

This worsening crisis of electricity

How does the government mean to handle it?

THE increasing frequency with which power cuts have been happening over the last few days is extremely worrying. Worse is the feeling that the authorities are either unwilling or unable to explain why the situation has come to such a pass where even a month ago it was felt that the supply of electricity had rather improved. That feeling came from the declining power outages, making citizens believe that the crisis could well be on the way to a solution. But those assumptions have now been belied. With power cuts occurring no fewer than eight times a day, it is reasonable to ask the authorities how they plan to tackle the situation. It does not matter that the government keeps telling us the power situation has improved when the realities on the ground show the exact reverse. With the power cuts comes an inevitable effect on water supply. Households are now faced with the prospect of not just inadequate electricity but the all too obvious possibility of insufficient water.

We would like to ask the authorities if they have any credible explanation to offer about the situation. More importantly, we would like to know if they really have any plans aimed at providing some relief to citizens where a good supply of electricity is concerned. With the weather registering a steep rise in temperature levels, it does not help and indeed it sounds rather insensitive when officials try to explain away the crisis as the result of increased consumption of power in homes, offices and industrial installations. Are we supposed to understand that the use of such appliances as air-conditioners, fans, et cetera, is causing all this havoc? Don't our officials realise that it is natural for people to use these appliances in such steamy weather? No, these explanations will not do. Neither will the carrots being dangled of all the plans the government has before it of augmenting power supply in the country soon. For the past two months, the authorities have compelled CNG filling stations to remain inoperative for six hours a day in the question of saving gas as well as electricity. The obvious question now is: has such a shutdown helped us at all if we are back to all the crises now confronting us?

The choice before the government is clear. It cannot but go for emergency action on the electricity issue instead of trying to explain the crisis away. A harassed citizenry is never in a mood for philosophical journeys into contemplations of life and the crises attendant upon it. It simply knows that there is a government whose responsibility is to make life simpler, easier and more comfortable for everyone. At this point, the huge damage that the power crisis is wreaking on life can be seen in the severe effects being felt in the utilities sector. Motor workshops, hospitals and clinics, computer centres, educational institutions, CNG refuelling stations and offices have as good as come to a standstill. Water supply in homes has been disrupted; and computers, refrigerators, generators, television sets and other electrical appliances face collapse through the endless power shutdowns.

It is time for action. There is only so much agony citizens can bear. If they are in a state of discontent, the government has much to worry about.

Recruitment to the lower echelons of health sector

Signs of self-corrective policy welcome

ON the back of the furore over the health adviser's ill-conceived announcement of inducting party loyalists in the community clinics, it is a breath of fresh air: the health directorate has stopped recruitment of classes-III and IV employees in 21 districts. This comes in response to public reaction against anomalies in recruitment procedures. Detractors could say that the health directorate has caved in to public criticism; but would the government have stopped the process had it not been itself convinced of the opacity? Thus in our eyes it is a self-corrective move worthy of appreciation. But in any case the government should at all events uphold the principles of fair-play, justice and job-specific eligibilities.

There have been allegations of political influence, corruption and irregularities tainting the process of recruitment of health workers in a large number of districts. That the government has paid heed to the grievances of the 'failed and deprived candidates' and held the recruitment in abeyance in several districts is a good step forward. But obviously this is not enough by itself. Now comes the question of adopting procedures whereby candidates who qualify the tests are recruited in a fair and impartial manner. The process should not be allowed to be stigmatised by political meddling and favouritism.

Let's not forget that this involves recruitment of base-level workers who are a very important component of the health complexes and hospitals. It is worthwhile to point out that altogether 4,217 employees are being taken in for 79 health complexes, medical colleges and civil surgeon offices in 64 districts. We don't know how many vacancies are involved in the review under which the 21 districts have been brought. Whatever it is, there is a lesson to be drawn from the stoppage of a process once undertaken.

We would therefore urge the health directorate to avoid any pitfall in future in a bid to establish the right precedent for recruitment to all categories of employees, especially when it involves recruitment on a massive scale. That is not to say that appointment to high places, howsoever small in number, will receive any less attention; on the contrary it is the exact opposite that should be the case to make government appointments in general credible.

The art of losing votes

It is the votes that are being frittered away here. And votes, once lost, are hard to recover. In this abnormal heat of a late monsoon, these power outages are not only placing citizens in great discomfort. They are also beginning to convince them that those in charge are not competent enough to make a positive change in the situation.

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LET the advice go out to the government: formulating a national media policy is not a good idea. And it is not because of two important reasons. The first, of course, is the government's repeated assertions of its belief in a free press. The second follows from the first, which is that if indeed the government thinks the freedom of the media is conducive to the growth of democracy, it ought not to do anything that even remotely looks like a move to discipline the media.

It ought not to matter that ministers, advisors and lawmakers get and will get irritated by news reports of their failings and their peccadilloes and the like. What matters is whether the ruling party should consciously be doing something that will drain support away from it at the next spate of general elections.

Anger does not pay in politics. Neither does the arrogance of power. And so when ministers and members of parliament decide to vent their indignation at the media and do not desist from casting aspersions on the integrity of a reputed editor of a highly-circulated national daily in the Jatiyo Sangsad, they perhaps do not realise that their attitude is about to take away some votes from them, at least in the media.

Politics ought to be all about winning friends and influencing people into doing all the good things that enrich life. But when you observe the tawdry way in which this entire episode has been handled in Pabna, you can be quite certain that those in power at the moment may well have lost the support of a significant section of the population.

By removing the deputy commis-

sioner, the superintendent of police, the upazila nirbahi officer and other government officials in Pabna, the present political dispensation has given two distinctive images, or worries if you will, to the country.

On the one hand, it has demonstrated a partisan approach to the issues that were troubling Pabna in the light of the brazenness with which the local lawmaker and his cohorts have been trying to undermine the civil administration. On the other, through withdrawing the DC and other officials and giving out hints of administrative action against them, the ruling party has patently lost a very large chunk of votes in the civil administration.

Go for some arithmetic here. If the DC of Pabna is not safe, if he cannot be defended by the government he serves, no other government official will feel secure anywhere. These officials may not vote for the opposition but they may just stay away from exercising their ballot at the next round of voting. And then there will be the lost votes of their families and their friends. You end up with a huge group whose discontent just might push the government to the precipice, indeed back to the opposition benches.

Ah, but does anyone in the corridors of power care? Too much of posturing, too much of looking away from the issues looks about to imperil the future of this government. Add to that the culture of denial it frequently has resorted to. Every time activists of the Chhatra League and Jubo League engage in violations of the law, ministers and advisors lose little time informing us that it was not the BCL or Jubo League that did the dirty work but criminal elements with no link to the



Misgovernance is a sure way of losing votes.

ruling party. That does not help the government.

Neither does the government come by any benefit when the prime minister's health advisor suggests that 13,350 health-related positions should go to Awami Leaguers and when her establishment advisor informs us, to our disbelief, that what happened in Pabna was a media exaggeration.

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Surprisingly, almost shockingly, no one in government appears to be alarmed. And that is where your worst fears may be coming to pass: when citizens plod through the dark, cannot watch television, when their generators collapse, when they feel they are all on a backward journey to medieval times,

they are beginning to wonder if they should give their votes to some other party or simply stay home at the next election.

CNG operators have threatened to strike early next month. Long queues of people looking for water in urban areas speak of a swift generation of discontent. In the markets, the sacrificial animals are those who have families to feed and yet cannot because of all those wolves in traders' clothing. Where is the government here?

Governance loses its sense of priorities when the powers that be go after the poor peddlers of cheap goods on city pavements. It becomes a disturbing enigma when political partisans seize the roads, thereby taking citizens hostage, to welcome the head of government back home from another of her run-of-the-mill trips abroad.

It is thus that votes are lost in a democracy. It is thus that the country is continually laid low.

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Re-unification of Germany: 20th Anniversary



And the wall comes tumbling down!

By most standards, the united Germany, the EU's biggest nation is a success story, an economic powerhouse with much to be proud of -- high export rates, low unemployment and growing political self-confidence.

HARUN UR RASHID

MANY call it a miracle, Germany's peaceful revolution in 1989 and reunification of East and West Germany less than a year later, which was remembered on October 3 by the German embassy in Dhaka.

On October 3, 1990, the country was reunified after more than 40 years of post-Second World War division between the communist East Germany (German Democratic Republic) and the democratic West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) by the bold initiative of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany.

"I'm very impressed with how the people in Germany's new states mastered the considerable challenges after

1989," German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who helped negotiate the original Unification Treaty, told Deutsche Welle. "I'm not disappointed at all."

In Geneva, two ambassadors represented two Germanys at the UN. Suddenly on October 3, 1990, before my eyes, the GDR ambassador lost his job and became unemployed and the embassy building of GDR in Geneva became the property of Federal Republic of Germany.

Huge strides have been made in the past twenty years. Just about every eastern German city and town has been thoroughly renovated. And while income and other economic indices in the East are only 70 to 80% of what they are in the West, cost of living -- especially for rent -- is commensurately

lower, so one could argue that most eastern Germans aren't that much worse off than their western fellow citizens.

Some 1.6 million people have relocated from east to west since 1990, most in search of better job opportunities, and that trend shows no sign of letting up.

Moreover, sociologists speak of a "brain drain" from the east since it's the better educated who make up the majority of those who leave. The current German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel hails from Eastern Germany although many Germans tend to forget that fact.

Living standards in the former East Germany have improved thanks to huge transfers from the West -- an estimated \$1.8 trillion (€1.3 trillion).

But, according to the Ifo economic research institute, the income of the average East German household is only 53% that of its Western equivalent.

As of July 2010, unemployment in the East (11.5%) was nearly double what it was in the West (6.6%), and an astonishing 50% of the €80 billion (\$103 billion) in annual developmental subsidies transferred from West to East is eaten up by social benefits and welfare payments.

It's not uncommon to see unneeded housing units being torn down in eastern cities. Autobahns and telephone networks have been upgraded, historic cities like Dresden and Leipzig restored to their former glory, new leisure facilities built.

In these respects, two different economic subsets continue to exist. And dissatisfaction with such differences and inequities has manifested itself politically.

The Left Party, the successor to the old socialist party in Communist East Germany, combined with left-wing fringe parties from the West, has established itself as a mouthpiece for disgruntled easterners.

The ironic result is that while the SPD and the Greens are leery of cooperating with former communists, the political left is bifurcated, helping Merkel's centre-right government to hold on to power.

The establishment of the Left Party as a form of peaceful political protest can be seen as evidence of Eastern Germans'

adoption of Western democracy. But it has also deepened many Western Germans' sense of a cultural divide between them and their fellow citizens.

Foreigners have an inestimable impact on today's German society, and immigration is crucial in offsetting population decline, as both Western and Eastern Germans are having fewer and fewer children. According to a report, in the next 30 years the labour force in Germany will shrink from 41 million to 21 million.

Foreigners account for roughly 8% of Germany's population, and with the removal of the East-West political divide, German society became much more multicultural, with large communities from Eastern Europe joining the substantial Turkish minority that had established itself in the post-war Federal Republic.

President Christian Wulff of Germany used the occasion to address a simmering controversy about immigration and integration.

Wulff spoke of a contemporary division between Germans and the nation's Turkish and Arab Muslim community. "Christianity belongs in Germany. Judaism belongs in Germany. And by now, Islam also belongs in Germany... the duty conferred by Germany's 20 years of unity was to value diversity, close rifts in our society... to create real solidarity."

The president was speaking at a ceremony in the port city of Bremen, attended by Chancellor Angela Merkel and other leading officials of state.

Controversy over the role of Muslims in German society recently led to the establishment of a new right-wing party.

Old national paradigms are coming under ever increasing challenges, so the future of the new Federal Republic is likely to be influenced just as much by factors from abroad as from within its own borders.

By most standards, the united Germany, the EU's biggest nation is a success story, an economic powerhouse with much to be proud of -- high export rates, low unemployment and growing political self-confidence.

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