

The trouble with our only other neighbour

Global response focuses on the coup, ignoring the Rohingya problem

Commuters suffer big time due to transport shortage

Govt must ensure its directives are practical and enforceable

PEOPLE living in Dhaka, especially the office-goers, suffered immensely on Wednesday due to a lack of public transport as the government's directive to keep half the seats in buses vacant came into effect. In the morning, many passengers failed to get into buses which were half-full. Struggling to find any other way of reaching their destination, some commuters decided to walk all the way, while others demonstrated at the bus stations. This, along with the severe transport shortage, resulted in many buses carrying more passengers later in the day while still charging the 60 percent higher bus fare, which was only supposed to make up for the losses incurred by buses plying at half capacity.

All things combined, the government's directive didn't really help commuters, but made their situation worse. While buses ran at half capacity—charging commuters a 60 percent higher fare—most offices, companies and factories were operating at full capacity, which naturally meant that there weren't nearly enough transports available for the majority of people.

Although the intention behind the government's directive looked good on paper, the reason why it became such a disaster was because of the thoughtlessness with which it was given and the lack of proper execution. For the majority of people living in Dhaka, transportation, or the lack of it, is a major struggle to deal with on a daily basis. Given the already existing lack of public transport facilities, the government's decision to direct offices, companies and factories to start operating at half capacity right away and also direct buses to ply at half capacity starting at the same time was bound to fail from the get-go. Most workplaces would obviously need at least a day or two to figure out how to go back to operating with half the manpower, which meant buses also had to operate at more than 50 percent capacity.

This absence of understanding shows how detached the authorities have become from the common people, lacking any knowledge of their situation and the realities on the ground. Had the government directed offices and factories to prepare operating with less manpower earlier, most of the problems that arose could have been avoided. However, because the government was too busy with its own celebrations only a week ago, it decided to give all the directives all at once which made them impossible for effective execution.

Given the rapid rise in coronavirus infections, social distancing in public transports has to be maintained. However, that can only be achieved if there are enough public transports to cover for the buses operating at half the capacity, or once most workplaces go back to operating with half the manpower. The authorities must either increase the number of buses plying the streets, or wait a few more days before directing them to operate at half the capacity.

Fully-fledged hospital sitting idle for 19 years

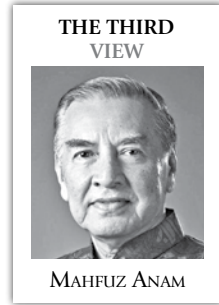
Authorities must ensure water supply to operationalise it

IT is deeply disconcerting that the Indurkani Upazila Health Complex in Pirojpur, which was established in 2002, has not provided any indoor services to patients since its founding 19 years ago, despite being equipped with the necessary equipment and facilities. The only facility it lacks, however, is a major one—supply of pure water. According to a report published in this daily yesterday, the health engineering department had planned installing a deep tube well to supply water to the 50-bed complex, which reportedly never materialised.

Being located in the coastal belt, Indurkani is known to suffer severely from lack of pure drinking water. But one would assume that those tasked with constructing and operating the health complex would have kept this vital fact in mind and come up with an alternative way of extracting and supplying water. So, why wasn't that the case?

It would seem the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) of the area is correct in saying that the hospital was built without a proper plan. Otherwise, why would there be a budget for gardening in the plan when a proper water supply and waste management system has not been ensured? Given the current Covid-19 situation in the country, such a hospital being functional would have meant that hundreds, if not thousands, in the neighbourhood could have access to potentially life-saving treatment. Even if an alternative plan for water supply is executed now, it will likely take months before the hospital can be made fully operational with proper staff and services.

One wonders why such projects are taken up by the authorities in the first place if these are not to be followed through in a timely or efficient manner. What is the use of spending crores of public money if the public is ultimately not getting the services promised? We urge the authorities to urgently solve the water supply problem at the Indurkani Upazila Health Complex and make it functional so it can start providing treatment to the local residents. Those whose negligence or inefficiencies deprived them of vital healthcare services for so long, even after the hospital project's completion, must be held accountable.



THE THIRD VIEW
 MAHFUZ ANAM

MYANMAR is our only other neighbour, with India being the overwhelming first. To the credit of our policymakers, we have tried our best to maintain good relations with Myanmar

notwithstanding their treatment of Rohingyas, forcing nearly 300,000 of them upon us thirty years ago, in the early nineties.

We really wanted to have a cordial relation, if not a warm one, with them. We thought if the whole world could trade with them, why couldn't we (especially after the withdrawal of western sanctions)? Thus, we reacted to the Rohingya influx of the nineties very softly. The tactics appeared to work when more than 230,000 of the 250,000 refugees from the first influx were repatriated, with the UNHCR playing an active role in the process. With about 20,000 remaining, we heaved a sigh of relief hoping that the rest would also be repatriated in time.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. Using the pretext of some activities of an armed group, the Myanmar military started a genocidal attack on the Rohingyas living in the Rakhine State. As the democratically elected leader and de facto chief of the government, we naturally expected Aung San Suu Kyi to play a far different role than what we were used to see from the military rulers. She did not. She may be a steadfast fighter for democratic rights but it was not meant for all. In terms of a fair treatment of Rohingyas, she turned out to be just as ethnically biased as her predecessors. The iconic symbol of freedom turned to endorsing ethnic cleansing when it came to a particular group, who practiced a religion—Islam—that was different from the majority practicing Buddhism.

We, in Bangladesh, saw first-hand the brutality of Myanmar's army when Rohingyas started flooding our borders again in 2017. Suddenly, nearly 800,000 of them poured into the Cox's Bazar belt and overwhelmed us. We opened our doors and hearts and took them in.

We told the world about the inhuman sufferings of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, especially women and children. Innumerable men and women were killed, thousands tortured and women raped, homes burnt down, and a whole community driven away from their ancestral land. The world took notice but only peripherally. Bangladesh got a lot

of praise for its humanitarian act, part of the money it needed, but none of the concerted international action needed for a quick and safe repatriation, which is what would really have solved the problem.

We watched, sometimes aghast, as the world—including some countries that professed extreme cordial relations with us—took a convenient position mostly based on geopolitical considerations rather than on facts on the ground. We

form the government. This overwhelming show of strength totally upset the carefully choreographed power sharing structure set up in the military-imposed constitution. Hence, the coup had to take place before the parliament sat. Suu Kyi was arrested the very day the parliament was to sit.

An unprecedented public rejection of this takeover has both surprised and unnerved the military who are used to taking people's subservience for granted.



File photo of demonstrators protesting the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

were told that's how the world works, forcing us to wonder as to whether we made a mistake by allowing our humanitarian instincts to get the better of our more considered ones.

After the recent military takeover in Myanmar and the brutality with which it has been suppressing protests against it, the world is taking a second look at the regime and hopefully having a better understanding of the true nature of this military machine that has absolutely no compunction about killing its own people to stay in power. It definitely should qualify as being among the worst military machines in the world. It sucks up the tax payers' money, the resources it earns from its limited exports and the earnings from the sale of its considerable mineral resources to line up its own pockets, and spends mostly on its own salary and perks and providing a luxurious living for their high-ups.

The army takeover was prompted by the Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy's extraordinary showing at the latest polls, getting 346 seats, which was far more than the 322 needed to

The continued protest and gradual extension of support by other ethnic groups of Myanmar are setting the stage for what could be an epic struggle for democracy in that country.

As the world wakes up to the new realities in Myanmar and takes up tougher positions against the coup, we are observing with great concern that it is speaking less and less about the 1.2 million Rohingyas stranded in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Restoration of the newly elected parliament and reinstatement of the elected government into power are now the priorities of the international community. The more these issues are coming to the fore, the more the Rohingyas' plight is fading into the background.

We believe that the above two issues—restoration of democracy and repatriation of the Rohingyas—are two sides of the same coin, and as such, the international community should not separate them. They should rather raise them together, and just as vigorously.

An argument could be made that there is an emergent national unity among

the larger Myanmar society as well as growing support from various ethnic groups against the military, which has to be preserved. It cannot be forgotten that a large section of the Buddhist community, including the monks, supported the anti-Rohingya actions and a general anti-Rohingya sentiment exists among a large section of the local population. Therefore, mixing the two issues would weaken the anti-military coalition which is still at a nascent stage at the moment. Hence, according to this argument, it would not be wise to raise the Rohingya repatriation issue at the moment.

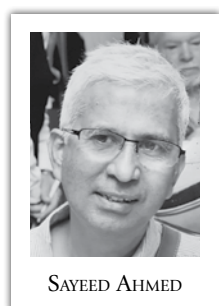
We in Bangladesh cannot accept this argument. It is true that a large segment of the Myanmar's population harbours anti-Rohingya sentiment but that is because of the decades of misrepresentation of history and distortion of facts about the life and culture of the Rohingyas. State-sponsored programmes of demonising this ethnic group and deliberate propaganda against their religion—Islam—and also falsely linking them to terrorism have resulted in this divide. Breeding hatred against this particular group was a state policy, and this has been the case for decades under the military since the 1962 coup, which replaced the elected government of U Nu and brought to power the Union Revolutionary Council headed by General Ne Win. Before that, Rohingyas were a constitutionally recognised part of the Myanmar's (then known as Burma) ethnic diversity and an integral party of its body politic.

We strongly feel that just as the international community must help the people of Myanmar to restore democracy and freedom in that country, so also it must assist them to regain the totality of their history and cultural heritage so that they are set free of the ethnocentric and racist biases that have poisoned their minds for so long.

The world community must also understand the challenges faced by Bangladesh. We have been an exemplary host for more than a million Rohingya refugees since 2017. We did receive international help but bore the maximum burden ourselves. Now that the nature of Myanmar's military regime has been fully revealed for the world to see, and there is a momentum at the international level for solving the present crisis, the Rohingya issue should not be lost sight of. This is the moment to build a grand coalition against the brutal regime and to simultaneously bring democracy and a culture of tolerance in that troubled country.

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Ethnic minorities' baffling show of support for Suu Kyi: What does it indicate?



SAYEED AHMED

AFTER Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest following the military coup, there was an outpouring of support shown to her by various ethnic groups in Myanmar, despite her outrageously disappointing

disregard for their rights. They have taken to the streets in large numbers, alongside the Barmars, reported AP, demanding a return to her civilian government. Why?

Suu Kyi rose to international stardom during her years of struggle for democracy. Those who hoped for an end to the long streak of military rule and consequent marginalisation of ethnic minorities in Myanmar applauded when her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won a landslide victory in 2015. However, once she took over as the State Counsellor, her admirers were at a loss to explain her actions, which were in sharp contradiction to their expectations. Some of her activities were beyond their worst nightmares, such as her defence of Myanmar's military forces (Tatmadaw) at the International Court of Justice, as it faced charges of atrocities against the Rohingyas.

Questions arose as to what she fought for all these years. Was it "democracy"? Or was it just a way of securing a share of the power, hugging international media limelight, and enjoying the goddess-like reverence from the Bamar majority, 70 percent of the population, and her support base? Meanwhile, the ruthless exploitation of the 130 or so ethnic minority groups by the all-powerful Tatmadaw and the political elites after the British rulers' departure in 1948 continued unabated.

Ever since Myanmar's independence, the ethnic majority Barmars enjoyed a privileged position in the country. Successive amendments to the constitution slowly but steadily downgraded the status of non-Barmars. In the process, more than a million Rohingyas in Rakhine State lost their citizenship and were subject to multiple Tatmadaw operations at various times, the

latest one being in 2017 carried out with genocidal intent.

Suu Kyi's lack of interest in resolving the issues underlying the ethnic conflicts during NLD's first term in office was evident as she ran a charade of "peace conference", reported Open Democracy, an independent global media organisation. Instead of inviting opinions on the long-felt demand for federalism, she spent a lot of time on trivial issues such as whether it would be a "democratic federalism" or "federal democracy", and ignored essential matters such as land rights. Meanwhile, she also lent unconditional support to the Tatmadaw's massive war-like operations in Rakhine, dismissing the reports of mass killings, arson and rape as fake news.

The November 2020 election saw Suu Kyi's party return to power with an even greater majority. But the military was unwilling to accept it and staged a coup, toppling her government. Evidently, the generals had different expectations from her.

Just then, to everyone's surprise, the ethnic minority groups have thrown their support behind Suu Kyi and NLD. What does it indicate for Myanmar?

First, it points to such groups' deep mistrust of the military and accepting the Barmars as an ally against a common enemy. But there are other aspects to it, as various political groups' reluctance to fall in line with Tatmadaw's plans illustrates. After the recent coup, the Tatmadaw formed a State Administrative Council (SAC) to run the country and invited the ethnic minority leaders to join it, presumably expecting to benefit from their dissatisfaction with Suu Kyi. But most invitees turned down such offers, and those who accepted them faced severe criticism. In Kayah State, the Kayah State Democratic Party (KSDP) joined its rival NLD and condemned the coup. It was also quick to fire its vice-president, who accepted the offer to join the SAC. However, the Mon Unity Party (MUP) of the Kayah State decided to join after a stormy debate among its leaders, triggering fierce criticism, reported Al Jazeera.

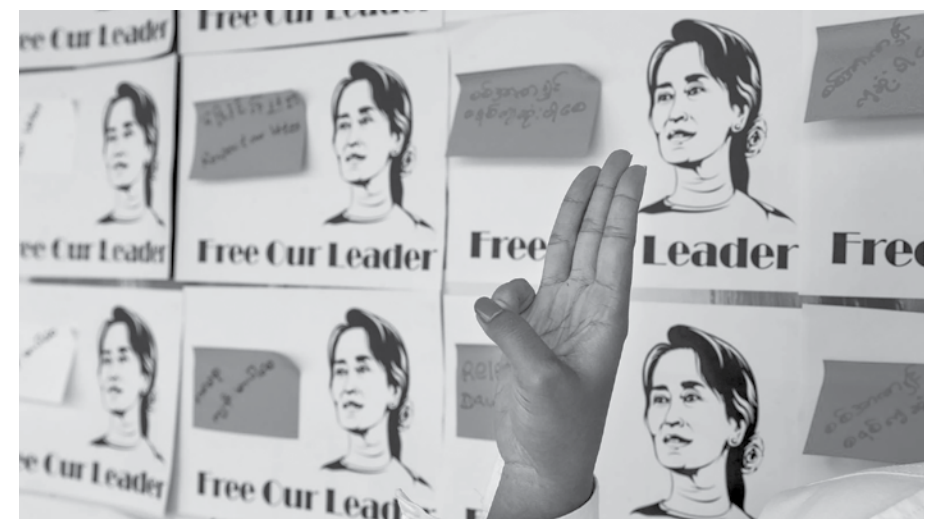
In Rakhine, the Arakan National Party, which decisively defeated the NLD in the

2015 elections, and was, until recently, fighting a bitter war with the Tatmadaw, decided to join the SAC. However, many Arakanese civil society organisations criticised this decision.

The Al Jazeera report also pointed to the loud demands by non-Bamar groups for an overhaul of the 2008 constitution based on federalism and their rights to land and natural resources. That leads us to the second aspect: a strong cry for establishing the minorities' rights, as

civilian oversight, let alone any form of democracy.

That brings us to the third aspect: you cannot appease the generals while fighting for civilian rule. Throughout civilisations, civil-military relations were never easy, as elaborated by Duke professor Peter Feaver. Myanmar is a typical case where the very institution created to protect the polity became a threat. The military's task is to protect the regime from internal and external threats, but it also vehemently



File photo of a demonstrator flashing a three-fingered salute of defiance in front of a public notice board with pictures of deposed national leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Mandalay, Myanmar, February 11, 2021.

PHOTO: AP

seen in the recent street demonstrations, reported Nikkei Asia.

Many in Myanmar believe that the 2008 constitution needs redrafting to remove the root cause of discrimination of the minorities. Suu Kyi's 2015 election manifesto included constitutional reform. However, it took full three years for NLD to form a committee on a constitutional amendment in January 2019. To no one's surprise, the parliament rejected it as it failed to achieve the required 75 percent of votes (25 percent Tatmadaw and 11 percent USDP voted against). Her actions were a delicate balancing act, one which involved betrayal towards her supporters and a dangerous game with the Tatmadaw despite its long history of loathing

protects its own commercial and other interests, as BBC reported.

What impact are the recent events likely to have on the Rohingya population, both in Rakhine and the Bangladesh refugee camps? If history is any guide, their future is bleaker than ever, considering how the successive military-backed regimes made them a stateless pariah.

Recently, the Tatmadaw killed 114 demonstrators in a single day and opened fire at their funerals. The ongoing events should be a lesson for the country's future leaders—that one cannot tango with the Tatmadaw.

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