

Hartal hits economy hard

Apply other alternatives

THE economy, it seems, is the number one target of political agitators as they wreak their vengeance on it at the first opportunity. During the four days' non-stop hartal from July 15 to 18, the Jaamaat-Shibir activists poured out their anger on the economy causing immense damage to it as well as to public life.

Even sanctity of the holy Ramadan, the month of self-restraint and moderation, could not deter them.

In the latest bout of hartals, small retail businesses took the worst battering. It is worthwhile to note that many of these small traders flock to the capital from rural areas, and look forward to having a brisk business through their pre-Eid Ramadan sales. But hartals have dealt a heavy blow to their hopes. Hardest hit among them were retailers in the clothing sector.

Not surprisingly, prices of iftar ingredients also skyrocketed in the kitchen markets as their supply were disrupted due to stalled movement of transports.

We have for the umpteenth times mentioned in this column what a day's hartal costs the economy. Assuming a loss of \$200 million, or Tk.1,600 crore a day, the country has lost Tk.6,400 crore as a result of the last week's hartals alone.

The hartal-happy quarters seem to have no twinge of guilt for the harm they have been systematically doing to the economy.

They must come to their senses, and find an alternative to this cheap but vicious tool of political protest.

Keshab's pioneering work

He has done us proud

WE often criticise the values of our youth, we are also quick to judge the influence of organisations working with youth in the grassroots level. But Keshab from Nilphamari proved us very wrong winning the United Nation's "Youth Courage Award," by working as a child right activist. Keshab has stopped 25 child marriages to date and brought back a hundred children from becoming school drop-outs.

Plan International-funded organisation Surjomukhi welcomed Keshab to join their work a few years ago as a volunteer. Before that Keshab himself was a school drop-out. But after working with Surjomukhi he went back to school and continued working in his community for children's rights.

When we look at the big picture and think of national level trends and outcomes, we often forget movements like the one Keshab has started with Surjomukhi. But we need to look at these positive sides of our nation and our youth. Perhaps our youth do not know certain things adults want them to, but at the same time we would like to believe that today's youth are more involved with a stronger understanding of their surrounding and the best part of it is that they act on it.

We hope there are more Keshabs out there around our country, and their accomplishments, small and big, will measure up to enlightened transformations, where ethics and values are strong and old traditions like child marriage are erased forever.

Our peripatetic foreign minister

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

IT seems that our foreign minister has taken a very literal meaning of her appointment, and that too extremely seriously. Taking stock of her travel abroad since she became the first woman foreign minister of the country, the FM has chosen to spend more time in foreign land and on foreign sky than on her country's soil. She has indeed lent a new meaning to the post of 'foreign minister.' Our FM has broken past records of not only her predecessors in the country, her record of foreign tours and the number of days of absence from home has been also unmatched by her past and present counterparts in the region.

Of course it is the job of the foreign minister to inculcate good relations between Bangladesh and other countries. And visiting foreign capitals is one of the ways of doing it. The sole purpose of these is to secure our national interest through enhancing mutual understanding and economic cooperation. Admittedly, not all visits result in tangible outcomes or even any outcome at all. But every visit must have a substantive purpose.

But where the foreign minister of the world's only superpower, whose interests spread all over the globe, whose military has presence in more than 300 locations around the world and whose diplomatic forays involve as many countries as there are in the UN, had spent only 306 days on foreign soil in 112 countries, in her four years in office, the statistics of Bangladesh foreign minister in this regard makes her almost nomadic. In her 54 months in office she has remained outside the country for 600 days involving 187 foreign tours. Naturally, the travel costs have run up to crores of taka.

Nobody questions the imperative of the FM to travel abroad. But when a travel includes only a 20-minute stopover in New York, then there is reason for the public to question whether the visit is worth the money.

We feel that the foreign ministry owes it to the public to explain the purpose of each visit of the FM and their outcome. After all, a poor country like ours cannot afford to waste money on a minister's predilection for foreign travel.

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Ominous misogyny: The Pakistan experience

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE manifest misogynic comments of Allama Shafi, the spiritual leader of Hefajat-e-Islam, have attracted adverse attention of different quarters including the ruling establishment. The prime minister and the minister holding the portfolio of women's affairs have come down heavily on the retrograde observations of the octogenarian figure who until recently had not caused any controversy. However, his recent remarks should cause worry lest the lurking misogyny in many dark hearts is fanned and turn into a socio-political issue.

Curiously enough, the slogan of the Islamic groups in Pakistan was 'chaddar and chardiwari' (the veil and the four walls of the house) and the sanctity of the private domain was epitomised by this statement. The segregation of women from public life was seen as goals that would enhance the security of women as well as occupying the moral high ground.

Evidence on ground suggests that in Pakistan the so-called Islamisation provided one dimension for the decline in the status of women. Prior to Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation there was a clear dichotomy between Islamic injunctions on women and cultural practice. During Zia's period, misogynist interpretations of Islam for political reasons, particularly the Hudood laws, were promoted. The emphasis of Islamisation was punishment and not justice. Women were a central feature of the Islamisation of law and society.

The chaddar and chardiwari were considered by the middle and lower middle classes to be important virtues that needed to be re-enforced. It also pandered to misogynist tendencies prevalent in the society. Politically, women were considered to be a soft target. The instituting of laws that undermined their position in society would not result in agitations and protests.

The point to note is that in women's empowerment, educational attainment is considered to be an important variable. The lack of education is in itself a clear indicator

of the susceptibility of women to oppression. In Pakistan what has changed is that with the explosion in madrassas they have a whole generation of men being inculcated with misogynist values that have re-enforced negative perception of women.

In Pakistan, on the relational level, there is strong evidence to suggest that violence against women has increased. In periods of social-political tension some types of masculinity are celebrated and promoted over other forms. The culture of masculinity in the context has meant that for a man to be a real man he has to be aggressive, egotistical, dominating and violent. This development did make a significant impact on the lives of women as the violence in public sphere has often transferred into the private sphere.

Domestic violence, ranging from harassment, beating and immolation or driving the person to suicide has increased in Pakistan. Inadequate dowry or gifts have motivated violence and murder. Divorce rates, consequently, have increased, the most common reaction being that women want to get out of marriage where there is cruelty by the husband or in-laws.

In Pakistan the military regime's need for Islamic allies in the recent past has to be appreciated. There the consequences of twenty years of deadly embrace with militant Islamic groups are unlikely to disappear overnight. Long years of conflict have led to hyper-masculinity becoming normal behaviour. This ways deeply internalised on the social and personal levels. The process was re-enforced by the Islamisation of society which systemically undermined the status of women on a number of levels. These factors have been responsible for violence into the private domain, thereby seriously affecting women.

The major political parties in Bangladesh do not need the so-called Islamic parties for mass mobilisation. The state here claims to stand for enlightened moderation. There is a casual relationship between state policy and violence on the social level within the country and on the personal level within the household. One has to admit that the conditions causing violence can be replicated within households. Therefore, the state has to accept responsibility for the overall propensity for violence in the public and private spheres, and for adoption of adequate mitigating measures.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Egypt shows how political Islam is at odds with democracy

YOUSSEF RAKHA

EGYPT'S top military commander, Gen. Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi, went on the air to defend the army's decision to oust Mohamed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president.

"The armed forces remained committed to what it considered the legitimacy of the ballot box until this presumed legitimacy moved against its own purpose," General el-Sisi said. "The Egyptian people were concerned that the tools of the state could be used against them. The armed forces had to make a choice, seeing the danger of deepened polarisation."

The general said that the military had offered Mr. Morsi the option of a referendum on whether he should stay in power, but that the deeply unpopular president had refused.

Painful as it was to see the democratic process interrupted so soon after the revolution that overthrew the longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the military's action was necessary. At its most blatant level, there was no way that Mr. Morsi and his affiliates in the Muslim Brotherhood were going to leave power willingly, no matter the severity of the civil discontent over the president's efforts to consolidate his power while mismanaging major problems from fuel shortages to rising inflation.

When has an Islamist government, however democratically elected, ever ceded power to non-Islamists through a functional political process? Is democracy about periodically displacing absolute power by force or about laying the foundations for its peaceful rotation, including mechanisms not only for transparency in governance but also for the protection of women and religious minorities?

Instead of reaching out to other parties and trying to effectively govern, the Brotherhood focused on consolidating its power, by forcing out competent national administrators and members of local government councils and replacing them with its own cronies and allies. Last December, the Morsi regime showed no hesitation as its Islamist supporters attacked protesters camped outside the presidential palace. The government was happy to suppress protest as long as the army stood aside.

In Egypt, the army has been seen as the "arm of the people" since long before the 1952 coup that led to the establishment of Egypt's first republic in 1953. Like Mr. Mubarak, his predecessors, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar el-Sadat, drew their authority less from political competence than from their belonging to the military establishment.

Like it or not, the military is the core of Egypt's deeply bureaucratic state apparatus. But the army, always a major political player, has seldom interfered with politics unless forced to. Just as the army pushed out Mr. Mubarak in 2011, so it forced out Mr. Morsi when it seemed like the Egyptian state might very well cease to exist. At risk were not only basic amenities but also control of the borders, notably with the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip, and diplomatic failures regarding Ethiopia's plans to build a new dam on the Nile, Egypt's long-term water supply.

The Brotherhood managed to antagonise every arm of the state as well as much of the business sector. In seeking office, it sold subsidised foodstuffs and fuel at reduced prices, or distributed them free of charge. It seemed clueless as power cuts and gas shortages became the norm.

The wiles and guile of Islamic fundamentalism were given free reign as never before, threatening not only republican norms but the spiritual wellbeing of the average moderate, and presumably pro-democracy, Sunni Muslim on the street. The legacy of the Morsi episode may

sadly be that in the Middle East, democracy and political Islam "don't mix."

They don't mix not only in theoretical terms -- the Umma (or community of believers) vs. the modern nation state; the sect vs. the citizen; Islamic morality vs. individual liberties -- but also because political Islam gives political cover to all that is undemocratic in an Arab society.

Under Mr. Morsi, jihadists blew up the export gas pipelines on the Sinai Peninsula with relative impunity. Indeed, when militants went so far as to abduct military personnel, Mr. Morsi expressed concern for both the abductors and abductees. (The kidnap victims were later released.) Members of unofficial Saudi-style religious police forces could kill a young man for taking a walk with his girlfriend. Women who did not wear the hijab could be subjected to discrimination and sexual harassment -- not to mention having their hair forcibly cut with scissors on public transportation and in school. The despicable practice of child marriage threatened to resurge.

In the dysfunctional Parliament, Islamist members focused on such issues as legalising female genital mutilation and banning the teaching of foreign languages in state schools.



A controversial Salafi preacher, Abu Islam, defaced a Christian Bible to make his sectarian point. (He was ordered to pay a fine.) Meanwhile, in southern Egypt, a Coptic Christian schoolteacher, Dimyana Abdel-Nour, was tried on trumped-up charges of attacking Islam in the classroom. She paid a much larger fine, and

her case is still open.

A glaring example of the Brotherhood's sectarianism occurred at a Syria Solidarity Conference convened by Mr. Morsi on June 15. What at first seemed like a fascist-style pro-Morsi rally quickly devolved into a hate-speech bonanza against the Alawite regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. A number of popular Wahhabi preachers, like Mohamed Hassan and Mohamed Abdel Maqoud, not only complained of Mr. Morsi's earlier, tentative rapprochement with Iran but also frothed at the mouth as they openly identified the Shiites with all evil. Mr. Morsi may not have been directly responsible, but he did nothing to prevent it.

On June 23, a mini-pogrom took place in which Hassan Shehata, a leader of Egypt's tiny homegrown Shiite community, was dragged through the streets in his village outside Cairo, and then killed, along with three of his followers. Not a peep from Mr. Morsi.

To say that the events of the past month cannot be described as a coup -- contrary to the position of some Western democratically obsessed political nobservers -- should in no way imply a pro-military position. The generals are not eager to govern directly and they fear Western censure (and the possible cessation of American military aid), as well as the Islamists' continuing political power, as demonstrated by ongoing pro-Morsi protests. What happens next is an open question.

What is no longer an open question is how Washington's role in propping up political Islam is more likely to result in the death and discontent of Muslims. The Obama administration, which has largely stayed on the sidelines as our crisis has unfolded, must recognise that Islamic fundamentalism will always be more of a problem than a solution.

The writer, a journalist and photographer, is the author of the forthcoming novel "The Crocodiles."

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Shafi's sermon against women

Hefajat Ameer Shah Ahmed Shafi made extremely derogatory remarks about women in his sermon in Chittagong. Although he was preaching about Islam, his words went against Islam. How could a so-called Islamist leader utter such offensive words against the women of this country? We were even more surprised to see an opposition woman MP taking his side. We expect no more abusive words against women.

Md. Shahjahan Mia
Satmosjid Road, Dhaka

Repair Kamalapur footbridge

I am a resident of Bashabo. Kamalapur footbridge plays an important role in our daily commuting. But this footbridge is now in a very risky condition. Most of the stairs of the bridge, especially which are linked to Mugda road, are broken, and one is missing also. People have to walk through this bridge daily risking their lives. Hope the authorities concerned will repair this footbridge as early as possible. Otherwise, serious accidents may take place any time claiming valuable lives.

Md. Anower Jahan
Bashabo, Dhaka

Renovate CU halls

After the deadly collapse of Rana Plaza, the government is trying to identify other risky and vulnerable buildings. But it is a matter of regret that the Chittagong University authorities seem to be very indifferent to many of the university halls, for example, Alaol Hall, A.F. Rahman Hall and Shah Amanat Hall, which are in dire need of proper maintenance and repair. These halls are in vulnerable condition and can collapse any time if any natural calamity strikes.

It is high time the university authorities took necessary steps to renovate the halls in order to avoid any accident.

Jainal Maruf
Department of Law
Chittagong University

Safeguarding teenagers

The teenagers of this day remain always engaged with various electronic gadgets and Internet. Many of them have multimedia mobile sets. They are on Facebook all day. Many of them waste their valuable time browsing porn sites and sharing these with their friends. Parents should be aware of their children's activities on mobile phones. And at the same time, they should teach them to differentiate between right and wrong. Inculcating a sense of morality and ethics in the children by their parents can only save this young generation from the harms of Internet abuse and other social evils.

Sami
On e-mail

Comments on news report, "Silence is BNP policy, for now," published on July 17, 2013

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed

BNP is miscalculating in thinking that the Jamaat-Shibir are still a force to be reckoned with, because the new generation have seen Jamaat for what they truly are: an anti-Liberation organisation that is abusing the good name of Islam.

truthprevails53

In the history of Bangladesh, they will be known as the real traitors.

Jack

If the party speaks against the verdict, it may draw public wrath. And if the party speaks in favour of the verdict, it will annoy the Jamaat.

hello

Are you afraid to call our politicians hypocrites?

Nds

Sometimes silence is more eloquent and a sort of investment that bears the prospect of good return. Extraordinary prudence indeed. The party has a sort of uncanny ingenuity to reap benefit out of every thing fair or foul.

"Jamaat terror continues" (July 17, 2013)

Vikram Khan

A few months ago, our dear prime minister and her government promised to ban Jamaat. We, the peace-loving Bangladeshi people, are still waiting for this to happen.

MH Khan

Bangladesh must recruit more police officers and other categories of law enforcing personnel. This type of lawlessness is intolerable and unacceptable.

Niloufar Sarker

Each episode of terror unleashed by the Jamaat and its cohorts without consequences emboldens them for further mayhem. We have a lopsided idea of democracy and many of us think it's their inherent right to protest however violently; even deaths become acceptable.

"Govt counts on India," (July 15, 2013)

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

In last 4 and ½ years Dipu Moni achieved nothing from her globetrotting. At the fag end of the AL tenure, she is wasting more public money.