

Main reasons why the government's recovery effort has fallen short



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

BANGLADESH is no stranger to disaster management. Since independence it has dealt with numerous natural disasters as well as political unrest and overhauls. Despite these past experiences, the Covid-19 pandemic was something that it couldn't have prepared for—especially due to its global nature and scope—even though it can be argued that having a well-funded and better managed healthcare sector could have made a big difference.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh is no stranger to corruption either, particularly during times of emergencies. In the first week of April, at the height of the pandemic, we saw a social media storm erupting over allegations of substandard masks being supplied to several state-run hospitals instead of N95 masks. Senior health ministry officials were heavily criticised for terming this a "mistake" without conducting proper investigations. Later on, a probe committee was formed as per the prime minister's order, which found, according to a report submitted by the committee on April 29, that the supplier JMI Hospital Requisite Manufacturing Ltd had delivered research-stage N95 labelled masks instead of the general mask demanded by the Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD)—and that the masks were made from unauthorised imported material.

This was not a one off case of corruption concerning the healthcare sector that we've seen since the pandemic began. Nor has such corruption been restricted to the healthcare sector.

According to a Transparency International Bangladesh survey, the pandemic has not only exposed the widespread corruption in the healthcare sector, but has created new opportunities for corruption in the country. In the case of just one government relief

programme, each affected family who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the system had to pay an average bribe of Tk 220 to get cash assistance of Tk 2,500, according to its findings. Moreover, over 12 percent of beneficiaries for government cash assistance had been victims of irregularities and corruption, while 10 percent of Open Market Sales (OMS) card holders faced the same. Also in the list of beneficiaries, the names of around 3,000 government employees and 7,000 pensioners were found and around 300,000 names had been included more than once.

One of the government's first response to the economic hardship, especially for low income households, was to provide subsidised food under the OMS social security programme. On April 13, 2020, UCA news reported that law enforcers had arrested 29 people, mostly leaders of the ruling party and its associate organisations and officials of the Union Council, for allegedly stealing



Hungry poor wait for food in a neighbourhood of Kamalapur, Dhaka. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

4,167 sacks full of rice. Plenty of similar reports—and allegations of government crackdown on the press following their publication—have come out since the pandemic began.

All these misuses have not only hampered the government's effort to provide relief to the poor, but have protracted their misery. According to Selim Raihan, Executive Director of South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, "the crisis has forced poor-households to sacrifice prospects of better health, better education and a better life" in order to survive. The consequences of these trade-offs will be long-term and intergenerational. But more effective government support could have minimised these effects, leading to faster recovery.

On the business side of things, the disbursement of funds to small and medium enterprises has also been mired with inefficiencies. Till October 31, only 31.73 percent of the stimulus packages slated for them had been used, while 70.87 percent had been successfully given to big

industries. Most of the small, cottage and small enterprises (CMSME) in the country have not been able to benefit from the stimulus package because of cumbersome and drawn-out banking procedures that required mortgage and collateral. However, it is particularly the enterprises that couldn't afford the required collateral that most needed urgent government assistance. Moreover, a large number of CMSMEs were unable to provide documents to banks, such as tax identification number certificate and trade licence, which is why the government should have used microfinance institution to disburse the loans to them, according to Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist at the World Bank.

The result of everything that has happened is that businesses are currently experiencing an uneven recovery, where larger firms are bouncing back strongly, while the smaller ones are still struggling. According to a Daily Star report, "large industrial and service sectors have made as much as 80-90 percent recovery compared to the pre-pandemic

level", whereas small and medium enterprises have recovered only 30-40 percent. And this is leading to a K-shaped recovery, rather than the V-shaped recovery that was hoped for.

The way the government stimulus packages have been designed and distributed has also affected employment. According to a joint Centre for Policy Dialogue and Oxfam study titled, "Employment Implications of Stimulus Packages: Challenges for Recovery", the government's stimulus packages to fight the economic fallout of Covid-19 have reached just 8 percent of total employment of the country, whereas it could have reached 12 percent had they been fully implemented.

According to one senior research fellow of CPD, the "stimulus packages in Bangladesh had only limited employment impact", and it was "much lower compared to most other countries in the region". The stimulus package offered for the agriculture sector reached 2.7 lakh people against a probable target of restoring 9.6 lakh jobs. The stimulus package for SMEs reached only 1.3 lakh people employed in the sector, instead of a possible 4.4 lakh. And one of the main reasons for this was that these packages were not designed to give employers the incentive to sustain employment, which was clearly a big strategic mistake on the government's part.

In order to correct some of these mistakes, the focus of the debate on recovery has to shift from the single-minded pursuit of growth only, to how that recovery and growth can be achieved through greater inclusivity. Of all the government packages, the ones meant for the poorer sections of society or smaller businesses, have had the greatest design flaws, which shows the lack of comparative importance given to these sections.

But the resultant recovery that would come from this will be unsustainable and short lived. Hence, the government needs to include experts and other stakeholders in the recovery discussion and in its planning process, so that its own blind spots get identified and are addressed.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Narendra Modi's Potemkin Democracy



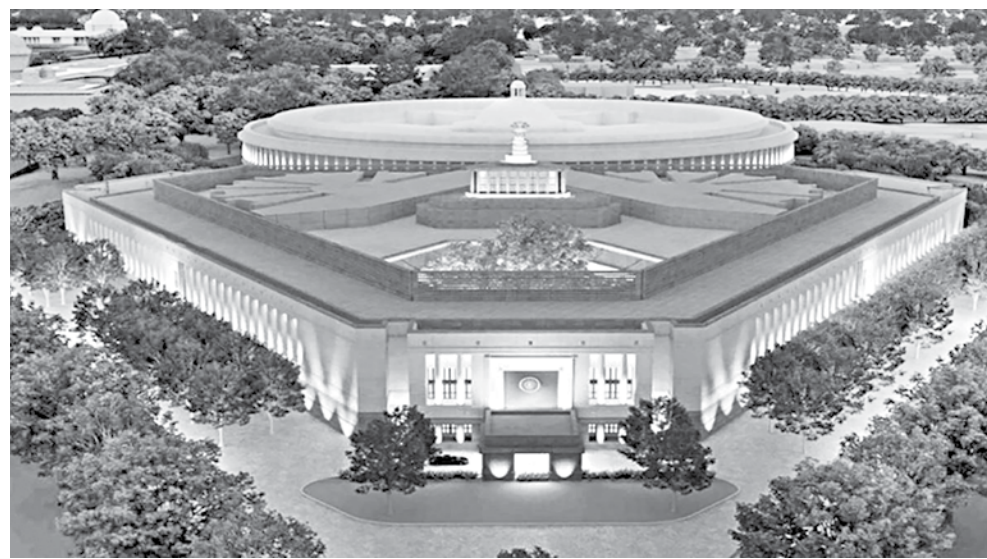
SHASHI THAROOR

INDIAN legislators woke up in the new year to two realisations. First, the annual winter session of parliament, from which they should just have been emerging, had not taken place at all. And, second, New Delhi's magnificent parliament complex,

a tourist attraction since it was built in 1927, had been turned into a construction site.

These two facts sum up the reality of Indian democracy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). On one hand, the government has shrugged off the very concept of accountability to the people's representatives, the cornerstone of parliamentary democracy. On the other hand, Modi, an increasingly larger-than-life figure whose flowing beard and other-worldly air make him resemble the "Raj Rishis" or emperor-sages of ancient days, is doing all he can to transform the republic physically as well as politically. A new, grander parliament building is to arise alongside the old one, as part of his determination to leave his visible mark on the national capital.

Modi's "edifice complex" includes plans to construct an array of new government buildings alongside New Delhi's Central Vista, the grand sweep of which leads past parliament to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the presidential palace. A new residential-cum-office complex for the vice president and the prime minister are also part of the plans. Environmentalists have obtained a stay on construction from the Supreme Court, but did not challenge the ground-breaking ceremony for the new parliament building to



The new building will have an area of 64,500 square metres and is being built at an estimated cost of Rs 971 crore.

PHOTO: PTI

proceed.

Parliament itself barely met in 2020. The official reason, of course, was the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the shortening of the year's first two sessions and the cancellation of the third.

Parliament sat for only 23 days in the budget session that began the legislative year, before being adjourned in March because of the pandemic. The government then showed no desire to convene the monsoon session, which normally starts in late June or mid-July and continues until August. It might happily have ruled by decree were it not for the constitutional requirement that parliament convene within six months of the end of the previous session.

The monsoon session was belatedly called on September 14 to meet for just 18 days

with no weekend breaks. But it was abruptly adjourned after 10 days, again because of the virus. And the winter session, which should normally have started in mid-November and continued until Christmas (on some occasions, it has even extended through the holiday session) simply never happened.

There is no doubt about the current dangers of 750 MPs and hundreds of officials and journalists crowding into the parliament complex. Three ministers, two dozen MPs, and several parliamentary officials tested positive for the coronavirus during the monsoon session; three MPs and a minister of state died after contracting Covid-19. But it seems absurd that a country claiming to be a world leader in information technology finds itself unable to connect its MPs virtually through videoconferencing, as so many other

national parliaments have done.

A national crisis is precisely the time when parliament should be meeting to discuss its cause, in this case the pandemic and how policymakers are managing it. But that appears to be exactly what the government wants to avoid. As the truncated monsoon session showed, it sees the legislature as a mere rubber stamp for decisions it has already taken. Key legislation—including hugely controversial labour and farm bills—was pushed through both houses without significant debate.

The government imposed its own priorities, ensuring that the presiding officers took up its bills (mainly those ratifying previously issued executive decrees) while deferring debate on the issues that opposition parties wanted to raise. These included the border standoff with China, during which 20 Indian soldiers were killed in June, a controversial draft Environment Impact Assessment, the government's New Education Policy, and financial and tax compensation to state governments.

Under the previous Congress-led government from 2009-14, 71 percent of all bills were first scrutinised in parliamentary standing committees. Under the BJP government, that rate has decreased to 25 percent, and since Modi's re-election 20 months ago, not a single bill has benefited from such scrutiny. This sorry record includes the three farm laws whose passage sparked major protests, with angry farmers besieging the capital for several weeks in late 2020.

The protests again proved the utility of thorough legislative consideration before bills are passed. But the government seems to believe that its electoral mandate is all the approval it needs, with parliamentary examination and debate being a mere formality.

Parliamentary committees have struggled to meet in recent months even after the easing of the initial draconian lockdown, because travel restrictions and quarantine rules in MPs' home states have made it difficult to assemble a quorum. Pleas by committee chairs, including me, to connect some members virtually by secure videoconference have been rejected on confidentiality grounds.

The irony of conducting a ground-breaking ceremony for a new parliament building during the pandemic, while suspending the work that should have been taking place in the old one, was lost on the government. Even the confidentiality excuse does not apply to regular parliamentary sessions, which, unlike committee meetings, are televised. The inescapable conclusion is that the government would rather dispense with the inconvenience of being accountable to the legislature.

Such tendencies were apparent even in the shortened monsoon session, when parliament dispensed with Question Hour, the one time when MPs can demand unscripted answers from ministers. I have previously noted the Modi government's propensity to sidestep debate on important issues and use its majority to reduce parliament to a noticeboard for its decisions. This is an administration that does not like to be questioned.

India will eventually have a new building to showcase its democracy. Sadly, under Modi and the BJP, the spirit of deliberation and debate that animated the country's old parliament will be left there.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is an MP for the Indian National Congress. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

QUOTABLE Quote

ALBERT SCHWEITZER
(1875-1965)
Alsatian-German theologian and physician.

Until he extends his circle of compassion to include all living things, man will not himself find peace.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Letter after epsilon
- 5 Highprotein grain
- 11 Spoken
- 12 Zombies
- 13 Storybook monster
- 14 Edmonton team
- 15 Heir, at times
- 16 Maze runners
- 17 Furious
- 19 Horse healer
- 22 Stopwatch button
- 24 Emergency light
- 26 Dull pain
- 27 Diva's piece
- 28 Burglar's crime
- 30 Discards
- 31 Lawn material
- 32 Alpine girl of story
- 34 Chinese secret society
- 35 Relaxing retreat
- 38 "Casablanca" star
- 41 Lash
- 42 Online icon
- 43 Lend a hand
- 44 The Milky Way, e.g.
- 45 Lofty pems

DOWN

- 1 Menageries
- 2 Therefore
- 3 Sullied
- 4 Pub brew
- 5 Ring tossed at a peg
- 6 Children's welfare org.
- 7 Not active
- 8 Originally called
- 9 Galley item
- 10 Spots
- 16 Yoga need
- 18 Sailing hazard
- 19 Like some floors
- 20 Composer Satie
- 21 Pekoe and oolong
- 22 "Doggone!"
- 23 Cave sound
- 25 Praise
- 29 Insect section
- 30 Lively dance
- 33 Contest form
- 34 "Toodleoo!"
- 36 Heap
- 37 Phone downloads
- 38 Do a checkout job
- 39 Future embryos
- 40 Lass
- 41 Question of identity

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BEETLE BAILEY

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

GRAY, AIMAT, GROSS, SPOKESMODEL, PERSTYARA, SNAPTO, DIED, SLEEK, ENOS, BEEP, HAIRS, ONLY, OSMOND, SAM, FLY, MOE, SMOKEEATERS, MEERIE, SAREK, SLEDS, PODS

BY MORT WALKER

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

BABY BLUES

EXERCISE 7: Describe what you think it will be like to be old someday. Include a personal interview and photograph of a grandparent or other senior citizen you know.

SO, WHAT'S IT LIKE? I'M NOT EVEN MIDDLE-AGED!!