

The Daily Star

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No alternative but to explore alternatives

We endorse recommendations by CAB not to raise electricity, gas prices

We urge the government to seriously consider proposals from the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), a platform to protect consumers' interests, to explore alternatives to raising gas and electricity prices in Bangladesh. At a time when ordinary people, particularly from low- and middle-income groups, are struggling to stay afloat, any decision from the government to raise gas and electricity tariffs more than it already has will be devastating. We have noted with alarm the recommendation of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) to raise the gas price by 20 percent and electricity price by 58 percent on average. Such a decision would not only be cruel, but also unmerited, given the widespread mismanagement and inefficiencies in the power sector—validated by our policymakers for decades—which have been driving the prices up, year after year.

Urging the government to take initiatives to cut the predatory expenditure of Tk 6,588 crore in the power sector, which it pays as "capacity charge" for surplus electricity, CAB pointed out that the government can save Tk 10,321 crore by reducing dependency on the privately-owned quick rental plants and single-cycle power plants. They also recommended withdrawing the recently imposed taxes on the import of petroleum, reinstating the tax break on the import of petroleum, and importing furnace oil through the state-run Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation instead of private importers, saving the government at least Tk 16,279 crore. To reduce the price of gas, CAB urged the government to opt out of importing high-priced LNG, and instead explore gas in the sea and focus on the existing fields to improve production by overhauling or augmentation.

It is clear to all external observers at this point that there is a major need for radical reform in the energy sector, but unfortunately, we are yet to get any indication from our policymakers that they are considering the changes desperately needed to make the sector efficient as well as cost-effective.

We urge the ministries concerned—and the prime minister in particular, who will reportedly make the final decision regarding prices—to explore all other alternatives before coming to the suicidal conclusion to raise gas and electricity tariffs, and fuelling another round of inflation in an already volatile economy. It's not just consumers; businesspeople, too, have warned of the grave repercussions of such a hike. It would significantly raise production costs, making it impossible for export-oriented businesses in particular to compete with other countries, and lead to further decline in our already depleting foreign exchange reserves. The government must do what is necessary to reign in the mismanagement and systemic losses in the sector, instead of punishing the consumers, as well as the economy at large, for its failed policies.

Low-cost, life-saving ambulance service through an app!

Others should emulate Lakshmipur district administration's initiative

We are truly amazed to learn about an ambulance service provided by the Lakshmipur district administration that can be used through a mobile app. Reportedly, the Lakshmipur district and upazila administrations have used their own funds to buy the ambulances—currently they have 10 ambulances to cover the 58 unions of the district—and to create the app, called "Shopnojatra," which is now available on Google Play Store for the inhabitants of the district. All they have to do is download it on their Android phones and call a number given there to get the life-saving service.

Such an initiative is particularly important for a country like ours, where people are often deprived of emergency healthcare either because the upazila health complexes do not provide those services or because the health centres are miles away from the villages. In the majority of emergency cases, patients have to be taken to the district or divisional hospitals for treatment, but getting an ambulance in these remote villages is as difficult as it is costly.

But the people of Lakshmipur can now get this emergency service within 10 minutes of calling, and the cost is also low compared to other government and private ambulance services. The ambulances of Shopnojatra have taken at least 358 patients to different hospitals in the last nine months. Although the primary aim of Shopnojatra was to provide ambulance service to pregnant women and new mothers in a bid to reduce maternal and newborn deaths, any person in a medical emergency can now avail the services.

The Lakshmipur district administration has set an amazing example by taking healthcare to people's doorsteps. They have shown us that change is possible if those in charge of looking after people's well-being are willing to take the right initiatives. We hope that other district authorities will follow Lakshmipur's footsteps and take similar initiatives for the greater public good. It won't cost them too much, since an app can be developed for only Tk 50,000, and the ambulance cost can be covered with their yearly budgetary allocations.

However, the question remains as to how the poor people can buy the costly smartphones needed to download the app. There is also a solution to this: community health workers as well as those in the community who have smartphones can download the app and help those in need.

Therefore, we think, nothing should stop other districts from taking such people-friendly initiatives.

Prices of machetes, bamboo and iron rods to go up?



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

IT may seem like an odd assortment of items to be afflicted by the inflationary fever currently in circulation, but following the basic rules of economics—when demand goes up, with existing supply, prices will go up in a free market—it is not surprising. Such deduction comes from the recent clashes between Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD)—yes, they still exist—on the Dhaka University campus, in Khulna, Patuakhali, Manikganj, outside the High Court, and so on, which seems like a prelude to what we may see in the near future as the election draws closer. In which case, more "soldiers" will be needed on the ground, and therefore more "equipment" will be needed to fight the battles of supremacy.

After all, why do political parties, especially when they are ruling, have their student wings in public universities and colleges, if not for the undeniable muscle power required to nip any kind of dissent in the bud? They will, for instance, be required to discipline those annoying students who take to the streets and check licences, because they are tired of seeing their friends get murdered by maniacal bus drivers. They will prevent unnecessary nuisance created by regular students when they demonstrate against violence on campus (allegedly by members of those student wings) or harassment of female students. Most importantly, they will make sure their counterparts from the opposition party are bludgeoned into total retreat if they try to bring out rallies or hang around voting centres. In exchange for such undeniable efficiency and control, what's a little domination of the dormitories, shares in tenders for constructing buildings on the campus, involvement in all kinds of recruitment, and a little mischievous behaviour now and then?

Thus, keeping with their JD (job description), attacking the recent procession of JCD in the Doel Chattar area inside the DU campus with traditional weapons was a perfectly natural response.

Later, members of JCD were slapped with various cases... wait, what? Yes, JCD; BCL, the ones using the machetes

and rods and many sporting helmets (as verified by photographs published in various newspapers), were not liable for legal action to be taken against them, but JCD, who were attacked first, were. The charges against JCD included attacking BCL members, obstructing government work, attacking a university employee, and disorderly conduct. It is a little

before the last election, when it would be insulting for a student leader not to brandish a pistol or two to let people know who's the boss.

The burning question is: Will such an inevitable inflationary pressure on weapons in general be reflected in the election-oriented budget of 2022-23? We are not sure. Firstly, we don't know how



As the election draws closer, more 'soldiers' will be needed on the ground, which means more 'equipment' will be needed to fight the battles of supremacy.

COURTESY: PROTHOM ALO

balling why the JCD, which hardly has any presence in the university, would jeopardise their own programme by "trying to kill" BCL members (as stated in one of the cases), who have total supremacy on the campus. Maybe the JCD is a delusional lot, maybe they have a death wish...

From these facts, we can deduce that in the days to follow, there will be many such "scuffles" between the two "student" wings that will entail the age-old way of resolution—beating the living daylights out of their rivals, with the ruling party cadres obviously winning. Hence, it will hardly be any surprise if the prices of such traditional weapons shoot up. Will the parent party leaders provide some sort of subsidy for their henchmen, who provide the essential human resources during elections? We will never know.

But it is not just the machete maker, the bamboo seller or helmet salesperson who will benefit from the increase in momentum of (violent) politics. Let's not forget that the market for small firearms, like pistols or revolvers, which may also be booming in the months preceding the general election. Just recall those days

or if firearms, the ones bought through legal channels, are taxed or whether they fall under the "essential items" category—at least when the recipients are the bouncers of the political party required to intimidate and decimate the opposition. In any case, there is little cause for worry for the hardcore political thugs who can easily acquire a 6mm or 7.2mm or 9mm pistol from the regular stash smoothly entering through the borders. Gun-loving cadres, moreover, can rest assured of the availability of locally assembled guns manufactured in scores of "informal" factories all over the country.

Which brings us back to the prices of bamboo, iron rods, machetes and helmets (all of which have alternative uses—as construction material, to cut meat, and for motorbike riding, respectively). Given the way the BCL is moving—boldly, ferociously and ready to embrace the collateral damage of success in the form of injury or death of members of rival parties, journalists and a few innocent nobodies—price hikes of these multi-use products, along with a spike in the citizens' anxiety levels, could be inevitable.

Was Muhammad Ali Jinnah the real villain in the story of partition?



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP of Bangladesh Police.

On June 3, 1947, Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, announced his plan for the partition of the subcontinent—in particular that of Punjab and Bengal. This plan gave birth to two independent states: India and Pakistan. Many historians would like to emphasise that it was the determination and obstinacy of Muhammad Ali Jinnah that were primarily responsible for the cataclysmic partition, and the attendant huge loss of lives and properties. They would like to portray him as the sinister villain who expedited the horrendous partition.

There is, however, another view which says Jinnah never really wanted partition, and that the Muslim League reiterated the Pakistan demand as its ultimate goal only to save face. Historian Asim Roy says, "Jinnah was willing to accept something less than what almost everyone else knew as Pakistan." There is another view, according to which Jinnah was under the mistaken assumption that the Congress and the British would never accept partition. Therefore, when in the end Congress accepted partition, Jinnah was beaten in his own game of wits. Roy adds, "It was not the League, but the Congress who chose, at the end of the day, to run a knife across Mother India's body."

It would not be irrelevant to point out that Jinnah floated the idea of Pakistan as a "bargaining counter," but the fact remains that he did not have the bargaining autonomy once the mass mobilisation campaign began in 1944 around the emotive symbol of Muslim nationhood. This assertion of nationhood

did not become a demand for exclusive statehood until the late summer of 1946. The Pakistan movement had started embracing a wider public from a much earlier period; once the communal riots started, the campaign only reached the point of no return.

The colonial British government may have created a Muslim community in its own image and allowed to transform a

segmented population into a "nation" or a "juridical entity," but that did not mean that the Pakistan movement lacked popular support, at least during the last years of the British Raj. The popular aspects of the partition history cannot be lost on any discerning mind. The movement for Pakistan was mass-based and democratic. The politicisation of the crowd along communal lines was manifest. Historian Joya Chatterjee says the Bangalee

"*bhodrolok*" launched

a campaign for partition and sought to involve the "non-*bhodrolok*" classes as well. The Pakistan movement, therefore, could not be described as the sole handiwork of Jinnah.

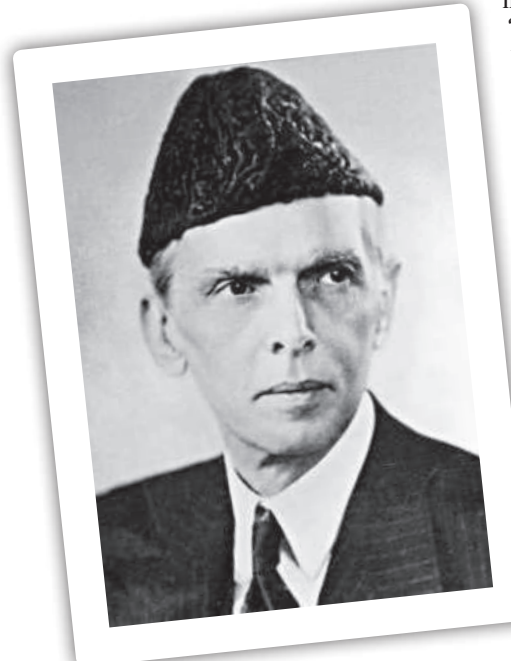
The "surging waves of Muslim communalism" since 1937 had its roots in the long-term failure of the Congress to draw the Muslim masses into the national movement. The Congress admitted its failure and accepted partition "as an unavoidable necessity in the given circumstances." Historian Sumit Sarkar says, "The Congress leadership, instead of

going for a mass movement, accepted this tempting alternative of an early transfer of power, with partition as a necessary price for it."

Historian Ayesha Jalal is of the view that the Lahore Resolution, which neither mentioned partition nor Pakistan, was Jinnah's tactical move, his bargaining counter to have the claim of separate Muslim nationhood accepted by the Congress and the British. The ideal constitutional arrangement Jinnah preferred for India was a weak federal structure, with strong autonomy for the provinces, with Hindu-Muslim parity at the centre. His optimism was that the Congress, keen on a strong unitary centre, would ultimately concede his demand to avoid his more aggressive scheme of separation, which "in fact he did not really want."

If we trace his early political career, we will find that Jinnah, in 1904, refused to be drawn into any controversy over the issue of forming a separate political body for Muslims. "Jinnah remained committed to his three-piece suits, his lorgnette, his cigarette holder and the king's English. No Gujarati for him and no political language that invoked religion." He saw Congress as his adversary and his nemesis. It was Congress versus the Muslim League, the two parties contending for power in an independent Indian state, that led to partition.

Jinnah's opposition, which later developed into almost hatred, remained focused upon the Congress leadership. His opposition was not against Hindus or Hinduism, it was the Congress that he considered as the true political rival of the Muslim League. During the last years of his life, Jinnah was both a self-avowed and the actual political leader of almost the entire Muslim community of undivided India. He had started his political life as an early champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, along with a total commitment to calls of freedom from the British rule. During that period, he stood unambiguously for a united India.



SOURCE: ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA