

The Daily Star

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## CCC must up its game

### Residents of Chattogram deserve better from their city corporation

It is totally unacceptable that the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) has failed to make any progress at all in a project taken up three and a half years ago to light up various city streets. According to a report by this daily, it has been stuck in the mud due to multiple reasons, including delays in tender procedures, negligence of CCC officials, alleged tender manipulation, etc. Already, the deadline of the project, which was first approved in 2019 and scheduled to be completed by June 2021, has been revised twice because of lack of progress.

Chattogram is among the most important business hubs in Bangladesh. Being the second-largest city in the country, it accounts for nearly 12 percent of our GDP, including 40 percent of industrial output, 80 percent of international trade, and 50 percent of tax revenue. The city is home to many of the oldest and largest companies in the country, and has one of the busiest ports in the whole of South Asia. Given these realities of national economic importance, one would expect Chattogram's urban development work to also run parallelly, which will only increase its contribution to our nation's growth. Despite that, the CCC's failure to start or implement a simple project even after three years shows how ill-prepared it is for the journey that lies ahead.

Upon completion, the project is expected to reduce the electricity bill of CCC by half, and a smart management system would be introduced instead of the present manual process, replacing around 500 switches for lamp control with four central server stations - while the LED lamps will be controlled by timers and magnetic control systems. This, again, would save the CCC, and thereby the taxpayers, a substantial amount of money every year. Yet, despite having the potential to significantly increase efficiency across the board, CCC authorities have ignored the importance of implementing the project.

This is, however, not the first time that they have failed to implement a project that is vital for Chattogram's needs. For example, about eight years ago, the authorities took up a project to excavate a canal to ease the suffering of city residents from waterlogging. Though the Tk-327 crore project was supposed to be completed by June 2017, the CCC failed to finish it and extended the deadline till June 2021, raising the project cost to Tk 1,256 crore. However, in April this year, it again appealed for, and received, a deadline extension from the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec), thus raising the cost four times the original to Tk 1,363 crore.

Though we are yet to hear anything about a cost escalation for the lighting project, the fact that the CCC has failed to even get it off the ground is completely unacceptable. It is high time for the planning ministry and other concerned authorities to intervene and ask the CCC for an official explanation, and take effective measures to ensure the corporation starts to perform better both for the wellbeing of residents and the nation.

## Yet another assault on Afghan women

### Taliban's ban on women's higher education will further harm the country

It is disappointing to witness the Taliban government continuing to backtrack on the promises it had made after taking over Afghanistan last year. In the latest breach, not entirely surprisingly, one must admit, the higher education ministry of the government has slapped a ban on university education of women, on top of the existing ban on girls attending secondary school, which has been in effect since March. While the latter decision was defended using a number of flaky excuses, the university ban, we're told, has been imposed to preserve "national interest" as well as women's "honour." But how can holding back one half of the population and their progress through education be in Afghanistan's interest?

It's no secret that the Taliban government is dealing with a serious, multi-faceted economic crisis at the moment, with it largely cut off from international trade and aid over the past year. For a country that used to receive USD 4 billion of foreign aid annually, as per OECD data, this blow has been especially devastating. One of the biggest factors behind the government's failure to be officially recognised as legitimate rulers of Afghanistan is its regressive policies relating to women.

As such, we must ask: what really drove the Taliban to impose the latest ban on women's tertiary education? What can they possibly expect to gain from this in realistic terms? And how does it help address their crises at the moment? More fundamentally, do such regressive policies at all align with the Islamic Sharia law that the Taliban claim to be following? Let's not forget, it is partly because of such policies and practices that Afghanistan became vulnerable to foreign interventions in the first place.

In the last 20 years, the Afghan people have seen the ugliest faces of war, and the lives of generations of people have been ruined. Women, in particular, have had to claw their way up to gain access to education and employment opportunities. Now, all that is at risk of disappearing, with the Taliban continuing to restrict women to the four walls of their homes, detached from everything else. This cannot be the attitude of a government looking to receive support from the international community.

The Taliban must realise that to advance the interests of Afghan people, it needs to invest in education for women - not ban it. This will not only help the government build better relations with other countries and earn public support at home, but will also help Afghanistan reach its potential as a nation. In this regard, the international community must play a strong role in holding the Taliban to its own promises and pressuring it to deliver. As a country that was once ravaged by war and built itself up from its ashes, we want Afghanistan to rebuild itself for its own good.

# Can BNP stick to its proposals for state reform?



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As part of its ongoing campaign, the main opposition camp BNP has presented a 27-point proposal for reforming the state structures of the country, which has sparked much speculation and debate. The ruling Awami League has already dismissed the proposal as "laughable" and "merely an attempt to mislead people." BNP leaders are hopeful of forming an inclusive and egalitarian "rainbow nation," as opposed to what they suggest is a spirit of vengeance, through the amalgamation of diverse views and beliefs.

Except for a few, the proposals are not new; most of the points were unveiled by the party chief Khaleda Zia on March 19, 2016 when BNP announced its Vision 2030. But two significant points were incorporated into the state reform proposals this time: one says that no individual will be eligible to serve as the president or prime minister of the country for more than two consecutive terms, and the other says that every citizen will enjoy full rights to exercise their respective religious beliefs based on the fundamental principle that dictates "religion belongs to respective individual; state belongs to all."

The 27-point proposal sounds quite rosy and ambitious. Even before remarking on the proposals, a few questions beg to be asked: does BNP really mean what it says? Why has the party come up with such a grand announcement in the midst of a campaign demanding the restoration of a non-partisan interim government during elections? What was it that triggered the party to incorporate two such points in their state reform proposals?

After the 11th parliamentary election in 2018, the party started going on its own way, breaking away from the



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electoral alliance Jatiya Oikyafront, which had performed rather poorly in the polls, raising serious questions within the party. BNP also faced severe criticism for its anarchy in 2013 and 2014, prior to the 10th parliamentary election. The BNP-led 20-party alliance was blamed for that election-time violence, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami, which was one of the key players of the alliance. Oikyafront's formation had created a rift among the 20-party alliance partners and there were rumours about its dissolution. On the other hand, many of the new Oikyafront partners had a good public image. And BNP needed both the old partners and the new to wage a strong and credible anti-government campaign.

BNP then started holding talks with both the left- and right-wing political parties to bring them under a single

platform, but many had reservations about Jamaat. The reform proposals came to the fore when BNP started holding talks with its like-minded parties to wage a simultaneous movement. It gained momentum after the party's acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, floated the idea of a national government after the 2018 elections.

the party really means it. It is too early to conclude whether the party will keep the promises if it is voted to power. These proposals are surely very good and substantive, but rather challenging for any political party to implement in practice, especially where most of the major parties do not even have the semblance of intra-



Following this concept, BNP spoke with its like-minded parties for an outline of such a government.

This was essentially when BNP accepted two recommendations of the left parties. One was the two-term limit. The religion issue was also a smart move by BNP to get the left-wing parties warm up to it and also to remove the right-wing tag off the party, although many of its top leaders had background in leftist politics. So, in order to strengthen its campaign, BNP brought all the opposition forces together, and the issue of state reform came to the fore.

It is evident that these two points might have been merely politically expedient for the BNP at the time. But now that the party has included them in the state reform proposals, one must revisit the question of whether

party democracy. BNP has been out of office for a decade and a half. The party is desperate to return to office, and for that it is ready to do whatever is required.

One only needs to revisit the lofty promises that the opposition parties made when they were campaigning against the military dictator HM Ershad. Both BNP and the Awami League were in the opposition camp together and quite desperate to get the autocrat out of office. But when everything was said and done, and a new party assumed office through a democratic election, the ruling party, which was the BNP, forgot about those promises. So did the Awami League when it assumed office five years later.

Will BNP be able to stay true to its promises this time around? We will have to wait and see.

# How do we protect workers' rights in the age of 4IR?



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The Covid pandemic can be considered an acid test for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The work-from-home and remote office culture have evolved due to the pandemic.

More than 80 percent of workers in Bangladesh, mostly informal, are not covered by the labour law; they are thus not eligible to form a trade union in the first place. Moreover, as per the labour law, it will not be possible for them to form a trade union unless 30 percent of the workers join the union.

Introduction of robots may lead to job loss and salary reduction of the existing workers. Considering this vulnerability, it is more difficult to form unions for the future workers who remain scattered and unorganised.

David Peetz, in his book titled *The Realities and Futures of Work*, argues that as more people are becoming "freelancers" or "gig workers," the traditional employment relationship is being severely challenged, and it becomes difficult for the workers to act collectively because they do not have a common employer. Ride sharing and home delivery workers may face difficulties if their company is shut down or goes bankrupt. For example,

workers of a number of e-commerce companies in Bangladesh had such a bitter experience during the early years of the pandemic.

Trade union movement in Bangladesh has not yet developed a clear understanding of the changes coming through 4IR. Therefore, they have not yet been able to prepare for its challenges and opportunities.

To adapt to this situation, it will require training, research, scholarly efforts, knowledge-sharing and

rights. In these circumstances, 4IR may create significant challenges for the trade union movement.

Struggling to survive in a competitive job market of digital automation can bring extra stress for workers, which can also lead to negative workplace behaviour and a toxic workplace environment. All these situations can create additional challenges for the workers, and detract them from paying attention to the trade union, and realising their rights.

Time-befitting reform of the labour law is also a must to address these challenges posed by 4IR. The last revision of the labour law is still lagging behind in terms of this demand. The government has planned to develop 100 economic zones within a period of 15 years. It is expected that 10 million jobs will be created through them. But the concern is that there is a separate labour law for EPZs, named the EPZ Labour Act, 2019. The question is: how can inclusiveness be possible if there are two types of labour laws for workers in the same country? The EPZ Labour Act has made trade unions illegal, which violates the ILO Convention No 87 and 98.

Harmonious relations at the workplace are also needed to keep pace with the progress. Apart from trade unions, the roles of government and employers are also necessary to ensure effective dialogues. Political parties need to add a pro-trade union approach and long-range strategic plan to their election manifestos.

The question is: if the cost per hour of a robot is cheaper than that of a worker, how will the large number of people find opportunities to contribute to the country's industrial growth? The answer is: workers may suffer from income reduction, leading to job loss. To get out of this situation, trade unions have to find their own way to protect the workers. Trade unions must move away from bargaining strategies that are focused on traditional employment, and must adapt their strategies to the new forms of work.

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