

## State must give protection to Rabiul’s family

Those who beat him to death must be held accountable

THE shocking death of 26-year-old Rabiul Islam, after being beaten by a team of policemen in the Kazir Chawra area of Lalmonirhat on April 14, has once again brought to light the impunity with which members of our law enforcement agencies carry out their brutal acts on powerless people. According to our report, police detained Rabiul at a Baishakhi Mela, suspecting him of being a gambler (although the villagers said otherwise and his brother claimed that he went there to buy toys for his baby daughter). As he got into an altercation with the police, about five policemen beat him until he fell to the ground and lost consciousness. Rabiul was later declared dead when he was taken to the hospital. Even though after the incident his devastated family members demanded punishment for the policemen involved, the reality is that they did not dare to file a case against them, fearing that if they did so, they might be further harassed by the police.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident where the family of a victim of police brutality could not muster the courage to file a case against the law enforcers. This has, in fact, become the norm now, because in the majority of such cases, the victims generally neither has the power and connections nor the financial ability to run the cases.

In Rabiul’s case, his family members are already in a vulnerable state, losing the sole breadwinner of the family. As such, in his absence, how the family can afford to survive has become a major concern for them—let alone afford to run a case against the police. Under the circumstances, we believe there should be a judicial enquiry into the incident to reveal the truth, as Rabiul’s family has also demanded. As the police has already formed a probe body to investigate the incident, we hope they will soon make their findings public and punish those involved. Simply withdrawing a sub-inspector from the police station is not punishment enough for brutally beating a person to death—regardless of whether he was a criminal or an innocent person.

The state must give protection to Rabiul’s family from any and all sorts of harassment and intimidation. And it must also remember its duty to ensure that our law enforcers do not abuse the power given to them for the purpose of protecting the rights of the citizens—and to make sure that law enforcers do not use that power to violate those rights.

## Timely inoculation a must to check cholera outbreak

But improving water quality is equally important

THE cholera outbreak continues to be a headache for residents in certain areas of Dhaka as well as hospitals, doctors and public health officials. The number of patients requiring hospital admissions is still high, with icddr,b—which recorded an all-time daily high of 1,383 cases on April 4, 2022—still receiving about 800 patients a day. Against this background, it is welcome news that the government has decided to launch a vaccination drive starting next month to contain the situation.

As part of the campaign, a total of 2.3 million people, aged one year and above, will get oral cholera vaccines in five diarrhoea-prone areas in Dhaka. We hope the campaign would not stop there, given the huge population that resides in close proximity in the capital. The drive should continue especially in slum areas where a large number of people live in severely unhygienic conditions. We also strongly believe the quality of water supplied by Dhaka Wasa needs to be improved drastically. Though health experts have blamed the contaminated water supplied by Wasa for the severe forms of diarrhoea in recent times, Wasa authorities have taken little visible action in this regard. Inoculation is only half the solution—if we cannot ensure access to clean water, this disease will keep coming back.

In 2020, the health directorate had vaccinated 12 lakh people with the first dose of cholera vaccines in six areas of Dhaka. Unfortunately, the second dose couldn’t be administered because of the Covid-19 emergency. Now that the scourge has weakened significantly, the full course will hopefully be administered without further hassle.

It can be recalled that the WHO had launched wide-scale vaccination drives against cholera in a number of African countries with considerable success. This inspired Bangladesh to replicate the programme, and in 2011, the World Health Assembly called for member states to strengthen efforts to prevent and control cholera mainly through the use of oral cholera vaccines, in conjunction with other recommended prevention and control methods.

So adequate and timely inoculation is a must, and we’re glad to know that the health department has plans to widen the vaccination coverage in the future upon successful completion of the drive in May. But clearly, more needs to be done in terms of prevention. We urge the government to ensure greater coordination and collaboration among the health authorities, Dhaka Wasa and other stakeholders to successfully eliminate this annual threat to public health.

# How fares the opposition in Bangladesh?



### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

THE prime minister had made a very profound and significant remark at the beginning of this month on the state of the opposition in the country. She touched the nub of the issue—democracy, the parliament and the opposition. Unfortunately, her comments did not receive the attention that it deserved given the abject condition of democracy and its indispensable adjunct—politics—in Bangladesh. That speaks volume on the scant interest that politics holds for the public or for the major opposition political parties living in the umbra of the ruling coalition. One possible reason could be that the public has swallowed the Awami League mantra of “development before democracy” and would not like to go back to the status quo ante where political activities often impeded development process. Thus, discourse on politics has become less of a priority, indicating the sapping of public interest in politics.

What the prime minister had stated, and I paraphrase her statement, was that the opposition has not been able to gain credibility or garner the confidence of the people. This is not the first time that she had commented on the state of the opposition in Bangladesh. In fact, she had made similar comments last January while inaugurating the Mujib Borsho; it deserves to be quoted in full: “For a democracy, a strong opposition party is a must as we want our democratic trend to continue.” What she further said is equally important: “The present opposition parties in parliament could not attain the confidence and trust of people at the desired level due to the lack of leadership.”

Clearly the prime minister is concerned at the state of the opposition in parliament, as she should be, since an effective, functional and vibrant opposition lend credibility to democracy which the current opposition in the parliament is certainly not, and this has shorn the current parliament of the credibility that a properly elected parliament would beget through a free, fair and credible election. Needless to say, a country without a worthy political opposition is fraught with uncertain political consequences, since the vacuum that such a state of things creates, allows the opportunity for supra political elements, outside the parliament, to fill the void, masquerading as an alternative to the current political regime.



▲ **Police beat BNP activists in the capital's Nayapaltan area on October 26, 2021. BNP men clashed with law enforcers after the party concluded a rally in front of its central office protesting communal attacks in the country.**

PHOTO: COLLECTED

The long and short of it is, why has the situation come to such a pass? Why has democracy and democratic institutions, freedom of speech and right to dissent become so constrained under the watch of a political party whose political cry was democracy and rule of the people? Should the ruling party not share a part of the blame for the situation that obtains today, a situation unique in parliamentary democracy, where the main opposition in parliament has been subsumed under the ruling party?

One is only too familiar with the tactics that the AL resorted to with Ershad and the Jatiya Party in the 2014 elections. It was about to be scuttled since all the opposition political party had decided to boycott the parliamentary elections. An opposition had to be found, since there could not be a parliament without an opposition, and Ershad was coerced to join. He was hospitalised, a handy euphemism for confinement, while his deputy was only too happy to participate in the polls, which validated the questionable elections that followed. His letter of withdrawal of nomination took several weeks to reach the election commission office from the Combined Military Hospital (CMH), only a few kilometres as the crow flies. Regrettably, AL replicated what Ershad did in 1988 with the fourth parliament. It must have cost the ruling party a pretty penny, apart from the queer arrangement where several JP(E) MPs were inducted in the cabinet. JP(E) came

to be jocularly termed as JP(AL), and the democracy we got, as hybrid.

The 2019 elections were conducted in similar fashion. So, what kind of “opposition” could one expect from a domesticated opposition? With the BNP, the main opposition in the country out in the parliament, it was easy sailing for the ruling coalition. And was it not what

the AL bargained for? So why rue about something that one is responsible for.

But democracy is not about the parliament and the parliamentary opposition only. There are enabling conditions that facilitate the practice of democracy and conduct of politics—for example, freedom of speech and freedom of association, assembly and right to dissent. Regrettably, space for practice of all the above ingredients have become increasingly constrained. The Digital Security Act (DSA) is like a Sword of Damocles, the worst sufferer is the media, which plays the role of the opposition in the absence of an opposition in the parliament. There can be no democracy, much less an effective opposition without free speech. The proposed new online laws are even more stringent. The recent Zila Parishad Act, which violates the constitution, has dealt a severe blow to the essence of local government, which under the constitution cannot be run by unelected persons. All these are being done, one fears, with an eye on the next parliamentary elections.

The PM’s comment is a rueful admission that democracy in Bangladesh suffers from grave deficit. There is raft of issues, apart from an effective parliamentary opposition that need to be addressed. Addressing the questions and applying one’s political will, and putting country above party is the only remedy to bring democracy in Bangladesh back on track.

## Why Bangladesh should worry about its economy

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GIVEN the gloomy global macro-economic outlook, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal’s assessment that Bangladesh’s macroeconomic stability is not at risk over the Russia-Ukraine crisis is questionable. Increased prices of cereal grains, agricultural inputs (e.g., fertiliser cost), fuel cost, devaluation of the taka, combined with high transportation cost will exert tremendous pressure on the country’s food security. A food crisis is on the horizon even if the crisis gets sorted soon. Special attention and relevant actions are needed from the concerned authorities to soften the impact.

Bangladesh is already struggling with the widening income gap which was worsened by the Covid-led inflationary trap. Issues in the international market combined with the Ukraine crisis will put further strain on domestic prices. Price of grain and multiple household items have skyrocketed in the international market. For example, price of wheat, which accounts for over 10 percent of the daily calorie intake in Bangladesh, is significantly higher compared to last year. The country’s annual demand for wheat, which is growing 10 percent per annum, stands at around 77 lakh tonnes, 85 percent of which is met through imports, as per the National Board of Revenue (NBR). However, wheat production worldwide has declined due to the pandemic and unfavourable weather.

In addition, both Russia and Ukraine missed the current sowing season which will impact wheat supply and prices even next year and beyond. Bangladesh imports almost half its wheat from Ukraine and

Russia. Data on Bangladesh from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) shows that consumers had to pay Tk 34 to buy one kilogramme of flour in November in Dhaka, which was 19 percent higher from Tk 28.69 a year ago. Like wheat, price of barley, corn and edible oil could hit all-time highs.



▲ **CARTOON: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY**

**An import dependent country like Bangladesh needs to be careful in depreciating its currency to avoid further inflation.**

Increased fertiliser cost will also seriously affect global prices of other essential crops like rice, vegetables, etc. To produce a variety of crops, Bangladesh uses over 50 lakh tonnes of chemical fertilisers annually, three-fourths of which is imported. Russia and Belarus are big exporters of fertilisers and their raw materials account for 37 percent of potash, 32 percent of ammonia and 14 percent of the world’s urea market. In January 2022, the international price of a range of key fertiliser ingredients shot through the roof. Since January 2021, the price of ammonia has gone up by 220 percent, urea by 148 percent, di-ammonium phosphate by 90 percent, and potassium chloride by 198 percent.

Currently, the government provides Tk 10-20 subsidy for each kilogramme of fertiliser. Given the price of fertilisers in the international market, to lessen inflation, the government will need to at least double its subsidy for fertilisers in the next financial year.

Freight cost is also at a record high. According to the Freight’s Baltic Index, while global spot rates for 40-foot containers have declined from their peak in September, they are still running at USD 9,604, more than double from a year earlier. And with oil price rising over USD 100/barrel, it is unlikely to go down any time soon.

Depreciation of the taka will also push up import costs. An import dependent country like Bangladesh needs to be careful in depreciating its currency to avoid further inflation.

Widening income gap has always been a critical issue in Bangladesh, and it has gotten worse in recent times. The South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) shows that the percentage of Bangladeshis living below the poverty line (upper poverty line) has nearly doubled from 21.6 percent in 2018 to 42 percent in 2020, while the percentage of extreme poor (lower poverty line) tripled from 9.4 percent in 2018 to 28.5 percent in 2020. Increased inflationary pressure will push more people below the poverty line which might lead to social unrest. In its latest assessment on Bangladesh, Moody’s assessed that Bangladesh’s exposure to social risks is very high because of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and inflation.

Even though Bangladesh can’t do much about the rising price level in the international market, the country needs to focus on internal supply chains. Actions like active market surveillance, targeted subsidies, reducing extortions on roads and highways and deploying more TCB trucks with essential products are urgently needed for the near future.