

We must uphold the constitution

People’s well-being should be at the top of the state’s priorities

A constitution is a beautiful thing to have, and it is more beautiful when the laws and principles codified into it are followed. This needed to be put in a single sentence because just as important it is for modern nation-states to have a basic agreement in place – written or not – about the rights and aspirations of citizens, it is more important that the agreement is followed to the letter. Unfortunately, though, through the five decades of its existence, our constitution has been, as the saying goes, “more honoured in the breach than the observance”.

This should be kept in mind as we officially observe the Constitution Day of Bangladesh for the first time this year. On this day in 1972, the constitution was ratified by the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, to be effective on December 16 later that year. Through honouring this day, the government has recognised an important milestone in our nation's history. In the last 50 years, we have achieved remarkable progress. Our achievements in various socioeconomic indicators have been nothing short of extraordinary. Today, Bangladesh is no longer just a dot on the map; it's a force to be reckoned with.

But our journey so far has also been a sad commentary on frequent attempts made by successive governments to deviate from the foundational principles set out in the constitution, particularly democracy, socialism, and secularism. The constitution recognises every citizen as equal, to be treated without discrimination and have equal access to all benefits and services. It recognises their basic rights – including freedoms of thought, conscience, expression and assembly – subject to reasonable restrictions, which too must be clearly spelled out in relevant laws. It puts people at the centre of the republic. And anything that goes against their shared interests will be unconstitutional. Today's reality, however, is a far cry from this beautiful, pro-people spirit of the constitution.

Everywhere we look, this spirit is being violated recklessly, often by the state or because of it. We have developed institutions and infrastructure that ostensibly serve the people but, in reality, those seem to be more for the benefit of the rich, powerful and politically connected. Clearly, the much-vaunted economic progress of past decades hasn't reached ordinary citizens, who are struggling with the sky-high cost of everything, from every essential item in the market to the utilities to transport fares to healthcare to education. The law-and-order situation has deteriorated alarmingly. The bureaucracy seems totally unconnected with the reality of citizens, while the judiciary is failing to deliver justice. The interests of the ruling establishment and their beneficiaries seem to be superseding every other consideration.

This is the opposite of the beautiful world envisioned for citizens in our constitution, and the mere observance of a Constitution Day will not mitigate their sufferings. We urge the authorities and the political class to uphold the spirit, not just the letter, of the constitution so that we can reach our full potential as a nation.

Stop institutional grabbing of forests

Why are government agencies taking over protected forestland?

Given the rate at which our forest coverage is depleting, it can be easily said that soon we will have little forestland left to maintain the ecological balance so critical for our survival. On the one hand, the government is making pledges to preserve our forests; on the other hand, it is allowing many of its own agencies to grab parts of forests to implement their various projects. If this trend continues, not only will we fail to fulfil our pledge to stop deforestation by 2030 – which the government has made at the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use in COP26 – but we may also have to face harsher impacts of climate change going forward. Needless to say, the damage to be done to the rich biodiversity and wildlife of these forests would be irreparable.

Ignoring all concerns, however, the Roads and Highways Department has reportedly embarked on an environment-degrading project as it seeks 174 acres of the Ramgarh-Sitakunda Reserve Forest in Chattogram – one of the oldest reserve forests in the country – to widen a road going through it. This is, we must say, in line with a disturbingly growing tradition of institutional grabbing of forests in Bangladesh.

Over the past decade, a number of attempts were made to grab protected forestland in Cox's Bazar district alone. While the Department of Prison reportedly planned to build a prison on 160 acres of protected forestland in Paglirbil in Ukhiya upazila, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) planned to build a residential training facility on 20 acres of Ramu reserve forest in the same district. Also recently, the Local Government Engineering Department planned to construct a road through the Ramu reserve forest, which would connect Ramu upazila with Cox's Bazar City at the Marine Drive along the sea beach. Earlier, the High Court gave a stay order on a similar project to build a civil service academy in this tourist district.

We cannot help but ask: why would the government agencies plan and implement projects on protected forestland, most of which were declared ecologically critical areas? What is noticeable in the majority of projects is, they have been undertaken without consulting the relevant government authorities – such as the Department of Environment and the Forest Department. In some cases, the land ministry allotted the land without consulting the forest ministry. Moreover, many of the projects started without even getting any environmental clearance. All this shows lack of coordination among government ministries and departments concerned.

We have already lost enough of our forests by now, and are in no position to lose more. We have all the laws and policies to protect our forests. But how long will they remain unimplemented? We urge government agencies to set an example of preserving forests, rather than destroying what's still left of them.

What the IMF said, our economists have said before



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Almost a hundred years ago, a prominent Congress leader, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, commented that what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow. Similarly, it can be argued that what Bangladeshi economists have been saying for a long time is pretty much what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has told our central bank and the government. But it is only after the IMF said so that our government has started listening.

The basic principles of economics are the same no matter who mentions them first. But our finance ministry – highly concerned with political agendas – trashed the suggestions when they came from our economists. The Bangladesh Bank, too, followed the finance ministry's footprint because of its lack of independence. The ministry didn't stop there. Rather, it produced opposing theories overnight, which are often ironic and have never been heard before in the

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field of economics.

One of their peculiar theoretical inventions is that the nine percent cap on lending rates need not be lifted to tame inflation, while all sensible countries in the world have raised their lending rates to put a brake on private credit growth – knowing that it will be recessionary. Our ministry justifies the nine-percent cap as investment augmenting to deliver more growth and employment. It is adding fuel to the fire of inflation, which is already above the 10 percent mark. Ironically, the last budget statement describes combating inflation as its number one priority. Then, why is there such



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a contradiction between its target and its action?

The non-market high rates on *sanchayapatra* (savings certificates) have been validated multiple times by the finance ministry over the last decade to hide its fiscal incapacity. It's the biggest national charity for pampering the super-rich in the name of supporting the vulnerable segment of our society. A *Prothom Alo* report from October 10 shows how painful it is for widows to get the income from *sanchayapatra*, which requires tax papers from them – in a country where the tycoons are notorious for dodging taxes every day.

If *sanchayapatra* rates are above the lending rate, wouldn't that create an opportunity for unethical arbitrage? Just borrow at nine percent and save at 11 percent. The government may not know how many business magnates are taking advantage of this loophole. But the ministry is sticking to its self-spawned theory.

The budget of FY2012 suddenly claimed that investment is not that sensitive to interest rates. Of course, interest rates don't matter to the habitual defaulters with political clout. But small and medium enterprises must take the cost of interest rates into account before investing in their businesses. In the face of declining

of nine and six percent; ii) floating the exchange rate and getting rid of multiple exchange rates; iii) proper accounting of foreign exchange reserves; iv) correcting abnormal rates on *sanchayapatra*; and v) improving fiscal capacity. Bangladeshi economists have been calling for these measures incessantly. But the finance ministry turned a deaf ear to all of them.

Bangladesh witnessed another strange spectacle when the planning minister announced the monthly inflation figures. Inflation is a matter of concern for the central bank and for the commerce ministry. It has nothing to do with the planning ministry, which is supposed to deal with long-term plans.

One morning, the planning minister proclaimed that inflation figures would be announced on a quarterly basis instead of a monthly basis, defying all good practices across the world. While all countries are trying to give more information to help the public and policymaking, ours is moving backwards. Intentionally hiding unpleasant figures cannot fool people who have some common sense.

The same is happening when it comes to monetary policy

to make it biannual again.

When ministries intend to provide data less frequently, it may imply that the data quality is low, and that they want to hide it. The need for quarterly GDP data has always been emphasised by economists. One statistics officer at the Bangladesh Bank once brought to my notice a project to upgrade the data quality by increasing GDP data frequency on a quarterly basis. I thought it was important and tried to convene a meeting with the finance ministry – without much success. Now, the IMF has again instructed to make it quarterly.

India moved to announcing its GDP quarterly since the mid-1990s, and Pakistan has also started doing the same. We brag about being ahead of India and Pakistan on many counts, but the quality of our data is atrocious compared to global standards. Economists always question when ministries publish data, particularly those concerning growth, unemployment, and inflation. The IMF has reiterated the same point. Fortunately, our government can't turn down the IMF's suggestions the way it does when it comes from our economists.

The threat of a ‘nuclear winter’



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On July 16, 1945, the world witnessed the mind-boggling destructive power hidden inside a nuclear bomb. After seeing the catastrophic might of the bomb at the Trinity Test Site in Alamogordo, New Mexico, Robert Oppenheimer (director of the Manhattan Project) famously invoked a quote from the Bhagavad Gita, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

In the decades following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, that killed an estimated 120,000 people instantly, global nuclear arsenal swelled to a frighteningly dangerous level.

Today, we are living in perpetual fear of ever-powerful nuclear weapons in the armoury of the US, Russia and China, hanging over our heads like the Sword of Damocles.

Our anxiety level about a nuclear war reached a new height after Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. However, most nuclear experts believe that the likelihood of Russia actually using a nuclear weapon in the Ukraine war is still relatively low. Regardless, given Putin's current predicament, his public statements and recent drills of Russian defence forces practising the delivery of a massive nuclear strike, the threat is seen as increasing.

As scientists study the likely ramifications of a nuclear war, a

new term has been added to our vocabulary: nuclear winter. It is a phenomenon in which the Earth's atmosphere will be so full of smoke and noxious mixture of particulates and gases from the firestorms caused by nuclear bombs that sunlight will be drastically reduced or may not even reach the Earth's surface, resulting in a prolonged cooling of our planet.

Clearly, the concept of nuclear winter deals with environmental

collateral damage of a nuclear war. Indeed, the idea of nuclear winter first gained attention in the 1970s, when a group of scientists, including the renowned astronomer Carl Sagan, considered the environmental consequences of a nuclear war.

Even though it is a chilling concept, there are credible precedents of nuclear winter.

In 1980, the father-son duo of Luis and Walter Alvarez presented evidence

that the impact of an asteroid hitting the Earth at the end of the Cretaceous Period some 65 million years ago scattered enough dust and debris into the air so as to darken the sky for an extended period of time. The subsequent climate change cooled the Earth by four to five degrees Celsius. Also, the abnormally cold summer of 1783, both in Europe and in the US, is attributed to the enormous eruptions of a chain of volcanoes in Iceland that lasted for eight months.

Drawing on the work of Sagan and climate models created by meteorologists, scientists at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge warn that a nuclear war between the US and Russia will result in fires that can spew “more than 330 billion pounds of smoke and sunlight-absorbing black carbon into the upper atmosphere,”

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causing a protracted period of darkness around the world. As a consequence, global temperatures may decrease by 10-15 degrees. In the event of an all-out-war scenario, some models predict global cooling by as much as 20 degrees.

Such a sharp drop in temperature will push the Earth into a “Mini Ice Age,” perhaps lasting for a few decades. The prospect of a nuclear war triggering an ice age was first speculated by the

science fiction writer Poul Anderson in his iconic 1947 post-apocalyptic story *Tomorrow's Children*.

A separate study conducted by scientists at Rutgers University in New Jersey found that a nuclear war would result in millions of instant deaths. In the long run, millions more who were not even close to the blast site will die from exposure to harmful radiation and exceptionally cold temperatures. The study further notes that the blockage of sunlight will greatly affect the ecosystem by wiping away a lot of plant and animal lives, thereby starving two-thirds of the world population to death within two years.

Without providing any evidence, Russia is accusing Ukraine of planning to use a dirty bomb, which is a weapon that combines conventional explosives like dynamite with radioactive material like uranium or plutonium. Unlike the blast from a nuclear weapon that is activated by a nuclear reaction, the blast from a dirty bomb is generated by conventional explosives. Often referred to as a weapon for terrorists, it is designed to spread fear and panic more than eliminate any military target. The radiation released by a dirty bomb will be similar to the radiation emitted after the 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which claimed thousands of lives.

The bottom line is, the Cold War may be over, but with tensions rising between Russia and Nato over Ukraine, the prospect of a widespread nuclear war seems real. Once the war starts, the nuclear weapons fired by the warring nations at each other and/or across different continents will herald the onset of nuclear winter with ominous reddish-brown mushroom clouds billowing above the horizon.