

Positive vibes from the parties

Time for moving on

WE are relieved to see that the January 5 programme of the two major political parties has passed off peacefully. But we are even happier and encouraged to note the positive tone and tenor of the comments coming from the BNP and Awami League (AL). There is hint of new politics, where both parties have called for a more peaceful path that does not involve violent confrontation, vandalism and arson.

BNP chairperson has called for dialogue on elections. This is the demand of a political party that can be addressed appropriately by the ruling party. As for the AL, it has also called for more peaceful politics. It is certainly a day to celebrate when we hear statements about peaceful raising of voices of dissent from the leader of the largest opposition party, who was in the recent past all belligerence. That violence begets violence and the casualties of such action are the people and the economy seems to have dawned not only upon the opposition but the party in power as well. The conciliatory tone that came from the AL General Secretary calling for a peaceful approach in politics could perhaps be the beginning of a new chapter in our political history where past hostilities are set aside in the best interests of the nation.

All in all, we are encouraged by the positive attitude and shunning of violence and we hope, as we enter into a new year, this will usher in new political development in the country and democracy will manifest itself completely in our national politics.

Threat of utility network-related disaster

Earthquake resistant infrastructure needed

IT is a highly worrisome prospect that the many utilities we are served by everyday may be a source of danger to us in the event of a major disaster such as severe earthquake. It is feared that in such a case rescue operation could collapse completely and the city might need to be abandoned.

According to experts, a major tremor would severely damage the utility networks of the Dhaka city. There would be leaks and cracks in numerous places of the long and crisscrossed networks of gas transmission pipes, water pipes and sewerage line. Overhead electricity poles and cables would also topple down. The number of casualties would be immensely high due to fire and other transmission line-related hazards. During the earthquake in Nepal, such failures added to the death toll. Being on the fault line and with poorly managed utility system, the haphazardly built capital is at the risk of similar catastrophe.

The government should conduct a physical survey of the total utility system to assess vulnerabilities and take immediate steps to make it earthquake resistant. Experts have suggested various defensive measures that include using gas cylinder instead of underground pipe lines; installing earthquake-resistant gas pipes in phases; establishing automatic gas transmission control system; and improving soil quality by injecting cement water mixture. The government should seriously consider these proposals.

COMMENTS

"People suffer as parades clog streets"
(January 5, 2016)

▼
Mohammad Ali Ullah

But who cares? None of our political parties ever care about this. Political activists block roads for their demonstrations and show-downs; MPs, ministers and influentials use the wrong side of the road to reach their destination. They don't bother with how many hours we are stuck in traffic.

▼
Refat Hossain Bappy

It took me three hours to reach Gulistan from Farmgate that day. If this continues, how can we save our jobs?

▼
Md Anwar Khan

Political parties' showdowns are threatening our livelihoods.

▼
Masud Haque

These kinds of political activities must be stopped in public interest.

▼
Shezan Mahmud Adnan

This is nothing new to us. In our country, might is right!

▼
"Helpless, shocked"
(January 2, 2016)

▼
Ovi Chowdhury

It is, of course, a matter of shock when ballot boxes are staffed and votes are rigged in the presence of law enforcers.

Conditional rally, conditional politics and more

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

IT is a great relief that 5th January passed off without any untoward incident, although the stipulations set by the DMP before giving the go-ahead were observed only in their violation. This time the DMP was magnanimous enough to levy only six conditions to the requests of the political parties to hold rally to observe 5th of January. One recalls that in March 2012 the BNP had to commit adherence and fulfillment of eleven conditions (apart from the 19 directives of the DMP) before they were allowed to hold a meeting in Dhaka city. That was conditional politics which we commented upon in this column, and apparently things haven't changed, for politics or democracy; those remain conditional still.

However, nobody got the Udyan, thanks to the DMP's 'evenhanded' tackling of the issue, which had no other alternative but to turn down both the requests. But shouldn't the first applicant, whoever that was, have a better claim on the use of the spot? One wonders who was the first to seek permission for the use of Suhrawardy Udyan!

When a political programme is subjected to restrictive proviso, admittedly for the sake of law and order and public safety, it does not say much about politics or our polity and even less about democracy. That a security agency of the government should remain the sole

authority to determine where, when and how a political party should organise its programme is indicative of the deep malaise in our system.

It is no fault of the DMP that it had laid down conditions for public meetings this time and in the past; it is in the DMP's terms of reference which it has meticulously followed. The injudiciousness is on the part of those that thought it fit to entrust a law

absolve itself of any responsibility in case an opposition's request is turned down, and as we have heard many times in the past and this time too, it 'is all up to the police, and the government has nothing to do with it.'

5th January has appeared twice since the 2014 general elections, when democracy assumed a different character. It is a day with great historical significance, but what is regrettable is

castigating the political opponent. It is more about one party's effort to come to power at all costs and another's attempt to perpetuate power by all means. Beyond those efforts, that have become a routine predisposition of the political parties in our country, there is need to reset the garbled democracy that we have at this moment. And surely a party like the AL, whose prime motive force has been to serve the cause of democracy, cannot feel happy or comfortable with the current political dispensation – the makeup of the parliament and the government.

We are happy to note that the tone and tenor of the BNP leader suggest an acknowledgement of the fact that political programmes without people's participation are counterproductive, and whenever there is spontaneous participation of the people violence no longer becomes an option. It would have been nice though to hear from BNP chief some expression of remorse for people like Selina Begum (who was in the headlines in this paper yesterday) who lost her 19 year old bus-helper son to the arsonists' fire last year, and many like her who are still carrying the scars of last year's violence.

As for the AL, it has called for moving on towards peaceful politics but it must come out of its mindset of denying space to the BNP, particularly in Dhaka city. And the urge to use the law enforcing agency to deny the BNP the political space it needs to function as a political party, should not be given in to. It is time the positivity that exuded from the language of the two parties on Tuesday at the rallies is given a fillip through substantive actions from both camps.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

enforcing agency to be the sole judge in the matter of politics. In many countries public meetings are subject to approval of the administrative authorities where advice of the law enforcing agencies is a determinant, but the final decision is that of the civil administration and not of the police. However, such an arrangement is sometimes of a help to the party in power, unwilling to provide any political space to the opponent at any cost, to

the violence it engendered last year when the safety and security of the people were subordinated to the interest of political parties. Neither the interest of the people nor the cause of democracy in Bangladesh was served. The ominous anticipation of the public was reflected in the unusually thin traffic on 5th January this year.

But 5th January is more about holding peaceful rallies. It is more about

Meeting our energy challenges

IJAZ AHMED

UNDOUBTEDLY Bangladesh is developing, and at a healthy pace, but how sustainable is it in an arena of constrained energy supply? Many economists believe that one of the ingredients of growth in Bangladesh has been low energy prices especially that of gas. Cheap electricity and gas has given Bangladesh a competitive advantage over many developing countries allowing the garments industry to flourish.

Is the era of cheap energy ending in Bangladesh? We have already seen electricity price double in the last seven years, with threats to consumers from the utilities to be prepared for higher tariffs. If electricity prices keep on increasing, will the steel melting and cement clinker grinding industries survive? These industries are known as energy intensive products because energy is considered to be a raw material in production. Typically, the energy component in the cost of production is more than 10-15 percent. If these two important commodities of the construction industry have to be imported, the impact on the foreign exchange rate and GDP would be significant.

Gas price for captive generators has been doubled. Although a necessary correction, this sudden increase has put a strain on many industries. We have seen wonderful plans for electricity generation with international companies lining up to build power plants, but we have no comprehensive plans for primary energy. The realities on the ground, with respect to primary energy for power plants and industrial process heat, hint at significant shortages in the years to come.

Natural gas, which has provided more than 50 percent of the total energy all through Bangladesh's history, has suddenly become scarce, and may be totally exhausted by 2030 if no new gas is discovered. What happens then? The government speaks of meeting shortfall with expensive imported LNG priced between \$10-15 per Million Btu. Is our industry ready for the *Imported Energy Price Shock*? If not, what will happen to our fragile economy that depends heavily on exports of RMG, an industry that is facing intense competition from the likes of Vietnam and the newly industrialised African countries?

The following is a list of the challenges facing the energy sector:

Setting up a regasification terminal and concluding a contract to import LNG
Speeding up exploration to discover new gas
Completing three large (> 1000 MW) coal fired power plants in the next four to five years, and conclude coal import contracts
Retiring or repowering old BPDB power plants

Setting up CCGT power plants using domestic gas
Setting up CCGT using LNG
Making significant progress with 2x1200 = 2400 MW Nuclear power plants

Upgrading the transmission and distribution electricity network from 12,000 MW to at least 20,000 MW
Reaching at least 90 percent coverage of rural electrification

Reaching 200 MW with utility scale solar power plants and construct 100 MW of wind power plants
Improving LPG distribution network and facilitate import of 1 million tons of LPG by 2021 as a transition from natural gas to LPG in urban households

Developing coal resources
As can be seen, this is a formidable list of projects that need to be completed by 2021. Given the complexity of some of the projects, it is hard to imagine 100 percent achievement. Even a 50 percent achievement would be considered a fantastic feat given past track records. If the plans and programmes given by the energy utilities were progressing as per schedule, then the following activities would have been visible:

At least two (2) coal fired power plants would have achieved more than 50 percent completion mark.

LNG regasification plant would have completed and the first shipment would have been in the pipeline

At least 3 Tcf of gas would have been discovered.

At least two (2) CCGT power plants under BPDB would have been completed.

The achievements in LNG terminal construction and gas discovery are virtually nil, and only one CCGT has been constructed so far. The coal power plant situation is in a dismal state. Not a single brick has been laid in these projects. Ground preparation is probably the only visible progress.

In the last seven years, the success story of the electricity sector that actually stands out is the quick handling of the power crisis in

2009-2010 by constructing liquid based quick rental power plants. This move was heavily criticised by many, but in the long run, the decision proved to be correct as the country managed to retain the 6 percent GDP growth rate all through the last seven years. It did, however, come at a cost, and that is high electricity prices. Consumers accepted this price escalation because they were relieved of the intolerable load shedding. At that point, the government promised two things. First, by 2017-2018, the prices of electricity would start coming down, and the furnace oil power plants would be retired in five years and the diesel power plants would be retired in three years. This was based on the expectation that low cost generation would be added to the grid. This did not materialise, and as a consequence, prices of electricity went up. Most disappointingly, we witnessed the contracts of the oil-fired power plants being extended and worryingly, some new oil-fired power plants were given permission.

There was great hope that having tackled the immediate crisis, the government will put the energy sector on a robust track to achieve sustainability. But, it appears that it has been derailed. True, there is no load shedding, and it is further true that the government will be able to meet increasing demand in the next two to three years until the next election, but many issues of the energy sector will plague us for a long time to come. Some of these are:

Price rationalisation of different fuels;

Domestic coal extraction;

Gas extraction commensurate with gas reserves and reserve augmentation through vigorous exploration;

Improvement of the transmission and distribution network of electricity so that the proposed massive increase in generation can be reached to the consumers as high quality and reliable electricity.

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the medium to long term electricity projects are facing numerous hurdles. How adeptly the government handles these difficulties would ultimately determine whether people will receive power at affordable prices.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We need more double decker buses

Traffic jam is a regular phenomenon in Dhaka city. Some people blame rickshaws for this enduring problem, but it is actually the increasing number of private cars which ought to be held responsible. I think the government should make room for more double decker buses. It should also impose restrictions on using private cars during peak hours to relieve traffic problems significantly. Introduction of more double



PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

decker buses could ease the plight of the commuters as well as reduce traffic jams.
Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Miserable condition of Chuadanga Sadar Hospital

The 100-bed Chuadanga Sadar Hospital provides treatment to the inhabitants of the district despite many limitations, such as shortage of doctors. But the most repulsive problem of the hospital is its unhygienic, filthy and totally unusable toilets. In fact, all the toilets of that hospital are out of order. As a result, foul smell, flies and mosquitoes are everywhere. We urge the authority concerned to take immediate measures to address the problem and ensure a healthy atmosphere for patients.
MD. Abdul Karim
Alamdanga, Chuadanga