

Counter-militancy efforts

Imams are a vital cog

A very important aspect of countering the onslaught of the militants in Bangladesh, particularly the religious militants, is the active role of the imams of the three lakhs of the country's mosques. The participation of the imams - half a million in number - and religious scholars can offer an effective counter narrative to combat the extremists' efforts to garner support for their cause and recruit fighters to their rank and file.

We are, therefore, disappointed to find that the imams are not being fully utilised to that end in the government's annual training programme targeting this group, as has been brought out in a report appearing in this newspaper on March 2. Admittedly, the government is yet to formulate a substantive counter-terror study. But as an outcome of the several studies carried out as a preparatory exercise towards formulating an operational directive in this regard, the government is fully convinced about the indispensability of the imams in the successful campaign against the religious extremists.

However, it is apparent from the said report that what is perhaps missing is specific guidance to the imams on the subject of extremism and firm instructions to them on the manner and means of conducting the awareness drive against extremism and militancy, in their respective communities. In this regard the help of the country's Ullamas should also be sought in presenting a counter-narrative against the extremists.

It is quite possible that some of the imams could be psychologically well disposed towards the extremists. We hope the government will make all efforts to include them in the training process to expose to them the fallacy of their views.

The reluctant election commission

Holding free and fair elections should be the priority

We are surprised to see that the election commission (EC) is yet to take any action on allegations that many candidates were barred from filing nominations for the upcoming Union Parishad elections. According to media reports, candidates, particularly BNP and Awami League rebels, faced threats, intimidation and physical assault from ruling AL men when they tried to file nominations. In his parliamentary speech on February 28, Workers Party President and Civil Aviation Minister Rashed Khan Menon also alleged that his party men have been subjected to similar impediments.

Ensuring submission of nominations by all the candidates is a prerequisite to holding fair polls. The EC is entrusted primarily with this responsibility. Quite contrarily, the EC seems to be indifferent to the alleged irregularities in the electoral process. The reason given by the EC - that if it starts addressing complaints by candidates it would not be able to maintain the election schedule - is unconvincing. We want to ask whether it is justified to hold a flawed election just to maintain the election schedule. A questionable election will certainly put the EC's credibility further at stake and hurt the grassroots democratic polity. We urge the EC to take cognizance of the complaints and probe these as soon as possible. It should take immediate actions if they are found to be true.

COMMENTS

"Provide personal info by March 15"
(March 1, 2016)

Misbaul Islam Orpon

Good decision; but the information should be kept confidential.

"She burned herself to be less attractive" (February 29, 2016)

Nondini Monwar

These IS men are barbaric and sick.

Petroleum price: Reduce price and add a green tax

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BAKGLADESH is now poised at a historically opportune moment to initiate a "green tax" on carbon-emitting fuels. International oil prices are low, but prices of motor oil and diesel have remained high in the domestic market. The government has been mulling an adjustment in price, i.e. a lower price, but there are many considerations keeping it from taking this path. However, there is an alternative to lowering price of petrol and diesel precipitously to reflect import costs. The government can split the benefit of current lower procurement price with the consumers, by letting price per litre slide down to let's say Tk. 50 per litre, and add a new 20 percent green tax.

As of February 22, 2016, the price of gasoline in Bangladesh is EUR 1.12 per litre which is 30 percent higher than the average world price of gasoline: EUR 0.86. The price of diesel in Bangladesh is EUR 0.77 per litre which is 5 percent higher than the average world price. Whether the government ought to peg the price of petrol at EUR 0.86 per litre (roughly Tk. 73) or not will depend partially on the cost of distribution through oil companies Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna. The government earns between Tk. 36 and Tk. 55 in duties, taxes and profit from each litre of fuel oil sold in the domestic market, according to a BPC official. According to another source, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) said it gained a profit of Tk. 15 to Tk. 40 per litre by selling various petroleum products.

Understandably, and not without strong economic and political rationale, the government has been dragging its feet for some time before it comes up with a plan to make price adjustments. Price of crude oil could bounce back, and it has been happening slowly but surely in recent weeks, and prices are, from a political consideration, easier to lower than raise. The arguments in favour of letting the current price of petroleum products stay where they currently are appear to be very strong. According to a World Bank study, "Since the prevailing prices of motor spirits, octane and jet petrol have been accepted by the public, there is no compelling reason for lowering them." And the prime minister recently pointed out that the government had subsidised oil prices when international prices were high, and BPC needs to clear up all its past liabilities and so do other state owned enterprises (SOE).

However, as the government and other stakeholders weigh the options to adjust prices of petroleum products to bring it in line with cost, two conflicting considerations are worth keeping in view. First of all, the price of petrol must reflect the cost, including procurement, shipping, processing, and distribution by the oil marketing companies. As is well known, in the past "pass-through coefficient" for Bangladesh was one of the lowest as compared with other South Asian countries. This resulted from the practice of subsidising certain oil products, but now can be institutionally phased out since the

BPC chairman said that the company is earning a profit of Tk. 40 per litre of octane, Tk. 35 per litre of petrol, Tk. 20 per litre of diesel and kerosene, and Tk. 15 per litre of furnace oil. Secondly, all carbon-emitting fuels should be priced "fully", meaning the cost to the environment or the external cost needs to be paid by the user. But a carbon tax or green tax was difficult to consider when oil prices were high.

However, in the changed environment and the oil bonanza, this may be a good time to put it back on the

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table. And if set efficiently, and publicised through a process of awareness campaigns, a green tax could result in a win-win position for the government. But will the public show an appetite for a higher price of energy? Yes, they did in the past even when there was very little apparent rationale for the raise. A case in point is the recent price hike of gas (26.29 percent) and electricity (2.93 percent) against the backdrop of a fall in global oil prices. A reduction in retail price combined with the creation of a

green energy fund would enable the public to become aware of the environmental impacts of fossil fuels, as well as provide them with an insight into the operation of market forces in the oil market. In EU countries, lower price at the pump has also enabled some governments to raise the diesel tax to bring it in line with petrol tax.

A few caveats; first of all, the "green fund" must be earmarked or sequestered for appropriate environmental projects. Alternatively, a "rainy day" fund may be created for any upward shocks from the energy market. Secondly, the government must transition to a regulatory regime of regular price adjustments. There are many mechanisms to minimise the risk to the government in switching to this "regulated free market", but it has fewer risks than the current practice. Thirdly, in line with the reforms, the fund may also be invested in creating a petroleum reserve or an investment plan for the green fund, including some hedging on future oil prices.

Finally, if we restructure the price of energy as suggested, it would be necessary to undertake a mass education campaign in order to garner public support. As a report by BIDS and IISD appropriately outlines, "Good practice includes a clear communication campaign, stakeholder consultation, transparency about fuel prices, and monitoring of the impacts of implementation, with adjustments if necessary".

The writer is an economist and the author of a recent book, *Economics is Fun: Short Essays for the Masses*.

Police for People



AMITAVA KAR

If we peel back the layers of the most recent crimes such as the killing of children and the disturbing prevalence of violence against women, we are likely to find broader socio-

political issues that we have looked at, thrown our hands up, and said to the police, "Now you deal with this."

Police cannot fix social problems and it is naïve to expect them to do so. Better regulation and training can tell officers when to pull the trigger and how to treat someone in custody with dignity but cannot make our socio-political problems go away.

A narrow focus on criminal behaviour misses the big picture. Neither the police nor the criminals come from another planet. They are products of society. The failure to take this into consideration evokes a society partitioned into seemingly two separate compartments—the "good" who always abides by moral codes and the "bad" who are inherently evil. Is that so?

The question would seem to strengthen the argument for community policing, a concept originated in 1874 Japan and now practiced in many cities in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and Singapore, according to David Bayley, Professor of Criminology at The State University of New York at Albany.

Let's take a look at Camden, an impoverished city in New Jersey that once had the reputation for being the most dangerous in the US. The city disbanded its police department in 2013, installing a new county unit. Since then murders and shootings dropped by 50 percent, robberies and rape are down by a third. The fast-food joint across the street from police headquarters is once again a place to buy burgers, not crack cocaine.

What seems to be working? Well, the organisational culture within the department changed and the city returned to old-style policing. Officers



DMP greets citizens with flowers at a cultural event celebrating Bangla New Year 1422 at Ramna.

PHOTO: DMP WEBSITE

are now trained to understand that they are more like social workers than warriors fighting the bad guys. Instead of using squad cars, police personnel now patrol on their feet or on bicycles. They knock on doors, introduce themselves and get to know the people in a neighbourhood. They play sports with residents and organise events where they mingle with the residents.

Nothing builds trust like human contact. We seem to be catching up with this old-fashioned idea. The Police Reform Programme (PRP), funded by UNDP and DFID, works to support the transition of the Bangladesh Police from a "colonial style police force" to a more service-oriented organisation. The programme, among other things, promotes better interaction with the community through model police stations and community policing forums. Accordingly, 52,000 Community Policing Forums (CPF) have been established countrywide. And

about 23,000 people are directly involved with community policing in Dhaka metropolitan area under the guidance and supervision of the Crime Prevention Center at the police headquarters.

The results show promise. According to Dhaka Metropolitan Police website, "Community policing has made significant contribution in matters of dispute settlement, arrest of criminals/suspects and in building public awareness about social issues like violence against women and children, child marriage, eve teasing, drug addiction etc."

There are obstacles to overcome. Lack of funding remains a major challenge. Dr Zia Rahman, professor and founding Chairman of the Department of Criminology at the University of Dhaka says, "It still is a voluntary service in Bangladesh. Given the high density of population and low police-people ratio, community policing has bright

prospects. The government has established Counter-Terror Unit, Industrial Police, River Police, Highway Police and Tourist Police. It's time they looked at community policing more seriously. University students can be involved in community policing. This will help build character and they will get to play a role in nation building."

Police are often judged according to how many people they arrest, not how many crimes they prevent. New ways for assessing performance, with data that measures crime prevention, could encourage less violent forms of law enforcement. One way to achieve this goal can be through community policing.

It does not substitute a new set of objectives for old ones like safety and order. It is a new approach to accomplishing the same objectives.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

What an irony!

I always read Mr. Mahfuz Anam's analysis with keen interest as I feel that whatever issues he deals with, he is outspoken, courageous and writes out of a deep love for the country.

When Sheikh Hasina herself declared the CTG of 1/11 led by Fakhruddin Ahmed "an outcome of the AL-led alliance's movement" and also declared that if voted to power, her party would legitimise the CTG as it

"earned the confidence and appreciation of the people," why is her government out to punish an editor who is a freedom fighter and a courageous journalist? Is it just because he published news supplied by DGFI without verifying it independently? In my view, Mr. Mahfuz Anam was brave enough to admit his mistake and this should be a lesson to all other editors and journalists.

My question to the government is this: Why not

blame the DGFI personnel who supplied all these information and other editors who printed the same news? Also, I wonder if there was any other option for them than publishing the news supplied by DGFI.

I earnestly request the 'over-enthusiast' ruling party men to come to their senses and not try to tarnish the image of a reputed editor. Please don't think that you are the only ones who love the country.
Hamida Rahman
A volunteer of OXFAM in UK



Improve the service

The train fare has been increased again by the government to make up for the losses in the railway sector. But what about increasing the quality of the services and tackling the rampant corruption that is eating away at the profit?
Amina Begum
Barisal