

Will Biman ever really take off?

There are no justifications for its continued inefficiency and irregularities

Despite Biman CEO's promise of turning the national carrier into a "smart airline", in line with the prime minister's recently unveiled vision of a "Smart Bangladesh", it seems its operations are becoming slower and more cumbersome by the day. How else can one explain the fact that Biman – even with the largest fleet it has ever had in its history (with 21 modern airplanes) – currently flies to 20 mostly short- and medium-haul international destinations, whereas, with fewer planes in the early 2000s, it used to fly to 29 international destinations (including New York, Tokyo, and several major European cities)?

In the last five years, Biman has expanded to only three new destinations. Its new aircrafts are underutilised, its market share is shrinking, and its services leave much to be desired – leading to the predictable result of losses in almost every fiscal year since its inception. Even in the years that it didn't incur a loss (two in the last five years), what it achieved could hardly be counted as profits, since the airline owes over Tk 3,500 crore to different organisations and pays instalments of around Tk 250 crore for the new planes every year.

According to aviation experts, lack of planning and poor marketing policy are to blame for this. But events from last year make it clear that the trouble runs much deeper. In November, the story of a Biman recruitment scam broke, with allegations that a top official was involved in the leaking of question papers for new hires. A few months before that, this daily reported on Biman's hiring of "controversial" and "underqualified" people as pilots and co-pilots, which certain aviation officials alleged were in violation of Biman's own recruitment policies.

And in September, nine out of 15 female cockpit crew members alleged that their bosses in training and scheduling departments discriminated and harassed them so much that it even jeopardised flight safety on at least one occasion. However, no concrete steps have been taken by the relevant authorities to address any of these issues.

Last year, Biman's poor ground and cargo handling services also led to a Gulf Air plane being damaged, and a Biman Boeing rammed into another of the carrier's Boeings and damaged it. In fact, Biman's reputation in this regard is so poor that the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh has passed over Biman in favour of an international firm for this job at the new airport terminal.

Unfortunately, such irregularities and failures seem to have become the norm, even though as our national flag carrier, we expect the highest level of professionalism and integrity from Biman. The question is, how long can it continue to justify this sorry state of affairs? It is clear that Biman needs critical reforms, and for that it needs to acknowledge its problems first, not throw around feel good pledges like that of a "smart airline" bereft of an action plan to achieve that. We urge the higher authorities to establish discipline and accountability in how Biman operates to make it profitable and worthy of customers' expectations.

Preserve Brajo Niketan as a heritage site

Local authorities deserve kudos for recovering British-era structure

It is heartening to hear of the recovery of Brajo Niketan, a palatial residence of a British-era zamindar, from the clutches of local influentials who had been occupying it since the original owners moved to India during Partition. The structure itself is a magnificent architectural relic of a bygone era that deserves to be preserved as such. We congratulate the local authorities for finally recovering it, which stands on 1.55 acres of land in the Kalakopa area of Nawabganj, Dhaka. We are also delighted to learn that the process to declare it as a heritage site through the cultural affairs ministry has already been initiated.

Now that it is in safe hands, it is reasonable to remind the authorities of the importance of preserving the structure properly. Bangladesh's records in this regard are not exactly uplifting. On the contrary, concerns have been raised frequently about the state of many heritage sites that are at risk of either falling into ruins because of neglect or getting occupied/destroyed by private entities. For Brajo Niketan, which had been in use all this time, the challenge came in the form of some modifications to its original design. Going forward, unless preserved properly, it too may suffer the fate of those at-risk sites spread around the country. We call upon the authorities to make sure this does not happen.

The first priority, of course, is to get it officially recognised as a heritage site, which will give it some institutional protection against future encroachment attempts. Appropriate preservation is also vital, which includes restoring the building to its original design and developing the area as a tourist spot so that it can fund its own upkeep and people can learn about its historical significance. Apart from Brajo Niketan, there are several historic structures in the neighbourhood that also deserve to be preserved. Once these sites have been taken care of, the authorities can declare the whole area as a "heritage village".

It must be noted that this nation is built upon hundreds of years of history, and heritage sites like these give us a glimpse into that history. As such, properly preserving them is also important for posterity. Unfortunately, we see the opposite of that happening across the country. Just like Brajo Niketan, many palaces, temples, and structures of historical significance are being taken over by vested quarters, especially when these properties are abandoned or considered "vested". Given that, the recovery of Brajo Niketan should be seen as but a first step in freeing all historical sites from illegal occupation and preserving them.

The government should also conduct a survey of all historical sites currently under occupation or at risk of being damaged because of the neglect of relevant departments. This should give it an idea of the gravity of the challenge we are facing and prepare accordingly.

Can Bangladeshi politics change its spots in 2023?



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

It will be a year of challenges, it will be a year of strife. It could also be a year of possibilities. It could be a year of change, too.

The year 2023 will be significant for Bangladesh's politics and economy. Election years typically feature greater strife between the two major opposing political camps. This year, however, that only seems to be further complicated, and so is the uncertainty over our collective fate.

Things were going fairly smooth for the ruling Awami League until the middle of 2022. The opposition, BNP, was still struggling to even gather enough resolve to be on the streets, and many had by then dismissed them as paper tigers.

The price hike of fuel and daily essentials, and severe load shedding, put the ruling party in an awkward situation, which was only compounded by the fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war and corruption allegations against AL members.

BNP exploited that ripe opportunity quite well – taking advantage of the overall public dissatisfaction towards the government – and took to the streets. Two of its leaders were killed but instead of having their spirits dampened, the BNP became desperate.

The main opposition camp then held its divisional rallies, one after another, defying all odds and obstacles. It was a challenge for the BNP to prove its strength. And to everyone's surprise, the party surpassed all expectations with spectacular turnouts. The more aggressive the ruling party was in trying to quell the BNP's campaign, the more desperate BNP became to show up in numbers on the streets.

The situation was such that the AL had to come up with counter programmes, although the government higher-ups had said previously that they would allow the BNP to take to the streets. The government went on to arrest a number of BNP's senior leaders and denied them bail several times. This included the party's secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, who finally gained bail on Tuesday for six months.

To be fair, the government had initially granted some space to the BNP. But this was, at least in part, due to international pressure.

In December 2021, the US imposed sanctions on Rab and seven of its officers. Though the government seemed to not care much about this, its image before the international community was tarnished. It was



PHOTO: STAR

evident from the way AL leaders, including ministers, talked about diplomats stationed in Dhaka that the government was under some pressure regarding the state of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

Diplomats have repeatedly said that, in order for the next general election to be accepted internationally, the opposition parties must be allowed to hold meetings. The government duly allowed the BNP to do so, but not without repression.

As the election is just a year away, last year's heat will spill over into 2023 and will continue till the election. Centring around the polls, the ruling Awami League has already commenced its election campaign as PM Sheikh Hasina started seeking votes publicly. The party also completed its 22nd national council, where it indicated that their next election manifesto would be "Smart Bangladesh." The AL has remained in office for three consecutive terms and is desperate to stay on. And thus, the constitution, which allows for the ruling party to hold elections, will be their main tool.

On the other hand, the BNP knows very well what would happen if they joined the polls under the incumbent government. Their experience in joining the polls under the AL has not

demanding the resignation of the government.

To make their demands clearer, the party's lawmakers have resigned from the parliament. Through this resignation, the BNP wanted to convey that they will not join the polls unless their demands are met. They are ready to boycott the election again, although some in the party still rue their previous decision to boycott the 2014 election.

Apart from this, the BNP has also started waging simultaneous campaigns with like-minded political parties – although many exist in name only – to mount pressure on the government. As part of the simultaneous movement, the party unofficially dissolved its 20-party alliance in an attempt to bring left-wing parties under a single platform.

By the end of 2022, some leftist parties were also supporting BNP's demand for conducting the election under a non-partisan interim government. It seems that all the opposition forces are uniting against the ruling AL.

The position of the Jatiya Party, however, is not clear, and the party itself is highly unpredictable. It can do anything at any moment. After the death of its founder, HM Ershad, the

party's top leadership remains divided between Ershad's brother, GM Quader, and Ershad's wife, Rawshan Ershad. Rawshan emerged from hospital after a long absence, while party chairman Quader was making the rounds of court to regain authority. In the meantime, the AL has been drawing up various strategies to keep the JP under its control.

Political leaders also engaged in a battle of words throughout 2022. But what the people had expected – a mutual understanding between the major political parties – remained far from reach. There seems to be no possibility of holding any talks between the AL and BNP. So, in the absence of talks, there is only confrontation.

Although the year ended with a sigh of relief that nothing too consequential had happened centring BNP's December 10, 2022 rally in Dhaka, the government had been tough on the opposition party.

The year 2023 started with uncertainty, which may further deepen in the coming days as AL and BNP seem to increasingly believe they are not just political opponents, but rather enemies. So, chances of reaching a consensus are almost nil.

While the Awami League is resolute on holding the general election, the BNP is desperate to force it to resign from office.

The stalemate can only mean imminent confrontation. And to avoid that, both parties must come to a consensus. Otherwise, there are bound to be clashes and instability. Lives and livelihoods will be lost. And it will be the AL and the BNP who will have blood on their hands.

The Caging of Afghan Women



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A few days ago, the Taliban government of Afghanistan banned women from pursuing higher studies and working for NGOs, which repeats the history of the 1990s when they were in power last. Although Islam has clearly allowed women's access to education and work outside of the home, the Taliban continues to deny these rights because they don't follow the principles of Islam.

When the Taliban came to power last year, they made many promises on women's rights. But Afghan women could not have faith in these promises, and they were proven right when the Taliban stopped girls from going to high school in March last year.

Now, due to the latest ban, a new generation of Afghans find themselves in utter despair.

Khatera Qasemi, a 22-year-old who studies computer science at Kabul University, spoke to me over the phone, relaying, "Before the Taliban came to power, I worked as a TV broadcaster. Now, the lives of journalists, especially female journalists, are in danger. I am also a civil activist. I was a member of the youth integration process and worked

in the Committee on Women's Affairs and Rights. The Taliban threatened all the people in our office, and eventually, our workplace became inactive. And I lost my job. Now, the Taliban has closed the university gates for girls and I no longer have the right to study."

She continued, "At home, my parents don't believe that I can progress in life and this is my biggest pain. I feel left alone; no one believes in me or my bright future. I don't know whether to complain about the stupidity of the Taliban or that of my family."

One young female activist and entrepreneur I had spoken to in 2021 when the Taliban had taken over, Nargis Nayeel Sadat from Kabul, shared her experience of the Taliban's cruelty. They had snatched her house and business initiatives, and filed a false case against her. Her only fault was helping Afghan women and girls to become independent through small business initiatives. After that, Sadat wanted to end her life, but desisted for her elderly mother's sake.

Historically, Afghanistan has not been governed according to its

constitution, or the principles of Islam. Rather, the land has been governed according to a conservative, male-dominated social system. However, some rulers played an important role in empowering women in urban areas in the last century.

The development of the social status of Afghan women began during the time of King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929). With his wife Queen Soraya, they established two primary schools and a high school for girls in Kabul for the first time. The aim was to introduce Afghan women to the modern secular education system beyond traditional madrasa education. In 1928, 15 girls (from Kabul's royal families) who had graduated secondary school were sent to Turkey for higher education, but this was viewed unfavourably by Afghans outside of Kabul and Herat.

During Muhammad Zahir Shah's regime (1933-1973), the first women's college was established in Kabul in 1950. In 1953, Daoud Khan was appointed prime minister of Afghanistan, and he took steps to empower women, such as by hiring women in government and semi-government offices. Girls gained the right to unveil their faces inside streetcars and horse-drawn carriages. However, the government's attempt to implement equal rights led to revolts, especially in the eastern and southern regions. Government offices and courts were vandalised and burnt, and in some instances, women with unveiled faces were killed by excited mobs.

In 1964, Afghan women finally got the right to vote. In 1975, PM Daoud

Khan tried to enact a new constitution in which men and women were given equal rights. It gave Afghan women the right to choose a life partner of their own liking. But unfortunately, these rights were not enforced outside of Kabul, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif, where the elite lived.

Again, when the Russia-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan started its communist regime during 1978-92, they began forcing girls into school, but Afghans feared the un-Islamic education system would turn girls into communists.

After a brutal two-year-long civil war, when the Taliban came into power in 1996, the dreams of women were buried. They stopped women's education altogether, confined them behind veils, and took away their right to work.

However, some NGOs and organisations were able to educate Afghan girls and women in the last 25 years. They were successful in urban and rural areas because they respected local traditions, engaged with men, listened to their concerns, applauded their inputs (sometimes to earn their trust), and then implemented pragmatic education through agreement with the local community.

The bottom line is that, even during the previous Taliban era, Afghan girls had learned and worked, covertly or overtly, through understanding and negotiating with the local community. Now, the world must come forward again to listen to Afghan women and their demands for education.