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No version of BCL seems good enough

Obaidul Quader's outburst betrays long-ignored urgency of holding it accountable

In a rare public outburst on Friday, Obaidul Quader, the general secretary of the ruling Awami League, blasted its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) for lack of discipline. While addressing the joint annual conference of BCL's Dhaka North and South units on Friday, Quader took a swipe at both BCL leaders and cadres, first because of lack of speech time given to invited guests and then because of thunderous slogans frequently drowning his voice. To the disruptive, poster-hoisting supporters of candidates for soon-to-be formed BCL committees in Dhaka North and South, he said: "Is this the Chhatra League? We do not want this Chhatra League. This is not the Chhatra League of Bangabandhu or Sheikh Hasina." He also said: "We do not want a Chhatra League that is undisciplined, that commits misdeeds." He repeated his warnings several times, and even threatened to take action.

We must admit that we do not want this Chhatra League either, for different reasons, however.

Obaidul Quader's reaction adds a welcome voice to ongoing concerns about the total lack of discipline and accountability in Chhatra League. But if we're being honest, his version of BCL and the version grilled into our minds are not exactly similar. His warning, without visible action, sounds like one of a temporarily irritated but perpetually indulgent guardian. It was prompted, rather than pre-planned. He seemed more concerned about a public spectacle of indiscipline than deep-seated organisational issues plaguing the BCL. He also sidestepped longstanding concerns of criminality and violence that BCL has been routinely accused of committing in public universities. His surprise – "Is this the Chhatra League?" – betrays a naïveté we can't afford.

In fact, it can be argued that the version of BCL that emerges in his speech is a direct offshoot of the version that the public have had to endure over the last decade or so, in a classic example of "as you sow, so shall you reap". The manner in which BCL leaders and cadres have been pampered and pardoned despite their reign of terror across most public universities and colleges only reinforced any illusion of the inviolability of their authority. Their control over campuses and streets has been absolute. Their insubordination – often directed at university teachers and administrators – has been seldom challenged, so it is only natural that they would feel emboldened to direct it inwards too, as they did on Friday.

Not a day goes by that we don't come across news of some disturbing developments courtesy of BCL. This is all the more painful because of its rich history of serving the nation. The problem, therefore, lies not in its existence but in how poor, unaccountable leadership led it astray over the years. We, therefore, urge the ruling party to control and reform its student wing. It must take measures to establish institutional accountability so that BCL can serve the general students and people rather than being a tool of manipulation for a few.

Local female representatives must be empowered

Women's political inclusion should not be reduced to tokenism

Even though the position of a female vice-chairperson at the local government level was created to ensure at least one-third representation of women in all elected posts, their appointment remains a cosmetic exercise, as they are often sidelined in the administrative process. These public representatives have often expressed their frustration about the obstacles they face in terms of development work and other activities, but their calls have been falling on deaf ears. Reportedly, they continue to be neglected at the policymaking stage, and in many cases, are unaware of their responsibilities themselves. It may appear that they have no role to play in the developmental activities of an upazila at all. This is quite frustrating at a time when Bangladesh as a nation is striving for women's empowerment and gender equality.

The problem at the local government level seems to be a deep-seated patriarchal mindset that is still at play there. At a views exchange meeting recently, female vice-chairmen complained that they have no role in decision-making regarding project implementations, even though sometimes they are elected with more votes than their male counterparts. Sometimes, they said, female representatives do not get much help from their male colleagues and are isolated instead. For example, a vice-chairperson who heads several committees and forums on women's rights commented that her decisions were not "evaluated" while policies were made. It is saddening to see the plight of women otherwise known as "powerful", because of their elected position, who, in reality, have to struggle to exercise the very power that they were elected to exercise.

Therefore, we urge the authorities to take urgent steps to rectify this disparity if they truly care about the representation of women at the local government level. True empowerment cannot be ensured through tokenism, and female vice-chairmen stand as living proof of that. Women currently face too many obstacles, from participating in education to participating in politics. When they try to enter into politics, they are often met with violence and character assassination. One may recall the case of a female Zila Parishad member candidate who, several months ago, was raped at gunpoint in Bagmara upazila's Mahmingram village so that she would not compete in the elections.

These types of incidents should be stopped from ever happening again. Women's participation in politics is crucial to improve the imbalance in our political system where men seem to hold all the power, even though some top positions are held by women. We must make sure that the positions allocated for women at the local government, and even at the central government, do not remain simply ornamental. These positions should not just be tokens of female participation. These must be true bastions of female leadership where women can truly play a role in the development of our society.

Coping with the twin shocks of inflation and depleting forex reserves



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Will a sizeable section of the population be facing food insecurity due to high inflationary pressures? And will the sharp depletion of foreign exchange reserves lead to macroeconomic instability? These are two major concerns that the country must now deal with as it struggles to come out of the current economic crisis.

Inflation has been hovering at between 6 and 9.5 percent since February 2021, and there are concerns that the actual inflation rate might be higher. Official rates of inflation may be underestimated since the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) still uses the 2004-2005 data to calculate the consumer price index.

There are four reasons for the soaring inflation of recent months – escalated prices of food, fuel, and other commodities in the global market; domestic production shortage; imperfections and anomalies in the local markets and supply-side disruptions; and currency depreciation. As always, low income groups are the worst sufferers. They are being forced to switch to cheaper food options, and cut down on costs of education, healthcare and entertainment, leading to deteriorating living standards that will result in negative intergenerational impacts.

Repeated surveys by Sanem among 1,300 garment workers in five cities in the last several months found that the food security indices of the workers and their families continued to decline. A delayed intervention will not work with the risk of food insecurity persisting for long. Though there is little scope for famine in Bangladesh, the risk of food shortage for marginalised communities and groups living in remote areas remains. The next two to three months are crucial for taking steps to deal with this.

In addition to boosting agricultural production, facilitating imports, and addressing market imperfections and manipulation through monitoring, the government should expand social protection programmes immediately



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

to support the people reeling from escalated food prices.

However, institutional and corruption-related challenges need to be addressed, too. There are always targeting errors in these programmes – those who are not supposed to receive assistance are getting it whereas those who need it the most are left out. The amount of support is small, and the coverage is low as well.

Regarding food security, we can use scientific methods to estimate food availability and actual demand, in order to find out production and import requirements, since incorrect supply and demand assessments lead to wrong policy choices. This can then create panic and allow vested quarters to spread misinformation about food shortage, and use the situation to make abnormally high profits from food prices.

In the last 11 months, on average, the foreign exchange reserve dropped by

more than USD 1 billion each month. This sharp depletion of reserves has put macroeconomic stability in danger. Though Bangladesh is not in a precarious situation yet, there is a danger if the rate of depletion does not slow down. Policies and strategies need to be put in place to boost reserves in order to meet import liabilities for 8-10 months.

In a bid to contain imports, the opening of letters of credit (LCs) to import capital machinery declined drastically during July to September. Similarly, the opening of LCs for importing intermediate goods and industrial raw materials fell by more than 14.5 percent during the same period, which could cause economic growth and employment generation

The taka has also lost its value sharply against the US dollar amid a shortage of the latter and a surge in import bills. Although the taka depreciated by more than 50 percent between 2010 and 2022, the sharpest depreciation happened only over the past few months since, before that, the taka was kept artificially appreciated. In contrast, India, Vietnam, and Indonesia allowed a gradual depreciation of their currencies to avoid sudden shocks.

The exchange rate regime in Bangladesh still remains highly distorted, as there are separate exchange rates for importers, exporters, remitters, and in curb markets. There must be a proper convergence of these multiple rates if we are to avoid further macroeconomic instability.

The trends in exports and remittances over the past few months haven't been encouraging, either.

to decelerate in the current financial year. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which are most likely to be affected by this, will need special policy interventions to cope.

The looming global recession is not good news for our exports and remittances. We must prioritise diversification of our export basket and address supply-side constraints, including the high cost of doing business. The hundi business, an illegal cross-border money transfer system, needs to be restricted to augment the flow of remittances through legal channels. It should be kept in mind that the hundi business is not only used by expatriates to send money home through informal channels, but also by people inside the country to illicitly transfer their wealth abroad. Unless these transfer routes from Bangladesh are restricted, there will always be demand for hundi.

Reducing child marriage is crucial for reducing violence against women



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Despite strong performances on socioeconomic and population fronts, the incidence of child marriage and associated adolescent fertility rate in Bangladesh is among the highest in the world and the highest in Asia. This is despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs' National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018-2030). It is clear that these efforts have been mostly ineffective in fighting child marriage.

In Bangladesh, the median age of first marriage was 16.3 years in 2018. More than half of women aged 20-24 years were first married before the age of 18, whereas 15 percent were married before turning 15 years old. This scenario has now been exacerbated by the pandemic. According to Manusher Jonno Foundation, during six months of 2020, almost 14,000 girls became victims of child marriage. Around half of them were 13-15 years old.

Against this backdrop, achieving the national target to end child marriage by 2041 will require political will and stronger actions. According to Unicef calculations, the country has to move eight times faster than the rate observed over the past decade to meet this target. In the case of the SDG target to eliminate child marriage by 2030, the country has to move 17 times faster than the present rate of reduction.

There are a number of factors leading to child marriages in the

country. Girls with lower education levels, experiencing poverty and having less educated mothers are more likely to be married at a younger age. Similarly, lack of birth documentation, lax enforcement of laws, lack of awareness of rights, gender inequality, and emergencies such as violence and climate change result in child marriage. Child marriages also tend to be concentrated in rural regions and urban slums.

Research has found strong links between child marriage and increased violence against women and gender inequality. Only 0.6 percent of women who married before their 18th birthday were found to be engaged in decent occupations, and it has been suggested that reducing child marriage by 50 percent could get 0.45 million more women employed in high-skilled occupations. Married girls are over four times more likely to be dropouts, and child brides are more likely to say that wife-beating is justified than their peers.

Globally, girls who married before the age of 15 were almost 50 percent more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence from their partners than those married after 18, disproving the present societal perception that early marriages can protect girls from gender-based violence. Married girls are also more likely to experience multiple pregnancies, recurrent miscarriage,

termination of pregnancy, delivery-related complications, and higher rates of child and maternal mortality.

Child marriage is associated with large income and welfare effects as well. According to World Bank analysis from multi-country data, the largest impacts of child marriage in terms of their economic costs tend to be related to fertility and population

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growth, education and earnings, and the health of the children born to young mothers. For instance, ending child marriage could result in USD 4 trillion in additional income globally due its impact on reducing population growth, under-five mortality and under-five stunting. It will also be accompanied by a 12 percent rise in income and productivity, and a 1.7 percent gain in GDP.

In Bangladesh, averting child marriage would lead to similar economic benefits through a reduction in maternal mortality, infant mortality,

child mortality, hospitalisation and inability to work – the total economic benefits in this connection could be USD 33.9 billion.

In contrast, it would take relatively little funding to actually end child marriage.

According to a 2019 UNFPA Johns Hopkins study, ending 90 percent of child marriages by 2030 would cost USD 35 billion in total, amounting to roughly USD 600 to spare each child from becoming a bride. Various compositions of cash, in-kind payments, and community-based approaches have been moderately successful in preventing child marriages in quite a few countries. Research has also pointed towards the need for complementary interventions to improve quality of schooling, since empowering girls with information, skills and support networks can be a vital strategy in increasing the age of first marriage.

In Bangladesh, the persistent occurrences of child marriage indicate the necessity of an institutionalised approach to address social norms that perpetuate child marriage, in addition to direct interventions. At the same time, there must be effective implementation of the law that makes these marriages illegal. Also, reliable and updated data on child marriage is crucial to ensure timely interventions and informed policymaking.

Reducing child marriage will not only benefit girls and women by saving them from missed education and earning opportunities, pre- and post-natal health risks, and infant mortality rates and malnutrition. It will ultimately lead to enhanced decision-making authority of women in the household and reduce intimate partner violence, which in the long run will benefit the entire country by lowering fertility rates, population growth, and poverty.