

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Give Egypt back to its people

Power tariff hike

Avoid ad hocism

ALREADY battered by endless cycles of load-shedding and outages, the general as well as commercial consumers of electricity are now faced with another predicament--a fresh hike in power tariff. As announced by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC), the new raise will be made in order to adjust the tariff rate with the high price of imported furnace oil as well as to reduce system loss and improve efficiency of power management. It is however not clear how increased tariff will address the problem of system loss, or distribution inefficiency as long as the pilferage of power rooted in systemic corruption as well as bureaucratic sloth continues to plague the power administration.

Equally inconceivable is the move on the part of the BERC to make the new tariff structure public in an ad hoc fashion by holding a meeting only with the power distribution companies keeping the end users in the dark, though the actual burden of the five per cent increase in power tariff will have to borne by the general consumers. And keeping in mind the knock-on effect of any increase in power tariff on the prices of goods and services, the assumption that the new tariff hike at five per cent is within the purchasing power of the public also hardly stands to reason. On top of this, one is also to consider the added anxiety of the general users in August next when, as further noted by BERC, the bulk users will have to go through a second bout of hike in the power tariff over the already existing one.

Such ad hoc-ish approach to raise power tariff has not only compromised BERC's integrity as a statutory authority, it has also impacted public interest negatively. Worse still, to all intents and purposes, the enhanced power price is neither going to neither improve quality of service from the distribution companies, nor address the prevailing scourge of erratic power supply. In the circumstances, it is therefore, hoped that the authorities will take the opinion of end users before going for such hike in power tariff in the future.

Deaths at building sites

Time to punish law breakers

MARUF is six years old. He lost his father before his birth, mother was married off to another person and since he has been under the care of his grandparents. The playful child now lies numb, staring at you blankly. He doesn't know that his 4-year old playmate, Tawhid is dead.

Maruf and Tawhid are victims of carelessness of the owners, builders, and construction workers. Pieces of brick fell on the two from an under-construction building at East Rampura on January 24, while they were playing by the building. Little Tawhid died. Maruf survived but a part of his brain has been damaged. He now lies paralyzed in Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Not only do the people who come beneath these under construction structures risk their safety, it is also the construction workers who are exposed to fatally risky situations. They are seen cliff-hanging while working in the exterior of high-rise structures. We have known many cases of death caused due to fall of workers from dangerous heights.

We do not know how many of the victims or the affected families are compensated duly by the property owners. Maruf's rickshaw puller grandfather was paid Tk.5500 by the building owner for his treatment. This is too little, for sure. The owner is on bail from the High Court in a criminal case filed against him.

According to National Building Code, the authorities concerned must ensure safety measures in and around the construction site. But almost all such sites do not have adequate safety measures exposing the surrounding area to dangers of loss of lives and limbs, let alone vehicles.

The government should seriously take note of the incidents caused mainly due to sheer negligence and disregard for law. Mobile vigilance team could be formed to monitor the ongoing construction works in and around the city and mete out appropriate punishment to the law breakers.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 10

1258 Baghdad falls to the Mongols, and the Abbasid Caliphate was destroyed.

1846 The Battle of Sobraon was fought between the forces of the British East India Company and the Sikh Khalsa Army.

1931 New Delhi became the capital of India, replacing Calcutta as the capital of British India.

1952 The Congress Party of India, led by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, won an outright victory in the country's first general election.

1962 Russia freed US spy plane pilot. American spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers was released in exchange for a Russian spy jailed in the US.

2003 France and Belgium broke the NATO procedure of silent approval concerning the timing of protective measures for Turkey in case of a possible war with Iraq.

Birth

1775 Charles Lamb, English essayist. Lamb was best known for his Essays of Elia and for the children's book Tales from Shakespeare

THE people of Egypt are claiming their country which had been so long outsourced. But they are also aware that display of overt



Brig Gen
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nationalistic inclination is likely to meet with serious opposition from the US whose role in stifling democracy and the aspiration of the people outside its borders, in spite of its lip service to these, is well known. We know how Nasser was ruined and we know how Anwar Sadaat, and his protégée Hosni Mubarrak, were promoted, and we know how the Iranian parliamentary system was destroyed in 1953.

But Hosni Mubarrak is unwilling to budge. That is the problem with autocrats and dictators. They get to enjoy their job so much that nothing in the world can convince them that enough is enough, that it is time to go, not even the deaths of hundreds of their countrymen. And if such autocrats exist on the manna thrown in by some powerful countries, the benefits come with political support too, which may prove costly for the recipient in the long run, and beneficiary becomes a dispensable commodity to the benefactor.

On the other hand, if the recipient happens to be a guarantor of the patron's interest in the region, he arrogates to himself an aura of invincibility, which in reality is nothing more than a gloss, a largely misplaced and self-defeating condition of mind, which eventually crumbles in the face of popular demand, as we see happening in the Middle East, Egypt being the latest tile in the domino board about to collapse. But there are efforts to prop the regime up by dubi-

ous means. The penchant for power is so energising that it moves even the most physical and mental decrepit to devise ploys to hold on to power. And of course there are always his backers who spare no efforts to make the deceptive tactics appear reasonable. We have in the situation obtaining in Egypt, and the shenanigans resorted to by Hosni Mubarrak, good examples of too much of fondness for one's job

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proving harmful for the person and his countrymen. According to the Egyptian president, he was pursuing a "career," and by all universal standards one would have called it a day after thirty years of disinvigorating occupation, nay career.

Luckily for Mubarrak there are many in Egypt, and outside, that have benefited from his rule, the upper class and the rich for example, some of who say, grudgingly, echoing the stand of the US, that his departure should be through a peaceful transition, while some abashedly root for him and his continued presence at the helm of Egyptian affairs. And of course there are the paid thugs who pose as loyalists and try to physically break the resolve of the anti-Mubarrak demonstrators. And all of

these have happened in full view of the world, in spite of a ban on the media and assault on newsmen. The "charge of the Hosni Brigade," for want of a better description, conducted by Mubarrak loyalists was in all probability designed to precipitate a bloody situation, designed to create an excuse for the army to step in. Having failed to disrupt and dissuade the demonstrators in Tahrir Square, or provoke them to react, the regime

the question of Mubarrak alone but the greater issue of his regime that people want to see gone. Will departure of Mubarrak mean the end of his regime? And is ElBaradei a viable alternative, who, notwithstanding his democratic dispensation, many see as being without proper initiation of politics and realities of Egypt.

Then there is always the bogey of Muslim Brotherhood (MB) to delay handover. It is the only other politi-



in Egypt is pursuing several other options. For example it has decided to increase government servants' remuneration, but it not likely to be an effective palliative. How many amongst the thousand of protestors are public servants? And one of the reasons for the current outburst is unemployment. One hears too the talks of revising the constitution, an idea that has come perhaps 30 years too late.

But there are some serious issues, that the current regime and its allies and indeed the international community must take note of. How valid is the argument of a power vacuum and the consequent uncertainty that might ensue were Mubarrak to leave power immediately? The question is whom shall the power devolve upon. It is not

cally organised group with a semblance of unity, and it was blamed for fomenting the present crisis, but apart from the fact that it does not have the support of the majority, many consider its agenda a suspect. But with every day that passes with Mubarrak in power, parties such as MB get the opportunity to increase their influence on the people.

And this is where the role of the US assumes importance. While the US position on Egypt is rubbished by the people because it is seen as being intended to manage the crisis rather than end it, ending the crisis should be what the US must seriously direct its diplomatic thrust at.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Change is in the air!



PRAFUL BIDWAI

FRAGRA NCE from the Jasmine Revolution, which overthrew Tunisia's hated President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, is spreading over the larger West

Asia-North Africa region, especially to Egypt, Yemen and Jordan. By the time these lines appear, it's possible that Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's oppressive 30-year-long reign would have ended and other changes would have occurred in the region.

Big events in Egypt, the Arab world's largest country, tend to shake the entire region. Tunisia (pop. 11 million) is tiny beside Egypt (pop. 84 million). But its 29-day uprising was the Arab world's first real revolution. Unlike past military takeovers and palace coups, this was a mass uprising.

It evoked the most resonance in Egypt, but it has shaken other Arab autocrats too, who must be watching the unfolding events in mortal fear that their own people would revolt.

Arab citizens are watching Egypt's protests with hope. It is ordinary people like them, not Islamists or foreign troops, who are challenging a dictator. Most people in the Arab League's 22 countries are disgusted with corrupt dictatorial regimes, which provide no public services or food security.

Arab governments haven't done well by their people. Even the oil-rich states haven't educated them. Under external pressure and the recent global slowdown, many governments have further cut food and fuel subsidies, increasing people's suffering.

People's experience of poverty, unemployment and lack of freedom is identical all over the Arab world. So, Egypt-style protests are likely to spread, seeking replacement of auto-

cratic regimes by democracy.

The Arab world's democratic deficit is huge. Where elections take place, they are rigged -- as in Egypt, where the ruling party's parliamentary majority rose from 75% to 95%.

Only three Arab countries can be called some kind of democracy: Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and Iraq. But they're flawed. Lebanon's democracy is denominational, with the top offices being divided up between religious communities and powerful families.

Hamas won free and fair elections in the Palestinian Territories in 2006. But it was excluded from the Palestinian Authority. In Iraq, the democratic process runs within a US-dictated constitution and policy framework.

Where elected legislatures exist in some form, they wield no power independent of the ruling families. The richest Arab states -- Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Qatar -- are at the bottom of the democracy index.

The democracy deficit is often blamed on Islam, especially salafi "desert Islam," reinforced by obscurantism. But other factors are more important: large-scale social destruction and creation of artificial states by European imperialists; tribalism and paternalism; oil money, which obviates the need to negotiate popular participation; the state's failure to tax the rich and break their stranglehold, and not least, foreign-aid dependence.

The Western powers, led by the US, sustained Arab autocracies during the Cold War. They do so now to maintain the US's strategic alliance system. Israel, followed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is pivotal to it. Washington has annually bankrolled Egypt with \$3.5 billion since Anwar El-Sadat made peace with Israel in 1979, breaking its isolation in the Arab world.

Faced with a popular upsurge, President Mubarak dissolved his cabinet and appointed former intelligence chief Omar Suleiman as vice-president. But the protesters chanted:

"Hosni Mubarak, Omar Suleiman, both of you are American agents."

Mr. Suleiman is indeed a trusted US ally, long-standing CIA collaborator, and the main conduit between Mr. Mubarak and Washington. He implemented the US policy of "rendition" of terror suspects for interrogation under torture. Torture has long been practised in Egypt.

The Egyptian people's anger is rooted in opposition to the Mubarak dynasty, police brutality, widespread poverty, high food prices, and unemployment. People under 30 make up almost two-thirds of Egypt's popula-

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tion. About 90% of Egypt's jobless are under 30.

Discontent has infected the army. Soldiers refuse to open fire on protesters and people paint anti-Mubarak slogans on battle-tanks.

Mr. Mubarak's government unleashed thugs upon peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square on February 1. But they had to retreat and the prime minister had to apologise.

Hatred of Mr. Mubarak has united different social layers, including trade unions, the 6 April Youth Movement created in solidarity with industrial workers, and middle class strata.

Numerous parties, including the National Association for Change led by former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohammed ElBaradei and the Muslim

Brotherhood, and secular parties too, support the protests. But none leads them, certainly not the Muslim Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, Egypt's millionaires are fleeing. And people are publicly telling Mr Mubarak: "The plane is ready."

A collapse of the Mubarak regime will almost certainly ignite protests in other Arab states and prove a transformative moment in West Asia-North Africa, radically reshaping it and opening a new democratic epoch.

What does this mean for the Western powers? The West was at first reluctant to distance itself from Mr. Mubarak, its loyal ally and Israel's closest friend in the region. Ditching him might provoke a groundswell of protest all over the volatile oil-rich region, creating further instability.

But the protests grew. The West is now asking Mr. Mubarak to step down: backing him would earn it intense popular hostility, just as happened in Iran in 1979 with the detested Shah.

Even Washington has stopped vacillating between expressing faith in the stability of the Egyptian government, and calling for "an orderly transition" to a broad-based government. President Barack Obama has told Mr. Mubarak to act immediately to make this happen.

Israel is worried that it'll lose an indispensable ally, which is crucial in maintaining confusion and divisions in the Arab world, and the status quo in Gaza. Growing protests could soon highlight the Palestine issue.

If Egypt's next government decides to open the Rafah crossing with Gaza, it will break Israel's siege of the Strip and foil its hitherto remarkable success in thwarting the Palestinian Authority's claims to sovereignty and forcing it to accept illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.

The situation is pregnant with possibilities.

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