

Quota reform: Beyond the demands



THE suggestion of the parliamentary public administration standing committee members for a

“logical reform” to the existing quota system in the civil service system should be considered as a positive step towards the resolution of the ongoing debate on the quota system. As we are aware, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s proclamatory statement at the Parliament on April 11 that the quota system will be abolished did little to bring an end to this contentious matter. The students and job seekers who were demonstrating since February did not demand the abolition of the system. Yet, PM decided that abolition is the way forward.

While leaders of the movement accepted the PM’s announcement at face value and suspended the movement, subsequent events, particularly the actions of the law enforcing agencies and the Dhaka University (DU) authority, reignited the movement and expanded it beyond the confines of universities. It appears that there are people within the administration and diehard supporters of the ruling party who have decided not to accept the PM’s decision. People who otherwise lend unqualified support to the PM on all issues seem to have found ways to say that it’s not agreeable to them without imputing the PM for her action; they instead blame the students who raised the demands. They believe that the PM has acted in an impromptu manner to stop further deterioration of the situation. They are expecting that the PM will find ways to reverse her position and that the status quo will be maintained. Absence of a gazette notification to this effect bolstered their expectation. It will be interesting to see how they react to the parliamentary committee’s opinion. They are the ones who are suggesting that the PM’s speech was an emotive reaction rather than a policy decision. The rationale for the demands of



Students demand reform to the quota system on the night of April 10.

PHOTO: STAR

reform and events since April 8 is well-known and needs no recapitulation; suffice it to point out that the demands for reforms were never meant to be against the executive branch’s prerogative and the constitution’s commitment to the disadvantaged segments of society; that it was never targeted against one category of the existing quota system; that the deplorable attack on the DU Vice Chancellor’s residence on April 9 has been used against the students before the investigation is completed; that police action, tantamount to abduction of three student leaders in broad daylight, was a violation of the law of the land; that the behaviour of the DU authorities, reflected in the series of actions such as expulsion of a leader of the student wing of the ruling party, expulsion of 24 other students, violating privacy of students and banishing at least three students from the student dormitory in the middle of the night, was appalling, to say the least. These events have taken place as a relentless campaign against the students in the social media and

in the public sphere by the supporters of the government and has remained unabated.

While the issue has remained unresolved, the quota reform movement in its wake has brought some questions to the fore and pointed to some uncomfortable facts which we can no longer avoid. The discussions on the demands have raised the fundamental issue of the state of Bangladesh’s economy—if the country is experiencing growth in GDP, then why is it failing to produce jobs which would encourage graduates to look for jobs in the private sector instead of battling for public-sector jobs? The unemployment data, provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, is staggering: 48 million people do not have jobs; the official number of people looking for jobs in the past three months based on the ILO definition—2.68 million—is considered a serious undercount and remains deeply disturbing. Equally worrying is the number of unemployed among educated youth. In 2014, the Economist Intelligence

Unit (EIU) reported that 47 percent of Bangladeshi graduates do not have a job; the situation appears to have further deteriorated. This larger economic issue and related matters of governance were not beyond our knowledge, but we hardly confronted them. It is one thing to explain the conundrum, the other is to address the issue. It is time to ask whether the repeated recitation of the mantra of “Bangladesh Paradox”—economic growth despite bad governance—without addressing the nuances has become the cheerleading song for legitimising authoritarian tendencies of the government and the perpetuation of non-inclusive governance.

The role of the universities, particularly of the administration and faculty of public universities, warrants our attention. The rhetoric of the VC and others of DU has laid bare how uber partisanship has undermined the core mission of a public university. For decades, the values of public universities have been eroding, but they have now hit rock bottom. Most of the faculty of DU acted with

little regard for their role as the voice of conscience, but fortunately a small number came forward to demand some accountability of the administration. It is now evident that the universities are failing to be the citadel of dissension—for both students and faculty. The allegation that the student dormitories operate under the control of the ruling party student activists with the connivance of the administration is borne out by the statements of students who joined the movement and the actions of the administration on display since February 9. This is not a revelation but an affirmation of a reality that had long been ignored. This may provide a picture of a “peaceful campus” but is it consistent with the objective of an institution of higher learning?

There are some indications of things to come in the weeks ahead. Actions of both police against the leaders and the DU administration

particularly in the uncertain political environment in an election year. Understandably, the government may try to divide and dissipate the movement; delaying could be the tactics of the government to achieve the objective. I hope that it won’t be the case. Whatever is done will have lasting impacts on society and among the youth who constitute the majority of the population.

The incessant vilification of the movement and its leaders shows that there are people who do not want a peaceful resolution of the issue. Evidently, there are efforts to pit the families of freedom fighters against the movement activists. This may appear a politically expedient move, but certainly will sow the seeds of further polarisation of society and will be counterproductive in the long-term. A section of the opponents of this movement has quite deliberately used the term “Razakar” to describe the supporters of the movement. We have been witnessing the recurrent pattern of using it to demean and silence any disagreement with the ruling party. It is time to remember the abuse of the term only benefits those who should be rightfully identified as such for their roles in 1971.

What should then be the way forward? The parliamentary standing committee’s willingness to bring “logical reform” should allow the government to expedite formulating a clear guideline about the government proposal. Experts of public administration, former civil servants and the members of the civil society, can be consulted in this regard. The ruling party should send a clear signal to its supporters that they have the right to express their disagreement but use of freedom fighters’ families for petty interests is disrespectful to the freedom fighters. The prevailing situation at DU should be investigated; perhaps a citizens’ enquiry committee can be entrusted to do the job. After all, this is a public institution run by taxpayers’ money.

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against the female students indicate that the government is relying on force to intimidate and create a sense of fear among students. It is very consistent with the government’s attitude towards any dissent and the dominant mode of governance over the past years. With apparent success in shrinking of space for opposition—both political and civil society—and limiting freedom of expression, the government might consider it as a winning strategy,

Surviving in a world of speed

How Bangladesh is coping with fast fashion



FASHION is perhaps the most dynamic industry of this modern age. We are living in an era of fast fashion where trends come and go, and where product is being regarded more and more as a disposable item. Speed is taking over

all aspects of the fashion supply chain and many of the everyday features of life, in particular with regard to the way the consumer communicates.

The traditional practice of retailers following trends emerging from the catwalk has had to be completely rethought. Designers now show collections that will be available in stores the next day, instead of the previously accepted method of delivering goods six months later. A celebrity can post an Instagram picture or a comment on Twitter about his/her latest fashion purchase, which may reach a global audience of many millions and spark an overnight trend.

Retailers face increased competition as each vie to offer the latest twists in fashion trends and to have products in stores in the fastest possible time to maximise shelf-life and profit, leading to increased pressure on the manufacturers to reduce their lead-times. We have also witnessed an invasion of

technologies and smart gadgets that have changed significantly the shopping habits and demands of consumers. In addition, we see the growth in smart supply chain management including access to Big Data, automation, robotics, etc. Maximising efficiency is at the core of these evolutions. It plays a fundamental role in the race towards increasing sustainability and speed of product delivery to market.

What impact does speed have on the manufacturers of apparel in a third-world country such as Bangladesh? The global fashion industry is highly fragmented, with design taking place in one part of the world and materials being procured and assembled in another part. Finally, the product is delivered to another country. For the manufacturers, the most common source of pressure is lead time. While the designers in the Western world are forecasting fashion trends—innovating colours, designs, construction, materials, patterns and styles—for the year 2020 or beyond, the manufacturers are left with the challenge to catch up with the pace and improve the lead-time from order placement to shipment.

Efficiencies in operation, procurement and movement of raw materials, and the continuing demand to fill up the shelves of stores in an increasingly shorter lead time (in some cases, within impossible deadlines!) are

giving headaches to the factory owners and managers in Bangladesh. Starting from sample developments and approvals through to fabric procurement, lab dips, and shipment, in every phase we find that the realities are quite different from the expectations of the buyers. The factories have to utilise all of their skills and occasionally have to go beyond their limit in order to meet customer demands and shorten the delivery timeline.

There are several issues that contribute to this situation: a) reliance on imported fabrics for higher-value products; b) poor infrastructure and connectivity (there are occasions when the port efficiency abruptly goes down, causing delays in shipments and added pressure on suppliers); c) weaker financial ability of the factories for advance procurement and additional financing costs not to be borne by the buyers; d) lack of accurate order forecasting by buyers, leading to sudden bottlenecks in the supply chain; e) lack of relationship with buyers, allowing factories to develop an understanding of the customers’ needs and to be able to forecast and support their demands; f) lack of professionalism in the mid-level management causing inefficient use of time; and g) lack of the use of modern manufacturing technologies, with heavy reliance on manual labour, and smart supply chain management system.

So who is paying the cost ultimately? When things run smoothly, it is a win-win situation for all concerned. Unfortunately, there is a culture of take-it-or-leave-it when buyers are placing orders and applying pressure to achieve the best lead-times. There are huge risks for the factories accepting orders with unrealistic lead-time targets, which can sometimes lead to drastic situations such as penalty discounts for late deliveries, or in extreme cases, bankruptcy!

Where are the things going wrong? Is it always the unrealistic pressure from the buyers? Or is it the failure of the factories (for not having a close enough relationship with their customer, and not adopting the latest technology and best working practices to enhance their competitiveness)? In many cases, it is a combination of all these factors. How then should we overcome these issues and move the industry forward?

Some of the answers to this dilemma lie in: a) developing closer, meaningful relationships with the customers to enable greater understanding of their needs, and for them to gain a greater insight into the problems being faced—a problem shared is a problem halved; b) employing the latest technology that is available to improve all areas of production; c) ensuring that the middle-level management is well versed in their roles and approaches any issues at hand in a professional manner;

d) developing closer relationships with local fabric suppliers (where possible) to shorten lead-time for fabrics developing programmes so that goods are available from stock for particularly important customers; e) manufacturers looking to upgrade their product so that it is not just perceived as “fast fashion” or a commodity item, but one that has credibility and which the buyer feels needs to be purchased from the manufacturer in question.

At the end of the day, it must be a hand-holding approach where all parties win. There are solutions that can be reached through advanced cooperation and interaction between buyers and suppliers, and for some issues we need the government to play a part.

Most importantly, we need to be realistic about the improvements in “speed”. What can be achieved in both the short- and long-terms? What investment is required both in machinery and training of staff? And ultimately, what are the benefits to be gained for the manufacturers in particular and Bangladesh as a whole? Once we have addressed these questions, we will have a clear picture and understanding of the value of speed.

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QUOTABLE Quote

DOLORES HUERTA (b. 1930)
American labour leader and civil rights activist

Organised labour is the only way to have fair distribution of wealth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Twin of Romulus	37 Sleuth Spade	18 Conference site of 1945
6 Bits of banter	41 Network practice	19 Like some situations
11 Happened	44 Full of energy	20 Curved path
12 Maui greeting	45 Swiss trill	21 Sock part
13 Office fixture	46 Lassoed	22 Storage site
15 Casual top	47 Past plump	24 Candle material
16 Chest bone		25 Freud topic
17 "Golly!"	DOWN	26 Bear lair
18 Saudi Arabia neighbour	1 Flat floater	30 Was pert with
20 Chance to swing	2 Pennsylvania port	31 Request at the deli
23 Did galley work	3 Embedded spy	33 Fan call
27 Muddy up	4 Purpose	34 Miles off
28 Carry on, as war	5 Concealed	35 Farm sight
29 Dollar divisions	6 Prattle	36 Marina spot
31 Johnson's successor	7 Quarterback	38 Shore eroder
32 Brother of Moses	Manning	39 Low bills
34 Wagon puller	8 Ditty	40 Eyeball
	9 Quaker's pronoun	42 First woman
	10 Fill completely	43 Hold up
	14 Target	

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D	R	O	P	D	E	C	O
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A	L	G	E	R	R	A	T
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