

## A hint at legitimising extortion?

*Apply brake on it, instead*

**C**ENTRING around Eid festival, extortionists of different denominations have had a field day. Transports were stopped at different points on inter-district highways to extract 'toll' without any compunction, legal or otherwise. Even policemen and ruling party name flaunters were found demanding money from the passing vehicles, reportedly. Perhaps, this year's festival time has seen record takings in reckless abandon.

Little wonder, this has been the case as we were flabbergasted at the news of virtual legitimization of extortion at a meeting held in the communications ministry on September 6. There, in the presence of ministers for communications and inland water transport and the state minister for labour and manpower it was decided that a toll be collected from buses and minibuses of Dhaka metropolitan area and those operating on the inter-district highways in the name of transport owners associations, labour unions and road transport workers federation. Even the toll amounts were fixed.

What is particularly disconcerting is the government apparently taking a role here. It is indeed for the owners' associations, workers' unions and their federations to prescribe any toll for their members towards sustenance of the organisations. Why should any segment of the government be meddling or seen to be interfering in a matter that is the preserve of the transport operators or their owners collectively. There is an element of imposition and giving stamp of authorization on a practice that needs to be regulated, not fueled. Call it 'service charge' or by any other label, it is bound to racket extortion. Besides in this specific case, has the interest of the ordinary owners and transport operators been safeguarded?

In this context it is relevant to cite the disapproval of the decision to collect toll in the name of transport owners and workers' associations on the part of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Chairmen of the standing committee on the communication ministry. He has gone to the extent of disassociating himself from the move. For all we know, there are numerous owner associations and worker unions who too have a stake. Should a certain number of them get a free hand to collect money, the resulting chaos in the sector can be easily imagined. If there is flurry of toll collection all around the fallout would be detrimental not only in terms of incentivising extortion but also raising cost of transportation.

The ultimate strain of extortion and rent-seeking befalls the consumers. It is the dictate of good governance that the government find an effective antidote to any attempt at institutionalising extortion in any form or shape.

## Turkey's referendum is a turning point

*Erdogan must now dispel his detractors' worries*

**T**HE results of Sunday's referendum in Turkey may well be regarded as a turning point, if not exactly a defining moment, for the country. The constitutional reforms package put forward by the ruling Justice and Development Party now has the support of 58 per cent of the electorate. And yet the fact that 42 per cent of voters disapproved of the reforms is indicative of the deep divisions which still assail a nation in the political sense of the meaning. Even so, the referendum is a clear triumph for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his allies. There are quite a few good reasons why that is so. The most significant is that the vote reduces the power or authority of the military, which has for decades seen itself as the guardian of Turkey's secular democracy, in politics. That promises to be quite a change, given that the Turkish armed forces have on more than one occasion --- four in fact --- in the past four decades have launched coups d'etat against elected governments, especially when they have perceived a threat to the secular republic put in place by Kemal Ataturk.

The outcome of the referendum now means that elements involved in staging coups or planning coups no longer have immunity from prosecution, which in effect could lead to former coup leaders answering in civil courts for their past actions. A second note of happiness for the prime minister and his government is that henceforth parliament will exercise overwhelming authority in the appointment of judges to the country's constitutional courts. For Erdogan and Turkey's Islamist forces, the courts have often been a barrier to governance. The judiciary has in the past stepped in to remove a government it thought was undermining the nation's secular spirit. More recently, it came close to clamping a ban on Erdogan's party on the suspicion that it was promoting an Islamist agenda in contravention of the fundamental principles of Turkey's secular constitution. Now, while the courts have their powers clipped, a new point of worry is that from here on the judiciary could be peopled by judges appointed on the basis of their loyalty to the ruling dispensation. That is a fear Mr. Erdogan will need to dispel without delay.

A clear objective behind the referendum was the government's feeling that Turkey needed to move closer to European Union membership, a process it has pursued for more than three decades now. The referendum, with its emphasis on a preservation of human rights and civil liberties, is one way in which the government will now show the EU that Turkey does meet its standards of membership. But there is one big hurdle Turkey must cross before the doors of the EU open for it: it needs to reassure the outside world that its long-persecuted Kurdish community will enjoy the same rights under the law as the rest of the population.

## September 11, 1973

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SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**D**ARKNESS descended on Chile and the world beyond its frontiers on September 11, 1973 when its military commandeered the state and put an end to its democracy. It was a coup d'etat which had been waiting to happen since the election of the Marxist Salvador Allende Gossens as Chile's president in September 1970.

For months and weeks prior to the election, US President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger (later to be secretary of state) had made it clear that Allende's election as president of Chile was to be prevented at all costs. At a time when the Cold War was yet a potent reality in geopolitics, Washington was unwilling to see, after Cuba, yet another socialist experiment in the Americas.

But then Allende won the election, which prompted a new, desperate move by Washington. This time the message was blunt: Allende, elected with slightly more than 36% of the vote, must not be confirmed by Chile's Congress. Days went by as Chile's lawmakers debated the issue. In the event, Allende was confirmed in office as president, the first socialist elected to that high position.

In the three years that followed, President Allende's government was thwarted at every turn by Nixon, Kissinger, the Central Intelligence Agency and Chilean right-wing groups keen on bringing down the socialist administration. The omens as to what might and could happen in Chile were the right to be pushed from power appeared as early as October 1970, more than a month after Allende was elected the country's leader.

Groups financed by the CIA -- and these elements were led by General Roberto Viaux and General Camilo Valenzuela -- murdered the commander-in-chief of the army, General Rene Schneider, on October 24, 1970. President Allende swiftly replaced the murdered general with General Carlos Prats, who also took charge as minister for defence.

In the less than three years in which Prats served as minister and army chief, Chile was subjected to intense pressure by its right-wing, by the CIA and especially by the Nixon administration. As the country rapidly went into a state of

destabilisation, thanks to a series of strikes initiated by 23,000 truckers refusing to work in 1972, calls emerged for General Prats to take over through an overthrow of the Allende government. Prats, loyal to the constitution, refused.

The chaos into which Chile rapidly descended following Allende's rise to power had little to do with the government's ineptitude or the president's inability to administer. It had everything to do with those who perceived in the Allende dispensation a grave threat to the future of capitalist enterprise in the western hemisphere.

Like all good politicians who knew what the future ought to be, President Allende reassured Chileans that the resources of Chile were theirs to be had and enjoyed. To that end, he nationalised the copper industry and then went into a nationalisation of banks and big industry. The socialist philosophy holds that power belongs to the people.

Allende was determined to prove that the philosophy could indeed be transformed into a ground reality. His government went for land reforms, setting off the programme through a major redistribution of land among Chile's poor and disadvantaged. Welfare schemes that citizens are politically and morally entitled to began to be launched within weeks of Allende's assumption of high office in Santiago.

The difficulty for Nixon and Kissinger and for the right-wing Chileans in their pay in Santiago was Salvador Allende's exalted status as the elected president of his country. Moreover, in legislative elections held in March 1973, the president's supporters increased their share of the national vote despite the buffeting the government was going through.

But these difficulties did little to deflect the Nixon White House away from Chile. In August 1973, the wives of generals in the army organised a rowdy demonstration against General Prats before his residence, an unprecedented move obviously backed by larger forces of disruption. It would later emerge that the CIA spent as much as \$8 million in the dirty job of destabilising and eventually forcing the collapse of Allende's government.

Carlos Prats threw in the towel on August 24, 1973. He was replaced as army chief by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, a soldier Allende thought was loyal to the constitution. The new minis-



Salvador Allende

ter of defence was Orlando Letelier. Eighteen days later, the army, navy, air force and the carabineros launched the coup that would, through bloodshed, remove President Allende from office and place the entirety of Chile into medieval darkness for seventeen years.

On September 11, the navy took control of Valparaiso. Soon, air force jets began strafing the La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago. Initially hopeful that the coup could be put out, Allende telephoned the chiefs of the army, navy and air force. No one answered. The president then went on radio and television to inform the country that a coup d'etat was underway but that he was not about to abandon his role as the constitutionally elected leader of Chile. Within minutes of the broadcast, the pounding of La Moneda by the air force increased. Allende was offered safe passage out of the country by the coup leaders. The president dismissed the offer.

By 2.30 in the afternoon, it was all over. President Salvador Allende died in La Moneda, either at the hands of soldiers storming the presidential residence or through committing suicide.

Chile passed into deep gloom.

Postscript: The coup of September 11, 1973 would leave 130,000 Chileans subjected to detention and torture at the hands of the Pinochet dictatorship. At least 2,700 people would disappear or be murdered between 1973 and 1990.

One of the earliest victims of the military would be the popular singer Victor Jara. Twelve days after the coup, an ailing Pablo Neruda, Nobel laureate, friend of Salvador Allende, former ambassador to France, would see his life coming to an end. Within days of the coup, soldiers would storm his home looking for seditious material. A sad Neruda would tell them, in extreme courage: "Look around. There's only one thing of danger for you here -- poetry."

Carlos Prats, in exile in Argentina, was to be blown to bits by Pinochet's goons in 1974. Orlando Letelier, in exile in Washington, would become a casualty at the hands of the dictator's agents in 1976.

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## Lesson from Twin Tower tragedy

To strengthen and counter the radical ideology, we need to understand the essence of Islam, which requires joint multifaith and multinational dialogue and effort. This is the lesson, in my view, that we can learn from the 9/11 anniversary.

HARUN UR RASHID

**T**HIS year's anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks was probably the most political and contentious ever, because of a proposed Islamic centre (Cordova Centre) and mosque near Ground Zero and a Florida pastor's plan to burn the Holy Qur'an.

As in other years, official ceremonies took place at the three locations the terrorists struck, killing nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (In New York, 2,752 people were killed when planes hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center.)

US President Barack Obama attended a commemoration at the Pentagon, while Vice-President Joe Biden attended the ceremony at Ground Zero.

First lady Michelle Obama and former first lady Laura Bush travelled to Shanksville -- where a plane crashed after a struggle between hijackers and passengers -- to observe the ninth anniversary there.

Speaking at the Pentagon, President Barack Obama told a deeply polarised America that Islam was not the enemy, and said: "As Americans, we will not,

and never will be, at war with Islam. It was not a religion that attacked us that September day. It was al-Qaeda," Obama said, urging Americans not to succumb to "hatred and prejudice."

He also urged the people to reflect on the fact that there were millions of Muslims who were American citizens, and that they also were fighting in US uniforms in Afghanistan. He said: "We don't differentiate between 'them' and 'us.' It's just 'us.'"

Earlier, Obama said that a plan by Terry Jones, the pastor of a small, independent church in Gainesville, Florida, to mark September 11 by burning copies of the Qur'an must be taken seriously because it could cause "profound damage" to US troops and interests around the world. "You don't play games with that," Obama said, adding that as commander in chief he had an obligation to respond.

Jones' daughter, Emma, said in an interview with the German news website Spiegel Online that she begged him in an email, "Papa, don't do it," but he didn't answer. She said that she hasn't had contact with him since 2008, when he was ousted by the members of a church he had founded in Cologne, Germany.

Jones, who had been under pressure from the White House and Defence Secretary Robert Gates, said on September 9 that he had called it off and wanted to meet with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who has been leading the effort to build the Islamic centre and mosque near Ground Zero. Rauf said in a statement on September 10 that he had no plans to meet with Jones, although he was open to seeing anyone "seriously committed to pursuing peace."

Along with the formal ceremonies, activists for and against the proposed Islamic centre had their own events to capture the emotion of the day for political purposes. Nowhere do emotions run higher than in New York, where the proposed Islamic centre just two blocks north of Ground Zero has inflamed passions before the planned commemoration.

The protests against the Cordova Community Centre (known as Islamic centre) near Ground Zero demonstrate that interfaith dialogue, which is essential for creating an environment where there is tolerance and recognition of freedom of worship by all, has been missing. It manifests gross lack of understanding of the essence of all religions -- living in peace, amity and love towards another person.

Islam is a religion of peace, and the word "Islam" comes from a cognate to shalom which means peace in Hebrew. Furthermore, "Islam" means not only peace but also total submission to Almighty God. In Islam, God is not only a Lord and Cherisher but also a Lord

whose glory is mercy, peace and harmony (Surah 36:Ya-Sin: Verse 58 of the Holy Qu'ran).

The Cordova Centre, as reported in the media, is not solely an Islamic centre but also a shared space for community activities where Christians, Muslims and Jews will have their separate prayer spaces. It will also reportedly include a multi-faith memorial dedicated to the victims of 9/11 attacks.

The name Cordova, a city in Spain, has been given because in the Middle Ages Muslims, Christians and Jews co-existed in a highly sophisticated and tolerant cultural environment during the rule of Muslims in Cordova. The citizens of Cordova -- Arab Muslims, Christians, and Jews -- enjoyed a high degree of harmony among themselves.

Lost amid the protests is the purpose of the Cordova Centre. The efforts at distortion by extremists and radicals tend to continue the unnecessary clash between the West and the Muslim world. We need to shift the paradigm and build on the positive momentum from leaders to heal relations among people of different faiths and bring peace to the world..

To strengthen and counter the radical ideology, we need to understand the essence of Islam, which requires joint multifaith and multinational dialogue and effort. This is the lesson, in my view, that we can learn from the 9/11 anniversary.

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