the movement's foreign fighters

eventually joined Al Qaeda. Western and Arab governments that clearly appreciated Soviet imperialism's danger, but not the growing threat of Islamist radicalisation, due to the war, amply funded the Afghan resistance. After the Soviet military withdrawal, these governments lost interest in Afghanistan, allowing extremist groups of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, to impose the radical Taliban regime in Kabul.

Meanwhile, many Muslim-background Soviet soldiers, who became radicalised, brought their jihadi beliefs home. The USSR disintegrated when President Mikhail Gorbachev, like other Soviet leaders, underestimated the power of nationalism. The Soviet Union's previously repressed nationalist forces exploited the limited democratic opening to rally support for greater autonomy and eventual independence. Although the governments of the newly independent states are controlled by religiously moderate leaders, the North Caucasus people, frustrated in their failed independence aspirations, often back local militants who forcefully seek freedom from Moscow.

Yet, the long Chechen resistance to Russian rule only recently became an Islamic-inspired insurgency. In the early 1990s, Chechen separatism lacked a strong radical Islamic presence. Muslim militancy's spread throughout Chechnya and other Northern Caucasus regions followed the rise of the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda. Many Russian Muslim insurgent and terrorist leaders were trained during the 1990s in Al Qaeda camps established by Bin Laden with Taliban support.

After the disastrous Chechen War of 1994-1996, the Russian federal government sought to confine Islamist radicalism within Chechnya, allowing Islamist

militants to control it in return for signing a ceasefire agreement. Within Chechnya, Islam united disparate clans and lent legitimacy to the new Chechen government. Difficult social, economic, and political conditions in the North Caucasus helped spread radical Islam. Communism's collapse left an ideological vacuum, while censorship's end and Soviet border controls gave Russian Muslims greater global awareness and connections with the larger Islamic world, increasing ties between Russian-based and foreign terrorist groups.

International conditions also radicalised Russian Muslims. Although some Chechen leaders preferred focusing on local reconstruction, rather than propagating Islamist fundamentalism elsewhere, the Chechen government found that the only foreign source accepting its appeals for assistance was the global Islamist movement. The Taliban was the only foreign government to recognise Chechnya's independence, while Islamist transnational terrorists provided direct support.

A key motivation for foreign Islamist intervention in Chechnya was converting the North Caucasus region from the traditional Sunni Sufism to the fundamentalist Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia, a major funding source of global Islamist groups. Foreign extremists and their local allies transformed Chechnya into an operations base to attack neighbouring Muslim-majority regions to end Moscow's control of those republics also.

Vladimir Putin's 1999 controversial decision to reinstate Chechnya appeared to succeed in recently restoring Moscow's control over Chechnya. Having learned from its defeat in the first Chechen war, the Russian military adopted more successful counterinsur-

gency tactics in the second, transforming a guerrilla conflict into a terrorist one. Unable to defeat Russian forces in battle, Islamist radicals have relied on indiscriminate suicide bombings against both military and civilian targets, including targets in Moscow. The federal government, besides a crackdown, also employed a "Chechenisation" policy, granting local allies considerable autonomy and assistance to employ whatever tactics they saw fit against their opponents, including radical Islamists and others.

The new Russian strategy dramatically reduced visible Islamist militancy in Chechnya, but at the cost of increasing violent attacks against Russian targets and local allies elsewhere in the North Caucasus. Foreign and local militants, rather than Chechen, appear to have caused many of these incidents.

One explanation for the Moscow Metro bombings is an effort by Russian Islamists to re-energise their global support base. By demonstrating their continued capacity and will to resist Moscow's pacification efforts, perhaps they hoped to increase support from foreign Islamist militants, now preoccupied with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other regions. The Kremlin needs to avoid a harsh response that could produce counterproductive results, enhancing the militants' appeal within the global Islamic community, despite their latest atrocity.

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