

## The current economic crisis is of our own making

Do we have the political will to come out of it?

For years, we boasted about steady economic growth and the resilience of our economy, all the while ignoring repeated warnings from economists and others that such growth would be unsustainable in the long run unless some major reforms were undertaken, particularly in the financial and energy sectors. Did we think the economy was invincible, as we took one disastrous decision after another, prioritising the self-serving interests of some vested quarters over that of the general public and eroding the pillars of crucial institutions in the process? Now, Bangladesh faces an unprecedented crisis, with surging inflation, fluctuation in the exchange rate, depleting reserves, growing unemployment, rampant inequality and rising food insecurity threatening the very stability of our economy and the well-being of our people.

In a recent roundtable organised by *The Daily Star*, noted economists highlighted that while the Russia-Ukraine war may have triggered the current crisis to some extent, Bangladesh could have predicted and prevented much of its fallout had the government addressed the longstanding issues afflicting the major sectors. Experts have long warned against – as have we, in this very column – the growing number of non-performing loans, extravagant spending and wastage on megaprojects, poor tax-GDP ratio, lack of financial independence of the central bank, failure to adjust interest rate to reflect the current economic reality and the dangers of artificially propping up the taka's value against the dollar, to name just a few. Our policymakers chose to remain oblivious of the forewarnings, and now, unfortunately, it is the public who must answer for their callousness. It is ironic that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are now prescribing much of the same conditions to avail its USD 4.5 billion loan as had previously been suggested by our economists.

The question, moving forward, is whether our policymakers have learnt anything at all from a decade of poor governance, and if they are willing to redress their past mistakes in light of the volatile situation of their own making. Thus far, the government has failed to produce a clear and comprehensive policy package, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, that provides a roadmap of how to come out of the current crisis. The piecemeal solutions it has taken over the past few months, such as import control or marginal adjustment of annual development programme, are simply not enough to address the severity of the problems facing the nation.

First and foremost, the government needs to come out of its mode of denial. Without any further delay, it must develop a transparent and comprehensive policy package that judiciously tackles the interconnected issues afflicting the economy. It ought to make the interest rate and exchange rate flexible, and take necessary fiscal measures to offshoot any potential instability as a result. It must get rid of subsidies from some sectors, such as capacity charges to quick rental power plants, while prioritising subsidies in others, such as agriculture. In the meantime, to protect the people from the ongoing inflationary pressure and impending food insecurity, it must expand its social safety net programmes and increase distribution of subsidised goods. The real question is: do we have the political will to rescue the economy and the people from a catastrophe?

## Education should spread knowledge, not communalism

The authorities must ensure hateful ideas are not seeping into our education sector

In any functional society, education is supposed to play a crucial part in dispelling ignorance, not in adding to it. Which makes it all the more shocking that an exam question has been found to be hurtful to the religious sentiments of the Hindu community – that too in the HSC examinations, which are being taken by over 12 lakh students across the country.

According to a report in this daily, the creative part of the exam's Bangla first part told the story of two Hindu brothers in a long-standing dispute over land, at the end of which one brother leaves his homestead and moves to India. This occurs because a Muslim man slaughters a cow on his land. However, the story suggests that this action was orchestrated by the Hindu brother, who used the slaughter to provoke his brother and force him to move, leading him free to grab his property and keep it for himself. The story then moved on to compare this brother to Mir Zafar, and asked questions with relation to untrustworthy family members.

This entire exercise is as problematic as it is baffling. Setting aside the bizarre subject matter and comparison, it portrays the Hindu community negatively and makes light of a very serious issue – the communal violence that has taken away land from many minority communities, some of which had been in their families for generations, and forced them to move elsewhere.

In recent times, we have seen a number of such incidents of violence flare up in the country. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, at least 1,642 Hindu houses have been attacked or destroyed between 2013 and June 2022, and over a thousand people have been injured. And we have continued to see more such attacks, including immediately after the period surveyed, when a mob vandalised a temple and several homes of the Hindu community in the Lohagara upazila of Narail. Every year, we see reports of sporadic violence and vandalism of idols in the run up to the religious festivals of minorities.

Instead of designing questions that recognise the uncertain and frightening circumstances facing many minority communities in Bangladesh, how can an education board come up with questions that vilify their hardships instead? The hypothetical situation created in the exam paper is horribly offensive and completely unacceptable, since it places the onus of the communal violence on the greed of the minority sibling and absolves the majority of their culpability.

We appreciate that the education minister has promised to take a strong stance on this issue, and that the teachers responsible for this question have already been identified. But the relevant authorities cannot look upon this as an isolated incident while a climate of fear continues to hover over minority communities. We cannot allow communal hatred and bigotry to seep into spaces meant for knowledge and understanding, and any attempts to do so must be investigated with the utmost seriousness.

# The perils of protecting the image



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

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On October 28, the foreign ministry presented the findings and recommendations of a report to its Parliamentary Standing Committee, assuring them that efforts were afoot to bring Bangladeshi expatriates involved in anti-government activities under the law. The report states that, despite their positive contributions such as sending remittances, “many (expatriates) are engaged in propaganda against Bangladesh and (the) government. The government is working to bring those to book who are engaged in anti-government activities and giving provocative and completely fabricated statements.” An exasperated ruling party member of the standing committee observed that due to the continuous propaganda against the government, representatives of some EU countries had started to express negative attitudes towards our country. Echoing the MP's concerns, the foreign minister noted that in several European countries, “a syndicate is spreading propaganda against the country on (a) broader scale” while the chair of the parliamentary standing committee urged the Bangladesh missions to step up their efforts to nab “the culprits.”

Such an approach to stem critics appears to be flawed on several counts. The amorphous concepts of “tarnish” and “image” provide a wide scope for subjective interpretation and abuse. The foreign ministry and MPs do not draw distinction between criticism of the government and the state. They give undue credence to detractors irrespective of the quality of content of the messages they convey. They also underestimate the people's intelligence and agency to draw a distinction between truth and propaganda.

In recent years, Bangladeshi expatriates have been increasingly expressing their views and concerns online, often questioning and challenging major political parties and their leaders about their policies and programmes. There is an enormous variation in the form, content and quality of such views: while a few are bold, revealing and meet high standards of investigative journalism, others descend into diatribes. Quite



understandably, both streams create discomfort for those in positions of authority, a group groomed by and used to a pliant media at home.

Those in positions of authority feel that these expatriates are tarnishing the country's image at a time when the government has elevated the country to a dignified position, leading them to draw the conclusion that these expats are on BNP Jamaat payroll “who do not believe in Bangladesh's independence” and thus are nothing but “enemies of the people of the country.” Time and again, senior functionaries have announced their resolve to initiate actions against those “who resort to cybercrime to tarnish the image of the country abroad.” In pursuing this agenda, they sought the support of Facebook and Youtube.

This fetish with the “image of the country” was stark when three groups of returnee migrant workers arriving from the Gulf states, Syria, Lebanon, and Vietnam were incarcerated soon after they finished their quarantine period. “Tarnishing the image of the country abroad” and “hatching conspiracy against the government and the state while in quarantine” were two principal charges against them. While the group that returned from the Gulf was comprised of

migrants who were in detention for breaking laws in their destination country, the returnees from Syria and Lebanon were irregular migrants, and those returning from Vietnam were victims of human trafficking. All were in quarantine administered by the Bangladesh Army.

When the veracity of these charges were challenged at the High Court,

certain quarter was conspiring to taint the image of the government, while his fellow minister, without providing any evidence, blamed BNP and Jamaat “for conspiring to topple the government by carrying out these incidents.” Likewise, in mid-October of 2021, when several Hindu temples were vandalised before the Durga Puja, the government announced that “such incidents were orchestrated intentionally so that Bangladesh's image is damaged.”

While this fixation with “the image” in the political establishment is somewhat understandable, it is worrisome when the term finds takers among the senior most functionaries tasked to dispense justice and ensure rule of law. On March 7, 2021, the chief justice of Bangladesh, while passing a judgment, observed, “It should be kept in mind that we would give priority to the country's image first. We will not consider bail if the image of the country is tarnished through someone's writing.” On March 8, 2021, while asserting his office's independence, the outgoing chair of the Anti-Corruption Commission admitted, “I had to refrain from taking some decisions during this period in order to protect the image of the country.”

Perhaps the ruling elite's disdain for the rule of law and lack of respect for citizens' rights stem from their inability to make a distinction between the institution of the government and the institution of the state. Any criticism of the government is hence synonymised with hurting the country's image. In response, the government is engaged in criminalising freedom of expression by crafting powerful tools such as the Digital Security Act. Analyst Kamal Ahmed makes the point that the issue of the country's image has not been mentioned in the descriptions of offences against the state and seditious offences under the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Bangladeshis deserve a just, fair and equitable system of governance. While quite a few laws and administrative practices increasingly stifle freedom of expression, assembly and the right to organise, there is virtually no progress in holding the perpetrators of extrajudicial killing, involuntary disappearance and torture to account – chipping away the much coveted image of the country. Enhancing the country's image entails making tangible and dedicated efforts to address those cracks. Those at the helm must also acknowledge that it is the common masses' trust and confidence in the institution of the state that is the ultimate promoter of a country's image.

## How will AL tackle the run-up to the election?



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Awami League may be going through the most difficult time in the last 13 or so years that it has been in power. On the one hand, it is trying to fend off a persistent BNP campaign that, for the first time in many years, has managed to gain some public sympathy, while on the other, it is trying to bolster an economy that has been battered by events beyond its control. The pandemic has weakened the global economy, and consequently affected Bangladesh as well, although the country was able to tackle the pandemic impacts successfully. But the Russia-Ukraine war has exposed the systemic weaknesses in certain sectors of our economy. However, there is a strong conjecture that even without the external factors, these cracks and weak links would have eventually come to light due to widespread corruption and money being siphoned out of the country.

One of the major fallouts of the Russia-Ukraine war is the raging global energy crisis, which has caused a crippling power shortage in Bangladesh, bringing load-shedding back to our lives. Since BNP has made this crisis, which is directly affecting people's lives and livelihoods, a major agenda in their ongoing campaign, they are getting public attention. Ironically, the disastrous end of BNP's rule in 2006 and their embarrassing

defeat in the 2008 general election is attributed to acute power shortage and spiralling food prices.

Embracing an issue that is people-centric is something BNP has hardly done before. In the last 13 years that the party has been out of power, its campaigns were always focused on partisan interests like reinstatement of the caretaker government system, release of party chief Khaleda Zia from jail, and so on, which gained negligible traction. Also, the ploy of waging violent street protests before the 2014 general election backfired after widespread loss of lives and property. The ruling Awami League cashed in on these strategic mistakes and managed to convince people that development and prosperity was more important than democracy.

However, BNP seems to have learnt from its mistakes and adopted the strategy of engaging people by highlighting pro-people issues, such as price hike of essentials, power crisis, etc, in its campaign. Consequently, more and more non-political people are showing their sympathy towards the BNP as the party holds one rally after another in divisional cities, thus putting more pressure on the ruling party.

Interestingly, when the BNP began the ongoing phase of their movement a few months ago, there were several

deaths due to shooting on the rallies by law enforcement members. However, in what appears to be a curious reversal of strategies, the ruling party seems to have changed course and is now trying to foil BNP rallies by allegedly “enforcing” strikes using their supporters in the workers and owners associations in the transport sector to prevent BNP

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supporters and sympathisers from going to the rally venues. Although this ploy isn't violent, the lack of transport is causing ordinary people massive inconvenience.

In mid-August, when BNP's campaign started to gain some real momentum, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said the opposition should be allowed to protest and not be harassed. She even said if the opposition wanted to cordon the Prime Minister's Office, she would let them. Is it rhetorical, or is there more to this statement? Was it aimed at placating quarters at home and abroad who are intent on seeing an inclusive participatory election? At least a part of the diplomatic corps in Bangladesh have apparently made it clear that their capitals believe it would behave them to insist on a

level-playing field leading up to the election. And not all of that can be managed through the quid pro quo that seems to have worked thus far.

But then, why the resistance against BNP rallies? Could it be that some vested quarters within the party are disobeying the prime minister and staging these transport strikes to mar her image? What would happen if the ruling party men did not create any obstacles for the BNP? The party would probably continue to get media coverage and remain the talk of the town. But that clearly isn't the case. And maybe the sight of people swarming to the BNP rallies and processions could make the bureaucracy doubt Awami League's chances of carrying the next election. And once that seed of doubt is sown, it will become rather difficult for the ruling party to enjoy the administration's cooperation during the election. Consequently, it seems as though the ruling party is quite nervous about seeing the support BNP is drawing, and in a desperate attempt, they are resorting to anti-people strategies.

The best kind of political movement is the one in which people participate in large numbers and a political party or several parties take the lead. A political movement without people's participation will never succeed. The question is: how long will people continue to sympathise with the BNP? The next parliamentary election is drawing closer, and it seems that the ruling party is making decisions that are alienating it further from the people. The sooner good sense prevails, the better it will be for the ruling party, which has a long history of taking the lead in all the greatest achievements of the country.