

The Daily Star

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## Is 'vice' in VC the new normal?

UGC report on the VC of Islamic Arabic University must be taken seriously

In a country where public institutions are undermined by widespread corruption, it is perhaps too much to expect that public universities would be immune to it. But there is a certain line that the public expects teachers and administrators of a higher seat of learning not to go beyond, for them not to be totally indistinguishable from corrupt bureaucrats and public servants. But even that line is being crossed now, with those responsible for the universities often accused of corruption, impropriety and criminal activities.

The latest example emerged from the Islamic Arabic University (IAU). According to our report based on the findings of the University Grants Commission (UGC), the university's vice-chancellor (VC) has been involved in "illegal and unethical activities and corruption", so much so that "it is not possible to maintain smooth academic and administrative activities by retaining him as vice-chancellor." The call for his sacking from the UGC is a refreshing development, given its own spotty record as an overseer, but it just goes to show the extent to which the VC's seven-year tenure so far has been marked by corrupt practices.

The VC apparently made a habit of ignoring or bending rules whenever it came to recruitments. He recruited more people than stipulated in the university's recruiting advertisements, without the approval of the university syndicate. And even though the Islamic Arabic University Act 2013 doesn't give him the authority to appoint anyone on a temporary basis, he often breached it too. As well as illegal recruitments, the process through which candidates were shortlisted and appointed was also found to be shady. For example, many of the appointment-related papers were found to be "doctored".

Among those thus appointed were both high-ranking and low-level officers. A member of the UGC probe committee also said that at least five teachers were also appointed, although as an affiliating university, the IAU has no academic departments of its own. This level of corruption would not have been possible without the blessing of the VC and top officials of his administration. The question is, why has no action been taken against them yet?

Unfortunately, this is by no means an isolated development. Similar irregularities, not just in recruitment but in many other administrative aspects, have been reported fairly regularly in public universities across the country. Seldom, however, do we see any meaningful action to prevent this. One may recall the President's scathing remarks last month about the nepotism, corruption and professional insincerity of some of the VCs of public universities. In his speech, he stressed the importance of recruitments based on merit and quality, as well as accountability for those in charge.

One may argue if the existing culture of politicised recruitment of VCs and other top officials in public universities will allow for an accountability mechanism to work. The strength that dishonest administrators draw from their political connection is undeniable. We must break this cycle. Universities must be allowed to not only teach honesty but also become an example of it themselves. That should begin with having honest and capable people at the helm of their administrations.

## Hasan and Sohel deserve justice

Authorities must unearth the truth behind questionable DB raid and arrests made in 2016

We are disappointed at the way investigations into a case filed over the "confiscation" of fake bank notes from a hotel in Paltan in 2016 have been going on, with the two men implicated in this case still struggling to get justice as they allege that the first information report (FIR) and the subsequent case filed against them had been cooked up by some officers of the Detective Branch of police. According to our report, the two men, Hasan Majumder and Sohel Rana – then manager and chef of Hotel Bandhu, respectively – were arrested by plainclothes DB men from the hotel premises on November 6, 2016.

Although footage from two CCTV cameras showed that the duo were being handcuffed and taken away by a group of DB men – and eyewitnesses also confirmed it – the FIR prepared by police a day after the incident gave a completely different picture. It mentioned that police officers arrested them from an alley near Fakirapool Fish Market area while the duo were apparently fleeing the spot with Tk 25 lakh worth of fake notes.

Reportedly, after Hasan and his brother filed complaints against nine DB men to the Police Headquarters, Dhaka Metropolitan Police, the Prime Minister's Office, and the home ministry, multiple probe committees were formed to investigate the allegations. However, until now we were in the dark about what these probe committees had found. And now that the police submitted two probe reports before a Dhaka court, we are even more shocked at the contradictions they contain. While the first probe report could not find any proof that fake notes were confiscated at the place mentioned in the case – with the place of arrest mentioned also contradicting the video evidence – the second report did not take the CCTV footage into consideration at all, and said that Hasan's allegations against the officers were false.

Why such contradictions in the probe reports? Why did the second probe body ignore the CCTV footage of the incident? Why did they not listen to the versions of the many eyewitnesses of the incident besides their own men? Did the police just form the second probe body to save their own men? All these questions need to be answered. And the allegation by one of the accused that DB officials demanded Tk 3 lakh from him for their release must also be investigated.

It is unfortunate that six years after the case was filed, the accused are still having to appear before the court. Both of them are living in financial hardship as their families had to sell most of their belongings, including land, to fight the case. We urge the higher authorities of the police to look into this case sincerely, clear the contradictions, and take action against their men if found guilty.

# How do we overcome spatial inequality in Bangladesh?



Dr Nawshad Ahmed, a former UN official, is an economist and urban planner.

NAWSHAD AHMED

As a country's GDP growth rate rises, development is likely to be concentrated in certain geographical regions, urban areas and growth centres. This phenomenon is common to most countries when they make faster socio-economic progress. Therefore, how the overall prosperity brings with it regional inequalities is a subject that is studied in many countries with lot of interest due to its policy implications. But in Bangladesh, not much research has been done on this.

One study conducted recently by the Institute for Planning and Development (IPD), titled "Spatial Configuration of ADP from National Budget in Terms of Sectors and Districts," demonstrated some disparity in public investment between urban and rural areas. The study shows that, in FY 2021-22, about 63 percent of the housing and community services allocation from the Annual Development Programme (ADP) budget went to three major metropolitan areas: Dhaka, Chattogram, and Gazipur. Dhaka received the highest allocation, which was 37.24 percent, Chattogram 17.40 percent, Gazipur 8.14 percent, Rajshahi five percent, Khulna 3.35 percent, Narayanganj 2.76 percent, and Cox's Bazar 2.41 percent. Several districts received as low as 0.20 percent of the housing and community services allocation from the ADP budget, such as Jhenaidah, Satkhira, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Kurigram, and Barguna.

Over the last several decades, Dhaka and Chattogram cities have been growing at a disproportionately higher rate, requiring formidable government investment to sustain their infrastructure needs. Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi and Khulna – these four cities accommodate about 60 percent of the country's total urban population. This large urban concentration is a kind of a spatial imbalance within the country. Article 19(2) of our constitution mentions that the state shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequalities and attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the republic. This vision of achieving both economic and physical equalities is a common objective in both developed and developing countries, and therefore, this is an important area that should get the attention of our researchers and policymakers.

Spatial inequality arises due to unequal distribution of income, wealth, health services, educational facilities, etc across geographical regions. This may be the result of

centres, trading areas and industrial zones that receive not only higher public investment, but more private investment too, has resulted in the spatial inequality to continue.

Without deliberate actions from planners and policymakers, spatial inequality is likely to get worse, since economic growth is an unstoppable process. Systematic evidence from

are certain lagging areas within the eastern region and some promising places in the western region. We know that poverty is bad in the haor areas in the northeast region, chars of Noakhali, and some areas in the north-central.

On the other hand, the increased agricultural production, greater concentration of micro-credit



Compared to the rest of Bangladesh, Dhaka along with Chattogram has been growing at a disproportionately higher rate.

PHOTO: STAR

local differences in investment in infrastructure, as well as natural endowment, geographical features and economies of agglomeration. Socio-economic inequality remains central to public policy discussions in Bangladesh, but not so much on spatial inequality yet.

Geographic inequalities can bring political tensions between local government leaders and national level policymakers and politicians. A big chunk of parliamentary debate time is consumed in discussions around demands from the MPs for health and educational services, roads and other infrastructure, which arises from a perception of regional disparities – among districts and upazilas, regions, urban areas, industrial centres, and among more advanced rural and backward areas. Higher amounts of budgetary allocation are made for certain regions, in some urban areas more than others, owing to the influence of powerful and more articulate politicians.

Over time, these influences have resulted in better services and facilities in some areas compared to others. As much as the government wants a more balanced regional development, by constructing new bridges, roads, ports, export processing zones etc, the sheer weight of already developed urban

a growing body of research work in various countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America proves that rapid economic growth is associated with uneven regional and urban development.

While the positive relationship between development and regional disparity is apparent, there is a lack of consensus on the causes of spatial inequality and what measures the policymakers should take to tackle the growing spatial inequalities. A background study paper for the Seventh Five-Year Plan, titled "Lagging Districts Development," mentions the existence of regional disparity between the eastern and western districts of the country in general. The eastern region includes Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet divisions, whereas the western region constitutes Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna and Barishal divisions.

The factors that underpin faster growth in the eastern region are thought to be better infrastructure, a higher level of public resource allocations, access to energy and natural resources, concentration of entrepreneurship, skilled labour force, industrialisation, urbanisation, access to finance, and favourable geographical locations. However, a closer look at data reveals that there

activities, and growing small and medium enterprises in the western region have reduced the disparity to some extent. The newly built transport infrastructure in the western region, including the Padma Bridge, has opened up economic opportunities for the future.

Reducing spatial inequality should be a critical objective of the government's development initiative under its "inclusive economic growth" policy in the Eighth Five-Year Plan. The plan calls for building equal opportunities for the citizens. The factors that create inequality should thus be addressed. The government needs to work on narrowing the infrastructure gaps, building human capital, promoting financial inclusion, expanding social protection programmes, improving the quality of primary health and nutrition, ensuring effective decentralisation, and encouraging participatory local government systems.

There are over 500 urban centres in Bangladesh with varying sizes, and these have very important roles in promoting growth and development in the country. Therefore, more equitable distribution of public resources should be ensured to these centres to have more balanced urbanisation in the country.

## Bangladesh takes another step in leading global climate adaptation



### POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

On December 11, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally launched the new Global Hub on Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) in Dhaka along with the foreign minister and environment minister, and Ban Ki-Moon, head of the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA). The new Global Hub on LLA will be located in the Dhaka office of the GCA, which is located in the Department of Environment (DOE) headquarters in Dhaka's Agargaon area. The office was set up earlier to provide support on adaptation, knowledge-sharing, and capacity-building for the South Asian countries and has already received some funding from the government of the United Kingdom to start its work in Bangladesh.

The activities in Bangladesh will involve supporting Brac in promoting LLA as well as supporting the International Centre for Climate

Change and Development (ICCCAD) for a publication on LLA based on the outputs from the Gobeshona Global Conference on Locally Led Adaptation and Resilience held earlier this year. Going forward, the Global Hub in Dhaka will link together all the government ministries with NGOs and other stakeholders in Bangladesh and South Asia to promote bottom-up capacity-building on adaptation in different climate-vulnerable ecosystems of the country as well as the region in a nature-based solutions (NbS) way.

At the same time, the Global Hub will also provide knowledge-sharing with the GCA adaptation acceleration programmes in Africa and Asia, which are already in progress.

The main reason why the GCA chose their regional office in Dhaka as the Global Hub for LLA was to recognise

Bangladesh as a global leader in LLA and to enable other countries in the Global South to learn from it.

Some of the key features that the Global Hub will focus on in South Asia and the South-South knowledge-sharing will involve local communities in both urban and rural settings. They will be given genuine opportunities to become leaders in adaptation instead

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of just being recipients of top-down funding from the central government or international donors. This means local communities will be involved in design, planning, implementation and even monitoring and evaluation of results of adaptation investments.

Secondly, it will involve peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing within each country and across countries both in South Asia and beyond. A South Asian network on LLA has already been launched on December 11. At the same time, peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing has already started between the urban slum dwellers in Mongla and in Nairobi in Kenya to promote knowledge-sharing with Africa.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the role of the Global Hub will be to leverage large-scale investment in adaptation through LLA from major funders such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), as well as others.

As Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in her opening remarks, Bangladesh is willing to share its knowledge with vulnerable communities through LLA, while also trying to leverage the hundreds of billions of dollars that have been promised by the developed countries to support adaptation in the developing countries of the Global South.

If a significant portion of that funding can be channelled towards LLA across the Global South, then the Global Hub will be a success.