

# Panic-driven policies hurt the incumbent

It is also essential to clamp down on the unacceptable level of system losses. System loss is a distribution problem, thus, the ministry must work closely with the field-level PDB engineers to bring this rate to an acceptable amount. There is a need to bring discipline in managing the load-shedding operation until things get somewhat normal.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

IMPLEMENTING public policies is always a major hurdle for any government, democratic or otherwise. Managing them after implementation is even harder for a government when the press and media enjoy complete freedom under democracy. In recent weeks, the mohajote government has been experiencing major difficulties in managing the panic-driven policies in the power sector. In this regard at least four recent moves have been facing public scrutiny. Last October, after completing the inaugural daylight saving trial, the government came to a decision that the scheme would go ahead in the summer of 2010. However, after rightly reading the pulse of the people, the government took an about turn and abandoned the idea for good. There is no point in talking about this now, however it must be remembered that a lesson was learned during the trial run in 2009. No one knows why, without studying the subject closely, the government suddenly went for such a scheme which no

nation in this region tried before. Was it a panic-driven policy for saving some precious megawatts of power?

It is now clear that by rejecting the idea of saving power via daylight saving the people remain committed to status-quo as far as their habit is concerned. Economics did not play any role. Once again, it has been established that the policies are for the people, people are not for the policies.

The readers without air conditioners at home or work will not be bothered about this initiative since it does not affect them. A few weeks back, the chairman of the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) barred use of air conditioners between 6 pm and 9 pm. Non-compliance is punishable. The ERC enforced the scheme in order to save some precious megawatts of power. While the general public will hardly be affected because of this, there is no doubt that industries and the media, both print and electronic, will suffer the most.

Is not this a panic-driven policy? What study of the ERC supports the trade-off

between savings in power and costs of running generators by peak time users of air conditioners? Moreover, when we know that the chairman and his colleagues have failed so far in reducing the so-called system losses (20 percent of generation), one wonders who will police this rule and collect penalties for the NBR's coffers. Certainly, this is panic-driven, and is unnecessarily hurting a democratic government in the eyes of the voters.

Presently, electricity consumers are going through a panic-driven trial run in managing load shedding, blackout at 2 hour intervals. One of my friends jokingly said that it was 2 hours of punishment and 2 hours of respite for the electricity

consumers. Time will tell whether this experiment works effectively in economic terms. So far, unfortunately, public opinion has been against this approach.

Once again, this rule intruded into the habits of the people and all economic arguments have been ignored by the consumers. The power suppliers must come up with hard evidence and that this method of power saving is superior to the former alternatives.

It was reported in the media that the government was shutting down five gas-powered fertiliser plants temporarily and diverting the saved gas to increase power generation. Once again, this move may have some merit, but is certainly panic-

driven. In doing this, one must remember that another front has been opened that might have future supply-side implications for agriculture.

Certainly, this is an extreme measure which governments would like to avoid. From this measure one can easily realise how serious the power generation problem is, and that it must be addressed without delay. Having said this, one needs to calculate the opportunity costs of diverting gas for generating power by shutting down the fertilizer plants.

Of course, it can be argued that things are easier said than done. But, I am sure that even the relevant policy makers would agree that policies driven out of panic do more harm than good. Thus, one must take lessons from the recent and not so recent past. Public policies must be backed by genuine and orderly studies in order to gauge public opinion.

Western-educated policy makers must not forget that the Bangla month chaitra is extremely hot. Moreover, it is now established without doubt that this region will experience more and more cold weather in the winter and lengthy hot spells in the summer due to global warming. There is no room for panicking. It is time now to educate the people and get prepared for tolerating extreme weather in both seasons.

While the present government's move for power generation is more praiseworthy than the former governments', it is also essential to clamp down on the unacceptable level of system losses. System loss is a distribution problem, thus, the ministry must work closely with the field-

level PDB engineers to bring this rate to an acceptable amount. There is a need to bring discipline in managing the load-shedding operation until things get somewhat normal.

In this regard, it is possible to use the SMS services of the mobile phone operators to alert their respective customers about the exact timing of the blackouts, so that people can take appropriate steps to reduce suffering. Also, people in big cities need to make it a habit to check temperature forecasts from weather reports of TV channels so that they get day to day information on extreme weather conditions.

To achieve all these, it is the energy ministry which needs to play the major role and coordinate generation and distribution effectively. To play this role with full commitment the minister needs support from all quarters, particularly from the PMO.

It is also not good that the media have been engaged constantly in speculating about reshuffling of the cabinet. This cannot be a moral booster for any minister, let alone the energy minister. However, if anyone is found to be underperforming, he/she must go immediately so that he/she does not have time to inflict any further damage.

The mainstream media must have self-regulation in place and avoid being a source of unsubstantiated and speculative news, particularly on a cabinet reshuffle, because it adversely affects the performance of the incumbents.

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Power outage hurts.

# Crippling energy crisis

The stark reality is that by 2020, the country would need to generate 20,000 MW of power to serve all of its population and the hard fact is that it would be impossible to achieve such a target with total reliance on gas. In such a situation, the government needs to take its decision on coal as soon as possible by adopting a coal policy.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WHILE unveiling the plaque of the newly built 51 megawatt Fenchuganj rental power plant on April 3 last, the prime minister struck a confident note, promising people 7000 megawatt of power by the year 2013 and ensuring electricity for all by the year 2020. The ground reality is that 2020 is a distant date and people's patience at the present moment of power crisis, the prime minister realizes, is wearing thin. Even though she speaks of the possibility of getting power from India, as experts opine, the modalities would take more than a year to complete before grid connection could be given.

Most importantly, what was distinctly missing in prime minister's speech is the utilisation of Bangladesh's own resources like coal and gearing up the effort of the exploration of new gas fields that could work as the primary fuel for providing electricity at the level the country now needs. Reports revealed by the PDB sources say that on an average it can generate 3900 MW power against the highest demand of 5100 MW during the evening peak hour in these hot summer days.

Sometimes this maximum generation also becomes uncertain if some of the plants go out of operation because of overload and technical glitch as it happened very recently in respect of the sixth unit of the Ghorasal-210 MW plant and Westmont-45 MW rental power plant. Report further says that Meghnaghat-225 MW power plant that went out of operation days before could not resume operation even after days of shut down.

With the government's frustrating experience of Rookie rental power companies that failed to deliver any result even after the stipulated date, the uncertainty with gas and oil based power plants, both private

and government run looms large. In such a precarious situation when the gas exploration prospect remains clouded in uncertainty, it is not known why the government has deferred the coal mining project of Fulbari, Jamalganj, Dighipara and Khalaspir on the issue of open pit or underground mining.

Open pit mining, experts opine would help lifting 90 per cent of the estimated 3.3 billion metric ton of coal believed to be buried underground in the north-western region. Other than Jamalganj where the deposit, estimated to be 1056 million metric tons buried at a depth of 640-1150 metres, other deposits found at shallower depth in other locations could easily be extracted. Advocates of underground mining also know that this process would help lifting only 6 to 10 per cent of the total deposit.

It is understandable that open pit mining will cause displacement of local people from their home and hearth but they have to be rehabilitated with full cost, benefit and livelihood means in the greater national interest as well as to save them from the damages. It has been further learnt from expert sources that the coal deposit found in north-western part of Bangladesh, estimated to be 3.3 billion tonnes, and equivalent to 87 TCF of gas, can ensure uninterrupted energy security for 30 to 40 years, calculated on the basis that 1 TCF gas=38 million tons of coal in terms of heating value.

At present Bangladesh is left with no other option but to go for coal mining and opt for coal based power plants. Most of the developed countries in the world including Australia, Germany, China, India, South Africa and USA have been using coal as the primary energy source. Almost 80 per cent of the coal extracted in India and China is by open pit mining. Then why should the government go for futile underground

exercise with so much of extravaganza? It is learnt from expert sources that not even 10 per cent of the reserve found in Barapukuria can be extracted by underground mining, now being followed there.

Nobody will want that either multinational company or business groups in the country should embark upon plans that downplay and hoodwink the interest of the people living there. They have to be rehabilitated first, must be provided with livelihood means, and have to be given a certain percentage of the profit accrued by mining coal from their homestead and cultivable land to induce them to forego their right to their ancestral land, at least for 30 to 40 years of the mining period.

What is most important now is that the cabinet committee headed by the prime minister should sit with the national committee on coal, gas and port, believed to be opposing the extraction policy and a cross-section of the people to be affected by open pit mining and should reach an understanding on a mutually agreed policy. At the same time the government must go for a win-win policy while negotiating with the multi-national companies to be engaged for extraction like that of increasing the royalty from 20 per cent to at least 30 per cent, and ensuring state ownership of the mines.

The country at the present moment has 7.7 TCF proven gas and 12.90 TCF probable gas reserve. In contrast to about 12-14 TCF proven gas reserve remaining, the country's coal deposit potential is huge. Unfortunately, underground mining process that is being followed in Barapukuria will produce only 30 million tonnes of coal in 30 years.

With power plant design and capacity utilization carried out properly, it is estimated that a 1000 MW thermal power plant will need between 3.0 to 3.5 million tons of coal annually. To be more specific, as experts claim, only Phulbari deposit can feed five 1000 MW power plants for 38 years, assuming mining capacity of 15 million tons annually. So there is no point why Bangladesh should not switch over to 100 per cent coal based power generation, sustainable over several years.

In regard to Jamalganj coal field, where the deposit was encountered at a depth of 640 to 1150 metres below the surface, extraction of coal, even by underground mining, may not be economically viable and the government may consider "coal

gasification" in this field. In coal gasification technology, pipes are drilled down to the coal seams and methane gas is drawn out to generate power. Example of Pakistan having signed a deal with a British company to generate 400 MW power two years back by using gasification technology nor did it look for viable alternatives to meet our nagging power generation demand.

While in opposition now, the BNP is crying hoarse for the present crisis in power sector and making postures for staging 'oust-government agitation', but the present bleak scenario in gas and power sector can largely be attributed to BNP-led alliance government's inaction, mismanagement and flawed policy in the energy sector. Also the government of the day not went for any fresh gas exploration activity nor did it look for viable alternatives to this fast depleting resource even when the national committee on gas utilization sent a cautionary signal.

The stark reality is that by 2020, the country would need to generate 20,000 MW of power to serve all of its population and the hard fact is that it would be impossible to achieve such a target with total reliance on gas as the only energy source or switching over to solar or other energy saving devices. But effort to popularize solar power in the nook and corner of Bangladesh must go on as it has also started changing lifestyle in rural settings.

To state more specifically, gas demand for power generation on a certain day in the past week was 912 mmcf (million cubic feet per day) but only 745 mmcf could be supplied. Evidently the shortage in gas supply has caused a shortfall of about 800 to 1100 MW daily. According to projections by Petrobangla, the country will face 167 mmcf gas shortfall per day till 2011, and the figure will spiral out in the corresponding years because the reserve is dwindling and there is no visible initiative for fresh exploration.

In such a situation when the issue of national interest and national prosperity should precede all other consideration, the government needs to take its decision on coal as soon as possible by adopting a coal policy. As it is learnt, new coal power plants will take at least four to five years to come into operation if a decision is taken today.

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# Trial of war criminals

Bangladesh has ratified the pact that established the International Criminal Court (ICC) for trying people accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. BNP is trying to create confusion by differentiating between crimes against humanity and war crimes.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AT last, the trial of 1971 war criminals has started after 38 years. Needless to say, had Bangabandhu not been assassinated these criminals would have been duly punished. It is indeed an irony of fate that a large number of living freedom fighters and their progeny are suffering from poverty while those anti-freedom criminals are having good life in the independent soil of Bangladesh.

There is absolutely no doubt that almost all Bangalees keenly desire to see due punishment of those war criminals to make the independence of Bangladesh complete and meaningful. In fact, it is our moral obligation to make our new generation fully aware of the sacrifice and sufferings of our valiant sons and daughters at the hands of the criminals.

The trial of the war criminals is a bold step taken by the Al-led government. It appears that Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP are not in favour of formation of a special tribunal to carry out the trial. It is unfortunate that instead of extending open support to the government to make the trial smooth and successful both the JI and the BNP are out to create obstacles in the proceedings of the trial.

Jamaat-e-Islami was not in favour of an independent Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman, the founder of BNP, though himself a freedom fighter, rehabilitated the collaborators just to establish his party in his own interest. Thus, the publicity of BNP that it is a pro-independence party seems as aimed at befuddling the people. Under the circumstances, it appears to be unrealistic to expect any help or cooperation from BNP in the matter of the trials. However, we are glad to learn that both

China and Pakistan consider the trial as an internal matter of Bangladesh.

Even to a neutral observer the trial of war criminals is necessary for the following reasons:

-Anybody who actively opposed the war of independence deserves punishment;

-Assisting in killings, arson, and rapes committed either directly or indirectly through collaborating with the Pakistani soldiers or their associates is punishable; and

-Killing of close relations/associates of muktijoddha is punishable.

Needless to say, the government has started the trial with no past experience. The trial is a very sensitive matter. The war criminals are trying hard to embarrass the government. What is needed is transparency in the trial. There is no scope for any favour or politicisation at any stage of the trial. International observers will watch the proceedings carefully. We hope the government will spare no pains to make the trial free from errors.

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Crimes against humanity are different from war crimes in that they are committed in times of war and peace. The trial in question refers to crimes committed during the liberation war of 1971. Thus, there is no confusion about the trial. We hope that the government will successfully complete the trial.

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# Where is the change?

The country would receive best return on its investment if the government shifts its focus to areas like agriculture, irrigation (agriculture's most important input), pre and post natal health care and disease prevention (particularly a pressing need in a country with the highest incidence of infant and maternal mortality). A healthier, wealthier and well educated population is more likely to shun violence and fanaticism.

ANAM A CHOUDHURY

MOST political pundits wonder why the Awami League with such an excellent ideological coherence and familiar with real-world policymaking, often favours policies that may worsen political crisis.

A wise leader must learn to tell the difference between sound advice and sycophantic flattery. There are times when forgetting can be just as important as remembering. In our country the

political climate changes faster than the weather. Most people believe that this government's ability to confront the major challenges of the country will depend on its ability to create a peaceful and conducive political environment. Unfortunately, it shows few immediate signs of heeding the demand for change.

Meanwhile, the moral majority have serious misgivings about the decaying standards of morality of the top brasses of the newly formed BNP's central committee. Should it be dubbed as "survival of

the unfittest", one wonders. As we all know the BNP's prospects of political survival in the next general election lie in the mistakes or wrong moves that the Awami League or its leader makes in the interim period.

Unnecessary clashes and angry finger pointing between the big parties, currently on display, say a lot about the state of democracy and politics in our country. The public's patience with quarrelling politicians is wearing thin and most people believe that this is not good for democracy and development. The worry is that economic and sociopolitical instability may start to feed each other.

Bangladesh cannot afford any more political drift. It really deserves a better image. The international community wants to see Bangladesh as a model of a sensibly run democratic country. But it is still one of the world's most corrupt countries, mainly due to its culture of impunity against corruption. Its infrastructure is in woeful shape. Politicians are shunning real debates and fighting on style and not on substance.

Voters expect our lawmakers to debate

seriously on issues like terrorism, energy, the environment, disease, economic reforms and problem of over-population. They should work hard to improve legislation, simplify regulations, reform bureaucracy and change the pattern of government's priorities. Economy should be the key element of our national debate.

Population growth, once a national worry, has become a forgotten issue to many of our politicians. Take one look at the congested roads of Dhaka city and try to imagine how this city will look like with a few more million people packed into it in a few years' time. The government should try to develop proper infrastructure to relieve Dhaka's notorious congestion.

People tend to think this government has been unable or unwilling to tackle pressing problems, such as the chronic lack of electricity on priority. Our difficulty is not just the lack of funds to build more power plants, but also the administrative and institutional capacity to award foreign contracts to credible companies to build such projects. It is really important for our politicians not to give people a sense that there's nothing that can be

done to fix this pressing problem.

The country would receive best return on its investment if the government shifts its focus to areas like agriculture, irrigation (agriculture's most important input), pre and post natal health care and disease prevention (particularly a pressing need in a country with the highest incidence of infant and maternal mortality). A healthier, wealthier and well educated population is more likely to shun violence and fanaticism.

Religious fundamentalists are likely to take over in Afghanistan and Pakistan as soon as the US withdraws from the region. Then terrorism will rise; fundamentalists of our country will take their inspiration from the Taliban of Afghanistan. Extreme poverty often saps the morale of the young people and makes so many of them prey to extremists. Insurgency thrives on the back of dire poverty and unemployment.

Maintaining a principled commitment to secularism and upholding the fundamental principles of social justice, this government should act boldly on all fronts. People recognise that it is useful to have a leader on good terms with India

and the West. The region needs to collaborate to promote better economic integration. It is the right time to reorient our foreign policy and reshape our economy to build the nation's industrial future.

So far Bangladesh has failed to attract foreign direct investment in anything like the volume that has poured into other East Asian countries. It is natural for labour intensive jobs go to low cost countries. Bangladesh should try to draw investment in the sort of labour intensive manufacturing sectors like ship building, car manufacturing and iron and steel industries that have largely fuelled East Asia's boom.

Our electorate is the world's poorest and least educated. Yet they always vote with remarkable intelligence; but alas, they often cast votes of protest and not votes of choice. Politics, as everyone knows, is the art of possible, and the real job of wise politicians is to broaden the horizon of possibilities. People want jobs, prosperity and better standard of living. People are crying for change, are the politicians really able to deliver it?

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