

New policy settlement for poverty reduction

GEORGE WOOD

I argued in my previous article (*The Daily Star* Jan. 30, page 15) that poverty reduction would always require provision from public revenue sources. That requires a new policy settlement with the rising taxpaying classes in Bangladesh.

Even in rich countries like the UK, up to 25% of the national budget is spent directly upon poor and stressed households which cannot survive in the market place of wages, profits, pensions and rents. Some of those may only have temporary problems as their income earners lose employment through economic downturns, but then regain employment within a short time. They require safety nets and other forms of insurance.

But other households have a multitude of interconnected chronic problems as a function of morbidity, mental illness, disability, old age and an absence of skills and therefore resilience. They need continuous social protection.

This is a complex issue involving rights and correlative duties; good governance as an incentive to reduce tax evasion and to expand the direct tax base; and thus more buy-in from the rising middle classes in Bangladesh that their bonanza years of profits and rent-seeking are coming to an end as they need to pay the price for more political stability and the expansion of public goods.

Is there a universal concept of a civilised society which holds for all societies, rich and poor? Surely there would be large majority opinion in favour of fairness, justice for all, and adequate livelihoods prospects, even if not equal ones. Is it possible then to live in a "civilised" society and tolerate widespread, persistent extreme poverty when there are resources in the society to ameliorate that poverty?

Over 36 years I have not met a

In a civilised society, it is the responsibility of better placed people to guarantee fairness and justice to the extreme poor through safety nets, social protection and assets transfer where applicable.

Bangladeshi who is not concerned either about his/her own poverty or that of his/her fellow Bangladeshis. So there is a culture of ummah, brotherhood and Bengali (i.e. not only Muslims) identity upon which to build the basis of a civilised society. And there is plenty of evidence of that concern through philanthropy, voluntary service and funded NGO activity as well as government commitments.

The Jatiyo Sangsad has established an all-party parliamentary group on extreme poverty, so concern is being expressed at the highest level. But concern has to be converted into commitments to move the society from rhetoric to action.

The main hurdle is not ideology but free-riding. There is not much to distinguish ideologically between the main contending parties beyond their different origins. Awami League may favour a more agrarian basis to economic growth

in mild contrast to the advance of small urban business activity from the BNP.

But actually both parties need all dimensions of "growth with fairness" upon which to base their claims to lead a civilised society. Both parties have been bundled out of office by critical electorates not because of their ideological stances, but because they have each presided over extremely poor governance characterised by corruption, rent-seeking, non-transparent favouritism and nepotism, into which ordinary hard working business, professional and agrarian families have become trapped.

Such pervasive "ways of doing business" have undermined the contract between successive governments and the people. Indeed, that intrinsic culture of fairness and concern for poor people by the elites has been eroded from the liberation.

Thus, the widespread lack of trust

in institutions of government means that even good leaders in government cannot make progress with collective, public approaches to sharing wealth and maintaining publicly funded safety nets and social protection for the extreme poor.

Each individual or corporate taxpayer understandably argues that if others are being favoured by corrupt tax inspection or lax tax collection, then why should they comply with tax obligations? Thus tax avoidance is widespread. That is the problem of individual free-riding.

If the government cannot be trusted to spend public revenues towards fairness and poverty amelioration, then why should middle-class taxpayers accept higher rates of taxation, especially when they have spent money in bribes and rents to government officials and party brokers to become middle-class in the first place? That is the

problem of collective free-riding.

Perhaps then, the middle-class people think they can indefinitely live in an unfair society surrounded by millions of poor people who cannot make ends meet. Perhaps they think an uncivilised society will work for them and their children, and that a small elite class can retain its privileged existence amidst the sea of poverty. History is against them on this.

What outcome would they prefer? A full-blown revolution of the masses and a socialist capture of the commanding heights of the economy; or a fascist, fundamentalist inspired form of Taliban repression?

The socialist option is unlikely and would likely go wrong under present social conditions in the country, entailing even larger-scale state corruption and isolation from the global economy; and the fascist option, though much more likely, will end up similar. Neither option

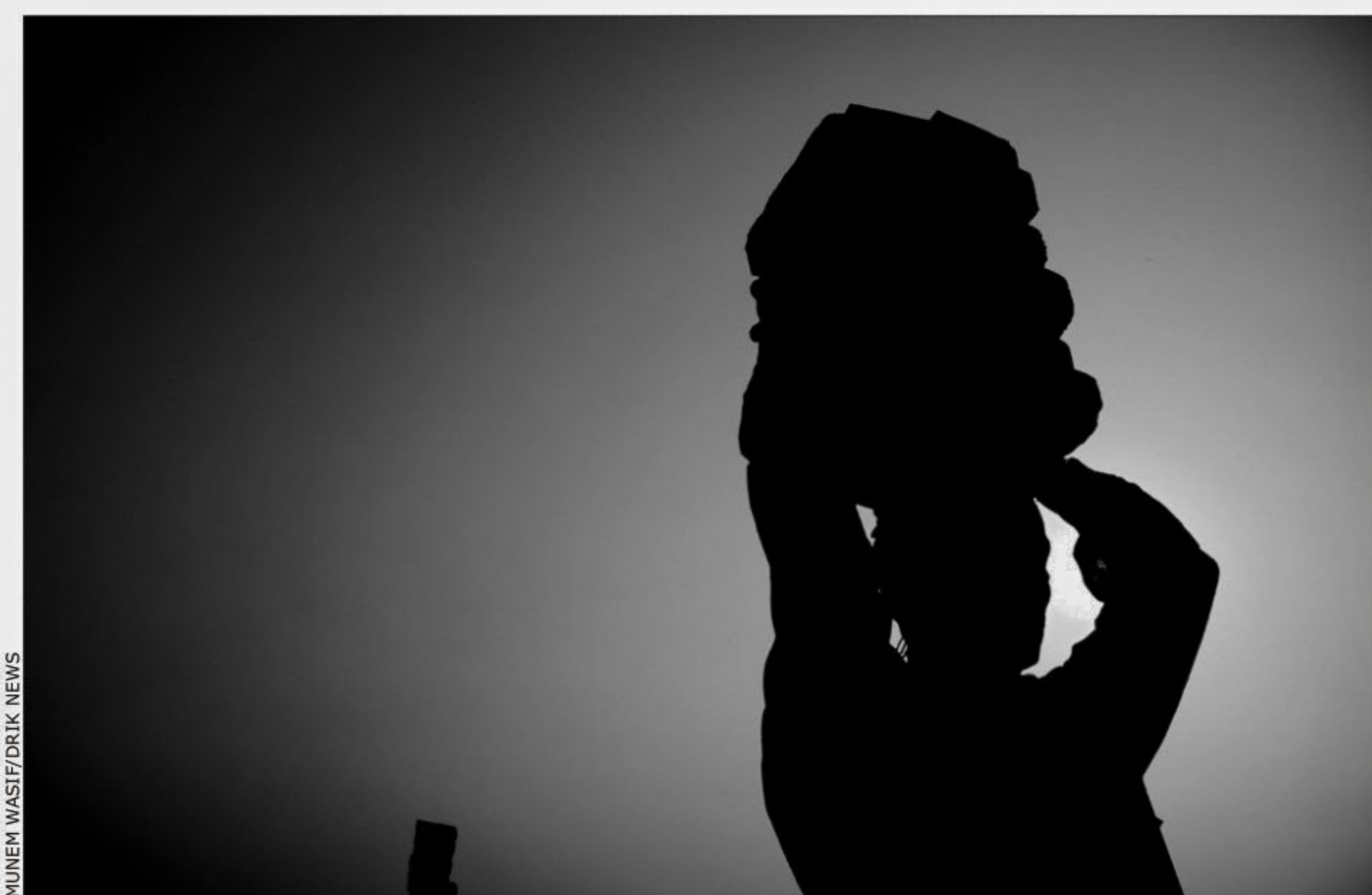
is a good outcome for the middle-class.

Pragmatically, the long-term survival and expansion of the middle-class requires an adequately civilised society in terms of fairness and justice, entailing a steady expansion of opportunities and enlargement of access to them to offset the prospect of either degenerate socialism or fundamentalist fascism.

Thus, the driving force behind establishing a new political settlement for a civilised society is as much long-term self-interest as it is values and principles. To achieve such a political settlement, several conditions have to be fulfilled: probity in spending public revenue as a precondition for being able to raise public revenue; a significant allocation of expanded public revenue to safety net and social protection spending to support universal basic incomes; a recognition by the present middle classes that business as usual is unsustainable for the wellbeing of themselves and their own children; a recognition that everyone can gain from the expansion of public goods; and that everyone's sense of wellbeing is enhanced when the wellbeing of all is assured.

The extreme poor cannot be blamed for their condition, which is a function of systemic variables in the political economy, eco-spatial vulnerability and idiosyncratic bad luck. In a civilised society, it is the responsibility of better placed people to guarantee fairness and justice to the extreme poor through safety nets, social protection and assets transfer where applicable. It is also good pragmatic sense too. And there is an overlap between the needs of the middle-classes and the needs of the extreme poor in terms of public goods.

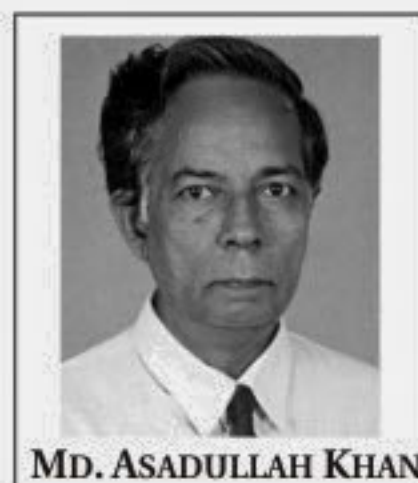
The writer is an Emeritus Professor of International Development. www.shiree.org



MUNEM WASIF/DRINK NEWS

BITTER TRUTH

Fatwa culture: Challenge to the justice system



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

GRISLY crimes have put a blot on the image of the country. When the news of the death of 14 year-old Hena

Akhtar, a rape victim in Shariatpur upazila, by whipping in public following a fatwa passed by self-styled religious leaders in collusion with some local Union Parishad members, a chill ran down the spine of the nation.

If the increasing incidents of macabre crimes in the capital or other big cities are alarming, the situation is no less frightening, rather worse, in small towns and villages.

What is most alarming are the edicts issued by some self-styled religious leaders that subject the rape victims to trauma, humiliation and inhuman punishment like lashing in public. The perpetrators are allowed to go scot-free without even being asked to be present in such an arbitration council meeting to prove their innocence.

Alas! Hena could not find anyone to judge her lapses, if any, and the circumstances that drove her to such a situation. Most shockingly, she could not find a safe abode even in Chamta village, let alone living in dignity. Weary of human insensitivity, she plunged to her death.

It is hard to comprehend the anger or plain sadism that drives these so-called religious leaders to pronounce such judgments without even the sanction of the state.

But the real story here, the real horror chronicled in painful detail in the media is the aftermath: sympathy turned immediately from the victim to the perpetrator and his mentors who are still at large.

Mahbub's wife and her brother beat Hena brutally without looking for the perpetrator. As the news spread some influential locals

headed by Idris Sheikh, a UP member, arranged an arbitration council. The five member judge's panel, which included a local madrasah teacher and the imam of the village mosque, sentenced the victim to 101 lashes and executed the sentence immediately without looking for the rapist.

How the fatwa culture has made its way back into the country after it was banned by a High Court rule in 2009 is a question that needs a quick answer.

People recall the lashing of mother and daughter in Charkakra village in Noakhali in June 2009 through an edict issued by the village leaders. The village matubbars held an arbitration meeting and inflicted 101 dorra on the victim while her mother was given 10 dorra. The victim and the mother didn't dare file any case against the abuser or the community leaders because of their influence and political connection.

As the wave of condemnation rattles the whole country, people describe these gory acts as a monumental aberration of the justice system and violation of the constitution of the country. Not even the harshest words could measure up to the indignation and outrage felt in the nooks and corners of the country.

When the Hena incident was brought to the notice of the High Court on February 2 last, the learned

bench in a suo moto rule asked the concerned administration in Shariatpur to explain within 15 days as to what steps were taken after Hena was inflicted such a brutal punishment even when such salish and punishment were declared illegal by an apex court order in July 2009.

Hena's death has raised eyebrows about the civil and police administration in that locality. People are asking whether the law enforcers did their job in arresting the perpetrator and the self-styled leaders who handed over such brutal punishment even though it was banned by the apex court.

It is so intriguing that every time such a horrendous crime is committed the apex court has to issue rule on the administration, saying that the administration has been failing to live up to people's expectation. In any case, the police as well as the civil administration can't evade the responsibility of the charges made against them.

Crimes and criminality exist in every society, but sexual violations of women, and even minors, and patronage of the offenders by a section of influential persons manifests a sort of depravity which unless checked will tear apart the entire social fabric. The alarming frequency of such crimes proves that a sizable section of the society is being criminalised. It is not unnatural in our country that every time such dastardly acts of sexual assault take place and such fatwa-based salishes are held, people are naturally outraged and loud protests are voiced by all, especially by the human rights activists. But, as it often happens, the alleged offenders and their patrons go away with impunity, and the perpetrators feel emboldened to commit crimes of greater enormity.

The law enforcers' alliance with the criminals and their reluctance to tackle such crimes make the situa-

tion worse. Even after the alleged offenders confessed to the magistrate that Hena Akhtar was whipped to death and the persons who bathed the deceased before burial saw bruises due to torture on her body, the police inquest and autopsy report contradicted them. The apex court had to issue another suo moto rule again, asking for another autopsy to be done by experts.

No Islamic law prescribes such queer dispensation of justice that punishes the victim and glorifies the offender. All these incidents and resultant sufferings have exposed the sordid side of police action as well as community leaders' legal standing and domain of trying offences of this nature.

Dreadful lapses of the law enforcers are becoming an alarming trend. Policing in is falling apart, ridden as it is by the colonial lopsided structure, an overworked, corrupt and stressed constabulary with rock bottom morale. Crime graphs are no indication, thanks to unreported crimes and suppressed cases.

Rape is more than just a rape. The blame of the crime is pinned on the victim and the attitude of all members of the society to rape victims is very cold. In our country, the rape victim's real weakness is forced upon her again and again. It begins with the humiliation at the hands of the rapist and then a tortuous and shameful journey that the neighbourhood, police and finally the law subject her to.

The protectors of law rape the law when they put a rape victim to shame by their machinations or, more precisely, character assassination of the victim at different stages of case framing. How the fatwa culture has made its way back into the country after it was banned by a High Court rule in 2009 is a question that needs a quick answer.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail : aukhandk@gmail.com

50 disguises for sugar



NURY VITTACHI

MY kids were scoffing sweet, flat pies from a box. "The sugar will make your teeth rot," I roared. But they thrust the package at me, telling me that they were sugar-free health foods.

I peered at the box suspiciously. It appeared to have no sugar and be mostly made of fruit. The packaging of Earth's Best Tots Cereal Bars said the main ingredient was "organic evaporated cane juice." It added: "It is recommended that children get six servings from this important category every day."

But it was so sweet the smell alone would give anyone type II diabetes from 100 metres. Strange.

About 20 minutes later, as I was walking down the street, the truth hit me. Hang on a minute! "Organic Evaporated Cane Juice?" That is sugar. We'd been fooled!

Now you see why I think business people are crooks. When I reached the office, I Googled the ingredient in question. Up popped the US Food and Drug Administration's website, confirming that "organic evaporated cane juice" was sugar, plain and simple, and saying: "Sweeteners derived from sugar cane syrup should not be declared as 'evaporated cane juice'."

I had allowed Evil Business People (a US "health" food firm called Hains Celestial Group) to

sugarise my already terrifyingly hyper children.

But before I could plot revenge, I was distracted by the fact that my email inbox was full.

Judging by mail and comments from readers, the most important technological invention of the modern age is the SMS Underpant. This garment, made by a firm called Simavita, automatically sends text messages to nurses if any "activity" has occurred inside them.

I asked readers to name "disguise words" for sugar. Angela Sias and others instantly found more than 50, including maltodextrin, sorghum, corn syrup solids, agave nectar, xylolose, etc.

Angela's list:
1. Barley malt, Beet sugar, Brown sugar, Buttered syrup, Cane juice crystals, Cane sugar, Caramel, Corn syrup, Corn syrup solids, Confectioner's sugar, Carob syrup, Castor sugar, Date sugar, Demerara sugar, Dextran, Dextrose, Diastatic malt, Diatase, Ethyl maltol, Fructose, Fruit juice, Fruit juice concentrate, Galactose, Glucose, Glucose solids, Golden sugar, Golden syrup, Grape sugar, High-fructose corn syrup, Honey.

One reader commented: "Your children's cereal bar packaging is shockingly misleading, but smart people are allowed to make money by tricking stupid ones. It's called capitalism."

You know what? I really miss communism. Communists don't trick your children. They just burn your books and make you go into the countryside and toil the land with peasant farmers until you die in the fields and your bones are picked clean by vultures. At least it's honest.

For more "sweet" thoughts, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com