

The rich getting richer

Income inequality disrupts progress

THERE is no doubt that Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in economic growth in the last few decades. But there is also the inescapable fact that income inequality in the country has gone up sharply. It's the wealthy and the powerful who have captured most of the benefits of economic growth in recent years, as studies carried out by research organisations have repeatedly shown. And more problematic is the fact that very little is being done to reduce this gap between the rich and poor, as reflected in our ranking (148th among 157 countries) in Oxfam's Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) Index 2018.

Needless to say, unequal distribution of income is a major threat to the country's economic and social progress. The national income share of the poorest 10 percent of the household population decreased from two percent in 2010 to 1.01 percent in 2016 whereas it increased for the richest 10 percent from 35.84 percent in 2010 to 38.16 percent in 2016. Along with this, lack of equal access to education and healthcare for all, limited employment opportunities, and rising youth unemployment, among other factors, are further fuelling inequality in our society.

There is an urgent need for increased public spending in the sectors of education, healthcare and social protection. But that is not all. State and other institutions have to be rescued from the grip of the rich and a system of transparency and accountability needs to be restored. The anarchy in the financial sector—with loan defaulters escaping uncashed and taxpayers ultimately paying the price—is a good example of the immense influence wielded by the wealthy in the country. The progress we have made as a country would not be possible without the contribution of the population as a whole. So why should the rich get most of the economic pie?

10 months of unpaid wages cannot be justified

Immediately ensure payment of healthcare workers in Barishal

THERE is simply no excuse as to why healthcare workers of four City Health Centres and one Maternity Centre in Barishal have not been paid their wages for 10 months. The sit-in protest on Saturday of dozens of healthcare workers demanding clearance of their salaries from January 2018 is completely justified, and shows the bureaucratic hurdles that can jeopardise laudable public projects.

An NGO has been operating the healthcare centres—launched in Barishal under the Urban Primary Health Care Services Delivery Project of the LGRD ministry in 2006—through an agreement, the terms of which have recently expired. According to the NGO project manager, an invoice for the salaries of January to March had been submitted to the LGRD ministry, but is yet to be approved. On the other hand, an official supervising the health centres has told this newspaper that the LGRD ministry has decided “on principle” to launch a second phase of the project for a further 10 years. And ultimately, the worst affected from this bureaucratic limbo are the healthcare workers, unpaid for almost a year!

The Barishal City Corporation (BCC), which oversees the overall project, the NGO operating the project, and the LGRD ministry have all failed these healthcare workers. The entirety of the problem—from the delay in approving the invoice to extension of the project—could have been avoided, if these bodies had played their part accountably and professionally. The unpaid wages must be cleared immediately. Furthermore, the demands of the workers (such as transferring the project from the LGRD to the health ministry) needs to be given serious thought. Whatever may be the final decision on how best to run these centres, a service as important as primary healthcare delivery, and the people who provide that service, cannot be shown such apathy that they have to finally stage sit-ins to demand their rightful salary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dialogue must be successful for future stability

Under the current political atmosphere, dialogue between the two major political alliances—one led by the ruling Awami League and the other by the main opposition party BNP—is a must for ensuring political stability in the country ahead of the national election.

If the demands of the opposition alliance are not met through holding talks before the election schedule is announced and if both sides are not ready to compromise, there is a chance of unsavory incidents before and during the elections. Our past experiences in regard to this has not been very good.

So both the alliances must come to a consensus regarding the nature of the election time government and the role of the election commission. We hope to see positive outcomes from the dialogues. Both parties should remember that it is not only their interest that is at stake, but the people have a lot riding on how the next elections are conducted, as well as the state of democracy in our country.

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Trivialisation of the dialogue is not the way to go

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

As the much discussed “dialogue” between the prime minister and the 14-party alliance members on the one side and the opposition parties is proceeding, many are pondering whether the political situation has changed. The question as to whether the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the election has been reduced is still very much in the mind of Bangladeshis and observers of Bangladeshi politics. The claim that the tense situation has eased has merit, but unless signs of concrete change in the political environment is palpable, the situation may quickly descend to a confrontational mode.

Dialogue is neither a zero-sum game nor can there be a victor and a vanquished, at least in one meeting; but unless a middle ground is reached, and both parties can claim to have achieved something it will be considered a futile exercise and a tactic for buying time by the government.

The dialogue, which began as a response to a letter of Dr Kamal Hossain, the leader of the newly founded Jatiya Oikyafront, to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, by now has involved quite a few alliances and parties. This reflects a 180 degree turn of the ruling party on the question of having any dialogue with the opposition. The PM deserves appreciation for a prompt and decisive move. As of now, even her detractors acknowledge that it was quite an astute strategic move, both in terms of the speed of her response and the timing. As the saying goes, one day is a long time in politics, we are already days away from that dramatic moment; thus, the initial sense of relief is way behind us. It is time to explore whether a new path has been paved to move forward.

What prompted the PM to shift her position—A desire to address the concerns of the opposition? Find an opportunity to be flexible without being perceived to be forced into it? To provide an impression to her detractors and the international community that the government has negotiated with everyone to make the forthcoming election inclusive? To stop the momentum of the Oikyafront? Demonstrate that the opposition are too divided? Create a fissure among the possible broad platform of opposition? We may not know for sure the answers to these questions, but the actions in the coming days will provide some clues.

It was not surprising that Jatiya

Oikyafront's letter was followed by many other alliances, including the Jukta Front led by former President Badrudozza Chowdhury. The ruling party's eagerness to bring as many parties to the table as possible can be viewed as a desire to not leave anyone behind. It is indeed good to have many voices included in the discussion on important issues such as the election. However, it has also added some strangeness to the entire process. For example, at the time of writing this article, a “dialogue” was scheduled with the JP led by the Prime Minister's Special Envoy HM Ershad which has three members in the cabinet. Prior to the dialogue, Ershad made it clear that he has no demand to place but wants to discuss seat sharing with the PM: “We will just ask the Prime Minister for the number of seats that Jatiya Party would be provided in the general election.” As if this was not ironic enough, the

talks with the Front. Both the government and the Front leaders have remained steadfast on their positions. But anyone familiar with any negotiations understand that the Front leaders do not expect all their demands to be met by the government—they seem to be prepared to find a middle ground. The government, on the other hand, is yet to indicate its willingness to make compromises. The PM has repeatedly asked to have trust on her about free and fair elections, but if such assurance was enough, a dialogue wouldn't have been necessary. It is the trust deficit that has caused the situation. The PM's assurance that the opposition will not be hindered in holding public meetings is portrayed by some as a concession, but shouldn't it be considered a reaffirmation of fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution? Besides, is allowing the Front or other alliances/parties to hold

with the Jatiya Oikyafront, there seems to be a deliberate push to make it a media spectacle, thanks to the food-obsessed journalists of various pro-government television channels, newspapers and web portals. For them, the food menu of the meeting was more enticing than the potential agenda of the discussion with larger implications. Social media was inundated with the “news” of the delicacies served and the catering services, which would have made one drool unless one could understand the reason why the country suddenly became a connoisseur of food and health-conscious. Perhaps this was because clickbait journalism has a penchant for salaciousness, and in its absence, it settled for deliciousness. This, of course, tells us about the state of journalism as does the lack of the balanced coverage of the contents of the deliberations of both parties. But these



Leaders of the 14-party alliance, right, and the Jatiya Oikyafront, left, in talks at the Gono Bhaban.

PHOTO: PID

meeting of the 14-party alliance with the PM held on Sunday has been reported in the press as part of the ongoing “dialogue”.

There has been widespread scepticism about the efficacy of the dialogue, because no dialogue in the history of Bangladesh, whether initiated by the parties or prodded by foreigners, ever succeeded. Yet there were many, including me, who expressed cautious optimism hoping that history will not be destiny. The attendance of the PM as the leader of the government side was unprecedented and provided the opportunity for decisions to be made instantaneously, if willing. Unfortunately, but for understandable reasons, the scepticism has not diminished even after the first round of

public meetings enough indication of an environment conducive to freedom of expression as delineated in the Constitution and a requirement for a free, fair election? As for the PM's effort to divert other demands to constitutional bodies such as courts on the issue of Khaleda Zia's trial or deferment of the announcement of election schedule to the Election Commission are nothing different from her previous positions. Despite assurances from the PM to the contrary, the so-called “ghost cases” are being filed, and at least 184 opposition activists were arrested on the day of the dialogue.

These concerns notwithstanding, some are wondering whether the entire dialogue episode is now being turned into a media spectacle. As soon as a specific date was set for the dialogue

also reflect an effort to trivialise the dialogue altogether.

Despite such not-so-encouraging developments to date, there will be a second meeting between the Front leaders and the government on Wednesday at the request of the Front. It is expected that the Front will unveil its proposal for the election-time government. The Oikyafront has also requested the Election Commission to defer the announcement of the polls schedule. It is imperative that the EC allows the current efforts to continue in a positive direction. This will demonstrate whether there are chances of paving the way forward.

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After the dialogue, now what?

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



NAZMUL AHASAN

It was unsurprising that the much-hyped dialogue between the ruling and opposition alliances didn't yield notable signs of progress. To expect a three-hour meeting to sort out longstanding differences would be naive. It would also be impractical to expect the ruling party, Awami League, to relinquish so many of its bargaining chips so quickly. In fact, far from letting go of any bargaining counter at all, the governing party may very well be buying time in the guise of talks, keeping the Oikyafront busy until the election schedule is announced. Also, the AL might have agreed to a dialogue just to avoid being seen as the one closing the door on the talks.

Nevertheless, the dialogue did break the ice. And, the fact that they agreed to sit for a second round of talks, slated to be held tomorrow, highlights both sides' willingness to devise a compromise.

To some in the BNP, the largest stakeholder of the opposition alliance

the Oikyafront, the initial dialogue resulted in almost next to nothing and it stalled the Oikyafront's momentum. Their scepticism is well grounded.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's decision to accept the offer of talks coincided with Khaleda Zia being sentenced to seven years in prison in a second graft case. The next day saw her sentence in the first case increased to 10 years.

And, the day after, a High Court

election. The Oikyafront has already decided to hold a rally in Dhaka on November 6, putting the government's promise to the test.

BNP may be particularly unhappy about the fact that the issue of Khaleda Zia and Tareque Rahman is highly unlikely to be resolved. But if it sets the bar of expectation that high, it would end up accomplishing nothing. It should focus on major election-related demands such as the dissolution of the



Everything is possible if talks are held with an open mind, Gono Forum President Dr Kamal Hossain, also a senior leader of Jatiya Oikyafront, says on November 2, 2018.

PHOTO: STAR/PALASH KHAN

bench ordered the Election Commission (EC) not to accept BNP's amended constitution, putting the leadership of Khaleda Zia and Tareque Rahman in jeopardy, at least in theory. Moreover, the fact that the ruling party expanded the periphery of the dialogue to other smaller parties certainly undercut its significance.

While Kamal Hossain, the Oikyafront chief, and Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the BNP secretary general, remained unsatisfied, they did not state that it was an utter failure. Because it wasn't. The PM agreed to reconsider “political cases” against grassroots opposition activists and allow the opposition parties to hold rallies without hindrance in the run-up to the

Jatiyo Sangsad and the government before the election, deployment of the Army with magistracy power and handing over the charge of law enforcement agencies to the election commission.

The opposition alliance can challenge the Awami League's insistence over the issue of constitutionality. Kamal Hossain, at the initial dialogue, invoked AL's own demands when it was in the opposition to argue that the fundamental requirements, to hold a free and fair election, remained the same. “It's not unknown to you that the efforts to amend the constitution are also within the periphery of the constitution,” he said to the prime

minister.

Furthermore, Kamal Hossain, as well as other BNP leaders, believe that there are multiple ways to accommodate Oikyafront's demands within the existing constitutional framework. Khondker Mahbub Hossain, a BNP vice chairman, has given more hints in this regard. “Despite the fact that BNP has no member in the parliament, its representatives can be accommodated in the interim poll-time cabinet because the constitution allows technocrats in such cases,” he explained in a recent programme. “The article 123 of the constitution says the parliament elections can be held in two ways. It can take place 90 days prior to the day parliament expires. So, if you (the prime minister) arrange the election after the parliament's expiration, both the sides can save face.”

BNP's legal point man Moudud Ahmed has recently sat with independent legal experts such as Shahdeen Malik and Professor Asif Nazrul. “If there is political goodwill, there are at least 10 different provisions in the constitution for holding an election after dissolving the parliament,” Shahdeen Malik told reporters after the meeting. “We believe that a free, fair and participatory election within the constitutional and legal framework is possible. We are discussing to find this way.”

In the first round of talks, the Oikyafront was cautious, did not push the AL too far, and remained calm in the face of disparaging attacks from a Jasad leader. BNP also wisely refrained from resorting to street agitation even when its leader was jailed and given prison sentence.

The fact that the Oikyafront has gotten its message—that the constitution is no barrier—across to both the ruling party and the public is its biggest accomplishment. And, in the next round, it will further push forward with its own formula and theories.

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