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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Rice bumper output

But farmers are the worst off

OUR farmers are always in a catch 22 situation. They are doomed if they don't grow enough and they are doomed if they grow more than enough. Growing bumper crops has become a bane for our farmers as a report in this paper so glaringly exposed.

When we should take delight in the fact that the country has become self-sufficient in food grains, producing nearly five million tonnes more than our requirement, partly due to the bumper boro output last season, the farmers are left to rue the bumper harvest because they are having to sell their produce at 20 percent less than the production cost. The price decline has been due to the glut caused by the bumper harvest coupled with imports by private traders. Not even the 10 percent import duty, that came too late, has been effective, because the exporters have skillfully circumvented the duty. And why should we import rice when there is enough in the market?

While market mechanism should dictate prices, we feel that the government should intervene in situations like these to ensure that the prices are not kept low at the cost of the farmers. There can be temporary moratorium on import to keep the price reasonable and the government should reinvestigate its existing procurement policy so that the farmers get their due. The farmers, who at times suffer from the vagaries of nature, must not become victims of man's vagaries particularly those that distort the market. Should the farmers suffer for growing bumper crops?

Khasis under duress

Ensure their constitutional rights

GREED and injustice are gradually putting the small population of Khasis of Moulavibazar's Kulaura and Srimangal upazillas under stress with the local administration, reportedly, putting pressure on the small indigenous group to give up the land they have been living on for generations and paying tax for it.

This comes after last year's violent attacks on them by a group of men led, reportedly, by the manager of a local tea garden in an attempt to evict them and occupy the land. Since then the plain living ethnic community who solely survives on the cultivation of betel leaf has been living in fear. Instances of their villages being attacked and betel vines cut are many.

Perhaps, at the root of the problem is the fact that there is no clarity of land tenure. And they seem to have fallen into a bureaucratic chasm, with local departments 'unclear' about who has jurisdiction over the land. But that notwithstanding, can the administration evict a community from the land they have been in occupation of and made their home for many years?

Minorities in the country constitute a small percentage of the population. In many cases they face overwhelming odds to eke out a living. The state has to be more sensitive to their rights and address their needs with more diligence in keeping with the values of our liberation war. We feel that we have failed occasionally in this regard.

The local administration, instead of putting the community under duress, should ensure their safety and security.

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

AFTER another long wait, the eighth pay scale for government officials and employees has finally been approved. A commendable initiative of the government, the new pay scale is timely and necessary for the 21 lakh people serving the rest of the country. As in many countries, government jobs in Bangladesh have been less rewarding in terms of pay and perks. Apart from a sense of job security and perceived power, most of the employees have to struggle to make ends meet with the cost of living going up every year.

Since the announcement of the new pay scale, discussions hovered around its impact on a number of areas including inflation, budgetary allocation, efficiency of public services and most importantly, corruption. Economists have explained adequately why there will be no inflationary pressure on the economy due to injection of an additional Tk 15,094 crore this year and Tk 23,828 crore next year. This is only a nominal amount compared to the total consumption and total national income of the country. However, the price hike of goods and services by unscrupulous people, particularly in sectors such as transportation and housing, during the period of post-salary increase is common in the country. This takes away a part of the benefit of higher pay and raises the cost of living. Therefore, any unreasonable price increase should be monitored by the authorities and action should be taken against it, so that the full benefit of increased salary is enjoyed by the recipients.

New pay scale NEW HOPES

Apart from providing financial respite to government officials, there are a number of underlying objectives of the government for upward revision of salaries. Though at one point in time, government jobs used to be the ultimate goal in the lives of many bright students from middle class families, public service gradually lost its charm as the private sector started to play a greater role in the economy since the late eighties and the early nineties, providing lucrative remuneration packages which government jobs could

human resource. Singapore has set very high salaries for government officials to reduce brain drain from the government to the private sector.

The other aim of the government is to reduce corruption. The argument is that a large number of government servants take bribes because of their meagre salary. Although a noble objective and a common intuition, it is too simplistic and naive to consider salary increase as an anti-corruption measure.

In economic literature, broadly two arguments are discussed in favour of

in corruption.

None of these hypotheses, in reality, is true for public servants in developing countries. These arguments consider corruption as a coping mechanism of underpaid officials who cannot fulfil their families' demands. However, there are plenty of examples which tell us that regardless of the wealth status of individuals, corruption exists. It is not need, but greed that motivates even high officials to pursue unethical practices to earn money. While a low paid clerk in a government office makes a few thousand simply by providing a piece of paper, their bosses are paid in millions for signing a deal. Such practices go unabated since there is no accountability and systematic practice of reward and punishment. As a result, cracking down on corruption in government office becomes extremely difficult. Though the Finance Minister, on several occasions, expressed grave concerns about corruption, pointed to the issue of inefficiency of government officials and emphasised the need for public service reforms, there was no mention of such issues while the pay scale was announced.

It is a far-fetched expectation to ward off corruption just by raising the salary and keeping everything else unchanged without improving the rule of law. However, the new pay scale will hopefully attract honest talent who want to live with dignity. With this new set of entries, the quality of service delivery in government offices is expected to improve which will in turn contribute to higher productivity and growth. But the caveat remains. Such positive outcomes will depend on whether the public administration is free from political influence or not. After all, public servants are there to implement political decisions, not to get politicised.

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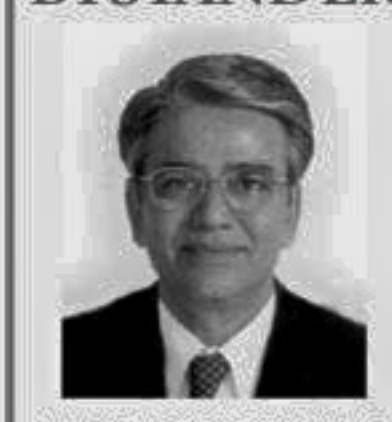


only pay a fraction of. This is not to say that money was the only deciding factor for them to not join government service. Rather, despite low pay, several brilliant students still chose to pursue careers in the government with the motivation to serve the country. With the current boost in government salaries, it is now expected that more talented people will be encouraged to join government office. India has revised the salaries of government service radically to attract the talented and competent pool of

raising salary to eliminate corruption. The first one is the 'efficiency wage' logic that states that when salaries are high, officials will refrain from corruption since stakes are high too. That is, the fear of losing a high paid job due to corruption will demotivate them from engaging in any malpractice. This apprehension will also make them work harder which in turn will contribute to higher productivity. The second one is the 'fair wage' argument that suggests without 'fair' income, officials will engage

NEPAL Confrontations over Constitution

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

THE political situation in Nepal is drifting towards chaos. People opposing the draft constitution have taken to the streets, often engaging in violent clashes with the police.

Dozens have been killed over the past several months, including eight policemen, and hundreds arrested. The government has empowered itself with ill-defined emergency powers and has mobilised the army to contain violence.

Nepal has been politically unstable for the past 20 years. Following the "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" brokered by India, the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) came to an end. The country adopted a hurriedly drafted Interim Constitution in 2007 and went on to elect the first Constituent Assembly (CA-I) in April 2008, which was mandated to write the new constitution within two years. By then the Monarchy was abolished.

CA-I was dissolved in May 2012 as political parties failed to develop consensus over major aspects of the constitution. The second Constituent Assembly (CA-II) was elected in November 2013 and given time to complete drafting the statute by January 2015. The 601-seat CA-II also works as parliament.

As was feared, the stalemate continued as the deadline of CA-II approached on January 22, 2015. To bypass the principle of consensus, Chairman Subash Nembang decided to carry on the drafting on the basis of majority. The opposition parties led by UCPN (Maoist) constantly blocked

attempts to build a consensus. There were even fist fights in the Assembly among lawmakers. The division between PM Sushil Koirala's ruling coalition (NC-UML) and the opposition is clear.

However, on June 8, four major parties - Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), UCPN (Maoist) and Madhesi Janaadhikar Forum (Democratic) - signed a 16-point agreement. That paved the way for the first draft of the statute to be tabled in CA-II on August 23. The draft is neither a consensus document nor a democratic one.

The major decisions taken were: divide the country into 8 states; have a parliamentary system of government; a bicameral house; a mixed electoral process involving 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR); and, an independent judiciary with a constitutional court to resolve legal issues.

The most contentious issue is the identity of the federal states and their powers, which has sparked protests. Boundaries of the new states will be delineated by a Commission. Many fear that creating new states will lead to the balkanisation of the country. The issue has also polarised the nation along ethnic and religious lines. Nepal's 26.62 million people come from 103 recognised ethno-demographic groups (2011 Census).

The Madhes-based parties feel they have been alienated from the constitution. They along with 30 other smaller parties have come together to oppose the constitution. They are seeking more rights for Dalits, ethnic groups, marginalised communities and women. The civil society and media have also joined the agitation.

Many accuse India of instigating the Madhesi people. Madhesi, the biggest bloc of people of Indian origin, live in the

southern Terai region, plain land adjoining Bihar of India. They are culturally different from the hill people and constitute 51 percent of Nepal's population. Marginalised lower castes like Gurung, Chhepa, Sherpa, Limbu, Rai, Raute, Thakali, etc. constitute about 35 percent of the population. The remaining 14 percent are hills-based high caste Hindus who have been ruling the country. Demographic heterogeneity has pushed the drafting process into an impasse.

The issues of religion and monarchy

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have also resurfaced. 'Hindu Kingdom' Nepal became 'secular' following the People's Movement in 2006. And now, public opinion calls for the restoration of the 'Hindu' status. The fear is that secularism will encourage religious conversion. Several parties also want restoration of the monarchy.

According to Deputy Prime Minister Prakash Man Singh the new constitution will be promulgated after two-thirds of CA-II adopts it. It will not be put to any

referendum. The constitution was supposed to be promulgated by end August of this year, but CA-II is still working on the draft.

The government's argument that not all in a democracy can be satisfied is a recipe for more confrontation. As the violence continues, Nepal can slip into widespread civil disorder. The risk is disgruntled sections of the population can act as a centrifugal force - pulling the poor nation in different directions. The dormant Maoists can rearm and push the nation towards conflict again.

India has significant influence over Nepal and can probably play a role to ease the tensions among different parties. Delhi, worried about the violence, has urged the Nepalese government to show restraint and make the charter inclusive. China is watching the developments closely. If the situation deteriorates it is unlikely that she will remain an onlooker. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has also urged Nepali leaders to engage in dialogue and ensure that the new constitution is inclusive.

Nepal's massive reconstruction efforts after the devastating earthquake in April 2015 have not taken off. Many suspect unholy motives behind rushing the constitution. The earthquake has come with a bonanza for the ruling elite. The political parties want to have their share of the billions of dollars that are in the pipeline for reconstruction.

Even if that is true, Nepal badly needs an inclusive charter that will bring political stability to the nation. Since constitution drafting has already been delayed, a few more days to produce a liberal democratic charter will do no harm. For once, the politicians have to rise above their parochial interests and unite as they did after the earthquake.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

COMMENTS

"87 killed in Makkah"

(September 12, 2015)

Lutfur Rahman

Why were there so many cranes at the time of Hajj? It is easy to make excuses of rain or stormy weather. But it is obvious that there was a lack of safety measures.

Rifat Darina Kamal

It's really heartbreaking. May their souls rest in peace.

Naim Hasan

The Saudi authorities are responsible for this. Why did they allow such heavy construction during Hajj?

Noor Fatima

They should have finished the construction work before hajj. They should be held responsible for this massive loss of lives.

Rizwana Akhter

The Saudi government could have avoided this accident, if they had cared enough.

"Bus, auto fare set to rise"

(September 10, 2015)

Shopneel Prodig

Wow! The government is going to give the drivers of CNG-run auto rickshaws another opportunity to demand more money from us!

"Khaleda, Jamaat behind losing GSP facility"

(September 10, 2015)

Saqlain Neon

When you say such things, you make BNP and Jamaat seem more powerful than AL!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Hats off to Prof. Zeba

Hats off to Prof. Zeba Islam and her research team for developing four transgenic rice varieties capable of production in high soil salinity (TDS, September 11, 2015). Nowadays when many university teachers keep themselves engaged in party politics for personal benefits, some also keep themselves busy in scientific research and present the nation with wonderful discoveries. The nation will always remain grateful to these scientists for their great work.

Faruque Hasan
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Dhaka

Barbarism of IS

We read with horror, anger and disdain the news item captioned "When Islamic State rapists win," (August 29, 2015). The so-called caliphate is neither Islamic nor a caliphate. The terrorist and barbaric outlaw outfit is a total shame and gangrene in the body of the whole world, and more so to Muslims. The photo of the crying Yazidi minor girls is heart-piercing. Physical relationship with minor girls has never been sanctioned or encouraged by Islam. The sole purpose of this barbaric activity is lust, perversion and repression of women and children. We don't have enough words to condemn the barbarism of IS.

Islam is a misunderstood religion by the West. The causes may be attributed to lack of proper, effective and interactive communication by all the parties, destructive acts by some deviant Muslims, sermons by some ultra-fundamentalist Muslim clerics, lack of interest and empa-



thy of many Western countries, etc. And now because of the barbarism of a small segment of deviant Muslims, 1.6 billion Muslims are being misrepresented.
Dr. SN Mamoon
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