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Why should people suffer for a bad pricing policy?

Authorities must reconsider the fuel price hike decision

IT comes as no surprise that Bangladesh's cost of living crisis has escalated after the record increase of fuel prices early this week, with transport fares, prices of essentials, and production costs already reaching newer heights. The inflationary pressure is set to rise further. If industrial and agricultural production is hampered – which it will soon be – it will further spur imports and decrease exports. It seems that in trying to solve one problem (“adjusting fuel prices”), the government has opened the floodgates to many more. What makes this more painful is that all this could have been avoided.

At an event organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, experts said that, instead of increasing fuel prices, there were a number of viable alternatives that could be pursued. The government could have, for example, taken steps to check corruption and mismanagement at the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), which would have saved a lot of money. It could have withdrawn or reduced the taxes it gets from BPC, which would have helped the latter to make up for fuel subsidies. The government gets up to 34 percent in taxes from BPC, in the name of customs duty, VAT and advance income tax. It earned Tk 8,540 crore in duty and taxes from the BPC in the last fiscal year, and is expected to get Tk 9,251 crore this year. This tendency of passing the burden of duties, taxes and bad practices onto consumers – but not sharing the profits with them – is unacceptable.

Speaking of profits, the BPC did make a lot of them. It made a profit of Tk 46,858 crore since 2015. With this money, it could have funded the subsidies and also offset the losses it has been incurring over the last six months – one of the reasons cited to justify the price hike. Earlier, we were told that the profits were spent on or invested in various development works, a claim termed “delusional” by the CPD. Of the Tk 46,858 crore, the BPC reportedly spent only Tk 9,214 crore on 11 self-funded development projects. What happened to the rest of the money? The BPC apparently has at least Tk 25,254 crore in different government and private banks as Fixed Deposit Receipts (FDRs). Is FDR an investment?

The gulf between official claims and the reality is getting harder to bridge. All this points to a bad pricing policy at best, and an exploitative practice at worst. Neither is excusable, given how badly it has been affecting the ordinary people. True, we cannot rely on subsidy forever. But it can be withdrawn in phases. To do so all at once – despite having alternative options, and despite international fuel prices going down – is alarming. We urge the government to reconsider its decision.

Money launderers must be brought to book

Govt ‘failure’ to inquire after Swiss bank deposits is inexplicable

AT a time when money laundering is turning into a serious threat to our economy, the Swiss ambassador's comment on our government's activities in this regard is quite disquieting. She said that the government has never sought any specific information from Swiss authorities on the money deposited with Swiss banks by Bangladeshi citizens. How will the government get information on money launderers or take action against them if it doesn't engage with the authorities of major money-laundering destinations? According to the ambassador, Switzerland provided the government with all available information on how to reach an agreement on these matters, but the latter didn't take any action in this regard. This again exposes the lack of political will to hold money launderers – who are often believed to be politically connected – accountable.

The Swiss ambassador's comment also contrasts the claim of the immediate past governor of Bangladesh Bank who, in June, said that they did not have any information that anyone from Bangladesh had smuggled money out of it and deposited it in Swiss banks. But according to the ambassador, the funds deposited by Bangladeshi clients with Swiss banks increased by nearly 55 percent to 871.11 million Swiss francs year-on-year in 2021. We would like to ask the central bank authorities: What information did they base their conclusion on?

Although the names of some individuals and organisations involved in money laundering had been revealed in the Panama and Paradise papers, hardly any action has been taken against them. Last year, the High Court asked the authorities concerned about what steps had been taken against these money launderers. But the relevant agencies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission failed to submit proper information on them. The government's latest decision to allow money launderers to bring back money from abroad by paying only a nominal tax – 7-15 percent – has also been criticised by all concerned.

What the government needs to understand is that our failure to take action against money launderers is costing our economy dearly. Instead of protecting them or giving them tax exemptions, it should use all its channels to gather correct information on the money deposited illegally in foreign countries and bring it back to the country. Bangladesh has good bilateral relations with many of the countries where the money is laundered to – Switzerland is one of them. So we hope the government will ask the country for information on the money laundered and investigate it following proper procedure, which is needed to identify and punish them.

‘Walkman Syndrome’ afflicts the AL and our govt

Nothing but their own voices reach them



THE THIRD VIEW

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

MAHFUZ ANAM

WALKMAN was a battery-powered portable personal stereo cassette player invented by Sony in Japan in July 1979, that made quality music available on the go. It revolutionised the experience of listening to music as people could take their favourite numbers wherever they went, making personal trips, especially their lonely, long and dreary commutes to and from work, considerably more pleasant. Soon, it took the world by storm – listening to music has never been the same since then. Like the transistor in the 50s, Walkman in the 80s was among the early signs of the digital revolutions that were to sweep the world.

However, like all revolutions – social or technological – there are unforeseen consequences. In the case of Walkman, as its use became almost universal, it appeared to isolate people. They became self absorbed (a situation that is far worse now) and detached from their surroundings. With a Walkman and its headphones, one could go anywhere – from the busiest of markets to the most boisterous of gatherings to the biggest of demonstrations – and yet be cut off from their surroundings.

The term “Walkman Syndrome” first came to use after the fall of the Shah

Not only are they listening to their own narratives, but they have gone one step further and have put all sorts of impediments in the creation and propagation of alternative narratives. If a contrary view somehow finds its place in the public domain, at once all sorts of ‘conspiracy’ theories are spewed with venom, accompanied with veiled and not-so-veiled threats of ‘consequences.’

of Iran in 1979, when people wondered how Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, being in power since 1953 and with SAVAK, his dreaded secret service, and all the other institutions of surveillance – not to mention the help from the CIA and successive US administrations, whose great ally he was – could not know or fathom that the ground was shifting from under his very feet. Later, research showed that “talk” was all over the market place in Tehran and other cities of Iran, but all the Shah's men/women were only tuned to their Walkman, playing the narrative that they wanted to hear.

How could this happen? It was my good fortune to witness this intense debate from close quarters. I was working at the Unesco headquarters then, and Paris was the city where Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, passed his last years of exile and from where he returned to Iran. Unesco's corridors



buzzed with hundreds of narratives at that time, the most prominent of which was how the Shah's regime could have been so unaware of the changing circumstances, proving, once more, Lord John Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The obvious analysis was his disconnect with the people, and the term applied in the Unesco circles in the early 80s was “Walkman Syndrome,” using the wide popularity of the newly invented gadget to make for easy understanding of what happened in Iran, especially to the Shah's regime.

After 40 years, and its disappearance from usage, I am tempted to use that term again. It is my view that our government and the ruling party have both been afflicted with the “Walkman Syndrome.” Not only are they listening to their own narratives, but they have gone one step further and have put all sorts of impediments in the creation and propagation of alternative narratives. If a contrary view somehow finds its place in the public domain, at once all sorts of ‘conspiracy’ theories are spewed with venom, accompanied with veiled and not-so-veiled threats of “consequences.” I had written sometime earlier that “press freedom has now become praise freedom,” and as long as praise continues, the press and everyone else are safe. The intolerance for critical views and alternative narratives is so pervasive and intense that democracy's fundamental feature, freedom of expression, is most severely compromised in today's Bangladesh.

Along with debilitating the press, the government has all but disabled the parliament in the sense that this vital component of a functional democracy has hardly ever debated issues of urgent public concern. Bangladesh is at the forefront of the climate disasters facing the world. Yet, there has not been a single in-depth discussion on it in our parliament. Education, youth, employment, environment, defence,

foreign policy, threat of terrorism, human resource development – name any issue of vital national concern, and we will see that they never featured in our parliament's agenda in any meaningful way.

We have one of the highest numbers of road accident deaths in the world, with no reflection on it in our Sangsad. Handling of Covid and the thousands

generation, quick rentals, LNG import, construction of LNG terminals, etc – are all serious questions that have escaped parliamentary scrutiny and ACC probes. Two days back, on Wednesday, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) published some astonishing facts about the record fuel price hike and whether it could have been avoided. This one act of the government has driven the poor

and the middle class into desperation and the industries into a severe crisis due to the enhanced energy and transportation costs. Will it find any serious reflection in our parliament? In the meantime, more draft laws – with many already in the statute books – are under consideration as to how the freedom of expression can be curbed (the Press Council Amendment Act), how to access personal data of citizens more (Data Protection Act), etc.

What makes our version of the “Walkman syndrome” far more lethal is the culture of rhetoric that goes with it. Two examples should suffice. We paid a foreign company to launch our own satellite (the need and the business case for which remain to see the light of the day) and it was called our “conquest of space.” We won a legal battle (the government deserves praise for pursuing it competently) in the international court and got our share of the Bay of Bengal and went to town calling it our “conquest of the oceans.” Did we convince anybody with these claims – not, perhaps, even the paid sloganeers?

The “Walkman Syndrome” produces a delusional mindset. By constantly feeding on self-praise and throttling contrarian views, our government and the ruling party have deprived themselves of vital feedback, which could have helped them to be more aware of what people want and what they are thinking. They have further removed themselves from the reality by indulging in a culture of rhetoric that so exaggerates their achievements (which, when realistically assessed, is significant and impressive, especially the Padma Bridge) that ultimately pushes them into a make-believe world that further removes them from what people – and many of them are their well-wishers – are saying and thinking.

Hopefully, the present challenges will trigger a “wake-up call” and inject a desire for reality check.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to letters@thedailystar.net

Zoos: A society-endorsed barbarism

The condition of zoos in Bangladesh, unfortunately, is among the worst in the world. The Bangladesh Zoo Act, 2018 states, “Under no circumstances should sick, weak, lean, old animals be shown.” But if you disrupt the normal life of an animal and keep them enclosed in cages, how can we expect them to be anything but sick, weak and old? We have built the cages for our own convenience, not for that of the animals who spend a lifetime stuck

within their confines. A few days ago, two pictures went viral on social media, which show how thin the lions in our national zoo are. This proves the extent of the neglect the animals suffer in the hands of their care-givers. We must get rid of zoos immediately and rehabilitate these animals in artificial sanctuaries, safari parks, and eco-parks.

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS