



The mad rush to the petrol station at 11.45pm after the government’s sudden announcement of higher fuel prices.

Govt’s decision will injure every section of society



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IT is very difficult to find any logic behind the government’s sudden decision to hike fuel prices, especially since global oil prices are starting to come down - this week, US oil prices fell below USD 90 per barrel, from USD 120 just two months ago. The government justified its decision by referring to previous global price hikes, as a result of which Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) incurred losses amounting to around Tk 8,000 crore. However, it should be remembered that when the price of oil was globally low in the past, prices in Bangladesh were not reduced. At the time, the government saved a sizeable fund from profits earned - around Tk 47,000 crore over a few years. Why, then, did the government not adjust this gap with the funds it has saved up from previous profits, which exists only because the people paid more than what was necessary for the fuel they used?

Whether IMF conditionality is a reason behind this rise in prices is not something we can confirm with any certainty, but it is certainly a possibility. Whenever the IMF gives loans to countries, it almost always comes with some common conditions and a certain style of crisis management. The same straitjacket is fitted onto every country. One of the main aspects of this is an increase in the prices of utilities such as gas, electricity, oil, water, and sometimes even education and healthcare, regardless of how important the reasons are for the government to invest in these sectors, or how much of an impact price hikes might have on ordinary people. These conditionalities are imposed in the name of getting rid of fiscal deficits, but the objective is to protect different global, capitalist interests. So it is not illogical to speculate that the Bangladesh government is taking this dangerous decision due to pressure from the IMF.

Before raising prices as a reaction to global changes, one must think of the consequences. In a country where inflation is already high and the prices of essentials are soaring, high oil prices are guaranteed to have a knock-on effect on almost all other goods, as well as transport costs and rent. Ordinary people have already reduced consumption, and their debts have started to pile up. Keeping this context in mind, there are a number of alternative paths the government could have chosen.

One was to use the profit the government received when they were importing oil at low prices and selling it to the people at high prices. Another alternative would have been to simply lift the duty levied on imported oil, which would have reduced prices. Also, last week, the

PM shared the information that we have sufficient stock of octane and petrol in Bangladesh as by-products of gas extraction. If this is the case, then why should the volatility of the global market have any impact on us? Given that there are zero production costs when it comes to by-products, why are prices not falling instead? There are a lot of inconsistencies for which the people deserve answers.

As a long-term policy, Bangladesh also had the option of safe and cheap gas exploration for greater energy sovereignty. The deal with the American multinational corporation ConocoPhillips is an example of the state of this sector. In 2009, we objected to a contract for gas exploration and production with ConocoPhillips because it held provisions for export. We argued that we should reserve the gas extracted for our own needs, but the government argued that the need to extract gas was so urgent that no consideration could put a stop to it. Our protests were dispersed, often with violence, the contract went ahead, and

ConocoPhillips’ share value went up. They went on to give a sub-contract to another company, which after a while changed their minds and left. And in the last 13 years, that gas has remained unexplored.

At the time, the alternative model we suggested was a bit like the Padma Bridge one. We could work with foreign companies in the fields where we have limited expertise, but we opposed any contracts that would give them authority or ownership over our resources. We wanted to build our own national capacity, not only in terms of gas extraction, but also in terms of tapping into renewable energy sources. I believe if the government had gone down that route, then the situation in Bangladesh would be completely different right now. Instead, the government played into the hands of interest groups in favour of importing LNG, and our focus also shifted towards coal and nuclear energy. The country became dependant on imports, foreign loans and foreign companies for our energy needs, creating an unsustainable system that not only made us

vulnerable but ultimately contributed to environmental destruction as well.

What happened in Sri Lanka is a warning for us. There are certain similarities between our two countries, such as taking on mega-projects without due process, loan dependency, lack of transparency in decision-making processes, monopolisation by a few groups, a lack of accountability, etc. Bangladesh’s main advantages are high remittance and export earnings, which are keeping us afloat despite capital flight and widespread corruption. However, policymakers are continually failing to deal with the root causes of the crisis that we are now being faced with.

It is dangerous to be so dependant on imports when there is such high pressure on foreign exchange reserves. But what created this pressure in the first place? Capital flight, or the laundering of money abroad by influential persons, now stands at around Tk 70,000-80,000 crore, according to international estimates, although some independent analysis suggests the amount could be twice as much. Stopping or at least controlling it should have been a priority for us. Yet, in the last budget proposal, the finance minister gave a green signal to these money launderers by making a provision for legalising money laundered out of Bangladesh in exchange for only 7-15 percent tax. High-cost imports for mega-projects are also putting pressure on forex reserves.

In this scenario, stopping unnecessary imports, controlling unsustainable mega-projects that operate without transparency, and controlling capital flight should be the government’s main priorities.

If the government takes the IMF loan and continue in this vein, the crisis we are facing will not be resolved. Without a solution to corruption and excess and with growing privation and commercialisation, it is the people of this country who will bear the brunt of the government’s wrong choices. The negative impacts will be potent for the country’s huge majority including informal workers, many of whom fell further into poverty during the pandemic.

In Bangladesh, the trend toward digitalisation has provided a pathway to deliver useful government information and various

Digital divide gets wider if there is power failure



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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HOW many of you have gone to the bank to get a statement of your account, and the bank teller informs you that the server is down? Or, went to the NRB Commercial Bank branch to pay your road tax only to be told to come back another day since the server is not working?

In this age of digitalisation, there are many advantages of this transition to the brave new world but it also comes with a few thorns. If there is load shedding in your area, or you have a bad internet connection, the challenges of carrying out simple transactions sometimes become a burden.

In Bangladesh, the recently published preliminary report of the Population and Housing Census 2022 indicates that around three crore people over the age of 18 do not own a mobile phone, while 6.5 crore people from the same group do not use the internet. As a result, it is easy to see that all people are not fully benefiting from the push toward “Digital Bangladesh”. According to an editorial in *The Daily Star* (July 31, 2022), the frequency of lack of server access, poor user-friendliness of the apps and system, and slow internet speeds have created headaches for those who are seeking to use the 761 digitalised government services that are nominally available.

A research survey conducted to gauge the impact of Union Digital Center (UDC) in Comaniganj Upazila of Sylhet found that the availability of electricity is a big problem in the upazila. The households can’t use their computer or mobile when they need to use them because of load shedding. To quote, the “research survey also found the internet speed problem. They are still using mobile networks. Some people were satisfied with the mobile network, but some said their internet services are not good. There aren’t

government services to users by using the internet and mobile technologies and enabled us to overcome weak physical infrastructure barriers and to increase accountability throughout the system. However, I have also heard that in many government offices, the online system is frequently out of order, and “the server is down” has become a much-dreaded sign. Clients who want to pay their electric bills or road taxes are turned away due to power outages, no connectivity, or other technical issues. What does that mean? The impact can be profound or temporary. However, these failures also provide the unscrupulous middleman or corrupt officials an opportunity to make a quick buck. I have written frequently about this issue and everyone is familiar with the increased “cost of transaction”. A birth certificate, road license, NID, or other documents become a major expense for those who do not have the skills, training, or street smarts to beat the “digital” system.

So, what is the solution? There are very well-known and time-tested principles that need to be built in to create a computer system that is dependable, and stays operational even during power failures. Similarly, system designers need to prioritise dependability and use metrics to track both the availability and reliability of service.

Fault-tolerant systems use backup components that automatically take the place of failed components, ensuring no loss of service. These include:

a) Hardware systems that are backed up by identical or equivalent systems. For example, a server can be made fault-tolerant by using an identical server running in parallel, with all operations mirrored to the backup server.

b) Software systems that are backed up by other software instances. For example, a database with customer information can be continuously replicated to another machine. If the primary database goes down, operations can be automatically redirected to the second database.

c) Power sources that are made fault-tolerant using alternative sources. For example, many organisations have power generators that can take over in case mainline electricity fails.

In a similar fashion, any system or component which is a single point of failure can be made fault-tolerant using redundancy.

Some important considerations when creating fault-tolerant and high-availability systems in an organisational setting include zero downtime, i.e., a highly available system has a minimal allowed level of service interruption. For example, a system with “five nines” (i.e., 99.999) availability is down for approximately 5 minutes per year. A fault-tolerant system is expected to work continuously with no acceptable service interruption.

The appropriate solution to create a fault-tolerant system often requires careful planning, understanding of how elements fail and the impact of surrounding elements of the failure. Redundancy or a set of alternative means can ensure that there are no catastrophic failures.

A very interesting analogy is the case of a failure in an aircraft and an automobile. In the case of an airborne aircraft, there is no room for a failure that brings down the aircraft. On the other hand, in the case of a car which has a flat tire, the car’s operating system can be designed to limp along until the tire can be replaced.

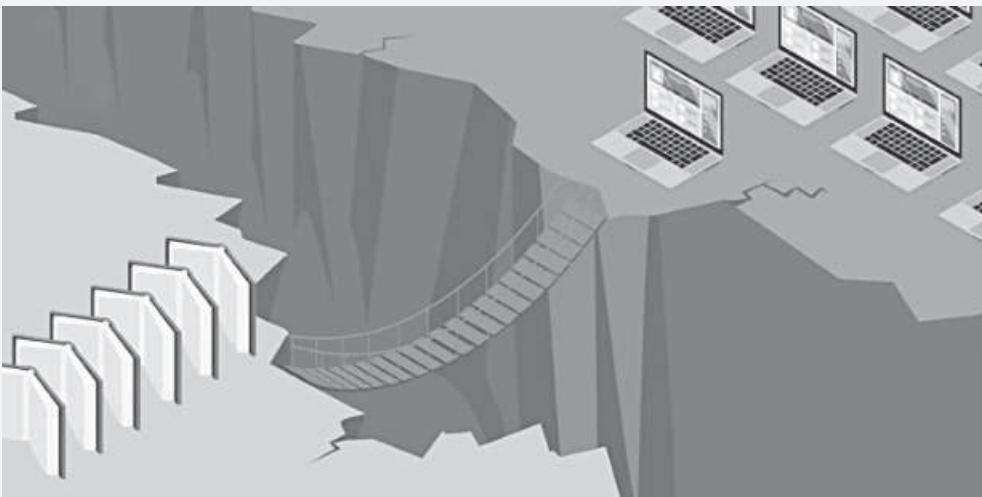


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