

Enforcement of house rent law

Equitable implementation needed

REPORTEDELY, there has been on the average a 15 percent increase in house rent over the last ten years or so. And the matter of house rent, particularly in the metropolitan areas, is an irritating issue that sometimes leaves the two parties, the landlord and the tenant, in a very abrasive relationship.

There is a tendency on the part of the landlords to arbitrarily increase the rent of the premises while one sees unwillingness on the part of the tenant to fulfill his or her part of the agreement. And we feel that it is just as well that the government has been asked by the High Court as to why it should not be directed to enforce the Premises Rent Control Act, 1991, properly. Indeed there is a need for the authorities to see that the relevant laws in this regard are fully implemented with equity, and that no one party can ride roughshod over another, either by bending the rules or disregarding them.

The apex court's ruling is a clear indication that the matter had not been adequately addressed by the government; one feels that the administration should have taken suo moto cognizance of the issue long ago, it being not only a matter of enforcing a particular law but also one that is concerned with consumer interests, without being prompted by the judiciary.

It is true that while the rise in prices of commodities has been considerably higher, the income of the tenants in general has not been in keeping with the rise in either commodity prices or house rent. And while no one should be allowed to arbitrarily increase or fix the rent of a property, there is perhaps ground to reconsider the mode of fixing the rent, which should take into account not only the laid down method of rent calculation, which according to the act is a certain percentage of market value of the premises assessed in that area, but also consider the price of construction materials, which has the tendency sometimes to increase many times more than that of other consumer goods or private income.

The act in question is a fairly comprehensive law, and not only is there a strong case for implementing it, we also feel, to start with, the government should appoint rent controllers, whose existence, if at all, is not known by many of us, but which is provided for in the Act of 1991. This, we are certain, will not only offer the parties an avenue of seeking arbitration without going to court, but will also take much less time to resolve a dispute.

Sangbad at sixty

It has made a palpable difference

SIXTY years ago, the daily Sangbad made its appearance in what was then East Bengal/East Pakistan. It was a time when the earliest indications of an emerging Bengali nationalism were to be detected. Sangbad, however, was not quite disposed to such causes in its initial stages, which again was quite understandable given the prevailing nature of politics at the time. And yet a moment came when Sangbad made that crucial choice of going for a defence of the cause of the Bengali people, a cause that not only focused on the need for a greater say in the politics of Pakistan for them but also on the necessity of a preservation of the heritage that underscored the Bengali social psyche. By the 1960s, it was Sangbad that was informing people insistently that the rights of the people of East Bengal could only be ignored at risk to the very state itself.

In these six decades since it made its appearance in our lives, Sangbad has truly upheld the causes that over time were to reinforce our argument in defence of autonomy and then our conviction that East Bengal/East Pakistan could only attain its objectives through charting an independent course for itself. Its position on the various issues affecting the Bengali nationalist cause was made clear through its upholding of a secular brand of politics in what would soon be Bangladesh. In many more ways than one, Sangbad came to be reflective of the national spirit, the life force that was to culminate in an independent statehood for the people of this land. And in the years following the emergence of Bangladesh, Sangbad remained steadfast in its belief that politics assumed significance only when it spoke for the people. To this end, it made its position vis-à-vis the military dictatorships that foisted themselves on this country unambiguously clear. Its consistent promotion of the democratic cause, coupled with its belief that the state could only reach its cherished goals on the basis of a secular polity, fuelled its acceptance among broad sections of citizens.

Today, Sangbad can look back with pride at the long road it has travelled. For journalism today, it remains a point of reference. It is a symbol of what newspapers ought to be --- liberal, always evolving and therefore home to new ideas. Our congratulations go out to everyone who has contributed to the rise and consolidation of Sangbad as a leading voice in the articulation of popular aspirations.



Policemen, seized vehicles and citizens' dignity

That is not how things are in civilised societies. The first thing you do in those societies, if you are in trouble or in need of help, is to approach the nearest policeman or police station. In this country, that is the last thing you do, if you must.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE cab drivers have made their point, somewhat. The police authorities have assured them that there will be no requisitioning of their vehicles on the streets and that there will be no cases filed regarding the recent chaos arising out of police action against some of the cabbies.

On the face of it, everything appears to be in order. And yet there is a whole lot to be said about how policemen in this country relate to their fellow citizens. Of course, we have always heard of all those exhortations from the powers that be, down the years, of the necessity of cooperation between the police and the people. You would think the police were a species apart from the people, that they were a force either foreign or elitist in nature, one that was in constant need of being understood. Why must that be the reality?

But that indeed is the reality. Bangladesh happens to be one of those blighted countries where the defining, enduring symbol for the police, as far as citizens are concerned, is fear. No one wishes to go to the police. The natural impulse on everyone's part is to sprint away into the alleys or the

bushes every time the police are seen to be approaching.

That is not how things are in civilised societies. The first thing you do in those societies, if you are in trouble or in need of help, is to approach the nearest policeman or police station. In this country, that is the last thing you do, if you must.

It, therefore, does not really matter that all those talk show hosts and police officers serving and superannuated, in fact everyone you can think of, often enlighten you gravely on how the police can improve their performance and on how citizens can go to them in times of dire need. The police have not improved their behaviour. And citizens yet have that terrified look in their eyes.

Take this matter of the requisitioning of vehicles. Why must the police go for such arbitrary action, in clear violation of the law and of moral principles? Those cab drivers have done a most creditable thing by refusing to kowtow to police misdeemeanour. But we cannot be sure that that is truly the end of the matter.

As we deliberate on the issue, we realise the difficulties that owners and drivers of privately owned vehicles go through every

time the police swoop on them, the sinister objective being a seizure of their vehicles for an uncertain period of time.

You would be right to raise the very good question of why such a powerful department of the government as the ministry of home affairs must be so strapped of resources as to commandeer vehicles not theirs? And even as you notice this paradox, you see all those sleek, shiny police cars, recently imported, sirens screaming away in glory, rushing past you in style that reminds you of all those crime thrillers made by the dozen in distant America. The only difference is that in America the police handle crime. Here, they intimidate people.

No, the police cannot go on treating citizens with disdain. There must be people, at the upper levels of the home ministry, to devise crash educational courses for them, to teach them the very basics of professionalism. The syllabus is short and simple. Let these policemen be re-educated on the principle of respect for the other person first. They must know that there is hardly any difference between their requisitioning a vehicle and someone else's seizing, at gunpoint, a private car. They must be told that they are only humiliating themselves when they strip a cab driver of his trousers. They must be reminded of the cardinal truth that dignity is the prerogative of all and that, therefore, they cannot with impunity hit a rickshaw puller or let the air out of his tires over an infraction for which there are

decent penalties to be applied.

There are other lessons that need to be imparted to the police. That old practice of traffic constables stopping vehicles and directing them to a corner, only because a stern-looking sergeant has asked them to do so, must be dispensed with. It is an ugly sight and it reinforces the popular belief that corruption is at work, on the highway and in broad daylight.

Policemen must be told that peaceful demonstrations need not be bloodied through a liberal use of the truncheon, that it is not their job to provoke citizens into fury. But they must be told, and told repeatedly, that when young men go after one another with guns and daggers and machetes at the universities, they cannot stand by and stare. Policemen of conscience do not watch hooligans create mayhem on the streets. They haul those hooligans up before the law.

Policemen who believe in the integrity of their profession do not insult citizens by forcing them off the pavement and into sheer helplessness only because the prime ministerial motorcade is cruising by. Those citizens, in case the police did not know, enjoy the very rights that the head of government does.

The police ought not to look down on us. And we must be given good reasons to look up to them. So let their re-education begin, in earnest.

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The coalition challenge

The setting up of the coalition committee demonstrates the recognition of a possible rift between the coalition partners on various issues, and the need to work them out.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE new British Prime Minister, David William Donald Cameron, has formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democratic Party as his Conservative Party could not secure absolute majority. The leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Nick Clegg, has become the deputy prime minister. Cameron is the youngest prime minister of Britain after the 2nd Earl of Liverpool in 1812.

The coalition government will have 363 seats in the Commons, well above the 326 needed for a majority. In UK, this is the first coalition government after decades.

Nick Clegg had a difficult choice. If his party joined with Conservatives, it risked being punished in the next election in Scotland and the north of England. If it supported Labour it risked a voters' backlash in southern and southwestern England. At the end, he chose the Conservatives because they had the most popular votes and was the largest single party in the Commons.

Cameron was gracious enough to pay tribute to 13-year rule of Labour Party by saying:

"Compared with 10 years ago, this country is more fair at home and more compassionate abroad." He also paid tribute to his predecessor Gordon Brown for his long-term public service.

Earlier on the day, Brown left 10

Downing Street to tender resignation to the Queen, saying he wished Cameron success. Brown was at his dignified best. This is one of the political decencies we see in a mature democracy.

Cameron said that his coalition government with Nick Clegg was characterised by "joint endeavour, not two competing teams trying to occupy office at the same time." Both the leaders said that their partnership would inaugurate a "grown-up" era in British politics.

Many European parliamentary governments (Germany, Belgium, Italy) have been successful in running coalition governments. In our part of South Asia, India has had a coalition government since 1998, and Nepal has a coalition government in place although it failed with Maoists. In Pakistan, the coalition government between ruling PPP and PML (Nawaz) did not last long.

Cameron had a privileged childhood. He was educated in Eton and later went to Oxford. At the age of 21, he began a series of political jobs with the Conservative Party, starting in its research department. He then spent several years working as head of corporate affairs for a media company.

He first ran for parliament in 1997. He lost, but was elected four years later in the Witney -- in Oxfordshire -- seat. He rose through party ranks and eventually became the leader of the Party in 2005.

He recast his party after he took the stewardship in 2005 and portrayed it as a "compassionate Conservative Party." He was successful in weeding out the old guards and replacing them with young politicians, including women and minorities. He promoted environmental issues and spoke about gay rights and civil partnerships.

Britain has a deficit of about \$240 billion (11.5 percent of national income), largely a result of prodigious deficit spending during the global recession of the past two years. The unemployment rate hit the peak -- 2.5 million. The prime minister faces the enormous challenge of cutting the deficit in the budget within 50 days.

In the first cabinet meeting, it was decided that the ministers would take a 5 per cent in their salaries to make a point that hard times are ahead. Some say the government needs to impose £50 billion worth of taxes.

Some political observers wonder whether the coalition will last long enough. Some of the risks are:

- Whether the Liberal Democrats are willing to hold the pledges to savagely cut the government deficit and introduce discipline in the country's expensive welfare state,
- Whether political reform in the voting system -- introduction of some kind of proportional representation -- which has been one of the core pledges of the Liberal Democratic Party, would eventually be implemented through a referendum as the Conservative party will campaign against the reforms during,
- A rift may emerge when the two parties' candidates battle in local and European

elections,

- Another rift could take place between the Conservative and Liberal Democratic leaders over the policy towards the European Union. LD is not opposed to an eventual move by Britain to join the euro single currency -- if the economic benefits can be shown -- but the Conservatives are passionately against such a move.

In the first cabinet meeting on May 12, it is reported that coalition cabinet members were encouraged to keep their differences quiet and told that a special coalition committee would be set up, co-chaired by Cameron and Clegg, to provide a forum in which to thrash out any disagreements. The setting up of the coalition committee demonstrates the recognition of a possible rift between the coalition partners on various issues, and the need to work them out.

However, there is also common ground on Afghanistan because both want the British military presence "clarified," and agree that the commitment cannot be indefinite.

Steven Fielding, Director of the Centre of British Politics at Nottingham University, reportedly said: "It is going to be a very interesting and hairy ride. We have got a set of politicians who are not used to a coalition government and who are going to have to learn on the job, in the midst of one of the worst economic crises we have lived through."

All will closely watch how the coalition government faces the test of being a stable and strong government at the time of economic crunch time.

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