

# The audacity to do what is right

## Spiking prices of essentials during Ramadan

*PM's call reflects the sentiments of the people*

THE prime minister's call to the businessmen not to increase the prices of essentials during the month of Ramadan, including ones that are in high demand during the month like edible oil and sugar, echoes the heart of the people. We thank her for her timely call.

It is an unfortunate reality that the prices of essential food items start escalating keeping the month of fasting in mind, starting well before the start of the month. No economic theory can explain why that should be so when there is never a dearth of goods in the market, on the contrary there is always a glut. And unfortunately, every time the prices go up, pegging on the religious festivals, they hardly ever drop, and go up again the following year. Prices have little to do with the market forces but everything to do with the greed of certain section of the traders who exploit the month without any qualms of conscience. We call upon these types of businessmen to resist their natural disposition to reap windfall profits during this month at the cost of huge public suffering.

We believe that along the PM's directive, several important measures should also be put in place. We know from past experience that the business community do hear but never heed the calls. In order that they act, the relevant agencies should set up a strong institutionalised mechanism for constant market oversight and punishment. The government should also ensure that there is adequate stock of these goods and, when and where necessary, intervene immediately to stabilise the market. After all, business must also be guided by some ethics.

## Manual fitness checking encourages corruption

*Digital technology needs trained manpower*

IT is unthinkable that the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is relying on manual inspection of trucks and buses to verify whether they are fit for the road! Sadly, the lone automated machine that checks a vehicle's safety features broke down due to lack of maintenance and overuse three months ago. We talk about digitisation and yet the BRTA that must check anywhere between 70 to 100 vehicles a day had worn out the lone automated system that was capable of checking up to 30 vehicles per day. Obviously, when we factor in the manual inspection of vehicles, it opens up the possibility of corrupt practices whereby vehicle owners can circumvent the system by paying speed money to obtain certificates of safety.

The safety of vehicles plying our roads simply cannot be an afterthought. Thousands of people are losing their lives on roads every year because we cannot ensure that buses and trucks are roadworthy. The first order of business of course would be to have the automated equipment repaired. Given the high demand for inspecting vehicles, funds must be made available for more such automated equipment to be installed at BRTA's facilities because there are some 650,000 vehicles that have to renew their fitness certificates every year. On the matter of digitisation, we have seen several such programmes flounder for lack of trained manpower or proper maintenance. A poor example of this is the traffic management system. After having spent crores on the project, we still have policemen engaged in manual control of traffic. The fact is that automated machinery requires trained hands to operate them. Hence there must be budgetary allocations in place to train personnel and keep experienced technicians, who will carry out these inspections, on the payroll.



AS the country become a state of thieves? Such a strong remark by a High Court judge was in reference to the strange reality of many policemen leading hard lives while others lived in expensive houses. The remark was made during the hearing of a writ petition challenging the legality of the OC (Officer in Charge) of a thana in Satkhira to refuse a case of torture of Md Fazlur Karim and the looting of valuables from his home. The nature of the case and the way the judges have reacted highlights how distant many members of the police force have become from the values and duty they are oath-bound to uphold.

It is sad that after 48 years of our independence we are having to remind our police force what those values and duties are. Do we really have to spell out that the rule of law is a fundamental element in democratic governance and the police force, along with other security agencies, are the primary actors to maintain and uphold it? A police force is a crucial and mandatory component for any modern society but of course it must be one that fulfils its functions in the interest of the public that it serves. The police are supposed to be the protectors of the law who will ensure the safety and security of the public. Thus honesty, professionalism, ethical behaviour, compassion and sincerity are basic attributes that are prerequisites of the job description. Unfortunately such virtues are becoming rarer than ever among many members of the various law enforcement agencies who consider themselves invincible and literally, above the law.

The Shyamnagar OC's arrogance is an offshoot of this degradation that can be seen in many other thanas, something the High Court has stated as giving the entire police force a bad name. Despite the successes achieved by the security forces in fighting terrorism and other crimes, despite so many law enforcers trying their best to provide security to the public, the misdeeds of some of their colleagues have made ordinary people look at such security forces with fear and mistrust.

The case we are talking about goes like this: According to news reports, on February 17, around 11 pm, a man with whom Fazlur Karim had a land dispute, came to his house with a few accomplices and attacked him, beating Karim up, looting gold jewellery, cash and other valuables. The attackers also damaged Karim's boundary wall and ran away. While the attack was going on Karim managed to call Shyamnagar's OC who told him he was too busy and would deal with it later. Karim then called 999, the emergency police number, and told an SI—but by the time the SI came the attackers had already left. The next day Fazlur went to the police

the audacity?" referring to some OCs setting up "courts" at their convenience at night to conduct arbitrations. Apparently this audacity comes from a lack of accountability within the police force where nobody has the courage to challenge a haughty high-ranking officer who is directly flouting the law, disregarding his duty and providing no protection to the victim. This is probably the lesser of crimes that members of the police force have been accused of. There are widespread allegations against police and other security forces of crimes as serious as forced disappearances, torture and death in custody, extortion and so on. We hear very few cases where the accused

rights which should be ensured by those in charge of the force and ultimately the home ministry under which it functions. But the increasing number of cases of negligence of duty or criminality among members of the police points to the fact that making sure law enforcers adhere to a strict code of conduct is not the highest priority. Moreover the close relationship many high-ranking police officers have with influential political figures gives them the immunity to get away with anything.

The result of this adulteration is a major weakening of the police force to combat crime and ensure security for the ordinary citizen. Those in power must realise that such a weakened police force leaves the entire country in a precarious position in terms of internal and external security.

Providing logistical and financial support are the easier ways to strengthen the police force. They would include paying decent salaries (especially to lower ranking law enforcers), providing adequate accommodation and various benefits for police personnel at all levels. Better resources such as efficient forensic labs and expert personnel as well as digitalising documentation can speed up investigations. Increasing the number of law enforcers—those who can be spared innumerable VIP protocols—to actually provide protection to ordinary civilians could go a long way in improving the image of the police in the public eye.

All this is possible but completely meaningless without a major clean-up within the force. This includes removing corrupt practices such as extortion, filing of false cases, refusal to take cases, harassment of opponents, unlawful arrests and disappearances, extrajudicial killings—just to name a few reasons why people are not exactly cosying up to the police. This means inculcating the highest moral standards as a part of police training. Which in turn, requires complete de-politicisation of the law enforcement agencies.

Unless our leaders make a concerted effort to help in this massive clean-up, they will soon find a state plagued by lawlessness, with a miserable, demoralised citizenry—a state that will become extremely difficult to govern. The question is do they have the audacity to take that step. To do the right thing.

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PHOTO: AFP

station but the OC refused to take his case and so he decided to send an application to the Satkhira Superintendent (SP). On February 26, the SP asked the OC to take the necessary steps but he did not register the case.

So what is going on, a naïve citizen would ask. Apparently the Officer in Charge of a police station wields a lot more power than the Superintendent of the entire district. This absurd tilting of power has not happened overnight but over decades of allowing this culture of impunity and one-upmanship to flourish. The same report quotes the High Court asking "where do they get

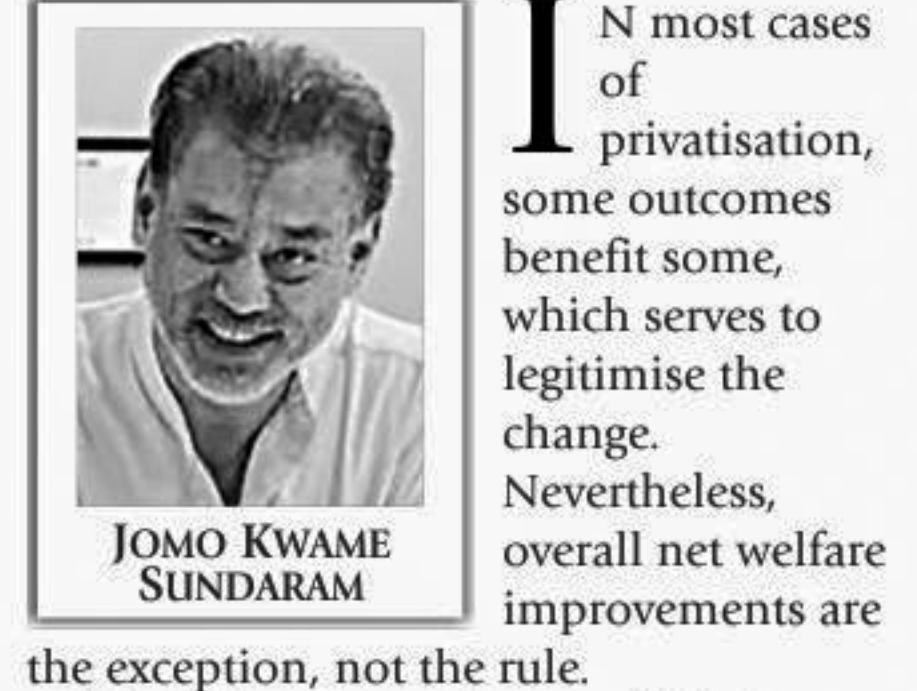
police personnel have been convicted and sent to jail. They are either transferred or closed.

But the biggest blemish on their image has been the blatant politicisation of the police by successive governments, resulting in a loss of public trust in the law enforcement agencies.

In a democracy, people's constitutional rights and freedoms are supposed to be protected through the police. They are empowered to apprehend anyone on the streets, arrest, pick up and detain anyone they deem breaking the law. But such power can only be wielded under strict guidance and without violating fundamental

# Has privatisation benefitted the public?

*To ensure public acceptability, some benefits accrue to many in the early stages of privatisation in order to minimise public resistance. However, in the longer term, privatisation tends to enrich a few but typically fails to deliver on its ostensible aims.*



JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

IN most cases of privatisation, some outcomes benefit some, which serves to legitimise the change. Nevertheless, overall net welfare improvements are the exception, not the rule. Never is everyone better off. Rather, some are better off, while others are not, and typically, many are even worse off. The partial gains are typically high, or even negated by overall costs, which may be diffuse, and less directly felt by losers.

**Privatised monopoly powers**  
 Since many SOEs are public monopolies, privatisation has typically transformed them into private monopolies. In turn, abuse of such market monopoly power enables more rents and corporate profits. As corporate profits are the private sector's yardstick of success, privatised monopolies are likely to abuse their market power to maximise rents for themselves. Thus, privatisation tends to burden the public, e.g., if charges are raised.

In most cases, privatisation has not closed the governments' fiscal deficits, and may even worsen budgetary problems. Privatisation may worsen the fiscal situation due to loss of revenue from privatised SOEs, or tax evasion by the new privatised entity. Options for cross-subsidisation, e.g., to broaden coverage are reduced as the government is usually left with unprofitable activities while the potentially profitable is acquired by the private sector. Thus, governments are often forced to cut essential public services. In most cases, profitable SOEs were privatised as prospective private owners are driven to maximise profits. Fiscal deficits have often been exacerbated as new private owners use creative accounting to avoid tax, secure tax credits and subsidies, and maximise retained earnings. Meanwhile, governments lose vital revenue sources due to privatisation if SOEs are profitable, and are often obliged to subsidise privatised monopolies to ensure the poor and

underserved still have access to the privatised utilities or services.

**Privatisation burdens many**  
 Privatisation burdens the public when charges or fees are not reduced, or when the services provided are significantly reduced. Thus, privatisation often burdens the public in different ways, depending on how market power is exercised or abused. Often, instead of trying to provide a public good to all, many are excluded because it is not considered commercially viable or economic to serve them. Consequently, privatisation may worsen overall enterprise performance. "Value for money" may go down despite ostensible improvements used to justify higher user charges.

SOEs are widely presumed to be more likely to be inefficient. The most profitable and potentially profitable are typically the first and most likely to be privatised. This leaves the rest of the public sector even less profitable, and thus considered more inefficient, in turn justifying further privatisations.

**Efficiency elusive**  
 It is often argued that privatisation is

needed as the government is inherently inefficient and does not know how to run enterprises well. Incredibly, the government is expected to subsidise privatised SOEs, which are presumed to be more efficient, in order to fulfil its obligations to the citizenry.

Such obligations may not involve direct payments or transfers, but rather, lucrative concessions to the privatised SOE. Thus, they may well make far more from these additional concessions than the actual cost of fulfilling government obligations.

Thus, privatisation of profitable enterprises or segments not only perpetuates exclusion of the deserving, but also worsens overall public sector performance now encumbered with remaining unprofitable obligations.

One consequence is poorer public sector performance, contributing to what appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. To make matters worse, the public sector is then stuck with financing the unprofitable, thus seemingly supporting to the privatisation prophecy.

**Benefits accrue to relatively few**  
 Privatisation typically enriches the

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politically connected few who secure lucrative rents by sacrificing the national or public interest for private profit, even when privatisation may not seem to benefit them.

Privatisation in many developing and transition economies has primarily enriched these few as the public interest is sacrificed to such powerful private business interests. This has, in turn, exacerbated corruption, patronage and other related problems.

For example, following Russian voucher privatisation and other western recommended reforms, for which there was a limited domestic constituency then, within three years (1992-1994), the Russian economy had collapsed by half, and adult male life expectancy fell by six years. It was the greatest such recorded catastrophe in the last six millennia of recorded human history.

Soon, a couple of dozen young Russian oligarchs had taken over the commanding heights of the Russian economy; many then monetised their gains and invested abroad, migrating to follow their new wealth. Much of this was celebrated by the Western media as economic progress.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Please let the people speak freely

I fully support the views of Abul Khaer published in *The Daily Star* on March 29 in the letters section, under the heading, "Freedom of expression must be ensured". He quite correctly said that people are afraid to express themselves because many individuals have been arrested over allegations of criticising the government.

This is not how things always were. But over the last decade, the suppression of free expression and thought seems to have become the norm. People have to remain silent on many issues that are completely unacceptable over fears of being harassed for speaking up.

In the past, newspapers used to allot a full page for letters. But now they print only a few hundred words in a small corner of a page.

We request the respected editors of newspapers to give more space for people to send in their letters. We have so many things to say that concern the welfare of the country. And we hope that the government will listen to them and that democracy, which seems to be dying in our country, will have a chance to get back on its feet finally.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram