

Cleanse the flagship organisations

Level of corruption in Biman and CAAB shocking

IT was no secret that these two premier public corporations do not have the best of track records insofar as transparency, honesty and straight dealings are concerned. But what the findings of an ACC inquiry into the workings of Biman and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) have revealed, as reported in this paper on Monday, defy one's imagination as well as cause us deep anxiety. While the level of corruption and its pervasiveness are astounding, what is equally worrisome is the fact that these two organisations are directly concerned with the safety of people's lives. Corruption and shady deals, poor level of maintenance or obsolescent aircrafts can cost lives. And these two organisations are the windows of the foreigners to our country. No wonder Biman is losing to other airlines which were at best mediocre not in the very distant past. And no wonder that foreign airlines shun our airports.

It is not the first time that we have been presented with damning enquiry reports on these two "siblings" and appropriate recommendations too, but no palpable action has been taken to save these two from the plague. In fact, things have gotten worse. The quantum decline of the national flag carrier speaks of that.

Time has come to take stringent measures against the powerful coterie inside Biman and CAAB who continue to get away with their misdeeds. Top brasses in these two organisations must answer for the level of malpractice in their respective organisation because the buck stops with them. While ignorance about the matter makes one guilty of incompetence, not taking action against dishonest people makes one complicit in the crime. The recommendations of the ACC as well as of the previous committees should be implemented quickly including streamlining the procurement procedures, forming a standing committee of experts for procurement and strong independent oversight bodies to constantly scrutinise these two organisations.

Doesn't labour law apply to garment factories?

Workers suspended without due procedures

AS this daily reported yesterday, 23 workers of a garment factory in Ashulia were suspended on charges of vandalism and theft, which the workers claim are false. They had also been blacklisted so that they do not get jobs in other factories in the area. This is outrageous.

A large number of garment workers lost their jobs because they had demanded a new wage board with a minimum monthly pay of Tk 16,000 in recent months. According to our report, about 400 workers lost their jobs in December and January in eight garment units of Ashulia. And as per the IndustryALL Bangladesh Council, a national coordinating body of IndustryALL Global Union, which works to ensure better working environment and trade union rights, more than 11,600 workers in over 100 factories lost their jobs across the country following the recent wave of protests. The workers of this particular factory in Ashulia have alleged that those who were suspended were active in trade union activities, advocating for their rights.

We do not understand how an employer can blacklist his or her workers when the law does not allow this. Also, if a worker must be punished for any alleged unlawful activity, there is a process that must be followed. According to Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, an employer can only take disciplinary action against a worker if the allegation is proven to be true. And to investigate the allegations, a probe committee with equal representation from workers and employers should be formed. But before doing all this, the owner has to issue a show-cause notice and the workers should get seven days to respond to it. Apparently, none of these steps have been followed by this factory owner. Also, blacklisting workers for being vocal about trade union activities and rights issues is totally unacceptable. The factories cannot penalise their workers for raising their rightful demands. They should give the workers a chance to defend themselves should any allegations arise. The BGMEA should also address this issue giving it due importance.

Student movements and the culture of dissent



ZOBABIDA NASREEN

AFTER a long and agonising wait, we are finally going to witness the election of Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) on March 11. With all major student organisations participating, the prospect of restoring students' democratic rights at the country's premier public university is certainly a promising one. However, it is worrying that no visible efforts have been made to overcome students' concerns about possible election manipulation and their fear that they could be barred from casting ballots.

It was a great failure of political leaders that the restoration of democracy in 1991 in a student-dominated uprising coincided with the destruction of democracy in educational institutions. As a bastion of oppositional activism and progressive politics, Ducusu has always been a thorn in the side of the establishment. Successive administrations systematically deferred holding of its election with tacit approval of successive governments. The ruling parties feared that an elected students' union might pose a political challenge to their rule, while the university administration also found the situation beneficial if the environment of the campus were to remain unchanged. It allowed the student wings of the ruling parties to establish their overwhelming dominance and control on the campus and in the halls of residence.

Despite a constant public demand for holding Ducusu election over the past 28 years, the authorities paid no heed and managed to postpone it. Why this change of heart now? Does it indicate that we are genuinely moving towards restoring the former glory of Ducusu as an institution that reflects the aspirations of the students?

The ruling party has learned the hard way that student agitations cannot be silenced through mere physical dominance and control. This tactic is no longer as effective as it used to be. The two recent student movements, one seeking reformation of public job reservations and the other seeking road safety, emerged not only in the heart of the capital city but also all over the country despite the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), being in full control of the campuses. The sheer force of the movements made BCL seem somewhat irrelevant.

The political will to allow for the Ducusu election marks a shift from the strategy of keeping control by other means. It is obviously healthier for a democracy when those in power drive students towards engaging in electoral activities. But interventions by ministers and ruling party leaders and involvement of agencies even in choosing candidates, as revealed by BCL leaders (*Prothom Alo*,

February 23, 2019), are ominous signs.

It may seem odd that a students' union election is generating so much attention and chatter. Such an election in foreign countries usually fails to attract even its own union members, let alone the whole nation. This is perhaps the case in our country because of the role played by student movements in our national life. Contrary to the experiences of most other countries, our students, historically, took upon their shoulders the burden of representing the whole society. They spearheaded some of the most significant events in our history—the language movement, 11-point movement, mass uprising of 1969—and played a crucial role ahead of the Liberation War. Even in post-independence Bangladesh, students continued to play a pivotal role in all major democratic movements.

Since its beginning, student activism

present day; it was their organic ties to the social classes that determined their political actions.

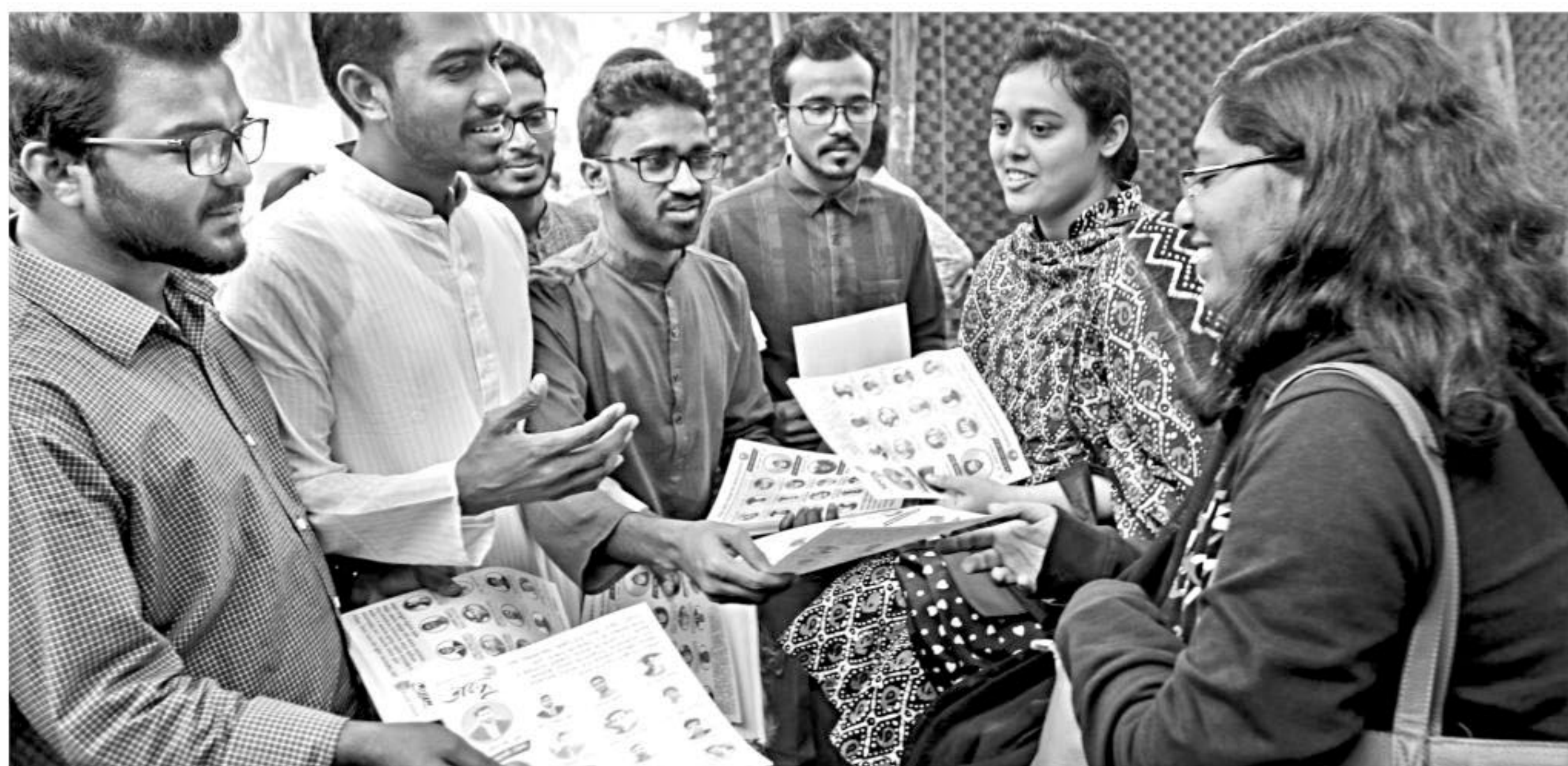
Student movements have no parallel in our history in terms of successfully bringing about changes on a national level. It is not only because of Dhaka University's strategic location, but also due to the contagious nature of student movements. The historic events of 1952, 1962, 1966, 1969, 1990, 2008, or 2013 were all intimately connected to student mobilisations. They were generational protests—students all over the country resisted the authorities. They were national protests—the whole nation stood behind them. They were able to bring together all types of people of diverse backgrounds and welded them together as one to fight against the ruling power.

In our political system, the power held and exercised by the state, from time to

A student regime loyal to the ruling party would not stand in their way of taking action.

Instead, unexpected things might happen if students feel unrepresented or abandoned. Outraged students in action, occupying the universities or streets, cannot be tamed by the police. So it might be a losing strategy for the ruling party if its friends and supporters were to stand in the way of their own community.

The ruling party would do better if it realised that organised liberal, secular student activism does not usually provide a strong challenge to them. Student organisations are no political party, and student movements do not seek state power. Students can begin struggles and set things in motion, they can reset anomalies and aberrations that grow within our political system, but their key limitation is that they cannot control the



Candidates from Bangladesh Sadharan Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, the platform that spearheaded the quota reform movement, campaign for the Ducusu polls on DU campus.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

did not confine itself to merely generating collective power, creating a democratic campus, or negotiating improvements to the academic environment; it served as a force of mass movements. As Ranesh Dasgupta observed, since Partition in 1947, especially after the official objective to achieve universal primary education was set, students started to represent a real organic social structure, and they thus came to the forefront of the nationalist struggle. Emphasising the class composition of early student movements, Dasgupta went as far as to claim that the class struggle of the day was also manifested through student mobilisations as they were from various classes that were seeking a restructuring of the existing social order. The students were speaking for the classes their parents belonged to. It is not that they were less aspirational than those of the

time, is held in check by the power of student movements. Whenever the ruling regime grew despotic, students emerged as the counter-balance to restrain the rising authoritarian power. Whenever the rule of repressive mechanisms became supreme, students were eventually able to bring back some sort of sanity in the system. At its core, student movements were often the last guards of the national order.

Therefore, if the ruling power thinks that legitimising a strong grip over the campus through elections will ensure that they would not need to worry about student movements anymore, it is perhaps gravely mistaken. If we are to learn anything from student-dominated mass movements, the first lesson would be that these movements are spontaneous, non-hierarchical, with no leadership or organised structure to lead or contain them. An explosive student movement never required any pre-existing structure.

wider national politics. Showing restraint and letting students decide the outcome of the election in a fair play would surely do more good than harm.

The core values that have dominated student activism in Bangladesh are liberal, pluralistic, inclusive and secular. Any coordinated attempt to silence dissenting and alternative voices on the campus would only put up more barriers to the development of a liberal, secular and inclusive society.

Ducusu is seen as a model to be followed by other universities. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the authorities ensure an election that is not marred by any irregularities, and that the students are not afraid to speak their mind and their aspirations are reflected in the election.

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UMUGANDA IN RWANDA

A powerful idea that can inspire community-driven development in Bangladesh



TANJIL SOWGAT

I went to Rwanda as part of the Sustainable Healthy and Learning City (SHLC) project, a consortium, to conduct research and explore global challenges to create sustainable and healthy cities in developing countries. When I was travelling to Rwanda, I was expecting to meet with many uncertainties and challenges given that it's a country still struggling to recover from the wounds of war and genocide.

But when I arrived, I was astonished to see how clean and green Rwanda's capital Kigali is. People there follow traffic rules and diligently obey traffic signs. While visiting some neighbourhoods, I saw well-planned residential areas that adhered to urban design guidelines. Among many pleasant surprises, I was especially happy to discover "Umuganda", an outstanding community initiative that I believe can set an example for the whole world. I was accompanied by more than 32 leading academics from seven participating countries including the United Kingdom, Philippines, India, China, Tanzania, South Africa, and Bangladesh. All the participants agreed that what Rwanda was doing through "Umuganda" could be emulated by the rest of the world.

Umuganda is a simple yet powerful idea; it's a collaboration between members of a community with an aim to contribute to the development of the neighbourhood. They come together every last Saturday of the month. The community combines their efforts to clean roads, build infrastructure, mend roads, and more. They even close their shops and stop doing other activities for at least three hours (starting from 7am) so that they can devote time when working with other members of the community. We realised the seriousness

and commitment of the government when we were stopped several times on our way to a community activity that we participated in. The police stopped us three times and were not convinced until we showed them proof that we had special permission from the city mayor.

We were once again pleasantly surprised when we arrived in a neighbourhood and became a part of their community work. That day, people gathered to repair a road that was heavily damaged by recent rain. Tracks brought soil from a nearby site to make the road

together with a common purpose to achieve an outcome." It became official in 1974 although the practice began right after the independence of the country in 1962. The initiative in its current extent and form has been there since 1998 as part of an effort to rebuild the country after the ravage that followed the genocide of the Tutsi in the 90s. Although initially the government struggled to make this activity popular, it was gradually accepted and welcomed when people saw the results that Umuganda could bring. Because of its



A Umuganda meeting to discuss future community activities.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

usable for vehicles. The soil brought was volunteered by a neighbour who had a construction site which he dug and had the soil left over as a result. We were welcomed by the community and had a chance to work with them. During the community work, locals shared their stories of success of joint collaboration in many similar activities. They were happy that they were able to raise funds, however small, and no more relied on government funds.

When we joined the post-work meeting along with the community, they explained that "Umuganda" meant "coming

success in controlling erosion and building primary schools, administrative offices and health centres, the initiative began getting attention and praise. The success encouraged voluntary participation of the people and community leaders.

The activity is managed by selected committees which are responsible for organising, supervising, evaluating and reporting the work done and, more importantly, motivating people. Statistics reveal that Umuganda's contribution to the country's development since 2007 is estimated at more than USD 60 million.

The results are visible all around the country, especially in Kigali, the capital city.

We visited a different neighbourhood as part of the project and noticed that the cities are very clean and found very little garbage on the streets. When talking to people, we were convinced that they took pride to be a part of this community-driven initiative. The self-dependency of the community was clearly recognised in the monetary participation of the community which ensured that neighbourhood watch and a system of solid waste collection could be provided.

The success of Umuganda is rooted in the commitment of the community—something that can easily be emulated in Bangladesh. Our culture and tradition of community bonding in rural areas especially can be utilised effectively in development programmes through activities such as Umuganda. As a result, labour costs and the amount of money being diverted to corruption would go down since the initiative would be participated in and financed by direct beneficiaries. In the face of rapid urbanisation and limited tax recovery by the government, people's pro-active involvement in community work may highly benefit our country by creating better and sustainable neighbourhoods in cities and villages. This would give the community a sense of ownership and belonging. Be it traffic management, keeping our cities clean, or preventing the loss of greenery in neighbourhoods, community action can be very effective in resolving many issues.

Africa gave me hope. If Rwanda can do this, why can't we? We have more people in our cities, we have strong community bonding, and we have achieved significant progress over the last few decades. With initiatives like Umuganda, we will be able to play our part in community development and be proud of ourselves.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Standardising gas cylinders

Although gas cylinders are not yet standardised, they are being carried by vehicles and used all across the country. The size and measure of the steel as well as other materials used to make a cylinder need to be standardised. Also, the list of the manufacturers should be published in newspapers and an authorised government body should be given the responsibility to check if they are okay to be used. It was alleged that the Chawkbazar fire originated from a gas cylinder explosion. We should be careful about using cylinders so that any such accident doesn't ever occur.

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