

SUNDAY POUCH

Prime Minister's sweeping comment on media

It ignores reality

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has accused the print and electronic media of disseminating news based on a mixture of truth and falsehood. Coming as it does from the head of government, this sweeping statement, we feel is unfortunate and not acceptable to citizens and the media.

So far as this newspaper is concerned, it has always been the policy to follow journalistic standards and professionalism while presenting facts to our readers. When, of course, individuals and organisations feel aggrieved by certain reports and send off clarifications or rejoinders to published items, we ensure that such clarifications or rejoinders are placed in the exact spots where the original reports had been published. Despite the government's huge machinery for dissemination of information, the gap between the government and the media exists because the media does not have ready access to information it requires.

Besides, the websites the ministries maintain are not updated and cannot cater to the day-to-day demand from the media.

We feel that if the prime minister or any other government functionary has any grievance against the media, a way out would be for the government to ensure a smooth working of the laws related to right to information. Unfortunately, here too journalists have been constrained to wait for inordinately long periods before coming by information they are often in urgent and serious need of.

We do not claim that media is infallible. We too make mistakes, but we make it a point to check and double check facts before serving them to our readers. But when mistakes are detected, we take swift measures to correct our information and inform readers accordingly.

The media remain aware of a basic truth, that unless it publishes or projects credible news and views its acceptability among readers will diminish, which no media can afford to happen.

Finally, may we remind everyone that the media are answerable to readers and the people, and not to the government of the day, nor to the opposition?

Electricity price hike

Streamlining of management needed

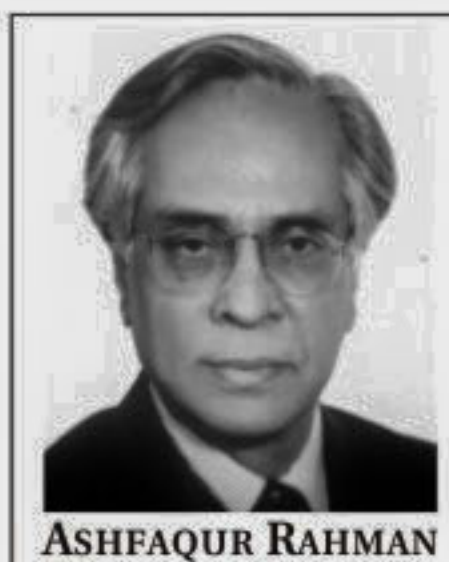
COMING on the heels of another hike effected only two months ago, prices of electricity have soared again by 7.49 per cent for bulk clients and by 6.25 per cent for retail users. And again, Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) chairman has come up with the explanation of price adjustment for fuel-based power plants following rise in oil prices in international market, and reducing pressure on government subsidies for power generation. This is the third instance of price adjustment in the span of four months. Despite claims of increase in power generation, power shortage has intensified with the summer about to set in, causing immense suffering to consumers at all levels.

Granted that retail prices may go up relative to increase in production cost, the way electricity prices are being frequently hiked appear to be predicated upon myopia and insensitivity towards management lapses. Systems loss, inclusive of unauthorized connections, under-billing and managed billing, is largely responsible for over-pricing of electricity and consequent need for increased subsidies. These are factors which are avoidable and for which the state-run production and distribution companies should be held accountable. Instead, the regulatory body once again has decided to pass it all on to the consumers.

Economists are unanimously of the opinion that the latest hike will have a domino effect, further increasing inflationary pressures. So, consumers who are already reeling from runaway inflation will have to face another blow of inflated prices of both food and non-food items. It is the people who will also have to bear the brunt when it comes to slashing government subsidies.

Time, indeed, has come for the government to open its eyes to the irregularities, waste, and corruption on the management side. It should also seriously consider opting for alternative sources of energy. Given the gas crunch and high prices of fuel we could move towards coal-based power plants instead of running the fuel-based rental power plants.

Wit as a political weapon



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

SINCE time immemorial, jokes have been cracked by people about their rulers. In ancient Egypt, most jokes

were about the pharaohs. During the Roman Empire the dictators were the butt of popular jokes. In modern times, wherever there are dictators or dictatorial tendencies in a democratic country, the media uses the first opportunity to flash them, in order to whiplash such trends.

Take the case of the Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The joke goes that a visiting prime minister asked the president: "What is your hobby? My hobby is to collect jokes people crack about me." Marcos replied: "I collect people who crack jokes about me." This illustrated the intolerance of the dictator to any satire or dissent.

Consider the present political upheaval in Syria. President Bashar al Assad asks the Almighty when Syria would return to normalcy? This time the Almighty remained silent. He just cried. It shows how intractable is the Syrian situation.

Tracing some of the Egyptian wisecracks is great fun. A joke scribbled on a 4,600 year old papyrus says: "Want to get the Pharaoh to fish? Wrap girls in fishing nets." It showed how lascivious some of the pharaohs were.

So what do political jokes do? First, they entertain friends and onlookers. But there is another serious purpose. When there is tense political expectation that suddenly vanishes, jokes are made up to describe the disconnect between expectation and the reality on the ground. Jokes and laughter are also "mechanisms for the brain to learn nonsense." So jokes, when repeated, can lose much of their tickle and may not always remain funny. Laughter is healthy only in moderation. It uses the stomach muscles and releases endorphins, "feel good" chemicals, to the brain.

Political jokes follow some rules. They must be well timed, be precise and have a message. A joke is best when it expresses the maximum level of humour with a minimum number of words.

Now what about political jokes in Bangladesh? There are plenty of jokes circulating which ridicule a range of political parties and their leaders as well



GREG PAPROCKI

The shouting matches that dominate the proceedings of our parliament nowadays must stop. In its place we must use wit when duelling with the opposition or vice versa. This will add the much needed spice and flavor in our politics. The people would indeed welcome this change.

as the political system here. This is the same for the countries in South Asia.

Take this particular one. The finance minister announces that our GDP will increase this year. No one challenges this, because in Bangladesh G stands for gas, D for diesel and P for petrol, all of whose price are increasing. This joke represent the disconnect between what the government claims and what is happening in reality.

A journalist asked a new rail minister what would be his top priority when he took office. The minister, according to the joke, replied: "I shall give all opposition leaders free rail tickets." The journalist was flabbergasted. How could this be? The minister said: "Yes, it will be a one-way ticket for them to leave the country." Here, the joke questions the democratic credentials of the party in power in that country.

Sometimes political witticism is expressed through cartoons. Newspapers print them regularly. Cartoons are also uploaded in the internet for wider circulation. They mainly caricature politicians and their activities.

The question that bugs people is whether these cartoons and jokes have any effect on the politicians who are lampooned? Do they appreciate the message they deliver and do they take corrective action? This is highly debatable. Although the government

seems not to censor any joke or cartoon, it routinely ignores them.

In 2010, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) shut down access to the Facebook after satirical images of our Holy Prophet (pbuh) were put up. The government said that this would hurt the religious sentiment of the people. Facebook was shut down temporarily till the foul images were removed. One man who uploaded the images was also arrested. Government policy in this regard was correct, since religious sentiments cannot be toyed with. It could lead to serious trouble.

Political slogans, witticisms, brain lapses and other political quotes are a regular feature on T-shirts also. Take a look at the following quotes:

- A patriot must always defend his country against his government;
- Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge where there is no river;
- In politics, stupidity is not a handicap.

Witty political remarks could be intentionally cruel. Witticism has also led to what is sometimes called a repartee. It is the wit of quick answer. It happens to be a snappy comeback and a retort.

Oscar Wilde, Mohandas Gandhi, John Wilkes and Winston Churchill were past masters of repartee. Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq, Hossain Shahid Shurawardy, Probhas Chandra Lahiri,

among others, were masters of this genre in our country.

28 year old Oscar Wilde went on a year-long lecture tour of USA. When he first arrived in New York, the US customs asked if he had anything to declare. Oscar replied without any hesitation: "I have nothing to declare but my genius."

John Wilkes of Britain was a political rival of the Earl of Sandwich. During a heated argument, the Earl scowled at Wilkes and said: "Upon my soul, Wilkes, I don't know whether you will die upon the gallows or of syphilis." Totally calm, Wilkes came back: "That will depend, my Lord, on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress."

Winston Churchill was the master of repartee. Once an American lady married to an English branch of the rich Astor family was invited by Churchill to dinner. But Churchill started to pontificate on some topic. Disgusted, the lady blurted out: "Winston if you were my husband, I would put poison in your coffee." Churchill immediately retorted: "Nancy, if you were my wife, I would drink it."

Such is the nature of witticism that has tempered politics since the days of the Pharaohs of Egypt. People and politicians have this rare bond between them. This can be ignored only at each other's peril. Both use their wits as weapons to jab at each other's vulnerabilities.

In Bangladesh, we should try to cultivate witticism in politics. This would make more sense about the insane nature of our politics. It is a shame that we have not nurtured this culture of jocular repartee and political witticism in our Jatiya Sangshad or when our political leaders answer questions to the press or speak to the public. This is far different from slander. Who says we Bangladeshi are not witty and lack a sense of humour? Like many others, we also routinely enjoy such brain lapses.

The shouting matches that dominate the proceedings of our parliament nowadays must stop. In its place we must use wit when duelling with the opposition or vice versa. This must per force be led by the prime minister or the leader of the opposition, for other parliamentarians to follow. This will add the much needed spice and flavor in our politics.

The people would indeed welcome this change.

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More than votes at stake in Myanmar

SUPALAK GANJANAKHUNDEE

SUNDAY'S elections in Burma are more than simple by-elections to fill a few vacant seats in the parliament. They have great significance for the regime of President Thein Sein, as Western countries have identified them as a criterion for reviewing sanctions.

The European Union said in a statement on Wednesday that the forthcoming by-elections are a key moment in the process of national reconciliation and should allow a substantial review of the EU's policy on Burma. The EU referred to the country by its official name, Myanmar, rather than the usual "Burma/Myanmar."

"The [EU's] High Representative is following the conduct of the campaign closely, and trusts that it will continue to unfold unhindered, allowing the candidates of all political parties to present their programmes to the electorate," a spokesman for European Commission High Representative and Vice President Catherine Ashton said in a statement.

Burma's general election held in November 2010 was widely viewed as unfair. Opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) boy-

cotted it.

The by-elections on Sunday are being held to fill 48 vacant seats following the appointment of members of parliament to cabinet posts and other executive positions.

A total of 157 candidates from 17 political parties will contest the polls. Of these, 129 will contest 37 seats in the Lower House, while 22 candidates will compete for six seats in the Upper House. Six candidates will compete for two seats in regional or state parliaments, according to the Election Commission.

The by-elections take place in the context of political reform championed by President Thein Sein aimed at democratisation and reconciliation. Suu Kyi and her NLD have been allowed to contest in the race after the emergence of a detente between the regime and the opposition.

The government looks likely to lose some -- even most -- of the 48 contested seats, as Suu Kyi and the NLD have been widely welcomed by voters in constituencies throughout the nation.

The stakes -- a number of parliamentary seats -- are high for the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). But they do not compare to the international recognition the country would gain if the poll were declared free and fair. As Thein Sein has said, it is a test of the government's commitment to the ongoing political reforms.

Altogether, 159 international observers from many countries and regional groups, including the EU, the United States, Canada, Australia and Asean, have been invited to monitor the casting of ballots, according to Election Commission Chairman Tin

Aye.

At a press briefing in Naypyitaw earlier this week, Tin Aye denied allegations of irregularities such as tinkering with advance ballots. The results of the voting would be officially announced within a week of the polling, he said.

Many Western countries have said they will take the process and results of the by-election into account in their decisions on whether to review their policies toward Burma, notably sanctions.

EU foreign ministers will discuss the matter at the Foreign Affairs Council in April. Ashton plans to visit the country shortly after.

US Senator Jim Webb, who has championed for US engagement with Burma, reportedly plans to visit to assess the situation after the by-election, and United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon said earlier that he might also visit.

Many Western countries have clearly demonstrated that they want good relations with Burma. If the result of the by-elections is fair, and if the process is transparent enough, it would make the decision to lift sanctions much easier for them.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 1

- 1924** Adolf Hitler is sentenced to five years in jail for his participation in the "Beer Hall Putsch". However, he spends only nine months in jail, during which he writes Mein Kampf.
- 1936** Orissa formerly known as Kalinga or Utkal becomes a state in India.
- 1941** A military coup in Iraq overthrows the regime of Abd al-Ilah and installs Rashid Ali as Prime Minister.
- 1971** Bangladesh Liberation War: The Pakistan Army massacred over 1,000 people in Keraniganj Upazila, Bangladesh.
- 1979** Iran becomes an Islamic Republic by a 98% vote, officially overthrowing the Shah.