

Perfect efficiency key to tackling the energy crisis

We cannot afford to have the government repeat its past mistakes

IN a disappointing turn of events, it seems the load-shedding era is upon us again. On July 18, several austerity measures were decided upon during a high-level meeting at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in order to deal with Bangladesh's gloomy energy and power generation situation. The decisions that stood out were those of hour-long power cuts from July 19 (the countrywide schedules for which have been put up on several government websites) and of temporarily shutting down diesel-fired power plants, which contributes 5.86 percent to the country's 22,348MW electricity production capacity.

To put it simply, we are dealing with shortages of electricity, diesel and LNG (thanks to the suspension of imports due to high prices, and the lack of gas exploration for unknown reasons). All of these austerity measures from the government indicate a severe situation. And while the public must do its part to be frugal, it is up to the government and its various arms to stray from its historically wasteful approach to utilising public resources. For one, it is high time for the authorities to renegotiate its terms with the many quick rental power plants (QRPP) which, even during idle periods, rack up expenses for the government in terms of capacity charges. As such, the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) reportedly owes the country's private power plant operators a staggering USD 1.5 billion. However, given the worryingly low state of our foreign exchange reserves, which are even more valuable right now for the country to continue importing essential items, this debt should, for now, be pushed down several notches on the government's list of priorities.

Although it is understandable that the high prices of LNG and diesel have led to their import being temporarily suspended, the government should not abandon the search for these items at cheaper prices – in case they become available, or the government manages to get a good deal on them. Here is where the government's negotiation skills will be tested.

At this moment, the government needs to put its focus on utilising our limited forex reserves as efficiently as possible, and on trying to redirect as little of the burden onto the public as possible. People have already been struggling for months against rising inflation and expensive necessities. Austerity measures of reduced office operational hours, one day off for petrol pumps, and daily hour-long loadshedding are all understandable. But the government must shield the public dutifully from further repercussions of the energy crisis – by being attentive and efficient in executing its own responsibilities.

Whose side is Bangladesh Bank on?

Habitual defaulters, or the public?

YET again, the Bangladesh Bank (BB) has decided to substantially relax the policy for rescheduling default loans, despite the proven track record of such schemes failing to benefit the banking sector or the country – repeatedly. As per its new policy, defaulters will be allowed to repay term loans over a maximum period of eight years, whereas it was previously two years, and reschedule their non-performing loans (NPLs) four times, whereas previously they could do so three times.

Defaulters who took term loans would be allowed to repay funds over a period of six years to eight years, in contrast to nine months to two years previously. And they will also enjoy a grace period between six months and one year before they need to start repaying the rescheduled loans. Such grace periods were absent in the previous central bank policy. Such policies, along with a big relaxation of rules on down payments that are required to be made by defaulters, have allegedly been issued to keep the financial sector stable from the adverse impacts of the Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, according to the central bank.

The fact remains, however, that such rescheduling policies have only harmed our banking sector, instead of helping it. That the default loans have risen over the past years – despite all the sugar-coating that the Bangladesh Bank has allowed other banks to do via accounting manipulation – hitting a near record high in the first quarter of 2022, proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Therefore, we fail to understand on what basis the central bank claims that their latest measures will help the banking sector. What evidence does it have to back up its claim? It's time for our banking regulator to share that – if it exists at all.

We are not against policies that are business-friendly. However, given that most of the impacts of the pandemic are expected to wane soon, why would the Bangladesh Bank allow defaulters to pay term loans over a maximum period of eight years? Why not offer such facilities exclusively to those businesses that actually need them – such as small and medium enterprises? By offering such blanket facilities, the central bank is simply paving the way for habitual defaulters to exploit them, as has happened extensively in the past.

The Bangladesh Bank has apparently said that habitual defaulters will not be allowed to enjoy any policy support from the relaxed rules. But we have heard it sing from the same song sheet many times before, only to see habitual defaulters benefit every time, pushing the NPLs up. What actual measures will the central bank take to ensure that this time it's different? The public has a right to know, and the Bangladesh Bank owes them a full explanation.

Whose religious sentiments are more important?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

HERE'S a conundrum no one wants to solve: When someone is accused of "hurting religious sentiments" in a post on Facebook, law enforcers show incredible alacrity in arresting the individual – within hours they are "caught" and taken into custody. But when hooligans attack the homes and places of worship of minority communities, vandalising, burning, looting and sometimes assaulting the community members, law enforcers are either nowhere to be seen, or are nearby but not doing anything to stop the mobs until most of the damage is done.

It begs the question: Are these attackers supernatural beings whose faces cannot be identified, and who disappear into thin air as soon as their deeds are done? Do they have invisibility cloaks when law enforcers are around?

This brings us to a second conundrum: Apparently, only the majoritarian population experience hurt sentiments – minority communities have no sentiments to be hurt. Also, they should not feel fear or insecurity just because their homes, shops and temples are attacked – the government will investigate and rebuild their homes in no time, and all will be forgotten.

These two puzzles have been cropping up with increased frequency these days. On Friday, mobs attacked a neighbourhood in Narail over a Facebook post allegedly by a college student who "hurt their religious sentiments." The attackers burnt and destroyed homes and shops of the Hindu community; the victims recognised some of them as residents from nearby villages. Witnesses said the attacks took place in front of the police. No one filed a case regarding the attacks in fear – the attackers were seen roaming around the area with the police (*The Daily Star*, July 18, 2022). The college student was promptly arrested and placed on remand. Five people have been arrested as suspects in the attack, though police have not revealed their names. Can the victims of this attack, which seems to be purely driven by bigotry, expect any justice when their attackers are chummy with law enforcers?

It is an eerie repetition of the attacks in Ramu, Cox's Bazar in September 2012, when zealots vandalised and burnt 12 pagodas and more than 50 homes over a Facebook post by a Buddhist youth, leaving the Buddhist community shell-shocked and terrified for their lives. The next day, another mob attacked five Buddhist

temples in Ukhiya and vandalised two Hindu temples; they also burnt down Buddhist homes in Teknaf. At that time, those who had committed the heinous acts were seen with officials who had visited to show sympathy to the victims. The Facebook post turned out to be fake; somebody had framed the young man in order to ignite the assaults. So, did the victims get justice? A number of criminal cases and two writ petitions by two Supreme Court lawyers against the perpetrators and against officials who were negligent in



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

The aftermath of the vicious attack on a Hindu home in Narail on July 15, 2022 over 'hurt' religious sentiments.

preventing the crimes were filed. Probe reports identified the attackers and found officials negligent in preventing the crimes. But nearly a decade after the event, justice remains elusive.

Since the Ramu attack, many more such crimes have been committed in the name of religion, terrorising communities and leaving them insecure and disillusioned. Is this the country that was born from a movement against sectarianism, discrimination, and the oppression of a people by a fascist government? Is this the nation that emerged with the supreme sacrifice of people from all faiths? What happened to the spirit of liberation – the egalitarian, inclusive society dreamt of by the father of the

nation and our freedom fighters?

These ideals sound naive and hollow in the present reality. We are now confronted with an attempt to impose a narrow, communal definition of identity that immediately labels anyone with differing views or ideology as "outsiders." As this is the definition of religion and identity, which is endorsed by the majority, it puts the minority populations – which include people of faiths other than Islam as well as anyone with an ideology different from a particular interpretation of Islam – in a vulnerable and unsure position. Meanwhile the majority, enjoying the power of numbers, feels emboldened further by the tacit indulgence of the administration and even the state. So much so that they have a sense of impunity when they lash out at the weaker groups at the slightest provocation or even by faking this provocation.

Whatever attempts have been made to stop some of the proponents of this bigotry have been too little, too late. Whether it is to appease certain groups as an electoral strategy or to keep them from acquiring political ambitions of their own, such concessions are inevitably dangerous for not just those outside these groups, but for the government itself.

What's most disturbing is that this bigotry has seeped into the administration, as evidenced by the inaction of police in many of these cases. While the person accused of this vague idea of hurting religious sentiment will be tried under a non-bailable law – the Digital Security Act (DSA) – the perpetrators of terror, if they are arrested, are out on bail.

The Narail incident and those that have occurred only weeks before, with Hindu teachers being targeted in various ways, point to the rot that

is spreading throughout Bangladesh, manifesting its ugliness with greater regularity. Is this the kind of society we want to build – one that fails to protect its citizens from particular communities, while giving licence to those who create mayhem, insecurity, and division in the name of religion? If the state wants to retain its credibility as one that upholds the rights of all religious communities, it must first hold these hatemongers accountable and bring them to book. It must also realise the absurdity of having a law that metes out disproportionate punishment for the vague and debatable notion of hurting religious sentiment – and that, too, of only a certain group.

Which brings us back to whose religious sentiments are more important to address: The ones who are offended by an unverified social media post or the communities whose houses and temples are attacked and destroyed? Given how the administration responds, it is apparent that the first group gets preference, and this bias determines how the legal system will deal with the incidents. The government, while successful in catching militant groups and countering terrorist attacks in the conventional sense, has not been very active in curbing the radical views of an ultra-conservative interpretation of faith. The hate speeches spewed out at religious sermons go on unabated at mosques, YouTube and social media.

Coordinated action needed to combat climate crisis



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

OVER the last few weeks, I have been in Europe, and it seemed that everywhere I went, there were record-breaking weather events. And these events are unequivocally linked to human-induced climate change due to the emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs), which are causing the global temperature to rise. Let me briefly describe some of these extreme weather events that I witnessed, and how we need to change our strategy to tackle this new situation, since our old strategies are no longer working.

The first climate change impact to take note of is the major heat dome over western Europe, which has already caused extreme wildfires in Portugal, Spain and France, causing hundreds of deaths and making thousands of people homeless – and the worst is yet to come.

In the UK, the met office just issued an unprecedented Red Emergency warning for temperature up to 40 degrees Celsius, which climate change modellers had not predicted to happen until 2050.

As I travelled back to Dhaka, I was able to witness the remnants of the unprecedented floods in the northeastern part of Bangladesh that left millions of people homeless and destitute. Loss of lives was minimised, which is good news, but there were major losses of livelihoods and infrastructure.

At the same time, global leaders are meeting in Germany as part of the Petersberg Dialogue on climate change in preparation for the 27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), which is scheduled for November this year. But the aftermath of the Ukraine war and the resulting rise in fuel and food prices internationally will mean potential global crises.

Unfortunately, the tendency of the leaders in major economies is to try to increase, instead of decrease, their dependence on fossil fuels, which has caused the climate crisis we now face.

So the question that all of us now face is: How can we change this business-as-usual approach and move to a new way of thinking and acting?

My first suggestion is to take a whole-of-society approach in place of simply leaving it to our leaders, who have clearly failed us. This means that every one of us must regard ourselves as agents of change in tackling climate impacts. Regardless of where we live, we must combine working at local as well as national and even global levels wherever we can.

Unfortunately, most leaders in major economies try to increase their dependence on fossil fuels, which has caused the climate crisis. How can we change this approach and move to a new way of thinking and acting?

The second way in which we need to change our thinking and planning is to recognise that the polluters all need to be challenged and exposed. These include the major fossil fuel companies as well as their client politicians who have been extremely effective in preventing actions over the last three decades. The time has come to make them pay for the loss and damage that they have been responsible for and have profited from.

My third suggestion is forming as

many global coalitions of actors who want to take action to come together and express solidarity with each other as possible. The good news is that these coalitions of the willing are already active, such as school kids in the Fridays for Future movement, companies and organisations in the Race to Zero and Race to Resilience initiatives, and platforms like the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). What these different coalitions of action need to do is accelerate their own activities while linking up with each other to enhance their effectiveness.

All this is not to minimise the importance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its annual COPs, where governments have already adopted the Paris Agreement, but to acknowledge its limitations and put in place more effective ways of taking global action by different actors.

Finally, in Bangladesh, the time has now come for us to also recognise that the global temperature may rise beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius in reality – perhaps to two degrees or even higher. This means that we may have to revise our National Adaptation Plan keeping the potential impacts of such a situation in mind. We need to hope for the best, but plan for the worst. I have no doubt that we can in fact tackle the climate crisis globally as well as nationally, but only if we acknowledge the emergency in the first place.