

Here comes the loan...

IMF deal further proof that economic reforms are badly needed

We're relieved that the International Monetary Fund's deal with Bangladesh has finally come off, ending weeks of speculations about its likelihood and possible conditions to be imposed by the multilateral lender. No, there is no "harsh condition" or reform plan attached to it, as was anticipated, but whether this will be good for Bangladesh in the long term will depend on who you ask. Reportedly, the two sides have reached a preliminary agreement on a USD 4.5 billion loan, which would be disbursed over a 42-month period, with the first of seven instalments expected in February. Bangladesh has thus become the third country in South Asia, after Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to secure a "staff-level" loan agreement with the IMF this year.

The development comes at a critical time for Bangladesh, with the government struggling with multiple crises including widening of the current account deficit, alarming decline of foreign exchange reserves, slowing growth, rising inflation, food and energy concerns, etc. In his reaction, the finance minister suggested that the move was a "precautionary measure" to ensure that the economic instability caused by the Russia-Ukraine war does not "escalate into a crisis." In the grand scheme of things, the loan amount, it must be said, is not substantial, nor is it expected to be a cut-and-dried solution to our dwindling foreign exchange reserves. But it holds a short-term value that Bangladesh can use right now.

The deal, requiring approval from the IMF's executive board to be effective, can help improve our creditworthiness, helping catalyse additional financing from other developmental and bilateral partners. Even though the full picture of the loan programme is to emerge, we are told that there were no IMF-set conditionalities per se. Instead, the government will be expected to pursue its own existing reform agenda. This includes raising the tax-GDP ratio, periodically adjusting the fuel price, implementing climate-related proposals made in the budget and on various international platforms, increasing remittance receipts through formal channels, increasing social spending, increasing exchange rate flexibility, expanding and diversifying exports, modernising the monetary policy framework, etc.

This is where critical focus must be given. With IMF or not, we must embark on a serious reform drive of our own volition to address these longstanding issues. Lack of good governance and sound policy has been a major barrier to Bangladesh's economic sustainability. Of course, the effects of external shocks like a war or pandemic cannot be underestimated. But economies where institutions are strong, accountable and capable of formulating and executing sound policies have a better chance of cushioning the impact of external and internal shocks. Unfortunately, the financial sector in Bangladesh is more known for corruption, mismanagement and unaccountability. Political interests often influence major decisions and policies.

We hope the IMF deal will put an end to this cycle and the culture of denial surrounding the poor health of the sector. We must critically think why such a deal was needed in the first place, and should move expeditiously to put into effect a comprehensive reform policy.

Ctg courts failing to deliver justice

Authorities must deal with case backlogs with the utmost urgency

How long should one have to wait to receive justice from the country's legal system? According to a report by the daily *Prothom Alo*, certain plaintiffs in Chattogram have been waiting for as long as 25 to 32 years for their cases to be resolved. The case backlog is so terrible that, in September this year, there were more than 2.5 lakh civil and criminal cases stuck in the system, with at least 150 new cases being brought to the district's 76 courts on a daily basis.

Time and again, media reports have highlighted extremely slow progress in investigation and charge-sheet submissions, continued postponement of hearing dates, and the lack of witnesses to testify in trials as some of the major reasons behind the backlog problem. There is also an acute shortage of judges across the system. Last month, for example, this daily reported how there are currently only five judges, including the chief justice, dealing with upwards of 17,500 cases at the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. That's 3,500 cases per head. Similarly, at the High Court Division, there are reportedly only 95 judges in charge of clearing a whopping 5.18 lakh pending cases. If this is the situation at the highest courts of the country, one can only imagine how the rest of the judiciary are currently faring.

This is a shocking state of affairs that makes the justice system more or less inaccessible to those who do not have the time and financial resources to pursue lengthy trials. The suffering caused by this is unimaginable. What is the point of having laws and courts in the service of citizens, only to have the system move so slowly that justice is effectively denied to them? If the state is not able to implement laws that punish violence, what is stopping society from spiralling into violence and lawlessness? The district – or even the country – cannot claim to be implementing the rule of law if the parents of a murdered child are still without justice 29 years later.

The authorities must do everything possible to strengthen the justice system immediately and ensure that the judicial process is not allowed to be manipulated or made ineffective. Changes will have to be made at every level – through the appointment of judges, better use of existing resources, the removal of procedural complexities and corruption, efficient and speedy investigations from law enforcement agencies, and building functional mechanisms to protect witnesses and encourage them to attend trials.

While all this cannot happen overnight, the relevant authorities must immediately show their commitment to getting the ball rolling. At the end of the day, we cannot lay claim to being a functional, democratic society if our judiciary is not able to deliver justice.

The underlying story of a simple photograph



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

The lead photograph published in the daily *Desh Rupantor* on Wednesday was of bamboo sticks for sale, whose demand has suddenly skyrocketed – with opposition political rallies becoming frequent, and violently obstructing them becoming a regular feature. The irony of the caption in Bangla – *Rajnaitik Baash* – is totally lost in its literal English translation – "Political Bamboos."

As an editor, I commend the photographer, the caption writer, and the news editor for depicting a sad reality with such subtle deftness.

I wish I could confine my feeling to just admiring the photograph and detach myself from the sad, and potentially dangerous, political story that those bamboo sticks tell. From the ruling party, the writing on the wall is that violence will be used to stop opposition rallies, and the message from the opposition is that it will be countered with equal force. The net result is rising political violence and the consequent vitiation of the atmosphere of freedom of assembly and free speech.

Every time the BNP called a meeting somewhere, almost like magic the local transport workers discovered issues to call a strike for. Mass presence in the Chattogram rally may have triggered this tactic. We saw transport strikes centred around BNP meetings in Mymensingh, Khulna, Rangpur, and Barishal. At first it covered only buses, then it included CNG auto-rickshaws, then battery-driven rickshaws, and so on.

In Barishal, where water transport constitutes a vital means of travelling, launch owners and drivers – usually at loggerheads – found some common cause to call a strike for. As if the coincidences of calling for transport strikes wherever BNP called for rallies were not enough, the magic showed greater power when those strikes were called off within hours – if not minutes – of the said rallies ending, without a single issue (for which the strike was originally called) even remotely addressed. BNP's Faridpur rally is supposed to be held tomorrow. The bus-minibus owners' association in Faridpur has already announced a strike from 6am today till 8pm tomorrow.

And all the while, Awami League's Obaidul Quader repeated *ad infinitum* that the strikes were the acts of the respective unions and had no connection with the ruling party. So much for his respect for our common sense.



PHOTO: DESH RUPANTOR

With opposition rallies becoming frequent, the demand for bamboo sticks has skyrocketed all over Bangladesh.

Those of us who had some exposure to mass demonstrations and know the psyche of protesters from our student days – and Awami League leaders have had plenty of such experience in the 50s and 60s against the Pakistanis, in the 80s in the anti-Ershad movement, and in the early 90s and in 2001-2006 against Khaleda Zia's government – know very well that the bigger the obstacles, the greater the determination of the activists to implement their programme. In our own student days, we would wait for the government to take obstructive measures; most often, it was the promulgation of Section 144, which prohibited gatherings and even walking on the streets in groups of more than five. It did nothing to dampen our spirit.

It is our belief that, had the Awami League not put up these obstacles, the gatherings might well have been less, and definitely not so defiant. In Barishal, we saw people arriving days in advance and sleeping under trees and eating only pulled rice just to attend the meeting. Such devotion is a dream come true for the BNP, and something that they have been craving for all these past years. Thanks to the ruling party, they have now got it.

Moves like engineered transport strikes end up affecting the general

minister's warning of police action if public suffering is caused by the BNP's proposed rally on December 10. Well, are the Dhakaites not witness to the city being almost paralysed when any major rallies are held by Chhatra League, Jubo League, other leagues, and by the Awami League itself? Public suffering, which is clearly evident and plentifully reported by the media, is not an issue then.

In judging our particular situation, we were made aware by our prime minister lately that Bangladesh was a part of the "Global Village" and, as such, we suffered from the same afflictions as the rest of the world. She is right. Just as we prosper when the world economy thrives, so we must also suffer when the situation reverses.

However, if we are a part of the Global Village in the economic sense, shouldn't we also be a part of that same Village in other senses – democracy, justice, accountability, respect for law, rights, freedom of speech, assembly and of the media, and whatever else the Global Village represents? Why must we only share its sufferings and not its benefits?

Why should voting – which many say cannot be banked on any more – every five years be our definition of democracy? What about

more the masters of the public than their servants. Have any of the project directors ever been held accountable for the endless delays and continuous budget revisions of projects that end up costing thousands of crores more to the taxpayers? What about the responsibility of their respective secretaries and line ministers?

We sometimes hear that the prime minister has expressed her displeasure about the said delays, but nothing about the officials being held responsible and punished. Accountability is a *sine qua non* in the governments of the Global Village that our prime minister has referred to and, as its part, we must have it too – not only their inflation, oil price rise, etc.

Coming back to the photo of bamboo sticks, it symbolises the unlawful use of power, which in its varied forms – political, financial, and physical – is how we are running our affairs. The current rise of political violence, against which the United Nations has expressed concern very recently, may become more acute as the general election nears.

The question that is deep in our hearts and remains only silently articulated is: will the election be free and fair or will the bamboo sticks have the last say?

HSC question paper is merely a symptom



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SHUPROVA TASNEEM

Remember when Soumya Sarkar burst onto the cricket scene and played a crucial role in the series wins against Pakistan and South Africa, inspiring many a conversation around how elegant his batsmanship was, and how Bangladesh had finally found an opener of real calibre?

Around that time, I happened to overhear one such enthusiastic conversation between a group of teenagers, one of whom was arguing that Soumya could be the next Brian Lara. And then I heard the words that, to this day, I find difficult to swallow: "The only problem is, he's Hindu."

This incident has recently been on my mind again, as a storm of debate rages around the controversial question found in the HSC Bangla question paper on Sunday.

For context, the creative section tells the story of two brothers, Nepal and Gopal, tied up in a long-standing land dispute. Nepal sells some land to a Muslim man to "teach his brother a lesson," but then becomes a victim of his own trick. The Muslim man slaughters a cow in front of Nepal's home, after which the latter leaves for

India forever. This bizarre account then asks questions comparing Nepal to Mir Jafar, whose name is synonymous with treachery in Bangali history.

The whole thing is offensive on many levels. The displacement of minorities after losing their ancestral land is no laughing matter, especially in Indigenous areas, where more than 10,000 have been forced to migrate abroad in the past four decades because of land disputes, according to the Kapaeeng Foundation. While it is difficult to find the exact numbers regarding such forced migration, the 2022 census suggests that the country's minorities have decreased in number since 2011. Over a similar period, there have been as many as 3,710 attacks on the Hindu community alone, according to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK).

However, the HSC question not only trivialises this issue by portraying it as a matter of personal choice, but implies that it is minorities' own "fault" – by trying to teach his brother a lesson, Nepal brings a calamity upon his own head, instead of being pushed away by external forces.

The question also completely

disregards the communal harmony that still exists in many parts of our country, and unnecessarily portrays the two communities as being alienated from each other. Why else would Nepal bring a Muslim person onto his land to punish his brother?

It is commendable that, as soon as this question became public, immediate actions were taken. A probe was launched, and the education board officials identified five teachers from the Jashore board who were involved in coming up with the question. In the latest development, the assistant professor identified as the question-setter has gone into hiding.

It is encouraging to see the government take this issue so seriously, with Education Minister Dipu Moni saying, "Once those responsible are identified, we would know if those who sow the seeds of communalism in the minds of students are involved in the question-setting and moderation process."

However, I can't help but feel we are focusing on the symptom and not the disease.

That the "seeds of communalism" have been sowed in the minds of many should be clear to us by now. It is reflected in the far-too-casually thrown out bigoted comments like that of Soumya's reluctant fan, and in the weaponisation of repressive laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA) against minorities for "hurting religious sentiments" – let's not forget that tenth-grader Dipti Rani Das spent over a year in jail for a Facebook status, while YouTube is still filled with so-called

sermons that spew hate speech against minorities and women.

And, of course, it is reflected in the frighteningly regular incidents of destruction of property, arson, and injury like we witnessed in Digholia village in Lohagara, Narail in July this year, where a mob vandalised a temple and several stores and homes of the Hindu community. We see these seeds of communalism during almost every Hindu religious festival, where there are always some incidents of idols being vandalised by "miscreants." Clamping down on question papers while all this continues unabated cannot bring about meaningful change.

However, we now have an opportunity to kickstart a crucial conversation on how little we encourage rational, progressive thought in our education system – demonstrated by the fact that such a bizarre and pointless question was part of the "creative" section of an exam. And at the centre of this conversation should be the fact that, five years ago, 17 different texts and poems by secular writers were removed from school textbooks in order to comply with the demands of Hefazate-Islam.

It is time for the authorities to acknowledge that failing to represent our nation's diversity in students' learning materials is far more likely to sow the seeds of communalism in their minds than exam questions. While the immediate remedy must be justice for victims of communal violence, in the long run, there is no alternative to a progressive education system in dealing with such regressive thoughts.