

Rising farming cost threatens food security

Authorities must ensure farming is profitable for farmers

Despite repeated calls to lower the cost of farming and raise the profit margin for farmers, nothing seems to be happening as expected. With the Boro season underway, a report by this daily says that hundreds of thousands of farmers in 16 northern districts – which account for 26.5 percent of the total cultivable land for Boro paddy in the country – are struggling with what some have estimated to be a 25 percent rise in farming cost compared to last year's. For marginal farmers, this is too much to cope with, a reality, one can imagine, they share with farmers across the country. That customers will be forced to pay even more than they currently do for this staple is a foregone conclusion.

The reason for the cost hike is not unknown. Ever since the government raised the prices of fertiliser and diesel – needed for the tiller machines and water pumps – everything related to farming has become more expensive. While the price of diesel was increased by 42.5 percent, the price of each kg of urea fertiliser leaped to Tk 22 from Tk 16 in 2021. The prices of pesticide, seed, farm labour, etc. have also risen simultaneously. Farmers in the northern regions of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and Bogura – each with four districts – face additional risks if the threats of flooding and extreme weather are factored in. In these regions, Boro will be cultivated on 13.25 lakh hectares of land. Last year's average production cost in Rangpur and Dinajpur was Tk 14,900 per bigha, and in Rajshahi and Bogura it was Tk 17,450. There will be a heftier bill to pay for all this season.

The question is, how are the ordinary farmers going to cope with this hike-fest? Many can't get a loan at low interest, and therefore have to turn to loan sharks just to be able to farm. For many, end-of season earnings are unlikely to be sufficient enough to pay back and make a reasonable profit to prepare them for the next season, meaning many will have to suffer indefinitely as a result. Experts, therefore, have urged the government to provide farmers, especially those who are marginal, with cash support as well as further subsidies to cut down farming costs. True, the government already pays huge subsidies in agriculture. But it must do more to ease the struggle of farmers, because it is directly related to our food security.

In the end, what matters most is the interest of ordinary farmers and customers. We must ensure that the former is able to pay bills and makes profits, and the latter can buy at reasonable prices. Unfortunately, because of the all-round increase in the cost of just about everything and the machinations of unscrupulous traders involved in production and supply, both have been suffering for long. This must be reversed. We urge the authorities to take steps to reduce the cost of farming. They must ensure proper regulation to ensure no one can take advantage of the vulnerability of farmers and ordinary customers.

Humanity learned little from horrors of war

Time to renew pledges of peace in a conflict-prone world

On this International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it is important to remember the horrors and suffering that war, any war, inevitably brings. The Second World War resulted in the extermination of six million Jews across German-occupied Europe – in concentration camps, gas chambers, pogroms and mass shootings, etc. – as well as millions of others who died directly or indirectly as a consequence of the war. January 27 marks the day when the Auschwitz concentration camp – a major site of the Nazis' "final solution to the Jewish question" – was liberated in 1945.

After the war, many hoped that the atrocities that the world had witnessed would result in the end of all conflicts, leading to some dubbing it as "the war to end all wars." Unfortunately, in the subsequent years, such lofty hopes have been dashed repeatedly by self-serving world leaders, whose greed and quest for power – and, in some cases, hatred for others – have led to millions of more deaths, displacement, and other forms of atrocities.

During the Nuremburg trials, the world tried to establish the idea that following orders to commit atrocities is itself an unpardonable crime. Yet, there has been little change in that regard, as the orders of so-called leaders to commit atrocities are still mostly blindly followed. Therefore, as disappointing as it may sound, the reality is that the lessons that the world should have learned following the tragedies of World War II, and World War I before it, have been mostly ignored.

In fact, we have even seen the state of Israel and its Western allies use innocent Jewish people once victimised by the Nazis to persecute the people of Palestine for more than seven decades. Peoples' legitimate concern for human rights violations has been weaponised to make way for other wars of aggressions to victimise millions of more people, all, ironically, in the name of upholding human rights. The international community, meanwhile, has failed to protect the legitimate victims of wars and atrocities.

We have seen that happening in the case of the Rohingya also. Even though more and more countries are recognising what the Myanmar army, along with religious extremists in the country, have perpetrated against the Rohingya people as genocide, the world is yet to take any meaningful action to hold the perpetrators to account, or stand beside the victims.

According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the world today is closer to doomsday than ever before. The main driving force for that is the ongoing war in Ukraine, which is drawing Russia and the West ever closer to a direct conflict. So, while paying homage to the memory of the Holocaust victims, we must renew our pledge to end the madness of wars and conflicts. It is time to ensure that such horrors are never visited or indulged under any pretext whatsoever.

ELECTED GOVERNMENT VS PERMANENT BUREAUCRATS

Who Runs the Country?



THE THIRD VIEW

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There is no question as to who runs the country. It is Sheikh Hasina, our prime minister. But who does she run it through? Is it through the parliament and the political forces? Or is it through the bureaucrats? That is the question we try to answer in this column.

For a functional democracy, we need both elected political masters and non-elected public servants. The first changes on the basis of public support, while the second is permanent. The former makes policies, while the latter implements them. The former's proclivity is to be populist, while it is the duty of the latter to ensure accountability. The political leadership is funded by public support, while the other is paid for by the taxpayers' money – perhaps leading to the term "public servant."

This combination of a changing political leadership and a "non-changing" governmental structure is the key to successful governance. Thus, there exists a supreme need to have a fine balance between the two.

Unfortunately, we have totally distorted that balance. And it has happened from both ends. Politicians politicised the bureaucrats, and then bureaucrats bureaucratised politics. Both try to extract maximum benefits from the other with the ordinary people being totally ignored, as there is none to fight for their concerns.

At the moment, the bureaucrats seem to be in the driving seat. The consequent marginalisation of our politicians is not only pathetic but also dangerous because, however distorted and skewed, the politicians have some sort of accountability to the people in the form of party, local, and national elections. Our bureaucrats' accountability is only to their seniors, which, over time, has become fundamentally self-serving.

Today, more and more decision-making rests in the hands of powerful bureaucrats who have greater access to the centre of power in the person of the PM who, over the last several years, has come to rely more on the bureaucrats than on her political colleagues.

Where the politicians have lost out wholesale to the bureaucrats is in the gradual diminution of the power, effectiveness, relevance, and prestige of the parliament. When parliament is reduced to practically nothing except self-praise and opposition-bashing – even when it is virtually non-existent – politicians as a group, regardless of whether they belong to the treasury or the opposition bench, lose. Now, the role of our MPs in overall policy formulation or in the general oversight process is next to nothing. We do not pay any attention when they speak because their comments hardly carry any weight.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

I would love to be proved wrong when I say that no issue of any significance ever gets debated in our parliament. The climate crisis has not been a subject of any serious discussion, even though we have been identified as one of the most, if not the most, vulnerable country in the world. Starting from the pandemic to the global economic crisis, to money laundering, to loan defaults, to quality health services and education, and specific topics like why Bangladesh has among the highest numbers of road crashes in the world – none of these subjects of public interest appears to attract the attention of our MPs.

Ironically, the bureaucracy's involvement in politics was legalised during BAKSAL, when the stature of our politicians was highest in our history. Later, the military's illegitimate entry into government and their natural dependence on the bureaucracy greatly enhanced the latter's power in the political sphere.

We received a golden opportunity for a fresh start to build democratic institutions with the toppling of the quasi-military autocratic government of General Ershad through a peaceful mass agitation. The grand coalition of political forces constituted a total victory, which set forth the future direction of politics in the country. (See this writer's column titled "Dreams Reborn," from January 14, 1991). However, the extreme rivalry between the BNP and AL gradually weakened this grand alliance and split the political forces, creating an opening for bureaucrats to regain power and political influence.

party was to come to power. And they never looked back.

At the moment, the power of bureaucracy is symbolised by the rise of the Prime Minister's Office – the all-powerful PMO, which is manned by senior bureaucrats only. The principal secretary, the secretary of the PMO, and the cabinet secretary constitute the triumvirate that serves our all-powerful prime minister. If we add to them the finance secretary, the governor of Bangladesh Bank (also a bureaucrat), and maybe one or two other secretaries, then we have almost the total picture of the power structure that runs the country. The cabinet – the most crucial decision-making body in most governments – is essentially a rubber stamp, as is the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), where suggestions mostly made by bureaucrats are signed off.

The rise of the bureaucracy's power cannot be fully understood without considering the gradual lowering of the quality of our politicians, and especially of their ethical norms and standards. Politicians were never judged by their "degrees," but by the degree to which they associated themselves with the hopes and aspirations of the people, and their commitment to serve them. When all that became substituted by one's wealth, ability to fund local *mastans*, indulge in violence (particularly in cornering their rivals), and buying their way through party nominations and the election process, their overall stature diminished.

Today, government officials assume

that the development funds that an MP, a union parishad chairman or other elected public representatives get will not fully be used for the purpose it is allocated for. This automatically leads to tighter bureaucratic control and a tilting of power towards the officials. The recent distribution of pandemic-related assistance, allotment of Ashrayan houses, relief goods, and

other government handouts through local administration (sidestepping local elected entities) bore testimony to the general mistrust of local political bodies.

"Bureaucracy" usually refers to administrative cadres, but taken in its larger incarnation – including all other cadres in education, health, etc, and especially the police and all the intelligence branches – we really get the full picture of the massive administrative body, which wields enormous power that has reached unfathomable proportions due to the gradual diminution of all accountability structures. This, coupled with the huge amount of resources allocated in our annual budget and mega-projects that are completely under bureaucratic control, the power of our bureaucrats has reached unimaginable levels, making for a lethal combination of political influence and control over allocation of funds.

Seldom, if ever, did our bureaucrats enjoy so much authority, such unbridled power and discretion. Not to mention the perks. It is as if the government is on its toes to take every step that will win them over to its side.

Why? Because so much of our politics now depends on the bureaucrats – especially the elections. It is the latter that gives our larger bureaucracy the final edge. Unless we restore elections to their free and fair status, the bureaucracy's power will continue to rise. And the stature, prestige, and power of our politicians will continue to decline, making for an ominous future for our democracy.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Next Globalisation



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MARK LEONARD

Is globalisation coming back to life? That was the big question at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, where WEF founder Klaus Schwab asked whether it is possible to have cooperation in an era of fragmentation.

For the past decade, the steady demise of "Davos Man" – the avatar of global business and cosmopolitanism – was the big story here, seen as signs that globalisation had gone too far and would be thrown into reverse.

But the mood at this year's meeting was slightly more optimistic. Despite much concern about conflict and economic strife, the world seems to be doing a little better than global elites expected when they last met in May.

While the globalisation of goods seems to have peaked, services are becoming ever more globalised, owing

to the revolution in telework during the pandemic.

There is also an accelerating revolution in energy, driven partly by the war in Ukraine. At the same time, advances in artificial intelligence are opening vast new possibilities, while also creating tensions over microchips and renewed fears about joblessness and rogue robots.

Developments in all three areas – telework, renewables, and AI – will bind countries together in new networks of interdependence.

But the re-globalisation glimpsed in Davos will be fundamentally different from previous iterations. While the old model was about corporate profits, the new one is about national security in all its dimensions. Western countries have portrayed the war in Ukraine as a defence of the liberal, rules-based

order against unilateral aggression by Russia (and, by extension, China). They are, therefore, busy decoupling from Russia and rethinking their economic ties with China.

But to many outside the West, Europe and the US are just as guilty of disrupting the global order – and with enormous consequences for their own security and prosperity. The way they see it, the West made a decision to turn the war into an economic conflict (through the most ambitious and far-reaching sanctions package in history), with devastating consequences for billions of people.

Back in Davos' halcyon days, the dollar-based financial system was seen as a global public good that would spread prosperity to every corner of the world. But now, it is increasingly seen as a cudgel with which the US can enforce its ideological and strategic preferences.

Whereas Britain and the US were, respectively, at the center of the first two waves of globalisation, this new one will be multipolar, and thus multi-ideological. China has not only closed the economic gap with the US, but has surpassed it as the biggest trading partner to most countries in the world. That implies a major shift in the balance of economic power.

This new dynamic suggests that

the world will be divided not only by nationalism, but by fundamentally different ideas about order. Davos attendees got a flawless illustration of this when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky beamed in to deliver a speech, calling on the world to rally against Russia's unprovoked war. While half the audience cheered enthusiastically, the other half appeared unmoved. Even if many sympathise with the Ukrainians, they fear that the conflict is being used to precipitate a Cold War 2.0 that will divide the world into democracies and autocracies.

That is the last thing most political leaders want. In private discussions, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American leaders complain that their countries already suffered a loss of sovereignty and control during the first Cold War. For them, there is little to be gained from having to pick sides yet again.

Even the US' allies are against having to choose. I spoke to a Japanese tycoon who is very worried about China's current foreign policy but also vehemently opposed to decoupling.

Ultimately, Schwab may be right to hope for cooperation in our time of fragmentation. But we must bear in mind how the next globalisation will differ fundamentally from the last one.