

Govt measures must keep people in mind

Move to expand TCB coverage, reduce VAT welcome

THERE has been no starker reminder of people's helplessness in recent times than men and women standing in long lines behind the trucks of Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), waiting to get their hands on subsidised essential goods. The tragic footages of people fighting each other for a packet of sugar or clinging onto moving trucks as they pass by have humbled us into the realisation that the celebratory discourses around economic growth and post-pandemic recovery have not translated into prosperous lives for a vast majority of the country's population. In fact, with prices of goods spiralling out of control over the past few months—and threatening to go up even further as Ramadan approaches—it's no longer just the working class who are struggling to make ends meet. We thus appreciate the government's decision to expand TCB coverage and to introduce the trucks at the union level.

Currently, TCB trucks sell essentials at subsidised prices in metropolitan areas, and at times at the district level. As we have seen in the past few weeks, the demand for subsidised goods is much higher than the current provision, and while the promise to include more people is encouraging, it is by no means enough. With a large number of people grappling with poverty, and even middle-class families struggling to maintain balanced diets, there needs to be a proper assessment of what and how much people need to even get by, and a mechanism to ensure that those in most need are getting the goods. More trucks need to be introduced in localities with concentration of low-income groups.

At the same time, we cannot underscore enough that the government must urgently find ways to bring the prices down, monitor the market, and ensure proper functioning of the supply chain.

The finance minister has also announced that the government would lower VAT and duties on essentials such as chickpeas, edible oil and sugar to keep the market stable. While that would be welcome news, reports suggest that the announcement may, in fact, be misleading. For instance, there is no import duty on chickpeas and lentils to begin with, and the NBR last week reduced regulatory duty on raw sugar import until May 15 this year. We hope the government will issue the notification regarding VAT waiver of edible oil, and clarify the confusion regarding the tariff, tax and VAT structure on these essentials. And lastly, the government must ensure that whatever steps it takes now and in the immediate future will actually help the end consumers, meaning the ordinary people—not the traders.

No end to corruption-ridden projects

Those behind inflated CSTU land prices must be held to account

IT is disconcerting to us just how intrinsic corruption seems to be in projects of any size in Bangladesh. Since late January this year, a flurry of reports has come out regarding how politicians—closely related to the education minister—have acquired land chosen for the Chandpur Science and Technology University (CSTU) by showing hugely inflated prices. Eerily enough, Selim Khan, chairman of Lakshmiipur Union Parishad chairman and local Awami League leader, applied to the education minister to select specific lands for the university four months before the administrative approval for land acquisition. Selim and his family members bought about 14.46 acres of land for Tk 38.16 crore between June 2020 and April 2021, besides some others, including the education minister's brother, who bought land (meant for the construction of the CSTU) at inflated prices—or at least that is what the papers show. Allegations have also arisen that Selim forced locals to sell/give up their lands to him.

The UP chairman, of course, denies these allegations and claims that he did buy the land at the stated hefty prices. If so, we wonder why the education minister, when contacted by our correspondent, would say that “the allegations of price manipulation were likely true.”

Moreover, why did Selim Khan and Co buy the lands at such hefty prices in the first place? Indeed, the prices were 20 times higher than what they should have been, compared to other lands in the area, as discovered by a 13-member committee formed by the Chandpur district administration to look into the matter. Are we to believe that a major local politician and people close to him were led to purchase land at such exorbitant prices? If this is the case, how come research had not been conducted on what the prices of the land surrounding the plots meant for the university was priced at? The district administration committee found that, at the falsely inflated prices, the government would have to pay Tk 553 crore for the 63.549 acres of land, as opposed to the estimated actual price of about Tk 193 crore.

We understand that a writ petition is currently pending before the court, and we hope it will get to the bottom of this issue. If proven true, we hope those behind the sinister plan of making some bucks by showing artificial prices in the deeds will be punished. We also hope that the CSTU VC's request to complete land acquisition for the university will be fulfilled promptly. It is disheartening that the construction of an essential educational institution should lag behind due to the greed of an influential few.

Do we need semesters?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked all its affiliates to implement the semester system by July 1. No new programme or curriculum will be approved unless the academic calendar is divided into two halves. The arguments are simple: since the public universities are using it, the private ones must follow suit for a uniform structure of study period. Trimesters, practised in most of the private universities, divide an academic year into three terms (each about 12-13 weeks long), and arguably encourage teachers to cut corners and reduce content. There is not enough preparatory time for exams. Apparently, the “hidden” reason for opting for the trimester system is “commercial” as private universities “benefit” from three rounds of enrolments.

Private universities have been running with credit-hour-driven, trimester-based, UGC-approved curricula since the 1990s. In the early 2000s, public universities started shifting to the semester system. But the UGC now requires all tertiary institutions to implement a standard system. From a logistics perspective, this new model will apply only to the incoming students—there will be two simultaneous systems during the roll-out phase. Has there been any study to find out if the universities in question have the necessary classrooms and teachers to run two parallel systems? There are already some universities where the old programmes are being run in a trimester system, while the recently approved ones are being run in a semester system with great difficulty.

The Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF), prepared by the Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC) and circulated by the UGC, aims at benchmarking our system against the best international practices. Interestingly, BNQF insists on modular and unitised course-offering for greater transparency, delivery efficacy, and learning benefits. BNQF outlines the credit hours, not the academic semesters. Why is UGC so insistent on the revised study period, then, when BAC is not?

Students pay per credit of coursework. In theory, the number of semesters will have no impact on university revenue. If the intake deadline is fixed by the government in alignment with the publication of HSC results, then the proposed change will be inconsequential. However, the mode of payment can appear to be burdensome for many students as some of the bigger private universities have a policy of upfront payment. If the UGC is sincere



Will implementing the semester system at private universities benefit the teachers and the students?

STOCK PHOTO

Has there been any study to find out if the universities in question have the necessary classrooms and teachers to run two parallel systems?

in streamlining the study period, then it must first work on bringing all stakeholders together. The higher secondary and tertiary systems must devise a supply-chain model, so that students get a fair opportunity to choose between public and private institutions.

The reluctance of certain private universities in resorting to the semester system makes us revisit the pros and

The UGC reasons that the semester system is congenial for faculty research. Not all undergraduate teaching entities are research institutions, and how best a faculty can use the longer semestrial break needs further guidance. The key difference between the public and the private, however, rests on the assessment criteria. Given the wide range of courses covered in a semester, more

cons of both the systems. The arguments for the semester system include the extra time teachers will get to give in-depth instructions. It facilitates greater collaboration between the faculty and the students. The preparatory week before exams and the longer break between semesters are useful. Conversely, the semester system demands a student to enrol for five to six taught courses in order to graduate in time. Therefore, students get a relatively shorter study period as they are required to be on campus for six days a week. There are more accumulative exams with only two breaks in a year.

In a trimester, students enrol in three or four courses per term with longer study periods. They have four short breaks in a year with three graduation/enrolment dates. Students can take on more courses with greater flexibility, required to be on campus three to four days a week. The trimester system generally allows students more flexibility in scheduling classes, looking for part-time jobs, and getting involved in co-curricular activities. The extra number of courses in the trimester system gives students more opportunities to sample diverse subjects, including remedial courses. The downsides include the faster pace, which puts pressure on students. They don't have any preparation week before exams. For the staff, the administrative work can be overwhelming.

than one teacher is assigned to teach a course. The final exams are evaluated by two examiners in public universities. Consequently, there are delays in result publications. Students resume their new semester without getting results of the old. A June 2020 report published in this newspaper observed that out of 83 departments of four public universities—Dhaka, Jahangirnagar, Chattogram and Rajshahi—75 failed to publish their semester results within the scheduled time of eight weeks. They took 18-34 weeks. In contrast, the private system with single course teachers is quite punctual in their result publication.

There are reasonable arguments on both sides. The UGC, however, is tilted towards the public-oriented semester system. If the performance of the public universities is any indication, the attempt to divide up the academic calendar pie is a reminder of the proverbial monkey. To ensure that the pie is best served according to the UGC design, a unique 16-digit ID is now being proposed so that any option to show the third semester is eliminated. This is in contrast to the BAC prescription, which has no observation on the semester. Because the accreditation agency knows that for greater student mobility and international mapping, we need to align our calendars with international ones where credit hours are more important than the weekly chart. If so, why cannot we allow both the systems to persist?

Is 2022 precursor to 2024 polls in India?



Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

HOLI, the festival of colour, has come a week early for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Even before the full results of the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur were officially available on March 10, 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed from the BJP headquarters in New Delhi that political experts would say the outcome of 2022 had decided the results of 2024 general elections. Time future is contained in time present, to tweak TS Eliot's poem *Burnt Norton*.

Politics is known to be a long-haul affair. Parliamentary elections in India are nearly two years away, but Modi's words on Thursday oozed confidence seldom seen. The BJP was widely expected to face headwinds because it battled strong anti-incumbency in four of the five states (barring Punjab). The polls in the five states took place at a time when economic distress grips India, with youth unemployment and fuel prices soaring. But BJP came out largely unscathed.

The key takeaway from the elections in the five states is important in two ways. Firstly, it reaffirms the efficacy of BJP's policy to blend Hindutva with efficient delivery of welfare schemes, and to reconfigure its strategy for 2024 elections. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, these poll results severely dent the credibility and ability of the Congress—which was in direct contest with the BJP in four of the five states

One never tires of hearing that the road to power in India goes through Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state, and because it has the largest number of Lok Sabha seats to determine which party will have a parliamentary majority.

and lost—to be the rallying point of a united fight against Modi in the next parliamentary polls. It also poses a much bigger question regarding the leadership of the Gandhi family to lead India's oldest political party, particularly the manner in which it handled its Punjab affairs.

One never tires of saying or hearing that the road to power at the Centre in India goes through Uttar Pradesh, the most populous (200 million) state and electorally decisive, because it has the largest number of Lok Sabha seats (80) to determine which party will have a parliamentary majority.

In UP, the BJP was under pressure following saffron-robed Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's handling of the devastating second wave of Covid-19 last year, and the emergence of Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Akhilesh Yadav as a serious challenger. Recent desertion of a number of leaders and sitting lawmakers belonging to Other Backward Castes (OBCs), like Swami Prasad Maurya, and their shift to BJP's main challenger Samajwadi Party was thought to be a blow to BJP, because OBCs comprise an estimated 35 percent of the UP electorate, and SP sought to woo this segment to add to its traditional Muslim-Yadav support base.

The SP tried to hit BJP where it hurts the most: the latter's assiduous efforts over decades to bolster its Hindutva agenda by bridging caste divides. The Hindu consolidation, which the BJP had built to counter parties like SP, had paid a handsome dividend for the Modi-led party in the previous assembly elections in UP in 2017, when it got an unprecedented three-fourths majority, and in the 2019 parliamentary polls. But the BJP should be worried as the SP's improved performance in the just-concluded elections brought out chinks in the BJP's Hindu consolidation,

mainly on the basis of raising the unemployment, bread and butter issues.

The second important picture emerging from the latest state assembly elections is Congress' defeat in Punjab to regional outfit Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) led by Arvind Kejriwal. The Grand Old Party of India is now left to govern just two large states—Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh—which will go to fresh assembly polls next year. The loss in the other four states is certain to put a bigger question mark over the Congress' ability to lead a nationwide anti-BJP alliance (It is already being questioned by Mamata Banerjee).

The Congress had betted big on exploiting the social identity of Charanjit Singh Channi, a Dalit Sikh, when he was made the chief minister four months before the state elections. Channi replaced Amarinder Singh, who hails from Jat Sikh community, the traditional landed and social elite in Punjab. By appointing Channi as chief minister, the Congress had hoped to beat anti-incumbency with his Dalit Sikh identity. But it boomeranged badly for the party in the polls.

AAP's emergence in Punjab with a splendid performance is going to have implications and trigger fresh alignments at the national level. Political observers who watch AAP closely see this performance as an endorsement of Kejriwal as a prospective national leader, possibly upstaging Mamata. One big advantage for AAP's acceptability outside Delhi is that, unlike Mamata-led TMC, linguistic identity politics is not at the core of Kejriwal's polity. Mamata played the Bengali sub-nationalism card to win West Bengal assembly polls last year and dubbed BJP leaders as “*bohiragoto*” (outsiders). Ironically, the same plank made TMC face headwinds in Tripura's civic polls last year, and in the recent assembly polls in Goa.