

## Why raise the prices of Ramadan essentials now?

Govt must take measures to keep the market stable before it spirals out of control

We are worried to notice the upward trend of the prices of Ramadan essentials well ahead of the start of the holy month. According to a report in this daily on February 17, 2022, the prices of Ramadan essentials such as edible oil, chickpea, dried pea, date and sugar have already started to rise in the market, despite being well-supplied. Traders and importers, however, are blaming the high costs of import for the hike. Reportedly, prices of all these commodities have increased in the global market due to lower production in the exporting countries, while the shipping costs have also increased.

According to data from the Chattogram Custom House, between December 2021 and January 2022, the import cost of palm oil, soybean oil, sugar, chickpea and other commodities have significantly increased. However, the data also shows that import of all these items has also increased during this time, except for the edible oil. For instance, between July 2021 and January 2022, about 144,000 tonnes of chickpea and around 305,000 tonnes of dried pea were imported. A year earlier, their imported quantities were 133,000 tonnes and 292,000 tonnes, respectively. The import of sugar also increased by 3.4 percent during this time. This means that there is an ample stock of these items in the wholesale market.

Because of the supplies, it is expected that wholesalers will sell their products at fair prices to the retailers, and retailers will not unnecessarily raise the prices during Ramadan. Because doing so would put an extra burden on people, especially those in the lower-income bracket, who already have their backs against the wall. Having failed to sustain their pre-pandemic income level, with lost jobs and steady source of income, many have been forced to compromise on their standard of living. The rising prices of daily essentials—such as rice, oil, lentils, vegetables, meat and fish—have already made their lives difficult. Now, if the prices rise again during Ramadan, how will they survive?

Therefore, it's time for the government to come up with some pro-people policies to help the low- and fixed-income people survive through this tough time. It needs to ensure market stability by establishing proper monitoring mechanisms. Fixing the prices of daily necessities and hanging up the price chart at every wholesale and retail market can prevent the traders from overcharging the consumers. The government also needs to make sure that unscrupulous syndicates cannot raise prices of food items by hoarding them before and during Ramadan. We believe it is definitely possible for a proactive government to prevent traders from unnecessarily increasing the prices of essentials.

## Rid Old Dhaka of chemical warehouses

Bureaucratic foot-dragging is inexcusable when lives are at stake

THE spectre of death still haunts the streets of Old Dhaka, where many precious lives were lost in raging fires originating from some chemical warehouses. When you have a fire caused by highly flammable substances stored in residential houses, with families living on other floors, it is not an "accident"—it's a sure recipe for disaster. Unfortunately, this has been going on for long, and the high-level promise of relocation of chemical stores and plastic factories to a designated place after the Nimtoli fire—which killed at least 124 people on June 3, 2010—remains unmet even after all these years. A survey done in 2019 by Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) identified 1,924 chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, with 98 percent being "moderately risky."

Clearly, Old Dhaka is sitting on a ticking time bomb. After the 2010 fire, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) drafted a plan on relocating the chemical warehouses. However, the BSCIC took eight years to take up the project. The decision was to shift chemical businesses to the city's outskirts in Keraniganj. However, after another devastating fire in Chawkbazar's Churihatta area in February 2019, which killed 71 people, the authorities decided to shift the project site to Munshiganj's Sirajdikhan area. Reportedly, it was scheduled to be completed by June this year, but it appears that the officials would need an extension of at least one more year.

Officials blame delays in selecting the relocation site and land acquisition for this situation. When contacted, the project director said that 70 percent of the project's 310-acre land development is complete. Other important work like the construction of a drainage system, boundary walls, fire station, a Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) and two jetties have not started yet. Also, a separate relocation project for plastic industries, also in Munshiganj, has seen only 1.47 percent progress so far. This extremely slow pace of work is distressing, to say the least.

Meanwhile, the government had a plan to build two temporary sites in Tongi and Shyampur for the warehouses and factories, but it could not be executed either. We urge the government to realise the urgency of relocation on a permanent basis and expedite the work accordingly. There has been enough dilly-dallying with the experiment of temporary sites which, as an environmental expert said, is nothing but "a mockery with the lives of people." The BSCIC's shamolic efforts and foot-dragging in executing the project are inexcusable. Old Dhaka residents deserve better.

# The Search Committee's task is as moral as it is legal

Don't let a few weeks of your work be a curse on the nation



### THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*.

MAHFUZ ANAM

(I thank the Search Committee for inviting me, and apologise for not attending due to Covid-related complications.)

At the very outset, the government said there was not enough time to make a law for the formation of an Election Commission (EC), which is mandated by the Constitution of Bangladesh since its adoption in 1972. Then suddenly, the government declared that it had enough time to make such a law. Though it is called a law for the "Appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners" (original name is in Bangla, abbreviated translation is ours), what it actually does is spell out the formation of a "Search Committee," which will select and recommend to the president who, in his turn, will form the EC in consultation with the prime minister (The president is bound by the constitution to do so). How and why the "Search Committee" idea came to the fore when the need was for a law to form the Election Commission itself has never been satisfactorily explained.

On the face of it, the Search Committee is trying to find the right team to form the EC. But the underlying significance of their task is that they are laying the foundations for a free and fair parliamentary election to be held in less than two years—by December 2023.

However hard the ruling party supporters may try to whitewash the events surrounding the last general election, serious doubts persist about its authenticity. Because of faulty elections, the prestige of the elected members of parliament (MPs) took a nose dive—and with it the prestige of the parliament itself. This has also made our democracy questionable—to us as well as outside—and clouded our otherwise stunning success in other fields.

Here, we may recall that under the Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed-led Election Commission (February 2012 to February 2017), in the 2014 parliamentary election, 153 MPs out of 300 were elected unopposed. This meant that no election took place in more than half of the constituencies in Bangladesh, with the majority of voters not being able to cast their votes. Of equal significance is the fact that the uncontested seats formed the majority in the House and formed the new government—without getting a single vote. So, former Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rakibuddin holds the dubious honour of presiding over perhaps the only election ever held in the world where the majority of voters could not cast their votes, and yet the election was certified as completely free and fair.

Over the years, the political parties' capacity to manipulate elections have grown. With the work of firms like Cambridge Analytica, in Donald Trump's election in 2016 (there must be many others who operate in the shadows and have not been exposed yet. We have no idea what Israel-produced surveillance software like Pegasus—which we are rumoured to have bought—can do), with their data crunching algorithms powerful enough to discern the deepest prejudices in the voters' subconscious and bring them into play in determining how a voter should cast his or her ballot, elections

have become more and more about subtle to crude manipulation of the masses, and not the making of an electoral mandate that it once was.

This is further exacerbated by the fact that ruling parties in most countries enjoy far greater advantage in manipulating elections than the opposition. Given its control over state media and their cosy relationships with the "friendly

manner that competition is rendered useless and removes the uncertainty. The removal of uncertainty is achieved through various measures, including constitutional changes and electoral changes, but it requires the election commission to become a tool that works in unison with other state apparatuses in favour of the incumbent."

In addition to the authoritarian nature



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

media," the capacity of the parties in power to influence public opinion is a thousand times higher compared to their rivals. This they do in many ways: like inaugurating development projects or making extraordinary grants in electorally vulnerable areas before the elections or by instigating divisive ideologies and exploiting ethnic, religious, and racial fault lines to their advantage. With all major institutions of the state—bureaucracy, police, intelligence, local administration—mostly in their total control, and with an enormous source of funds, the ruling parties all over have reduced to a mockery what was meant to be the expression of "people's will."

Prof Ali Riaz, distinguished professor at Illinois State University in the US, in his highly readable column published in this daily on February 16, 2022, talks about hybrid political regimes—meaning political regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian traits—and how they conduct elections. He highlights that such regimes are of two distinct types: competitive electoral authoritarianism, and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. The major differences between them, he says, is the way they conduct elections. In the former type, while the entire political process is highly repressive and the media are muzzled, the election does engender a type of "uncertainty" through some form—however rudimentary—of competition. But in the latter type, that "uncertainty" is removed. He quotes from an essay by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A Way titled "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," that in the hegemonic variety of hybrid regimes, "election manipulation is institutionalised in a

and tendencies of the present ruling party, the status of our elections has been further affected by the main opposition party's utter failure to reorganise itself and regain any place of consequence in the hearts and minds of our voters. BNP's leadership crisis in the form of Khaleda Zia's illness and Vice-Chairman Tareque Rahman's incompetence have further reduced the prospect of any serious challenge for the incumbent.

It is against this backdrop of globally shrinking democratic space, the rising tendency of ruling parties to manipulate elections, and Bangladesh's own prospect of graduating to the status of a developing country by 2026 (Covid pushed it back by two years from 2024), that the Search Committee is selecting possible candidates for an Election Commission that will conduct the next election within 22 months.

The last factor is important to remember. Graduating to the developing country status will definitely entail higher governance standards and insistence by the global community for more and more democratic practices in the coming years.

It is our hope that the Search Committee sees the totality of their task, and does not deal with it as a technical task of fulfilling certain criteria and legal niceties. Being only correct in procedures and not in substance will amount to missing the forest for a few trees. Far greater than the legal, there is an enormous moral task facing the learnt and experienced Search Committee. We hope they will not forget for a moment that their few weeks of work will either be a boon or a curse for our nation and democracy for the next five significant years.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to [letters@thedailystar.net](mailto:letters@thedailystar.net)

## Maintain speed limit to avoid road crashes

Road crashes have become an epidemic all over Bangladesh. Slow-moving vehicles have been banned on the highways. Dividers have been installed. Many bends on highways have been straightened out. There are laws in place, too. But even so, road crashes seem to keep happening every day. Five members of the same family were killed by a pickup vehicle while crossing the road on February 8 in Chakaria upazila in Cox's Bazar. Locals say the main reason for the crash was that the driver of the pickup van could not control its speed.

There is no reason to continue

to claim that the excessive loss of lives on our roads are mere accidents. Many irregularities take place on the road, such as competitive driving and drivers talking on the phone while driving. Experts say that not driving within the speed limit is also one of the major causes of road crashes. The speed limit for vehicles should be enforced by law to prevent road accidents. If proper measures are taken by authorities, it will be possible to reduce crashes and save lives.

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