

Brutality at its worst, on full display

Nahid’s gruesome murder should be a wake-up call for the ruling party

IT is difficult to understand the viciousness that we witnessed during last week’s New Market clashes, and why it continued for as long as it did. What was especially troubling was the nature of the attack against 19-year-old Nahid Mia, who was killed while on his way to work. The men who did this have primarily, and unsurprisingly, been identified as members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). Video footage of the gruesome attack shows a motionless Nahid lying on the ground, seemingly dead already, being indiscriminately hacked with a machete by a young man wearing a black helmet. Officials of the Detective Branch of police have identified him as Zakir, a BCL activist.

A post-mortem examination revealed that nearly every inch of Nahid’s body bore injury marks. The level of insanity that led to someone being murdered like this is unfathomable. And it wasn’t just one BCL activist who was involved in the violence. According to various witnesses, Dhaka College students led by three BCL factions took part in the clashes with New Market shopkeepers that eventually led to Nahid’s death. The question is: Who are these people bearing the banner of the ruling party’s student wing? If they didn’t belong to the ruling party, they would never have had the courage to do something like this. It was clear from the footage that the attackers didn’t care whether Nahid lived or died, even though he was engaged neither in politics nor with the shopkeepers.

Now that investigations have revealed BCL’s involvement, it makes sense why the police didn’t go in immediately and stop the violence. We have seen BCL members using such violent tactics—wearing biker helmets and wielding sticks, machetes and other weapons—against students demanding safer roads, while police idly stood by. If instruction from the ruling party is that police shouldn’t interfere when BCL is involved, it can only lead to building resentment among the public. By allowing BCL to repeatedly resort to such violence, what message is the party giving us? That BCL can get away with anything?

We have no idea what benefit the ruling party thinks it’s getting from the atrocities of its student activists, but as far as we can tell, it has led to seething anger among the people while tarnishing the country’s image in front of the world. We call on the authorities to immediately arrest and punish those involved in the New Market violence, including those responsible for Nahid’s murder. And we once again ask the ruling party to seriously reconsider the repercussions of its actions that have allowed for its activists to become like this.

More security doesn’t mean fewer rights

Proposed laws may end up doing exactly that

LAWS are supposed to protect our rights and security against abuses committed by other people, by organisations, and by the government itself. But one often sees the enactment of laws that actually impede honest citizens from conducting their affairs freely and exercising their right without let or hindrance. Thus, the four recently proposed laws—namely, the draft data protection law, the anti-discrimination bill, the new social media and OTT regulations, and the mass media employees bill—which the government says are meant to serve public interest will, in reality, do very little of that. This view was recently expressed at a discussion organised by a rights platform, and we believe it is fairly representative of the general public opinion.

First of all, the due process in formulating a law was not fully followed. Vital stakeholders were left out of the consultation process, and the views of the few who were involved were not incorporated. It is not as if there are no laws or regulations related to most of the subjects dealt by those bills. The problem is the lack of fair and equitable application.

We believe that, as citizens, our personal data should be protected, and that the digital space should be brought under closer scrutiny for the sake of the country’s security, and that a law that makes discrimination on any grounds an offence is the order of the day. But such acts must be formed in a manner that would bring maximum benefits to the maximum people. But if the motive is to be more repressive, curb free speech and dissent, identify critics of the administration, or keep journalists under its thumb, then we have serious reservations about the proposed bills. More security does not mean fewer rights.

We should remember that government and state are not the same, but our government seems to be mixing them up. Criticism of the government cannot be an offence, much less considered anti-state. In fact, one may say that criticising government plans or policies that harm the interests of the people is the bounden duty of all citizens. Revealing the fault lines in society should be the duty of every creative person, whether a filmmaker or a cartoonist. We hope the members of parliament would consider the bills minutely before casting their votes. Theodore Roosevelt’s wise saying is worth quoting here, “It is difficult to make our material condition better by the best law, but it is easy enough to ruin it by bad laws.”

Invest in education to reduce inequality



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QUALITY education is urgently needed in Bangladesh as the country is progressing at a fast pace. Unfortunately, despite having a large number of youth, the dearth of skilled and competent human resources is felt by most of the employers in the country. The problem is two-pronged. First, our high economic growth has not been accompanied with enough jobs for the youth who enter the job market—two million of them every year. Opportunities for those who want to be self-employed are also insufficient. Second, those who seek jobs are not suitable for the labour market. Employers do not find them good enough to do the job. So, the scope for harnessing youth potential through education, skills, and access to finance is inadequate.

This also speaks of the quality of education imparted by the educational institutions in our country. Several studies have indicated poor quality of education at various levels—from primary to tertiary. Despite progress in several educational indicators in recent years, the quality of education has not improved much. Particularly, poor performance in mathematics, science, and English even after secondary- and higher secondary-level education is disappointing.

The Covid pandemic worsened the situation. In-person lessons stopped at schools, colleges, and universities. This has been termed as the greatest disruption in the learning of students. Around 188 countries suspended face-to-face education during the pandemic. Therefore, countries that were already facing a crisis in the case of education could face a learning catastrophe. In Bangladesh, about 40 million students have been affected due to the closure of educational institutions. In the last two years, students suffered a learning loss that is irreparable in many ways. Very few institutions provided online education. Those who did, the quality of their lessons were rather poor. All these are expected to have an impact on the lifelong earnings of many youth as the loss has been on many fronts. These include learning loss, experience loss, employment loss, and disruption of social and professional interactions. This has taken a toll on their mental health, too, as they were in isolation and anxiety during this difficult time.

To overcome the challenges in our education sector, adequate resources are required. Sadly, the budget for the education sector has been stagnant at around two percent of the GDP for the



▲ **Investment in education is key to developing a skilled workforce and keeping the wheels of economic growth turning.**

PHOTO: FREEPIK

The allocated resource remains underutilised and the budget allocations for most sectors, including education, are revised downwards due to low spending.

Education 2030 Framework for Action. However, the Eighth Five-Year Plan (FYP) of Bangladesh sets the target to increase budget allocation to 3.5 percent as a share of GDP by 2025, four percent by 2031, and five percent in 2041. However, at the current rate of resource allocation, the education budget as a share of GDP may reach up to 2.15 percent in 2025, 2.26 percent in 2031, and 2.43 percent in 2041. Hence, the immediate target must be breaking the cycle of two percent of GDP for education and raising it to at least 2.5 percent in the upcoming budget for FY2022-23. For poor and low-income families, public expenditure plays a positive role. Unfortunately, in the rural areas, out-of-pocket expenditure on education is increasing. High personal expenditure on education may discourage parents to educate their children, especially in poor rural families. This could also increase the inequality between rural and urban areas further.

Higher allocation in the budget is, however, not the only remedy to help recover from the learning loss due to the pandemic, as well as improve the quality of education in Bangladesh in general. The budget for education should be spent efficiently. The allocated resource remains underutilised and the budget allocations for most sectors, including education,

low teacher-student ratio—particularly in primary and secondary levels of schooling, which build the foundation of learning for students—leads to poor quality of education, particularly in science and mathematics. Moreover, the number of trained schoolteachers is low. Available data indicates that as of 2020, the percentage share of trained teachers was 66.4 percent. Teaching is no longer considered as an attractive profession, and the lack of meritorious teachers is one of the reasons for the poor quality of our education.

Covid has intensified the already existing challenges in accessing quality education in Bangladesh. There seems to be a lack of understanding that investment in human capital is key to economic development. Skilled human resources have more opportunities in the labour market, and they are more productive and economically better off than those who are not. They also contribute to their economies. As Bangladesh is on its journey of graduating to the Developing Countries group by 2026, and becoming an upper middle-income country by 2031, investment in education is vital not only for its smooth and sustainable transition, but also for reducing inequality among its citizens.

For real change, listen to RMG suppliers



RMG NOTES
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WE’VE spent so many years going round in circles on various issues impacting garment supply chains. We are still no closer to ensuring fairer purchasing practices now than we were a decade ago; it’s the same case with other supply chain issues, too. This week, I read an article that suggested that the organic cotton supply chain in India was under scrutiny. This will have an impact on Bangladeshi garment manufacturers, many of which use organic cotton. I could name so many other issues in supply chains that are not being resolved; sadly, it doesn’t seem like they will be resolved in the near future.

There is a common denominator in all of them: nobody is listening to the suppliers. If they are, they are not listening hard enough.

To me, this is like a detective attempting to solve a crime without considering their most important evidence. Take the issue of organic cotton integrity. I know through supply chain contacts that this is a major challenge in India. I also know why it’s a challenge and why root and branch reform will be required to bring trust and confidence back to that sector. I only know all this because I talk to suppliers, and that stands to reason: Who else would be better to have true insight on these issues

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than the actors themselves?

This year, our industry will—thankfully—be returning to live events and conferences. It is interesting to note that many of the key events relating to supply chains take place in Europe or the US. This in itself seems strange. Fashion’s environmental and social challenges reside in supply chains. We all know that. But when the major fashion retailers gather to discuss these issues, they remain close to home. They largely discuss these issues among themselves.

The speaker line-ups for these events will likely be overwhelmingly dominated by the same old faces, fashion brands and retailers, various NGOs and industry consultants. Can these people bring any insight on these issues? Yes, of course. But to get the full picture, we need to hear the voices from the supply chains. Surely, a weighting of 50 percent supply chain voices for each event would be the best way to ensure that we find out what’s going on and how the issues can be resolved.

Instead, we risk an event scene where the same issues are raised time and again—the same, ineffective solutions are put forward and no progress is made.

I was invited to speak at a major European event several years ago. My speech was well-received; however, I was not invited back to the event later, and I assume that’s because I had probably ruffled too many feathers in the fashion industry.

This issue relates, of course, to the topic of transparency. There is much talk of transparency in fashion circles. But how can you have true transparency when some voices are being ignored or side-lined? True transparency means having difficult, awkward conversations. And it means having these conversations

in public, where they can be heard by all stakeholders. At present, fashion is making too many claims about transparency, which simply don’t stand up to scrutiny. One example is publicly listing their suppliers. Is this a welcome move? Yes, of course. But please, let’s not try to claim that it’s for transparency. Real transparency would mean enabling the world to hear what these suppliers have to say in an open forum.

Think about some of the world’s most successful companies: Apple, Nike or Microsoft, for example. One of the aspects which drives companies like these is that they are constantly challenging themselves internally. Structures are in place to ensure that all voices are heard—good or bad. If there are problems, they are not swept under the carpet (which, sadly, is what we do far too frequently in our industry). To get to this stage, these companies create a climate where people are comfortable raising their voices—from senior management to the lowest ranking officials. No stone is left unturned as they strive for perfection, and the end result is a constant process of innovation and improvement. And, of course, market success.

Now think about our industry. Are problems and issues thrashed out in public? Are all voices given an ear? Is there a willingness to openly discuss difficult subjects? Are people comfortable raising their grievances?

Sadly, I think the answer to all these questions is a resounding no. This is a systemic failure of our industry to take on board the sentiments of some of its most important players.

Until this changes, until we get true transparency and listen to the voices of suppliers, we will not get the radical change our industry requires.