

Confusion over movement restrictions for the unvaccinated

It typifies the chaotic state of affairs in our official Covid-19 response

THE decision on not allowing anyone above the age of 18 on the streets or onto any mode of transport unless they are vaccinated—announced by the Liberation War affairs minister after an inter-ministerial meeting on Tuesday—created a wave of criticism against the government's Covid-19 policy for being out of touch with reality and seemingly created on the fly. How else can one explain this outlandish idea when, according to the government's own data, only eight percent of its targeted population have received the first dose of the vaccine?

As has been the case with most Covid-related policies, there was, once again, utter confusion in the aftermath of this announcement. How will the government reach its target of inoculating approximately 11.8 crore people when, so far, only around two crore doses of vaccines had reached Bangladesh? Given that the authorities are already struggling to enforce a strict lockdown, how do they plan on checking those who are unvaccinated? Are people meant to carry their vaccine certificates with them? What sort of punishment will be given to those who break this new "rule"?

These perfectly legitimate questions and the storm of criticism that ensued led to another strange turn of events—yesterday afternoon, the health ministry issued a press release distancing itself from the Liberation War Affairs minister's announcement, saying "no such decision or proposal was given anywhere on behalf of the ministry". So are we to assume that the health minister or any other representative of his ministry was not invited to the inter-ministerial meeting? Or that, despite being there, the input of the ministry in charge of the public health system during the worst phase of this pandemic was simply not asked for? Or did they listen to the suggestion of movement restrictions for the unvaccinated and simply stayed silent about it? Or did the suggestion not come up for discussion at all, and was only arbitrarily announced later?

To further add to the confusion, on the heels of the health ministry's press release, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs also issued a press release withdrawing its statement. While we appreciate the withdrawal of this completely ludicrous and unjust proposition, we are deeply concerned at what can only be called a chaotic state of affairs within the government, where there seems to be no consensus or cohesion regarding pandemic-related decisions. How can we expect to have policies that are thorough, well-thought-out and grounded in evidence and reality in the midst of such total disarray?

Over the past few days, there have already been crowds at the vaccination centres, increasing potential risks of Covid-19 transmission. After Tuesday's meeting, the Liberation War Affairs minister, whose mandate generally doesn't include healthcare, gave shopkeepers all of three days to ensure they are vaccinated so they can open up their shops. The government's slipshod and erratic decisions have needlessly created uncertainty and panic, when they should be providing guidance and leadership during an emergency.

We urge the government to consult with experts to come up with the best policies to rein in the pandemic in Bangladesh. At the height of this Covid-19 wave, it is not enough for the authorities to consult amongst themselves and come up with rules that ultimately do not benefit the public. They must involve all stakeholders and come up with more judicious policies.

Matuail landfill is in utter disarray

Dhaka's waste management system needs a complete overhaul

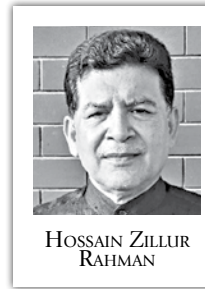
RESIDENTS from areas near the Matuail landfill have been suffering from its awful stench for nearly five to six years due to lack of waste management capacity at the site. The landfill's capacity was exceeded last year, and more than a quarter of the site has been unusable since February this year due to a high-voltage pylon collapsing onto that part of the site. As a result, landfill authorities are dumping waste into a nearby lake and other waterbodies.

Due to this lack of dumping space as well as a severe shortage of equipment and manpower, the landfill area has become an open-air crude dumpsite. Poor leachate management, lack of daily covering of the garbage with soil and greenhouse gas emissions have also made it extremely unsanitary. Leachate, a toxic by-product generated from compacted high-moisture content waste, has leaked all over the site, as the leachate collection drains are either full to the brim or completely choked by solid waste. In some places, the solid waste layer is nearly 70 feet high, which means there should be at least three layers of leachate drains; instead, there is only one layer of leachate drain.

Officials concerned say they have only around 40 percent of the heavy equipment they need to process the daily 2,500 tonnes of waste. And even the available equipment is damaged frequently as they have to operate on uncovered waste, in contact with overflowing leachate. Lack of manpower is another major issue, in addition to the complete absence of recycling facilities. Overall, the terrible condition of Dhaka's biggest garbage dump depicts a woeful picture—one that illustrates criminal mismanagement and extreme apathy on the part of the authorities who have let things get to this point.

The way things are handled at this landfill is in no way sanitary. It is making the nearby region unlivable and is completely unsustainable in the long run. However, it is perhaps a part of a bigger problem: failure of the authorities to create a sustainable and sanitary waste management system. And in order to solve that, there has to be a complete overhaul of our waste management system. In that regard, the authorities need to quickly approve and implement the Clean Dhaka Master Plan 2018-2032. Moreover, hiring the necessary manpower and equipment to handle all the waste that is being dumped, as well as creating recycling facilities, is the need of the hour.

Development and political leadership: China's Wang Huning and new perspectives



HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

WE have all become accustomed to the economic story of China, its astonishing success in reducing poverty, its emergence as the economic powerhouse of

the 21st century and its infrastructural ambitions expressed through the Belt and Road Initiative. Lesser known is its foray into the world of ideas and political theorising. Few people in Bangladesh may have heard of Wang Huning. The political theorist behind three paramount leaders including the current leader Xi Jinping, Wang Huning's induction into the all-powerful Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party marks the first time a person primarily from the world of ideas has been assessed as important for the corridors of supreme power.

Born in Confucius' birthplace, Shandong, Wang Huning's rise from being a professor of international politics at Fudan University in Shanghai has not merely been a personal journey. Seen by some international circles as China's Machiavelli, his theoretical constructs of political leadership during the modernisation process and integration of Confucian thoughts represent serious challenges to established theoretical orthodoxies on the interface of politics and development. They also provide a

reality check on the over-optimistic modernisation theories and pointed to the possibilities of political decay as much as political development in the process of social and economic change. Analysts and academics have had to cross the traditional disciplinary boundaries to grapple with such complexities, in the process bringing to prominence newer disciplines such as political sociology, institutional economics and culture studies.



Wang Huning's (left) induction into the all-powerful Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party marks the first time a person primarily from the world of ideas has been assessed as important for the corridors of supreme power.

PHOTO: REUTERS

A critical insight emerging from such analysis is that it is less the form of government and more the degree and quality of politics and governance (i.e. legitimacy, opportunities for contestations, rationalisation of authority, state capacity, robust spaces for public discourse, minimising system disruptions around transitions in power) that distinguish politically developed societies from politically decaying ones. Clearly, politics and development are closely intertwined processes that have no easy or predictable answers on cause and effect. Experience shows that there are both

well-performing and poorly-performing "democracies". The more relevant issue thus is less the regime type per se or a normative set of "good governance" indicators, but rather the constellation of system and process features that generate a "political governance" capable of nurturing inclusive and sustainable economic outcomes.

Prevailing perspectives on democracy and governance in developing countries

these countries are all too visible—all-encompassing corruption, state capture by elite groupings, deepening inequalities, pervasive insecurity, and political marginalisation of the common citizenry.

The pandemic has created an existential moment for humanity. Sadly, facile talk of "common purpose" is belied by the reality of vaccine inequality between developed and developing worlds, rise in number of billionaires and millionaires during the pandemic, and the misery of the "new poor". Clearly, the driving of "common purpose" has to start at home. And home here is the nation-state and the political order on which it functions. Fifty-odd years after Huntington penned his seminal work and the intervening rise and fall of neoliberal hubris of market supremacy, the development discourse is needing to embrace the thorny discourse of "politics".

It is here that Wang Huning and China's burgeoning discourse on political theory present new points of departure for the interface of development and political leadership. The impetus for rethinking came in the wake of the ideological crisis of communism, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Wang Huning was the driving force for an ideological repositioning that also drew on Confucian thinking to project new concepts such as political meritocracy, virtuous governance and performance legitimacy. Such theoretical efforts have not necessarily led to a full-blown ideological construct such as liberal democracy. Nor have they gained broad-based endorsement. But they have certainly put a spotlight on the urgency of seeking new answers to the all-too-familiar problems of democratic dysfunction and political decay in many of the developing countries. How can merit and efficiency be nurtured as integral building blocks of political governance? And is "merit" enough without a commitment to values and being open to performance scrutiny? The discourse is notably reticent on issues of representation, focusing instead on the issue of legitimacy.

From an external perspective, these are large canvases worth exploring with lessons to be independently arrived at rather than axiomatically drawn. Whatever such instrumental lessons turn out to be, the discourse lesson is already clear. Without "good politics", there will not be "good development". Unlike "good governance", which has over-focused on technical solutions, "good politics" forged on values, vision and competence can only emerge out of risk-taking and active engagement.

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novel opportunity to take a fresh look at issues of governance, politics and development, which are particularly pertinent for countries like Bangladesh that are aspiring to climb the next rung on the development ladder.

The linking of democracy and governance to issues of developmental performance has long antecedents but in recent times has had varied and contested formulations. The coming to prominence of the "good governance" paradigm in the

have a typical blind spot as to how politics and political leadership is accommodated within such analysis. For example, the "good governance" paradigm favoured by civil society and development agencies includes a politics variable—"political instability and violence". This is certainly relevant for many contexts. But what of realities such as today's Bangladesh, where there is both enforced political calm and pronounced uncertainty about the future—a case of "uncertainty despite stability" reflected, for example, in stagnant private investment, and rising brain-drain and youth unemployment? Similarly, the "democracy" discourse too has found it hard going to concretise the "politics" variable beyond "elections". The sad reality of "electoral democracies" across many parts of the developing world is either of "voter-less elections" or various degrees of "controlled" elections or directionless blood-letting by rival political blocs during transition. The economic and social fallout in

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Helping the poor to survive lockdown

RISTO RÖNKÖ, STUART RUTHERFORD, and KUNAL SEN

EVEN as rich countries begin to glimpse the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, developing countries are still struggling to contain Covid-19. But there are important lessons from the past year that can help governments to devise more effective policies and programmes to support their poorest residents amid continued outbreaks and lockdowns.

One valuable source of such lessons is the Hrishipara Daily Diaries Project (HDDP), which has been tracking the daily financial transactions of 60 poor households in rural Bangladesh for the last six years. Analysis of the data collected—especially the changes to spending patterns that have occurred during the pandemic—reveals four areas where governments should step in.

First, policymakers should ensure access to emergency cash. The rural poor are no strangers to shocks to their livelihoods. Droughts and floods are recurrent features of their lives, as are serious illness and job losses. But they usually have some access to lifelines: they can tap into family-based mutual-aid networks or borrow from microfinance institutions, money lenders, and friends and family.

This has not been true during the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions on movement meant that households could not visit extended family to seek financial support. And even if they could, with everyone's livelihoods squeezed at the same time, friends and family often had nothing to offer.

Harsh lockdowns in many places also forced microfinance providers and other financial institutions to close, preventing households from borrowing or even withdrawing their savings. The 60 Bangladeshi households in the HDDP study halted almost all financial transactions during the government-imposed lockdown.

This highlights the urgent need for large-scale unconditional cash transfers from the state, disbursed directly to the poor with minimal paperwork. A crisis

of this magnitude is no time for fiscal rectitude.

Second, poor people's capacity to exercise agency and entrepreneurial spirit should be supported. The HDDP households were agile and resourceful in their response to the Covid-19 shock, and showed impressive money-management skills.

Sometimes this took an entrepreneurial form. For example, Samarth, a farmer who grows crops and rears dairy cows on a tiny parcel of land, quickly recognised that barriers to road transport were driving up prices of goods from the capital, thereby driving down the prices of local

This should change, with policies that encourage and reward these instincts—and improve poor households' ability to harness them. For example, low-income households could be brought into consideration when devising "ease of doing business" regulations.

The private sector also has a role to play. In particular, the financial sector should develop flexible products that enable poor people to take advantage of opportunities that come their way. Of course, this also requires that governments ensure uninterrupted access to financial services during lockdowns.

Third, the poor need generous food



The 60 Bangladeshi households in the HDDP study halted almost all financial transactions during the government-imposed lockdown.

PHOTO: STAR/MINTU DESHWARA

produce that was usually exported. So, Samarth bought produce from desperate local farmers at very low prices and sold it at a temporary street market he set up inside Hrishipara. Local people, confined to their neighbourhoods, provided the demand, and Samarth ended up with a major boost to his daily income during lockdown.

Policymakers rarely account for such entrepreneurial instincts in devising programmes to support the poor.

aid, especially during lockdown. Even under the most difficult of circumstances, the HDDP subjects found ways to put food on the table, but at the cost of drastic cuts in other expenditures. Our analysis shows a sharp reduction in recurrent household expenditures other than food in the first month of lockdown (April 2020). Moreover, it was only in October—several months after lockdown ended—that those expenditures returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The private sector also has a role to play. In particular, the financial sector should develop flexible products that enable poor people to take advantage of opportunities that come their way.

Finally, low-income households' cash reserves need to be protected. Most of the HDDP subjects kept some cash at home for emergencies. The Covid-19 pandemic—and especially the lack of access to savings—meant that they kept those reserves to buy food and meet other basic needs.

Government and the financial sector should find ways not only to help secure these home-based reserves, but also to make it easier for the poor to replenish them. Expanding the scope of cash disbursements, and making delivery more efficient, is vital, as is keeping mobile-money agents open during crises.

The Hrishipara diaries show that, during Covid-19 lockdowns, the poor had to fend mostly for themselves. Thanks to their ingenuity, money-management skills, personal networks, and past crisis planning, they managed to survive. But they also had to make great sacrifices. As governments devise strategies to support the poor not only during Covid-19 lockdowns but also in future crises, they should reflect on what happened to the HDDP households during the pandemic so that, next time, such sacrifices will not be needed.

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