

Another round of power hike in the offing?

It is illogical

WITH a significant portion of electricity generated today coming from oil-fired power plants and the international price of oil plummeting to new lows, we find the arguments of Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) for increasing power tariff for both bulk and retail customers not particularly convincing. Indeed that was the general feeling of various stakeholders across the board at an ongoing hearing organised by Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Authority (BERC). (BPDB) has proposed an 18 per cent price hike for bulk consumers and nearly 21.5 per cent increase for retail consumers.

The rationale given for such proposed increase is to offset BPDB's earlier losses. The question is now that international oil prices have halved, BPDB should be in the green in terms of profit. And if this planned increase goes through, then the profit margins should increase further, but at what cost? Industrialists have argued that an increase in electricity tariff would negatively impact on fixed income groups and medium-sized enterprises. An inflated electricity bill for industry will ultimately have to be borne by consumers and the poor will be worst hit by such an action. Though BERC's recommended increase of 5.16 per cent is significantly lower than the nearly 22 per cent hike proposed by the utility provider, an increase is an increase. Whatever increase is decided upon, the monthly power bill for the average consumer will see a rise and this extra cash will have to be scraped from the monthly budget by cutting corners elsewhere.

Ban on free messaging apps!

Order without freedom is an illusion

BTRC has established a disquieting example by shutting down free-internet based messaging services, that too without any prior notice. On January 17, the telecom authority banned Viber and Tango for two days. Later they extended the ban upto 11.59 pm of January 21. Meanwhile, the telecom authority has shut down another popular app, WhatsApp, on Monday. According to BTRC, the decision was taken on directives from an intelligence agency and the home ministry, apparently in an attempt to prevent protesters from exchanging information evading monitoring. But the purported reason for maintaining law and order at the expense of people's right to free flow information and freedom of expression seems untenable. It rather shows the authority's penchant for muzzling dissents.

In recent years, these free-internet massaging apps have become very popular as people can communicate free of cost with their friends and relatives, particularly those living abroad. It has also been widely used as a lucrative and profitable business medium for entrepreneurs. While the government talks about digital Bangladesh, this move to restrict modern communication apps is self contradictory.

Previously, the government blocked various social sites like facebook and YouTube on occasions which proved later to be futile. According to experts, without hampering the cybernetic communication of general people, security software can be integrated with any cyber communicative tool to monitor communication between criminals. We urge the authority to lift the ban on the free messaging services immediately. It should emphasis more on developing skills on cyber security than gagging free flow of information.

Stop the violence, stop it

SULTANA KAMAL

DIFFERENCES in a given situation must be resolved through non-violent means. What the political parties are now doing in the name of democracy is totally unacceptable. In a democratic society violence cannot have any place. So, first and foremost, they must stop the violence. Then they can sit for dialogue or negotiate between themselves, but stopping violence is the demand of the day.

There are rules and norms in a democracy for expressing your demands as well as for responding to that, which must be followed by all parties. Nobody is allowed to take recourse to violence in a democratic society. The State, however, monopolises certain use of force but that must also be done within the given limits.

History tells us any popular movement has to be guided and fully participated by the leaders and political actors initiating it. We don't see that happening now on the streets. Rather hired miscreants have taken over the charge to make the political programmes successful!

Petrol bombs are being hurled at the general public, on the ordinary people who are out there to get to the place of their work, to schools and colleges. Public vehicles, private cars, trains are being attacked, drivers and helpers getting killed. Crores of children all over the country, in the cities and rural areas are missing schools for indefinite period day after day. Food producers are sitting with their products to see it rot in front of their eyes for not being able to bring it to the market, or daily wage earners waiting in vain to get hired for the day to earn their daily income. The sick are not being able to reach a doctor. We, the professionals too are not being able to move freely to do our job. Even the media people are coming under attack. About 30 people have been killed from the general public till date. It is therefore essential that every political entity exercises rights with responsibility.

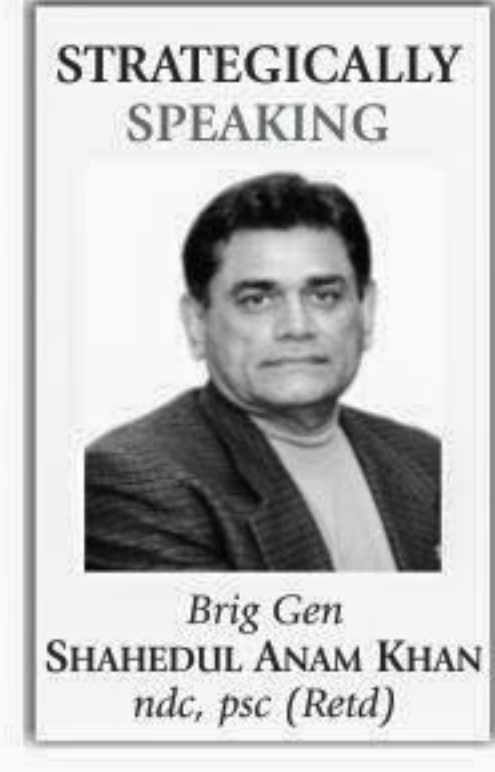
We must also say that it is the duty of the government to protect rights of all citizens, be they political parties or ordinary individuals. And that must be done strictly in accordance with the Constitutional directives enshrined. Whatever power is given to the State in dealing with violence must be used with due diligence. The government should also be careful in seeing that its members are restrained from making irrelevant and irresponsible comments beyond their jurisdiction.

In short, as an ordinary member of the public, I want to say without any ambiguity that, "say whatever you want to say, fight for your freedom of expression and other rights, but you can't burn people alive or cast insecurity onto our daily life. It's as simple as that. We want to live our daily life in freedom and security and at the end of the day, we want to go home safely, stay at home peacefully. All the political parties in or out of power, must respect that."

Our demand is "stop the violence, stop it."

The writer is Executive Director, Ain-o-Salish Kendra.

Development or democracy?



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, ndc, psc (Retd)

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
 ONLY over a fortnight ago the two major parties focused on democracy in their own different ways. One was celebrating its 'success' while the other lamenting its 'demise.' And only a popular vote can determine which of the parties is closer to the truth.

While democracy and its most essential factor -- the people -- remain the constant refrain of politicians, nowhere are these more grossly debased than in this country. And nowhere are so much ill done to a country's interest in the name of the people and in the name of democracy than ours. The current situation is ample proof of that. 26 people have died for the sake of 'democracy' since January 5, 2015.

The violence we are witnessing today has mutated from a political character to the seminal stages of a more precarious conflict where terror tactic is being employed. The indirect target is the government while the direct targets are the unfortunate victims. (More on this issue next week).

The path of democracy in Bangladesh has been very patchy at best. Even now it survives, but only just, and rather tenuously. In the more than 40 years of its existence, democracy in this country has been conspicuous either by its long absence or its feeble attempt to survive in a quasi state or of its largely dysfunctional character mostly due to the very intolerant disposition it often assumes because of the very illiberal attitude of politicians.

According one scholar, the difference between a consent-based political system and an undemocratic regime was getting increasingly blurred. That was written several years ago. And if he were writing the piece today he would not have failed to notice that democracy has not only become illiberal, the propensity to assume a tyrannical and autocratic character of those that have come to power through a very notional democratic process has also become dangerously pronounced.

No discussion on the present state of democracy would be complete without delving into the past, but lack of space allows only this to be said that abridgement of a pluralistic system of government by a one party rule in 1974 was spurred by the examples of some East Asian countries of the late '50s and '60s, where the principles of democracy and democratic practices were subordinated

to the primary consideration of economic growth. What is disconcerting is that those examples are being cited now also as justification of a quasi democratic state that is in place today in Bangladesh.

Some scholars have justified this position going so far as to suggest that democracy can wait till we have reached the status of a middle income country. I understand this to mean that had we not had the political turmoil, an inevitable consequence of the struggle for democracy against military autocrats in the country, and had we allowed a non-pluralist political arrangement to continue from the early stages of the country's independence we might have become a middle income country long ago. And again we are being served up the examples of Singapore and South Korea. Not long ago, the military dictators in this country were using the same examples to pit democracy as an antithesis of development.

The current discourse on development and democracy reminds one of similar narratives originating from a segment of scholars and civil society on development and defense not very long ago. Unfortunately, the arguments lacked rationality, and most of those failed to address the core issues of the defense-development debate. One author went so far as to question the need for a standing military citing five reasons, one of them being: "In a disorganised society like Bangladesh a regular force, being an unequal force, acts as the major hurdle to socio-economic development." I am sure he has revised his views since it was articulated in 1996, having been a minister for the last six years, and acknowledged the reality that the investment in defense far outweighs the apparent opportunity cost involved in maintaining a relevant defense force in the long run.

It is true that in many countries autocratic regimes or controlled democracy have seen considerable economic growth but such state cannot be sustained for long. And when it comes to the question of change of government, which is expected to be peaceful in a democratic system, it often assumes a violent character under autocratic regimes. (One would like to keep Bangladesh out of this equation. It is perhaps only in this country that change of democratic government has been preceded by severe dislocations, more than even countries run by despots).

It is as odious to pit development against defense as it is to project democracy and development as being mutually exclusive. There is no precondition for democracy. And both democracy and development must go in tandem for a nation to progress.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Freedom of speech and Charlie Hebdo

There is a fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity. Protestants never mind any caricature or jokes about Jesus, although Roman Catholics do not like that. Pictures and sculptures of Jesus are abundant in the western world and it has become a part of their culture. We Muslims revere our Prophet (pbuh) in a way which is not seen among any other religious groups. So it hurts our feelings whenever we find someone talking baselessly against our Prophet (pbuh). It is only natural for us human beings to protest if our feelings get hurt. And there are some people who respond violently if their religious feelings are hurt.

So in the name of free speech and expression why do advocates of this group only make jokes about our Prophet (pbuh), but are, at the same time, afraid to treat other religious icons similarly? We must stand firm against hypocrisy of the western media.

Prof. Dr. K.A.R. Sayeed
 Gulshan North
 Dhaka

Hartal again?

Another 48-hour hartal has been called by the opposition. What is the use of such hartals and



PHOTO: STAR

blockades? Does the BNP want us to suffer endlessly? The general people are the victims of their violent political programmes. We are suffering with burn injuries at the burn unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. We know that the opposition wants to put pressure on the government. But this is not the way to go about it. They should spare the common people and try to handle their problems in a different way.

A student
 Dhaka University

Comments on news report, "No let-up in arson," published on January 19, 2015

Mahboob Hossain
 It is better to stop this violence by holding a fair election.

Northstar
 Enough is enough! It is high time the so called leaders of vengeance and destruction be brought to justice. People won't accept such heinous crimes in the name of democratic movement.

"Hunt down petrol bomb makers" (January 19, 2015)

Robert
 Yes, the bomb makers and throwers need to be punished. Raise your voices in unity against these terror attacks.

Mehreen Alam
 As usual, political statements...blaming the opposition.

No talks with those who kill people (January 18, 2015)

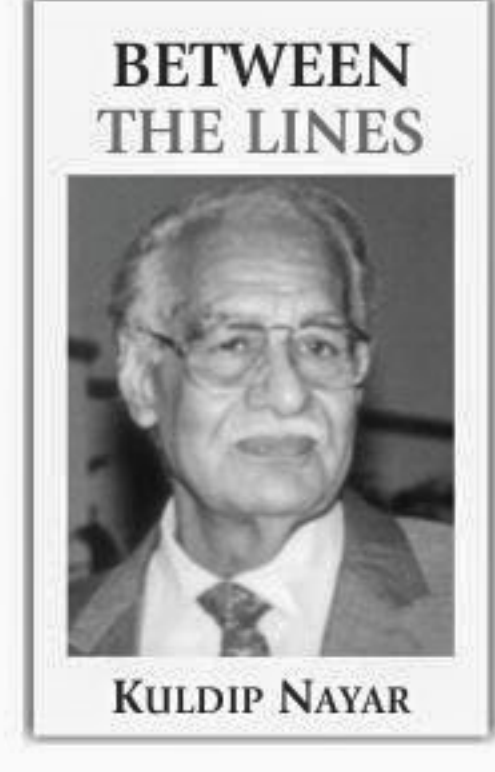
Mizan
 Is he speaking about people's rights or Awami League's rights?

Barkat
 Mr. Rahman is least interested in human rights as he is advocating for more violence. His statement is more like that of a ruling party man than a human rights activist.

OpeeMonir
 We now see the real face of the NHRC chairman and he is not above partisan politics. He sees things with one eye only.

Hiron
 The BGB, police and the so called National Human Rights Commission all are making political statements which will only damage the reputation of these organisations.

The idea of India



KULDIP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
 WHEN Jawaharlal Nehru declared on January 26, 1929, from the banks of Ravi that India wanted complete independence, not the dominion status hitherto demanded, very few people believed that they would see the end of the British rule 18 years later. But it happened non-violently and without any rancour.

So much so that it took Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, two hours to travel from the Viceroy Lodge, now Rashtrapati Bhavan, to the Parliament House. Every person in the throng wanted to shake hands with him. There was no bitterness and the people looked forward to a polity which would be independent and would have their elected representatives to help them realise the ethos of pluralism and egalitarianism which they had cherished.

Why the social fabric has got torn and why the dream of a pluralistic society has become more distant are the questions that stare us in our face. From whichever angle you look at it, the fault lies with the political parties. Their parochial ideologies and an eye on power have pushed aside the ideals which inspired us to throw out the mightiest colonial power without firing a shot.

Having gone through the ordeal of freedom struggle we were inspired by idealism and values. Little did we realise that the British had divided us so much that for the time being we pushed into background our inclination to caste and community. This schism reappeared soon after the last British soldier left the gateway of India at Mumbai. And today we are divided caste-wise, religion-wise and language-wise.

One can argue that China, when it attacked India in 1962, thought in the same way but found a united country to defend the northeastern territory which in ordinary times was considered arguably a point for discussion. The only explanation is that an outside invasion unites the country, not the dangers of division or dispute.

However reprehensible the reason, it does not hold water today. The country has been furrowed deep by caste and religion. This becomes all the more appalling when the state is found mixed up in strife. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on development, however praiseworthy, loses its sheen when he meets the RSS leaders who make no bones about their ideology of Hindu Rashtra.

The BJP rules at the centre and it endangers the idea of India, a democratic and pluralistic society. I do not buy the argument that radical Islam is encouraging the violent fringe among the Hindus. The RSS is systematically changing the complexion of the polity so that it looks Hindu. Its chief, Mohan Bhagwat, has proudly said many a time in public that the Hindu raj has returned after 800 years! What effect will it have on the minorities? Several Muslim leaders

have told me that the community lives in fear.

Things have reached such a pass that serious Muslim thinkers are worried over the extremism in Islam (Islam literally means 'Peace upon you'). There is even a move to admit Hindu students in madarsas. The Muslim students also want to join the DAV and Arya Samaj educational institutions.

What is disconcerting is that even activists from secular parties are making a beeline for the BJP. It cannot be the love for ideology but sheer aspiration to be on the side which is in power. Such personalities like Kiran Bedi who have stood against communalism all their lives are proudly parroting the stand of the BJP. Basically, it is the lure for key positions in the party they consider would come to power.

The fallout of these developments is not healthy. It is making the minorities insecure and forcing them to think that they are second class citizens. This will sap the energy of India and come in the way of development. Until there is a feeling among the minorities and the marginalised that they will gain equally, there will be no concerted effort to push the wheel of India ahead.

The increasing strength of the BJP should be a point of concern not only for the minorities but also the liberals in the country. The idea of India, as inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, is a state where all are equal before the law and enjoy equal opportunities. The feeling of the Muslims is that they are being increasingly pushed to the wall. This may lead to desperation. The world has seen such developments in the past and more dangerously in the present.

The killing of 12 people by armed gunmen early this month in the Paris office of Charlie Hebdo is not justified by the tenets of Koran. The insult of the Prophet Mohammad is not acceptable but killing the people connected with it is also equally condemnable. I can understand and appreciate the hurt and anger the insult of the Prophet must have caused. But to kill the people allegedly connected with it is a blow against humanity, particularly the freedom of expression.

The axiom that your liberty ends where my nose begins holds good in this matter. But in this case, the revenge is the killing. It will be a law of the jungle if individuals take upon themselves to avenge insults to the religious icons. People's anger is understandable and all efforts should be made to assuage it. But what kind of world would it be if people take to arms because their religion has been insulted or their icons run down? Methods are very important.

Mahatma Gandhi said that if means are vitiated, the ends are bound to be vitiated. It is a pity that Indians have not come up to that standard. But this does not falsify the nobility of what he said. In a world, crisscrossed by fanaticism, extremism and jihad, the only dictum to adopt is cooperation and conciliation. This was the dream of Nehru when he raised the flag on the banks of Ravi. I wish that India would follow that path and be an example for other countries, particularly the neighbours.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

