

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

The end of an era

Death of Akbar Ali Khan is a true loss for the nation

We deeply mourn the loss of Akbar Ali Khan, eminent economist, public intellectual, and former adviser to the caretaker government, who passed away on September 7, 2022 after suffering from cardiac complications. His death will be felt by the entire nation, which has not only lost a shining example in the form of a man of great integrity, but will now have to deal with the intellectual vacuum that has been left in the wake of his demise.

It is difficult to adequately capture the depth of the contributions that this towering personality has made to Bangladesh within the confines of these columns. Whether it was during his years of service as a seasoned bureaucrat, or in his work as an educator and academic, it was clear that everything he did was guided by a deep love for his country and uncompromising personal ethics.

This became apparent early on in his life, when his active participation in the 1971 Liberation War while being a part of the Civil Service of Pakistan led to him being sentenced in absentia to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment by a Pakistani military court. Once Bangladesh became independent, he immediately went back to the civil service to continue to work for his country, occupying some of the highest positions of government before retiring. At the same time, he added to the nation's intellectual wealth through his work in academia, shaping the futures of countless students, while also writing 17 books.

Akbar Ali Khan's expertise spanned across several fields, including economics, politics, governance, history, and literature. But regardless of what he did, there was always one common thread: the development of Bangladesh and the improvement of its people's lives. Alongside this central thought, his work was grounded in a progressive, pro-people, and democratic philosophy. This philosophy has, time and again, guided this nation in the right direction, especially during his time as an adviser to the caretaker government during 2006-07, when his strong sense of personal ethics led to him resigning in protest of the chief adviser's failure to ensure a free, fair, and impartial parliamentary election.

The fine example of honesty and integrity in the service of the nation that was set by Akbar Ali Khan is even more crucial for us now. In many of his writings, he made clear his wish for the people of Bangladesh to think about politics and government, and to choose progressive and democratic values over conservative and illiberal practices. We cannot think of any better way to honour his memory than to respect this wish and translate it into action.

Another needless foreign trip in the offing

Does the govt's austerity directive exclude top officials?

THERE'S no stopping the flock of government officials vying to go abroad in the name of "gaining technical knowledge", despite a directive banning such non-mandatory trips amid the ongoing financial crisis. Often, these all-expenses-paid trips by senior and/or well-connected officers have no real benefits for the projects arranging them. The latest case involves the mayor of the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC) along with six other officials, who are seeking to visit a factory in the US to "evaluate" the quality of 20 vehicles purchased for a waste management project. The LGRD ministry has already issued an order for the mayor to go on the trip; the remaining six still await permission.

We do hope the Tk-17 crore project will be able to modernise waste management in Sylhet city, but what we cannot understand is why the mayor himself has to close shop for four days to visit another country and inspect the quality of said vehicles. Given that the chief engineer of the SCC is also lining up for the same trip, why is it necessary for the mayor to go, then? Are we to assume that the engineers appointed by the government are not suitable for the task of vehicle inspection? That's not the end of the absurdity of this trip, however. The SCC and LGRD are claiming that it is the intermediary Bangla Trac Limited that is financing this trip. But in actuality, the cost of the trip has been included in the prices offered by Bangla Trac, as per its head of group brand management.

Hence, as with any foreign trip of public officials, the cost of this trip too will be borne by the citizens. Unfortunately, we are too familiar with this disturbing trend by now. According to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), which audited 13 government projects implemented from FY 2017-18 to FY 2019-20 under the ministries of agriculture and fisheries and livestock, 228 officials went abroad using public funds during this time. Of them, 23 were just one year shy of their retirement age, while 73 others had nothing to do with the projects at all.

We must ask: whatever happened to the government's ban on unnecessary foreign trips by public officials? It was introduced to deal with the global economic crisis in the aftermath of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. But now that inflation is even worse than it was at the time of the directive, why are government officials still being allowed to embark on such expensive trips? We urge the government to strictly enforce its directives and stop such "pleasure trips" at the expense of the public when the latter are visibly struggling to cope with the sky-high prices of bare necessities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reduce dust in Dhaka

It is normal that, with so much construction going on in the capital, the city will be dusty. However, so much dust can cause serious damage to people's health over time. The city corporations must sprinkle down roads all over the city a few times throughout the day, prioritising areas where there is more ongoing construction.

Anjum Akter, Mirpur

Leave private universities out of BCL politics



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IT doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that one should not change a running system. The private universities are doing just fine without the presence of partisan politics. They have recently been told by their monitoring body, the University Grants Commission (UGC), to up their game (read: curricula) by incorporating several essential skills and co-curricular club activities. They have been told to move to a semester system with a notional credit hour system outlined by the Bangladesh Accreditation Council. The proposed system entails a lot of outside-the-classroom activities to facilitate critical thinking, team building, and creative expression to foster youth activism.

Students of the top private universities, by design, must engage in clubs where they learn life skills such as leadership, negotiation, time management, finance, communication, presentation, IT skills, and so on. They take part in healthy debates or defend their entrepreneurial ideas curated by experts from the industry. They incubate their ideas and pursue various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in alignment with government plans. Their efforts are reflected in various ranking indexes. The upper crust of these universities strategically pursues ranking criteria and regularly participates in the ranking process. Some of them have even attained global benchmarks with mentionable success.

In a rare feat, two Bangladeshi debaters from a Bangladeshi private university won a world championship. It goes on to show the congenial climate of the private universities in which critical discussions and extracurricular activities flourish. Regrettably, these are fast withering from the public system. One can argue that these two debaters had their foundational years at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) of Dhaka University; that only goes on to highlight the non-political feature of the institute.

We can still find old footage of BTU debates in which some of our current political leaders are seen representing public universities, medical colleges, and engineering universities. The incumbent education minister is a case in point. Unfortunately, such a culture of tolerance, plurality and social cohesion that can be argued for and against is gone.



It is time for the ruling party student wing to do some soul-searching.

VISUAL: STAR

The student wing of the ruling party has not proven itself to be a champion of discursive practices. Their recent presence in the media has been far from positive. They harp on the glory days of student politics without stating their current role in it. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave us a nation. And in a resource-scarce, heavily populated country, the onus of building the nation is on the human capital that includes the stock of knowledge, skills and other personal characteristics that make people productive. I do not know of any student-focused activities of the student league that requires a formal presence in private universities.

It was refreshing to watch a video report published by *Amader Shomoy* featuring Golam Rabbani, the former general secretary of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). As the head of HR in a corporate house, he is trying to accommodate his former colleagues in the organisation that he works for. He candidly confesses that he receives over a thousand CVs a day, yet he cannot give jobs to even 10. It's not because there are not enough jobs, but because the job seekers do not have the necessary skill sets. They have their academic degrees, but nothing beyond the certificates. Rabbani goes on to comment that his party has become a "factory for

The dream reality of power they fashioned by posting PVC banners here and there to vie for the visibility of their central leaders faces a reality check. On campus, they mark the walls and pillars with graffiti to announce their pervasive presence. Their material expressions of their everyday politics are evident in their clothes, sunglasses, motorcycles, and mobile phones, declaring that "visibility is everything." Whether they truly believe in the ideology they are airing remains to be tested. They display their power in the protection of state power.

So when they unilaterally announce that they will have units in different private universities, ordinary citizens get alarmed. They have not discussed this with any of the institutions to which they are assigning fully fledged student bodies. The private universities registered under the Trust Act are non-political. A press release issued by the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB) reiterated their position, saying that they do not discourage students and faculty from holding and exercising progressive political views in their sphere, but they do not want partisan politics on campus, which they feel will disrupt the congenial academic atmosphere.

It is time for the ruling party student

Insights in Survey Research (CISR) on campus politics maintains that there is an overwhelming cynicism against politics as students see it as a self-serving agency. The student political parties do not focus on real student concerns such as seats in the dormitories, food quality, logistics and infrastructure, job placement, updated curricula, healthcare services, substance abuse, etc. Instead, they promote a culture of political favouritism that exacerbates campus problems. There is a dearth of civic education. Campus politics can be beneficial only if faculty, administration and students are freed from partisan politics.

We have seen it in the case of youth activism led by Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg. We want our students to be world leaders who can negotiate deals in an entrepreneurship contest, offer counterarguments in a debating meet, lead a team in sports or programming contests, generate ideas for social developments, and reach out to the disenfranchised community. We want them to win hearts with their passion for the real development of the country. We do not want to see them muscle-flexing for a piece of the development pie. We do not want student bodies to chase fancy for campus glories that do not have an afterlife.

US controls advanced chips, but China has another card



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SAYEED AHMED

US defence giant Lockheed Martin's highly successful fighter jet F-35 made its maiden flight in 2006. This sleek flying machine is still in operation with variations such as the F-35A (2015), B (2016) and C (2019). Each such jet contains 417kg of "rare earths," an essential material without which its intricate electronics and weaponry would not exist. But it is the US' foremost strategic rival, China, who controls the rare earths' supply. Beijing realised the importance of rare earths as early as in 1992, when Deng Xiaoping said, "The Middle East has oil; China has rare earths."

What are rare earths, exactly? These are 17 nearly indistinguishable lustrous silvery-white soft heavy metals in the Periodic Table, a scientific tabulation of Earth's chemical elements) such as dysprosium, praseodymium and ytterbium. From jets or weaponry, smartphones, hard drives, electric vehicles and LED lights, to wind turbines and petroleum processing – everything depends on these "touchstones." Rare earths provide the magical touch to all these products that power today's advanced economies and cutting-edge technology.

China holds 40 percent of the global rare earths reserves, but

produces 70 percent of the raw supply. In the technically complex and environmentally hazardous downstream processing, it has near total control – 90 percent. Beijing suspended its supply in 2010 after Japan's navy arrested a Chinese fishing boat captain in disputed waters. Supply resumed after tense negotiations, but the incident sent shockwaves through the Western capitals. Beijing has already indicated that it would consider using control on rare earths against Washington's sanctions. Sending an unmistakable message, President Xi Jinping visited JL Mag, a major producer of rare earth-based permanent magnets, once the Beijing-Washington May 2019 trade talks broke down. Almost 60 percent of America's rare earths imports go to the petroleum refining process as catalysts. Its military's dependence on rare earths is just as critical. Jets, Smart bombs, drones, cruise missiles, laser targeting, radar systems, the Joint Strike Fighter programme – all such equipment rely on rare earths. There is no viable substitution yet and a shortage will jeopardise the US' superpower status.

Beijing's threats to weaponise rare earths may, however, backfire. American buyers are already pursuing deals with miners all over the world.

There is only one operational mine in the US: Mountain Pass in Southern California. But its part owner is China's Shenghe Resources, which buys all its outputs, and processes and sells them at a premium price.

In 2019, the US Department of Defence approached Malawi's Mkango Resources Ltd to extract rare earths. A British company, Pensana, has recently received approval to set up the world's first sustainable rare earth separation facility in the UK. Its mine will be in Angola, which China's Great Wall Industry Corporation will build. Pensana expects to produce approximately five percent of the 2025 projected global demand, which industry experts consider highly ambitious. Africa has become a battleground for nations as they scramble for rare earths and other minerals. Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Madagascar and Tanzania have carbonite and peralkaline rare earth projects that may start production in the coming years. The US, China, Europe, Japan and Australia are all wooing these governments for access to the mines. But with state backing and finance, China is already in an advantageous position because of its geo-economic influence in Africa and its control over the refining industry. The US could also import rare earths from Brazil (with 22 percent of global reserves) and Vietnam, but that needs a long lead time. Meanwhile, Australia's Lynas Corporation, one of the largest processors of rare earths outside China, with its separation facility in Malaysia, received USD 30.4 million in funding from the Pentagon to build two

processing facilities in Texas. However, its Malaysian mine is under scrutiny over radioactive waste concerns.

Beijing is also looking into acquiring more mining rights. As the US made a messy withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, China is eyeing the USD 1 trillion or so in untapped mineral deposits, including rare earths. The other source is Myanmar, where Beijing enjoys a monopoly. In 2020, Myanmar mined 30,000 tonnes of rare earths. Between May 2017 and October 2021, it exported over 140,000 tonnes to China worth more than USD 1 billion. Beijing is also rapidly moving up the industry's value chain. Its aim is to integrate and upgrade its rare earth supply chain of mining, processing, manufacturing, and deeper applications. Late last year, it merged three companies to form the China Rare Earth Group Co Ltd, an industrial conglomerate that holds almost 70 percent of China's annual heavy rare earth production quota. With stronger financial muscle, the conglomerate can buy up smaller companies and secure mining rights in other countries. Beijing has also added two R&D companies to the newly merged group to facilitate innovations.

Long term planning has given China 90 percent control in rare earth processing. At least since 2001, it has been investing in Three Ms: mining, metallurgy, and material science. The US, on the other hand, abolished the Bureau of Mines and its Division of Mineral Economics in 1996. Time will tell where the same plan will take China in the coming decades, and how its rare earths dominance will play out in the ongoing superpower rivalry.