

Students' concerns should be addressed

Why do demonstrations have to spill over into the roads every time?

WE sympathise with the students of the seven DU-affiliated colleges who have been victims of a number of uncertainties, first due to the chaos caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and now due to the unplanned and unwise decision making of the authorities. The pandemic has thrown a wrench into the workings of all academic activities and students have already suffered enough for an entire year. The fact that the authorities have continued to make decisions that the students are in disagreement with after such a difficult year is greatly disappointing.

The pandemic has caused huge delays and session jams, which in turn have created major and varying types of problems for students. On top of that, the authorities prematurely announced that university activities would resume on May 24 and student dormitories at those universities would reopen on May 17—meaning that pre-scheduled and ongoing exams at these colleges would get postponed. Following the announcement, students of the colleges under Dhaka University staged demonstrations for two days demanding the authorities hold their ongoing and previously announced exams and reopen their educational institutions and dormitories.

While we support the students' right to protest against such ill-advised decision making, we cannot approve the blocking of roads by some protesters, which led to huge sufferings for commuters at different locations of Dhaka. But at the same time, we must also condemn this rigid habit on the part of the authorities to make decisions willy-nilly and force students to occupy roads before finally paying attention to their concerns and giving them a fair hearing. This trend can also be linked to other ongoing protests over decisions affecting the students of other universities and colleges.

We call on the authorities to immediately reassure students that whatever final decision is taken will be based on better understanding of the situation and the concerns of students, so that the demonstrations do not continue to spill over into the roads causing traffic jams throughout the capital—and so that the demonstrations end without any violence. Having done that, the authorities must remain sincere to that pledge and whatever decisions are taken must take into consideration the best interests of students and their future.

Over 2.5 million vaccinated

While we celebrate this milestone, we must still be careful as we go forward

AS the nationwide vaccination campaign progresses, the latest numbers suggest that over 2.5 million people have been vaccinated against Covid-19 in Bangladesh over the course of 15 days. This is no small feat for our country, and the government and all involved authorities must be congratulated for the speedy and efficient procurement and rollout of vaccines. This is even more impressive when you compare the data to our neighbouring countries—while Pakistan has distributed only 0.03 doses of the vaccine per 100 of the population and India is at 0.87 doses per 100 people, Bangladesh has the highest rate of inoculation in the region, with 1.53 doses per 100 of the population.

However, we must also remember that given our large population, there is still a long way to go. So far, only around 1.95 percent of the targeted 130 million have been vaccinated. As we go forward, we must ensure that the vaccines are reaching the people who need it the most—the elderly, frontline workers, and people with underlying conditions that make them more vulnerable to Covid-19.

There are already worries that online registration has made it harder for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to sign up for the vaccines. While provisions have been made for community health clinics to help with this registration, are people in rural and remote areas being able to access this? Is there enough awareness surrounding the importance of getting vaccinated, especially in underprivileged and difficult-to-reach areas? A report in this daily from last week showed how the majority of vaccine uptake was still concentrated in urban areas, and that only a third of those vaccinated were women. Are there similar disparities in terms of economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds, and are there any plans in place to tackle these disparities and make access to vaccines more equitable?

While we applaud the authorities on the success of the vaccination drive in Bangladesh, we also hope that they will seriously take these issues into consideration and ensure that no one who needs a vaccine is excluded from the process. At the same time, although positivity rates are dropping, we must remember that the pandemic is not yet over, and around 400 people are still being infected every day in Bangladesh. Despite the success of our vaccination programme, we must ensure that safety protocols continue to be in place and people continue to take precautions such as wearing masks, especially in public spaces.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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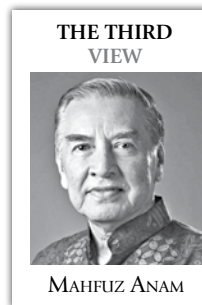
Fate of low-value coins?

In Bangladesh, the one- and two-taka coins are hardly considered to be of any value. At a time when goods and services costing Tk 5 or below are getting rare, it makes us wonder why coins of these values exist. The only scenario where they might be useful is on ferry terminals and for small donations. Otherwise, recipients of these coins struggle to come up with any use for them. I think the authorities should think of a way to either use these coins or simply eliminate them.

Farhana Yasmin, Barishal University

Restoring Jatiya Sangsad's moral high ground

Time for a code of conduct for the lawmakers



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

IN the recent past, our honourable members of parliament have been known more for their legal actions against journalists—first under the ICT Act, then the Digital Security Act (DSA)—than for any consequential legislation in any of the vital fields of economic, social or democratic advancement. The “crimes” of the journalists were that they allegedly hurt the image, sentiment, reputation and feelings of the venerable public representatives. So heightened is the sense of “self-image” that not only the MPs but their supporters also feel free—and we dare say, encouraged—to take journalists to court if the latter feel that their leaders' image or reputation has been “hurt”.

When such is the degree of their sensitivity, it is important to know what actions the same MPs take to “protect their image” at a time when it is being so devastatingly shattered by the likes of Mohammad Shahid Islam, an MP from Laxmipur-2 constituency, popularly known as Kazi Papul. He has been convicted in Kuwait for human trafficking and bribing local officials. There are two other charges pending, including one related to prostitution. Our own Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)—described as a “toothless tiger” by one of its own former chiefs—is investigating a case of amassing wealth over Tk 1,400 crore through human trafficking. Papul's wife, who is also an MP from the reserved seats for women, has been fined Kuwaiti dinar 1.7 million (Tk 55 crore) in the same case. We have heard of no action taken against her yet, except her being questioned by the ACC.

How did Papul get his MP nomination in the first place? Media reports repeatedly brought out the fact that he paid crores of taka to procure his nomination and also paid off potential opponents to clear the way for him to contest. His wife is accused of having done the same to become an MP from the reserved seats for women and is being investigated by the ACC.

How many others are there who may have gotten their nomination in the same process? How big is the so-called “nomination business” that we hear about every time an election comes our way? How much does the party involved makes in this process, and what is the share of those who help out?

Hasn't the image of our parliament, of our MPs, and of the whole legislative process been “maligned” a thousand times more by these actions by one of their own? According to a report of bdnews24.com published on October

30, 2020, the ACC is investigating the affairs of 21 MPs in connection with various cases of corruption and scandals. Of them, 11 are being investigated for syphoning off government funds, grabbing government land, taking bribes and illegal commissions and indulging in extortion, etc.—and another 10 for having income far above their legal source of income. Then there's the case of MP Moazzem Hossain (Ratan) of Sunamganj-1 who, according to a Prothom Alo report on February 20, occupied some neighbours' land to build his palatial house—an accusation that he denies. This is but the latest of similar reports that many newspapers regularly carry. The same MP is being investigated by the ACC also.

Where is that angry, outraged and concerted reaction of our MPs when the institution that gives them everything, including legitimacy, is being so



MP Mohammad Shahid Islam from Laxmipur-2 was recently sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment by a Kuwait court. PHOTO: COLLECTED

shamefully denigrated by one of their own?

In its report of October 14, 2012 (though nine years old, but nothing appears to have changed), the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) did an overview study of the major newspapers' reports on lawmakers of the 9th parliament covering the period from 2009 to 2012. To further substantiate the study, TIB conducted 44 group discussions in 42 districts involving 600 prominent and credible citizens known for their objective stance. The analysis showed that 181 MPs had been subjects of negative press reports and none gave any rejoinder or protested against those reports.

There were a number of positive feedbacks about the work of the MPs in this study. For example, 35 percent of MPs were praised for their contribution in the health and education sectors, 31.3 percent praised for their work connected

to local infrastructure development, 10 percent for personal initiatives in helping the poor and getting relief assistance for the locals, 6.3 percent for ensuring rule of law and helping the farmers, 5 percent for empowering women and 17.5 percent for various other positive contributions.

But there was also a contrary picture. Eighty-one percent of MPs were criticised for abusing their power and influencing the administrative work in favour of their chosen ones, 76.6 percent for taking over control of local schools, 75.5 percent for misuse of development funds, 70.6 percent for being involved in criminal activities, 69.2 percent for abusing the official procurement process, and 8.4 percent for procuring government plots by giving false information.

Perhaps the most alarming of the above findings was the involvement of MPs in criminal activities, including alleged involvement with murder, land grabbing (including khas land, river banks, ponds, water bodies), extortion, tender manipulation, ransom, etc. MPs were seen to be involved with all the big crimes of their respective areas by their voters.

The above study does not include the benefits our MPs enjoy as a favour from rich and unscrupulous businessmen. In fact, we do not have the institutional capacity to discover such irregularities as they require sophisticated financial tools.

It is not our intention to show how corrupt our legislators are. In fact, a recent revelation of the British MPs' financial corruption showed a huge number of them having massively misused their various allowances and taken illegal benefits as MPs. There are plenty of such stories from many countries, both Western and Asian, where lawmakers regularly indulge in corruption. Our intention is to help improve, mend, become better and regain the credibility and respect that is a precondition for the parliament to be effective.

Perhaps what's different in our case is that we do not do anything about the corruption of our MPs even when facts hit ourselves in the face. When something is revealed accidentally, we see a sudden spurt of activity and cries of “nobody is above the law”. And then when nothing happens, we are told that “the law will take its natural course”, followed by “it takes time—nothing can be done overnight”. This goes on until some other revelation grabs our attention and the same process starts all over again.

We want this to change. We want to see that when some serious research findings are made public, instead of the usual cacophony of “this is a conspiracy to malign us”, we will take some note of the findings and try to correct ourselves and make our parliament live up to the expectations of the public.

In this regard, we want to recall a valiant effort made by a ruling party

MP, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, who submitted a Private Members Bill to the Speaker in 2010, suggesting a “code of conduct for MPs” and the formation of a House Ethics Committee to oversee the implementation of the code and related matters of integrity and honesty. The Bill stipulates seven general principles—namely selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership—as fundamental qualities that an MP must possess to serve the electorate effectively, efficiently and fairly.

In this Bill, Saber Hossain made a vital point about how to deal with “conflict of interest”—a concept that we do not think much about, if at all—between the personal world of an MP and the public world of his electorate, the world from which he comes and which he is elected to serve. The Bill goes on to provide clear provisions for disclosure of an MP's personal and family businesses and other proprietary interests including receiving gifts, using public resources, interacting with ministries and public bodies.

As stated earlier, this remarkable Bill provides for the formation of an Ethics Committee headed by the Speaker and nine members from the treasury and opposition benches to which anyone could file a complaint about a sitting MP and with whose proceedings every MP would be obliged to cooperate. The proposed Bill required the Ethics Committee to submit an annual report to the House.

What do you think happened to this Bill? Not only did it never come anywhere near being adopted, but it was also never even seriously discussed. We think privately Saber Hossain might have been even laughed at.

Need we stress that the nature and effectiveness of parliament depend on the type of parliamentarians we elect? That depends on the ways that nominations are given from different parties. Now, if the process starts on a corrupt premise—in which electability does not depend on the honesty or public service orientation of a candidate but on how much one can afford to spend in an election—then, obviously, “electability” acquires a whole new definition which cannot bring good to the electorate, the country and democracy.

If laws are to be just and pro-people, then we must necessarily have an elected parliament constituted by individuals of character, integrity, vision and love for the people who elect them. In other words, members of parliament must be persons of impeccable reputation.

The case of Papul must act as a wake-up call if we are serious about institutionalising democracy in whose centre stands the Jatiya Sangsad.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How India could win its Covid vaccination race

SEMA SGAIER and PRASHANT YADAV

AS the world enters the second year of the coronavirus pandemic, vaccination has moved front and centre in policymakers' responses. But while vaccines offer the surest way out of the crisis, countries are approaching them in different ways. Some are racing to vaccinate their populations, while others await longer-term efficacy data before beginning. Still other countries find themselves in a long line to receive or purchase desperately needed doses.

Many have noted the rapid rate of Israel's vaccination drive, the ambition of the United Kingdom, which was the first country to approve a Covid-19 vaccine for emergency use, and the stumbles to get supplies distributed in the United States and the European Union. But for those seeking lessons on how to protect a population through vaccination, there's another country to watch: India.

With 1.3 billion people, and an estimated 11 million cases of Covid-19 to date, India faces a seemingly mammoth vaccination challenge. But the government recently announced a plan to vaccinate around 300 million people by early August. And, judging by the country's preparations and actions so far, it may be well-equipped to handle the task.

That's because India can meet the challenges of scale with massive manufacturing capacity, a strong public-health infrastructure with experience in vaccine delivery, an army of frontline workers, and meticulous planning. Add to that some innovative digital tracking, and the results could put the country in an enviable position by later this year.

Frontline health workers are central players in India's vaccination rollout, and the first in line to receive the shots. The drive to vaccinate around 30 million frontline and other health workers began on January 16, and in the first 34 days, India achieved ten million vaccinations.

The US took 31 days to vaccinate the same number after it authorised vaccines (the rate of China's vaccine rollout is unclear).

After India's health workers are vaccinated, frontline workers and people aged over 50—and younger people with serious health conditions—will be next in line. That's a further 260 million people that the government plans to vaccinate in under seven months.

India has the capacity to manufacture all its Covid-19 vaccines domestically. The Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine producer, has boosted its capacity in order to manufacture one billion doses of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine (known locally as Covishield), while Bharat Biotech will produce the government-backed Covaxin shot. This should be enough to vaccinate the country's priority groups this year. And, because the vaccines produced domestically are priced to be the cheapest in the world, India has already supplied vaccines worth USD 47 million to 13 countries.

India will rely heavily on its public-health infrastructure to scale up its vaccination drive. Three thousand Covid-19 vaccination centres have been established across the country, along with 27,000 cold chain points to keep supplies cool en route to and at their destinations. About 150,000 staff people in 700 districts have been specially trained to administer the vaccines.

India already runs the world's largest public-health immunisation programmes, targeting 27 million infants and 29 million pregnant women each year. Since a national campaign to vaccinate children against measles and rubella began four years ago, several states have achieved coverage rates of over 90 percent. The Covid-19 vaccination push is certainly ambitious, but its scale is not fundamentally different.

As some countries—including the US—have found out, multi-level government systems can hamper speedy vaccine rollout if there is inadequate information

flow, lack of clarity on decision-making authority between the various levels, and diffuse accountability. India proactively addressed this issue when planning the deployment of Covid-19 vaccines by establishing a well-defined governance structure between the central government, state government, district government, and local administrative blocks. Roles and responsibilities for each level are clearly defined, allowing a nationally coordinated response.

In addition, India is using technology to streamline tracking and accountability. In record time, the authorities have created

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the dedicated Co-WIN system to track procurement and distribution of vaccine supplies, and allow people to pre-register for vaccinations. Co-WIN builds on Aadhaar, the country's nationwide digital ID system. On the supply side, it uses e-VIN, the national vaccine information system. Bringing them together has been the key to making the system work, and initial glitches have been quickly fixed. Citizens can receive a text message informing them when and where to get the vaccine, and will receive a unique QR code certificate after they've received the second dose.

Although the prospects look good, India must still overcome significant hurdles. Building a comprehensive and accurate database of individuals with comorbidities, in order to prioritise them for vaccination,

remains a huge challenge.

And, as in other countries, there are worrying levels of vaccine hesitancy. India's impressive Covid-19 immunization figures in the first weeks could have been even higher, but some medical staff have been reluctant to get the shot, especially because the locally developed Covaxin received emergency authorisation before all the trial data on its efficacy had been reviewed. The government will need good communication campaigns to persuade older people and those with medical conditions that the vaccines are safe.

India's experience holds at least three lessons for other countries. First, they should make the most of their strengths. Not every country can develop or manufacture its own vaccines. But almost all can draw upon committed frontline workers, public-health infrastructure, or prior experience confronting epidemics or holding immunisation drives.

Second, prioritising vaccine access and tracking rollout should be built into the vaccination drive from the start. Digging deep into the data to allocate vaccines most effectively may require building upon existing data systems, or using new tools, such as the Covid-19 Vaccine Allocation Planner for the US, and the Vaccine Coverage Index, which highlights which geographies are likely to have problems achieving high levels of Covid-19 vaccine coverage and why.

Finally, vaccine hesitancy will require a tailored response in each country. Policymakers and public-health experts must devise effective strategies to reassure people that vaccination is safe—and the only road out of the pandemic and toward recovery.

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