

Seven crises, seven barriers to stability

Govt must adapt to new reality and go for long-term measures

We're hardly surprised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue's assessment that Bangladesh is facing at least seven major crises. These challenges – namely dollar shortage, high price and shortage of energy supplies, rising inflation, spiralling food prices, continued fallout of Covid-19, effects of Russia-Ukraine war, and climate change – have been with us for quite some time. Of late, Bangladesh has made regular headlines for its poor handling of the fusillade of economic disruptions that came on the heels of the pandemic, and later the war. What's new, however, is the alarming prediction that there will be no relief from them within the next year.

The CPD has made a number of observations and recommendations along with a few caveats, all worth taking seriously. The most important observation is that while the government took some steps to ride out these crises, those were “inadequate” and “short-term in nature”. We cannot agree more. It's tempting – from the government's point of view – to shift the blame onto global factors like Covid/war instead of acknowledging pre-existing issues that exacerbated them. In truth, this was a disaster waiting to happen, thanks to years of bad policies, financial irregularities and poor governance. Had it taken appropriate steps when the going was good, we would have more fiscal space now and could handle the situation better. As the CPD executive director said, all countries are facing the heat of the global economic slowdown, but those whose internal policies are strong will fare better.

Bangladesh, clearly, is not one of them. For example, its current gas and electricity crises, caused by dollar shortage and high fuel prices on the global market, could, in part, be attributed to its own energy policy that rewarded over Tk 26,000 crore in “capacity charges” to power companies in the last fiscal year alone. Consequently, many of those companies became richer while the government's fiscal space shrank.

The dollar crunch, which affected our buying capacity amid rising demands for imports, also should have been anticipated. In the absence of effective measures, forex reserves depleted to alarming levels – USD 36.3 billion as of October 12 – although it was USD 41.8 billion at the end of FY 2021-22. Meanwhile, food inflation reached almost 10 percent in August, the highest in 10 years, before dropping to 9 percent in September. The prices of food (and non-food) items have hit all-time highs, despite much-vaunted gains in food production. Households and businesses are suffering equally because of acute gas and electricity shortages.

With no sign of imminent global economic stability, and with quick fixes bringing no relief, the time now is for the long game. For that, the government must first address persistent internal problems like weak governance and corruption, and follow it up with long-term policies to reduce suffering and strengthen the foundation of our economy. To tackle these crises, experts have recommended forming a high-powered committee to monitor key economic indicators and come up with proper responses. The authorities should also control food prices, check further depletion of forex reserves, adopt production-friendly measures, increase minimum wages of workers, reduce fuel costs, take and properly utilise long-term loans, etc. They must do these urgently.

Commuting to deaths

Will this continue to be the reality for commuters on our roads?

It's unacceptable that despite having a law to regulate the road transport sector and a well-oiled system to prevent crashes, the number of deaths on our roads is steadily increasing. According to the Road Safety Foundation, at least 5,043 people were killed in 4,225 crashes in the first nine months of this year. A majority of these crashes involved bikes and three-wheelers. While partial and selective execution of the law is, of course, something to worry about, untrained drivers and unfit vehicles have emerged as a major headache, causing the rising number of road crashes.

The law being ineffective means that unfit vehicles still rule our roads, drivers without valid licenses hardly have to face punitive action, powerful people get away with violating traffic rules, and transport owners and workers rarely have to face deserved punishment for crashes and other unlawful activities such as charging exorbitant fares from passengers. We all know how transport associations opposed important provisions of the law as soon as it was passed, and proposed amendments that would reduce fines and punishments for offenses committed by them. If the proposed amendments are approved, the law will become even weaker.

Besides the poor implementation of the law and non-implementation of some of its sections, there are other factors that are making our roads increasingly unsafe. One such factor is the sharp rise in the number of three-wheelers and motorcycles over the last few years. According to the Road Safety Foundation, these vehicles were involved in 59.49 percent of road casualties during this year, with bikes contributing to 37.78 percent of deaths while three-wheelers to 21.71 percent.

While 3.75 lakh bikes were registered with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) in 2021, a total of 3.96 lakh bikes got registered in just the first nine months of this year. And a significant number of bikes still remain unlicensed. Meanwhile, according to sector insiders, the number of three-wheelers could be around 30-40 lakh now.

One wonders why the BRTA is still registering motorcycles despite the fact that they create a major nuisance on our roads and are also a key reason for road crash deaths? And why couldn't the authorities still implement the ban on three-wheelers on the highways, which was imposed in 2015? Three-wheelers, particularly the locally made ones, often have structural flaws and are driven by unlicensed drivers, leading to frequent crashes. Therefore, the BRTA must seriously try to control the numbers of bikes and three-wheelers.

But above all, in order to bring some much-needed discipline on our roads, the Road Transport Act, 2018 must be properly implemented. We will never get the benefit of the law if it is enforced selectively, and if offenders are allowed undue concessions through improper amendments.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

A right under siege

ON THE SHORES
OF (IN)JUSTICE

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On October 7, a memorial meeting at the Dhaka University campus to mark the third anniversary of the brutal murder of BUET student Abrar Fahad came under attack. Video footage and eyewitness statements clearly establish that the attacks were led by members of the DU unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). Denying the involvement of his organisation, the general secretary of DU BCL lost no time in claiming “it was a move by the general students to resist the Chhatra Odhikar Parishad (the event's organisers), which has essentially become a rehabilitation centre of Chhatra Shibir.”

This was a clear endorsement of the violence. Needless to say, university campuses across the country have been periodically experiencing such suppression of the right to assembly by students who hold views other than those officially sanctioned.

On that very day in Chattogram, a large number of BNP supporters were assaulted by organisations affiliated with the ruling Awami League. Party leaders and activists were injured and several minibuses were vandalised; reports suggest plainclothesmen allegedly raided their homes in the previous evening as well. Thousands coming from adjoining areas endured immense hardship as a number of mobile check posts were erected by the police ostensibly to verify vehicle documents. Analysts believe this was done to prevent them from joining the rally. In many instances during such checks, passengers were forced to get out of their vehicles and walk to the venue. We witnessed similar obstacles being put in place again yesterday in the run-up to the public rally held in Khulna.

On October 14, ruling party activists and law enforcement agencies took recourse to similar methods when



Procession taken out by activists of ruling party affiliated organisations in Khulna yesterday during the rally organised by BNP.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

BNP organised a follow-up rally in Mymensingh. This time, a new dimension was added. To prevent people from attending the rally from other locations, without any prior announcement, transport owners' and workers' associations terminated all bus, minibus and truck movements to the city. Like Chattogram, a number of those presumed to be attending the rally were attacked at different points of the city, and in one instance in Galfargaon, a worker hailing from Kishoreganj (who was attending a wedding party) was savagely attacked with sharp objects after being mistakenly identified as a BNP supporter.

The right to hold peaceful assembly, as guaranteed by the Constitution and reaffirmed by the state's adherence to several international instruments, is under severe constraints in Bangladesh. The administrative stipulation of securing police permission to hold rallies and

guarantee that the event in question can indeed be organised successfully. There have been many instances where the ruling party or one of its affiliate organisations announced its own event at the same time and venue, forcing local administration to either rescind the original permission granted or declare Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which forbids congregation of persons at the stipulated site for maintenance of public order.

Disrupting the event by tearing down posters, seizing microphones and harassing campaigners is not uncommon, nor are police raids of local hotels and homes of opposition party loyalists. Party supporters and sympathisers often suffer major hurdles in reaching the event, facing harassment at police checkpoints and even at the hands of ruling party activists.

In recent times, the propensity of swooping down on rally attendees,

either before or during the event, has become a regular phenomenon. Media has reported on police resorting to baton charge and firing teargas shells and rubber bullets, and on occasion live munitions, causing grievous bodily harm instead of ensuring their physical protection and right to assemble.

There is widespread dissatisfaction among the masses, informed by credible media reports, about how instead of booking the perpetrators, members of law enforcement agencies opted to file cases against the victims of the attacks in many instances. While names of some are stated in the FIR, a number of unnamed persons are also listed, creating scope for the harassment of ordinary people, and leaders and activists of opposition parties. Rights groups inform that the police lists have included names of elderly sick persons, the physically challenged and even persons living abroad.

Article 37 of the Bangladesh Constitution stipulates that, “Every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions.” Setting up administrative hurdles and creating impediments on movement do not meet this criteria of “reasonable restrictions.” The failure to take action against non-state actors in obstructing others to assemble by declaring parallel programmes and launching attacks also constitute a gross failure by the state in upholding citizens' constitutional rights.

Freedom of assembly is an inalienable right of all Bangladeshis. Individuals have the right to gather and meet in groups, both publicly and privately, in person and online. Such gatherings are critical for the sustenance of a democratic polity in which citizens can express opinions, share views and ideas, and collectively chart out courses of action for change. It is unfortunate that even after 50 years of independence, the right to freedom of assembly is under siege in Bangladesh. Surely, such a state of affairs is an anathema to the much-celebrated spirit of the War of Liberation.

Iran's Ayatollah could lose all legitimacy soon

And not just because of the protests



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The nationwide protests in Iran over women's rights and abuses by the religious morality police have once again shined a light on the country's ruling clerical class and the seemingly limitless powers of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a two-tier government. The first tier, ostensibly representing the sovereignty of the people, includes a president who serves as the executive of a highly centralised state, a parliament charged with creating and debating laws, and a judiciary that vets and interprets those laws. The second tier, representing the sovereignty of God, consists of just one man: the Supreme Leader, or *Faqih*.

The *Faqih* has an absolute monopoly over state power. He appoints the head of the judiciary and can dismiss the president at will. He is the commander-in-chief of the army, and he can veto any law passed by Parliament. The office is both anachronistic and utterly unique, allowing for the institutionalisation of clerical control over all aspects of government.

It is also heretical. Far from being the foundation of Shia Islam, as Iran's clerical regime claims, the concept of the *Faqih* represents neither the historical consensus nor the current majority view of Shia political thought. It is a wholly made-up office, created by the man who first claimed the position for himself: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Shi'ism, like Christianity, is

messianic. Shia doctrine posits that the temporal world and all its imperfections will be swept away by the appearance of a figure known as the Mahdi, who will one day rule over the earth. Until then, all governments are temporary and illegitimate, as any exercise of direct political power would be considered a usurpation of the Mahdi's divine authority. Thus, for most of the last 1,400 years, Shia clergy have refused to interfere in governmental affairs, instead adopting a position of political quietism.

To be sure, Iran's leading ayatollahs did fight alongside the country's merchants and young intellectuals to create the first indigenous democratic movement in the Middle East. The Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, as it came to be known, resulted in the creation of a progressive constitution guaranteeing basic rights and freedoms for all Persians, an independent parliament (the National Consultative Assembly), free elections, and a clear separation of powers.

But the Constitutional Revolution was short-lived. In 1921, a British-backed military coup established the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. The constitution was discarded, Parliament was defanged, and the state reverted to dictatorship. The Pahlavis brutally suppressed any political activity by the clergy. While a few prominent clerics participated in Iran's second revolution of the century, the so-called Nationalist Revolution of 1953, it

wasn't until Iran's third revolution, in 1979, that the clergy left the mosques and entered government.

That development owed everything to Khomeini's unprecedented interpretation of the Mahdi. Countering 14 centuries of Shia doctrine, he argued that, in the absence of the Mahdi – the sole legitimate leader of the Islamic state – political power should rest in the hands of the Mahdi's representatives on Earth: that is, the clergy. Put another way, rather than waiting for the Mahdi to return at the end of time to create the perfect society, the clergy should be empowered to create the perfect society for him so that he will return at the end of time. Khomeini called this theory the *Valayat-e Faqih*, or “the guardianship of the jurist.”

This was an astounding assertion and a radical religious innovation in Shia Islam. Yet Khomeini went even further, arguing that political authority should rest not with the whole of the clergy but with a single “supreme” cleric. He then insisted that, as the deputy of the Mahdi, the supreme cleric's authority should be identical to the Mahdi's. “When a *mujtahid* [a qualified jurist] who is just and learned stands up for the establishment and organization of the government,” Khomeini wrote in his political treatise *Islamic Government*, “he will enjoy all the rights in the affairs of the society...”

No Muslim cleric had ever made so startling a proposal. The notion that any human being could have such infallible, divine authority contradicts centuries of Islamic theology. The theory was so plainly heretical that it was immediately rejected by almost every other ayatollah in Iran, including Khomeini's direct superiors, the Ayatollahs Boroujerdi and Shariatmadari, as well as nearly all the grand ayatollahs in Najaf, Iraq –

the religious center of Shia Islam.

What made Khomeini so alluring was his ability to couch his radical doctrine in the populist rhetoric of the time. Once his colleagues had been intimidated into silence and Iran's pious masses had been stirred to action, Khomeini was free to seize control of the post-revolutionary government. Before most Iranians knew what they had accepted, he had injected his interpretation of the Mahdi into the political realm, transforming Iran into the Islamic Republic and proclaiming himself the country's first *Faqih*: the supreme temporal and religious authority.

In 1989, Khomeini died and the office of *Faqih* passed to his hand-picked successor, Ali Khamenei, with little clerical or popular resistance. Even though the *Faqih* was supposed to be Iran's most learned religious authority, Khamenei was little more than a mid-level cleric – not even an ayatollah – with thin credentials. Nevertheless, he was given the office largely because practically every other qualified religious authority in Iran – including Khomeini's first choice as successor, Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri – had decried the doctrine of the *Faqih* as anathema to Islam.

Now 83 and in ill health, Khamenei is widely believed to be grooming his eldest son, Mojtaba – a cleric of even lower rank than he was when selected – to succeed him as the next Supreme Leader. That would strip away any last remnant of religious legitimacy the office still maintains, exposing the *Faqih* for what it actually is: a synonym for unchallenged power, like the Shah. Should that happen, the protests that would follow could dwarf the uprisings we are seeing today.

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