

The Daily Star

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Whatever happened to fielding candidates with clean image?

Political parties and EC both have a responsibility in this regard

THE idea of a political candidate with clean image is perhaps overrated. After all, as experience shows, there is no guarantee that once elected and exposed to all the temptations of power, they will stick to their clean image of yore. Yet this idea is often tied with the wannability of a candidate, and political parties, including the ruling one, use it to signal that they've the best interests of people in mind. But the disclosure of the questionable background of Awami League's mayoral candidate for the Cumilla City Corporation polls raises doubts about whether this is really the case. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the candidate, Arfanul Haque Rifat, happens to be number one on a government list of patrons of drug dealers and smugglers in the district.

We fail to comprehend why or how such a candidate could be picked. Did he bypass pre-nomination scrutiny? Did party higher-ups even consider a background check? Reportedly, his nomination was finalised in a meeting presided over by the AL President and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself.

There is no reason to doubt the veracity of the list in question. It was prepared by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) with the assistance of a government intelligence agency, as part of a country-wide drive to identify drug traders and smugglers, their patrons and law enforcers involved with them. The PMO, in 2018, even sent the home ministry a letter along with the list of Chattogram Division urging it to take action following scrutiny.

Rifat, a former senior vice-president of the Jubo League unit of Cumilla, was reportedly backed by the incumbent MP from Cumilla-6 constituency. With such powerful backers, and in an environment where political expediency outweighs fair play, it is perhaps no surprise that he passed the test. There would be no stopping him in the absence of powerful opponents—with the BNP not participating in the election—or proper action by the Election Commission, which has a duty to ensure only candidates with no criminal records contest in the polls. But if such candidates are allowed to contest, or elected, it will no doubt be a bitter pill to swallow for the EC.

The Cumilla polls will be the first to be organised by the new EC, so all eyes will be on how it conducts all electoral activities including the screening of candidates and its action against campaign-related irregularities. We hope the EC will do everything needed to ensure a fair election. Equally importantly, the ruling party must do its part to build confidence in the electoral process, starting by not fielding questionable candidates which will only taint the election.

Even hospitals are letting down road crash survivors

Govt, hospitals must ensure proper treatment for them

WITH frequent road accidents—due to faulty vehicles, reckless drivers, and the lack of enforcement of proper traffic rules—becoming the norm, especially over the last few years, thousands of Bangladeshis have lost their lives on the roads prematurely. But what about those who survive, but barely? How does the state plan to take care—physically and mentally—of those who have gone through the ordeal of a road crash? Are our hospitals, public or private, equipped well enough to treat these survivors properly? Evidently not. As a report by this daily has outlined, the number of patients paralysed in road accidents has increased at an alarming rate, putting hospitals under immense stress to provide quality treatment.

In 2018, the High Court delivered a judgment, making it mandatory for hospitals to provide emergency medical services (EMS) to road crash survivors, irrespective of their financial ability or the medico-legal nature of the case. Three years later, what steps have been taken to ensure its implementation?

Now, as per the latest report, experts have opined that both public and private hospitals must expand their capacity greatly in order to accommodate the treatment of patients who have been paralysed by road accidents. There must also be upskilling of surgeons so that the patients' quality of life can be improved as much as possible post-accident. But given the increasing number of road crash survivors in Bangladesh, the lack of treatment resources available to them is seriously alarming. During the recent Eid holidays alone, the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR) recorded at least 600 motorbike accidents. Statistically, five to six percent of bike accident survivors suffer from spinal injuries, which our hospitals are currently not equipped to deal with.

As crucial as it is to implement traffic rules properly and reduce the number of road crashes, it is equally important for the government to ensure proper treatment for road accident survivors. This includes emergency services as, in many cases, the treatment provided during the first hour of an accident is crucial. Additionally, given the pressure that the more affordable public hospitals already have to deal with year-round, private hospitals must also scale up their capacity and skills to treat road crash survivors effectively. Survivors of road accidents are actually victims of the country's unruly traffic system—the health sector must not also turn its back on them.

Holistic approach needed to rein in rising prices



MACRO MIRROR

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THE prices of essentials continue to rise at a fast pace. Bangladesh has been feeling this inflationary pressure since June 2020, which recently became unbearable for the poor and fixed income groups in the country. The pressure has been compounded further due to the Russia-Ukraine war that began in February. High prices of fuel, edible oil, food, wheat, sugar, and intermediate goods and raw materials have been passed on to the Bangladeshi markets as we import these items at high prices. Edible oil prices have been on the rise since March 2021. Despite the government reducing the value-added tax (VAT) on imports of some commodities, including edible oil, the price hike remains unabated. Food inflation went up to 6.2 percent in March 2022 from 5.3 percent in July 2021, according to the Bangladesh Bank. However, the real pressure of high prices is felt much more than what the official statistics depict.

On the heels of such high prices and supply shortages comes the announcement of India banning wheat exports. Before the Ukraine war, Bangladesh would import about 45 percent of its wheat demand from Russia and Ukraine, 23 percent from Canada, 17 percent from India and 15 percent from other countries. Following the war, Bangladesh became heavily dependent on its neighbour, with almost 63 percent of its wheat import coming from India. As expected, this announcement has immediately pushed wheat prices up in Bangladesh. If the ban continues and alternative sources are not managed, our food security will be at stake, since Bangladesh imports almost 86 percent of its wheat requirement annually.

In view of this situation, our policymakers have to act promptly. It may be noted that India is not a regular exporter of wheat. It exports only when there is excess production. So, Bangladesh should explore and make agreements with other wheat-surplus countries. Official discussions with India should be continued as well, since India has indicated that it would keep its window open for its neighbours and vulnerable countries.

This decision may be temporary, but the impact has already been felt in the markets here. As always, prices have gone up in no time, and have also had an impact on rice prices, which have been on the rise for the last two years. There is also the artificial crisis that is created by a small group of traders. Therefore, the government must ensure adequate supply in the market through procurement

from domestic and international sources. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has predicted that, due to uncertain climatic conditions, high input costs and the pandemic, the international food market is likely to remain unstable in 2022. When it comes to commodity imports, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) is often responsible for importing

expenditures. Suspending foreign travels of government officials for the next six months unless urgent, putting import-based projects on hold, and spending only on the maintenance of the existing roads instead of building new roads are all welcome moves. There should also be more transparency on project expenditures so that their expenses



▲ VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

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consumer items. However, the organisation does not have enough capacity and is often blamed for lack of transparency. Instead of being involved in imports, it should focus on better distribution of commodities by increasing its organisational capacity. It can also work towards enhanced market monitoring.

Increased supply of commodities to the market will require more public resources and their efficient utilisation. Our policymakers will need to work on several fronts. First, domestic resource mobilisation must be improved by collecting more taxes. The tax-GDP ratio in Bangladesh is only 7.7 percent; it needs to be increased to at least 18-20 percent in the next few years, particularly before the country graduates from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status. Currently, much of the revenue is collected from import tariffs, which is now very high because of high import prices. However, the major source of revenue should be direct income tax, and there are huge scopes for increasing the tax net and the volume of tax.

Second, good governance must be ensured in case of public expenditures. During an economic downturn, expansionary public expenditures are suggested since spending money on productive activities can create employment and income, which in turn increases aggregate demand, which is essential for economic recovery. But now it is time to be cautious about public

remain within their initial budgets and wastes are curtailed. Projects that are going to be completed soon should be prioritised.

Third, the government should use foreign exchange reserves cautiously. In the face of expensive imports and lower export income, the forex reserve is declining. Remittance flow is also declining and is not able to improve the current account deficit, which stands at about USD 10 billion now. In the coming years, there will be more pressure on the forex reserves as loan repayment of some of the large projects—such as the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant and the Padma Rail link—will begin. If the current account deficit persists for a long period, it will create pressure on the foreign exchange market. As a result, the value of taka will decline and lead to further inflation. The central bank has taken a number of positive measures to save the forex reserves, including using forex supply only for the most important sectors.

The discussion on reining in inflation is incomplete without addressing the above-mentioned issues. Controlling high prices requires comprehensive policy measures. This is all the more important in view of the fact that inflationary pressure will not wither away soon—nationally or globally. If not addressed immediately through appropriate measures, inequality will widen further in Bangladesh. The government will have to adopt a holistic approach to deal with this crisis.

Why don't we care about research?

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"If we knew what it is we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?" said Albert Einstein.

Indeed, research gives us a glimpse of what the future might hold through the study of the information available in the present. Throughout history, countries have developed and advanced through innovation brought forth by research work. Sadly in Bangladesh, the significance of research is yet to be fully realised.

Research is a crucial criterion for determining how well a university is doing, among many others. All top-ranked universities worldwide have a large portion of their fundings allocated for research work. If we look at the top universities on the QS World University Rankings 2022, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the best university in the world, had an expenditure of around USD 762 million. The second top university, Oxford, had a USD 820 million budget as well. If we go further back, we will see a connection between research expenditures and university rankings. While university research funding in wealthy countries should not be compared with that in a country like Bangladesh, there is no ignoring the extent of negligence among the universities in the country, both public and private, in terms of research activities and expenditure.

Compared to the research activities in other countries, Bangladesh is at the bottom of the pond. According to reports from 2006, the number of

annual research paper publications in the country was around 400. Although the number has increased since then, it is still not up to the global standard. According to a report by the University Grant Commission (UGC), the total spending for research in 2020 by 38 public universities was Tk 72.91 crore, with Dhaka University at the top, spending Tk 6.61 crore. Even without government funding, private universities came out ahead on research budgets. Brac University spent Tk 55.23 crore on research in the same year, and North South University spent Tk 6.17 crore. Sadly, the average spending on research in all universities in Bangladesh is around one percent of their allocated budget. Chittagong University announced a budget of Tk 360.79 crore for 2021-22 with a 1.52 percent allocation for research. There are hardly any students who consider doing their PhD in Bangladesh.

In the QS World Ranking, there are several criteria to determine the university rankings. One of them is citation per faculty. Citation per faculty is "the total number of citations received by all papers produced by an institution over five years by the number of faculty members at that institution." MIT scored 100 in this category. Comparing our universities with an institution of this magnitude is like comparing apples and oranges. However, compared with the universities in the Indian subcontinent, where the countries are on a similar economic level, Bangladeshi universities still fall short. Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology's (Buet) score of 7.8 in citation per faculty looks pale compared to the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay's (IITB) score of 55.5. Even the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad, Pakistan has a slightly higher score of 9.1.

Bangladesh is currently a lower-middle income country, waiting to become a developing country by 2026. However, countries like China and India are spending more and more on research as they are becoming more affluent. Without innovation, a country can never truly develop. As a soon-to-be developing country, are we doing enough for research? Should Bangladeshi universities worry about research? The answer is, yes! Why? Because, there is empirical evidence that research spending is positively correlated with economic development.

Brain drain is a term used to characterise the transfer of talented people from a country to others. This is similar to the "rich getting richer" argument, but from a human resource perspective. Gifted students from Bangladesh seldom consider a university in their own country when pursuing a PhD. Instead, they move abroad, and most of them get accustomed to their life there and stay back, becoming valuable human resources for their host countries. The lack of research activities plays the primary role here as PhD is a research-based degree. If we want to avoid this unfavourable brain drain phenomenon, if we want our talents to contribute to our country's development, we must give them the incentive to do so.

There is hope as well, North South University recently qualified to apply for a Times Higher Education (THE) ranking—the first private university in Bangladesh to do so. There is a high threshold of research output that is needed to be met to be eligible for THE ranking. Things are moving towards a better future; we can only hope that this progress is taking place at all higher educational institutions. Only then can we deliver quality education and an environment for learning.

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