

Why this cruelty to an ordinary citizen?

Authorities must respect people's right to protest, prevent police excesses

Just when the government seems to have scored a point in its fight against US sanctions on Rab, with a visiting US official praising progress in reducing extrajudicial killings, it is painful to learn of an ordinary citizen facing extrajudicial excesses in the form of police torture. Allegedly, Md Mostakim, who last week was arrested for protesting a hike in kidney dialysis fees at the Chattogram Medical College and Hospital, was beaten mercilessly while in custody. The goal, apparently, was to teach him a lesson for "disrespecting" the officer-in-charge of the local police station when protesters were dispersed in front of the hospital.

In photos published by a national daily, his left leg is seen covered in bruises. Mostakim alleged that he had been beaten for 15-20 minutes by a cop before he secured bail on Sunday. The very nature of the case in which he and others were implicated – for "obstructing government work and attacking police", despite himself being a victim of assaults even on the protest site – smacks of excesses. The Human Rights Foundation, which fought for his bail in court, has appealed to the Inspector General of Police to take action against the policeman involved in custodial torture, and also demanded that the case be transferred to Rab, PBI or CID.

One side-effect of this incident is that an important issue like the increase in subsidised dialysis fees for the poor has been pushed into the background. This could be a reference point for how subsidy reductions in various sectors are becoming a trend, pushing up the cost of living. This could be an example of how people's out-of-pocket healthcare expenses are rising while government spending on public health is declining, despite promises to the contrary. Instead, it has become a case of random acts of cruelty and intimidation, using legal tools or official badges. Such excesses are precisely why the very name of police still conjures up feelings of dread in citizens.

The fact is, despite recent efforts to paint a picture of accountability within security agencies, the latter remain largely unaccountable, especially when it comes to violations of political rights, including the right to protest and peaceful assembly. While the government may use permission being given for protest rallies by opposition political parties as an example of democratic freedom in the country, the truth is, it doesn't come without haggling or, for activists and general citizens alike, a threat of violence and legal repercussions – with police often deviating from established practices to handle street gatherings.

It goes without saying that when legitimate grievances are suppressed this way, it only leads to further shrinking of civic space. We urge the authorities to respect people's right to protest and address their grievances. They must ensure that no excesses occur in handling protests or in police custody, especially when Bangladesh is trying to mend its image in this regard. As for Md Mostakim, the case against him and others should be withdrawn, and the allegations of torture by police should be properly investigated.

A commendable initiative, indeed!

High time to make our educational institutions inclusive

We applaud Dhaka University for taking the decision to include a special quota for transgender students in its undergraduate programmes. It has done so in an attempt to promote diversity among its student body, recognising the systematic stigmatisation faced by the community. This decision comes on the heels of another notable development in recent days, when Ankita Islam became the first openly trans woman to be admitted to the university to pursue her MBA.

The decision is significant because the transgender community in Bangladesh suffers from a range of exclusionary practices, including limited access to jobs, education, legal and health services, and decision-making at the policy level. A majority of them, particularly those who identify as *hijras*, struggle to complete their education, ostracised by their families and society from an early age. They are denied a safe learning space, having to constantly confront harassment and bullying from classmates as well as teachers throughout their education journey. As a result, most of them eventually drop out, limiting their prospects of a future job and a stable life.

We hope DU's stance in this regard will encourage other educational institutions to follow suit, and take inclusive measures to create a safe space for members of marginalised communities. It goes without saying that they, too, deserve a dignified life, which includes the right to education.

While the government has taken some notable steps to give recognition to the transgender community of the country over the last few years, these initiatives have at times fallen short of their desired outcomes because of a fundamental failure to understand the lived realities of the community in question and a general ignorance about the fluidity of gender, diversity and sexuality. For one, there is a tendency to conflate transgender with the term "hijra", though not all *hijras* identify as trans, and certainly not all transgender folks identify as *hijras*.

Given the widespread confusion, *hijras* are often asked to "prove" their authenticity by going through intrusive physical examinations. In 2016, for instance, the government took the laudable decision to provide employment to the community; however, their employment was contingent upon a medical checkup, the process of which ended up being harassing, humiliating and dehumanising for the community members, according to a report by the Human Rights Watch. Twelve of their pictures were even published in print and online platforms, and they were shamed as being "frauds" because their bodies did not conform with our expectations.

As an academic institution we hold in high regard, with a reputed gender studies department, we hope DU will not make similar mistakes. However, we remain wary of the statement that trans people will need to provide "related papers for confirmation". We urge the authorities to make the process smooth and dignified. People who have been humiliated all their lives do not need to go through further humiliation to prove their marginalised status.

BANGLADESH'S MONETARY POLICIES

A poor dose of the right medicine



OPEN SKY

Dr Birupaksha Paul
is a professor of economics
at the State University of New
York at Cortland in the US
and former chief economist of
Bangladesh Bank.

BIRUPAKSHA PAUL

The herbal medicine prescribed by a rural *kobiraj* may be scientifically right, but its inadequate dosage often fails to cure the diseases of patients in the village. The same has been true of our latest monetary policy for the January-June term of FY2023.

Despite all good intentions, Governor Talukder fails to change the parameters of monetary policy well enough to make a perceptible reduction in inflation and prevent the probable depletion of foreign currency reserves.

The policy brands itself as "cautiously accommodative" – a phrase akin to saying that something is "bitterly sweet." No matter what numeral tricks regarding inflation are displayed by the bureau of statistics, whose data is often disputed because of its faulty basket and cunning calculations, inflation is the number one torture for the mass whose savings are evaporating, and livelihood has come under hardship.

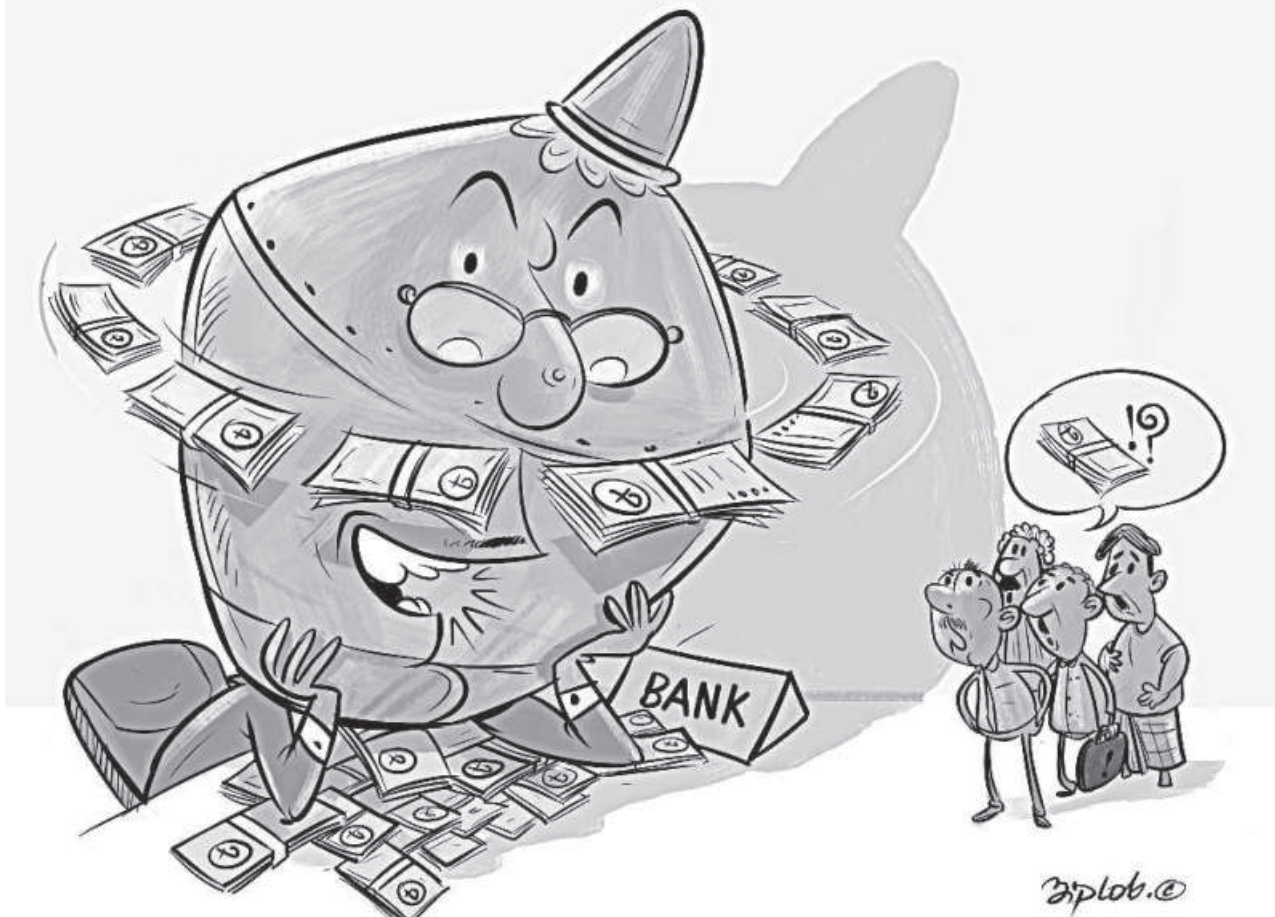
Even with the disputed data of BBS, the downward trend of inflation – which some policymakers are seizing with ample self complacency – is statistically insignificant. The imperceptible downward trend of inflation is attributable to global commodity and fuel prices, and is not a credit to local policymaking, which actually fueled high prices by stubbornly clinging to the strange nine-percent lending rate, and thus letting the rich borrow banks'

Bangladesh Bank has missed the train by caving in to the pressure of the finance ministry, which dictates policymaking at the central bank being driven by short-term political interests. And this is even more so now, before the general election.

money at zero real costs.

Despite all the cosmetics of the new monetary policy, that anti-theoretical nine-percent cap still prevailed by signaling that money is still as cheap as dirt for wealthy industrialists who often turn into defaulters. It signals that money is more expensive for people of the middle or lower-middle classes, who resort to availing consumer loans for buying their durables like refrigerators, televisions, small vehicles, and furniture.

The policy twist of the nine-percent cap for capitalists and the 12 percent for fixed-income-earning consumers is an open testimony of favoritism for the super rich. The selective tightening of consumer loans is discriminatory to



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

the financially weaker section of society, who have little bargaining power.

Usually, economists are noted for their wide differences of opinions. As the British social economist Barbara Wootton observed, when six economists gather, seven opinions emerge.

But not a single economist in Bangladesh supported the nine-percent cap on the lending rate in the face of galloping inflation. Still, the finance minister manufactured his own theory by arguing that the cap is beneficial for the economy.

The nine-percent cap was imposed in 2020, during the pandemic. But oddly, the music is still on when the Covid-induced debility has ebbed long ago. The intent of keeping this cap is to continue nourishing the tycoons at the cost of high inflation.

Recently, FBCCI business leaders met the BB governor and argued for keeping the cap to serve their interests. And the governor catered to their demands. Although he indicated that removing the cap is only a matter of time, it's hard to understand what better moment there could be to justify removing the nine-percent cap than right now. At present, no sensible country in the world has kept any such cap on lending rates as inflation blisters their economy.

The reverse repo rate. The repo rate – the rate at which banks are allowed to borrow funds from the central bank – has been raised by only 25 basis points, to be six percent, which is much lower than the existing call money rate. This suggests that the central bank's move to raise the policy rate is correct in its direction, but that its magnitude is farcical – an attempt to show that BB has only a theoretical understanding of how to fight inflation by raising policy rates.

But the magnitude of 25 basis points resembles the herbal dose of the nervous village *kobiraj* – both are miserably inadequate to make any perceptible changes in the patient's health and for inflation, respectively.

If inflation goes down, it will be due to luck and a global price reduction for oil and other commodities. BB cannot claim any credit for making it happen. Rather, its inertia towards the dirt-cheap lending rate for businessmen and defaulters will keep stoking inflation. Had the nine-percent cap been dismantled, inflation would have gone down, giving some comfort to poor and middle-income people.

Bangladesh Bank has missed the train by caving in to the pressure of the finance ministry, which dictates policymaking at the central bank being driven by short-term political interests.

from which during the previous governor's regime caused the severity of the current dollar crisis and foreign exchange depletion. The governor commanded his apparatus to find the cheating of importers who accomplish money laundering by over-invoicing. Importers also resort to under-invoicing to dodge import duties, worsening Bangladesh's fiscal capacity, which is already the weakest in the region. This murky area was never diagnosed so closely as it is being done now, bringing some hope of tightening the outflow of funds. The governor should seek magisterial power to punish some notorious importers who are largely responsible for laundering USD 8 billion annually from Bangladesh, as per World Bank data.

The government has started frantically borrowing from the central bank since its revenue collection lagged behind the target, as usual, and its *sanchayapatra* source has stopped laying golden eggs of late. The credit growth target in the government sector of almost 38 percent – a desperate rate never seen before in recent decades – must be curtailed if BB wants to combat inflation. Otherwise, the central bank will remain a helpless observer of inflation that draws its vitamins from huge public sector credit and hunky industrial loans.

What will we get out of Lu's visit?



M Humayun Kabir
is president of Bangladesh Enterprise
Institute (BEI) and a former
ambassador of Bangladesh to the US.

M HUMAYUN KABIR

The recent visit of US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, in my opinion, was a type of stock-taking visit since, over the past few years, the relationship between the US and Bangladesh has been a source of some worry. Prior to this, a senior director from the national security council also came to Bangladesh.

In terms of the outcome, it is positive that there was an exchange of ideas and that understanding between the countries has been improved. This visit has ensured that the relationship between the two countries still stands on firm ground, despite some earlier concerns about human rights abuses by law enforcement agencies. There was a concern regarding whether or

not there would be sanctions from Bangladesh's side. These issues have now been resolved.

Another thing to note is that Donald Lu has clearly stated the expectations of his country regarding Bangladesh. He gave an indication as to what should be done to meet these expectations, too. For example, he has given an update about the sanction on Rab and indicated that the agency has improved in terms of human rights abuses and dropped hints about what more the agency should do. Lu has also expressed his expectations about the upcoming national election. He has said that the US wants to see a peaceful environment and expects a credible election. Citing the prime minister's promise to hold a free and fair election,

Lu has expressed his expectation that the premier will deliver on her promise.

Donald Lu also raised issues about labour rights and has advised on what the government should do in order to improve the labour conditions. Our country currently does not enjoy GSP privileges. Lu has given an indication as to what the government should do in terms of enacting better labour laws to meet the requirements for regaining the GSP status. There were discussions about regional strategic issues as well.

Though these discussions have not been made public, my guess is that the US wants Bangladesh to be a part of its regional strategy. Bangladesh could be a productive partner in that process. If we become a part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and calibrate that to explore our interests, especially in the economic domain, and also to protect other national security issues from our side (such as resolving the Rohingya crisis) that would be useful to Bangladesh.

Overall, the three main dimensions which were discussed are governance issues (from elections to human rights), economic issues and bilateral business, and strategic issues. This is part of an ongoing discussion, and

any discussion is welcome as it clears the air. But the US' expectation is very clear. They want the promotion of human rights and democracy, and they will continue to push for reforms in that regard.

Donald Lu has also met the law minister and home minister. And I presume that the Digital Security Act was an issue of discussion at the meeting with the law minister. It is possible that there may be some updates and amendments to the law as a result of the US and European interest in reforming the law.

Labour rights is an urgent issue for the US as well as for us, as many of our future opportunities will be contingent on how the concerns are resolved. In terms of sanctions, there need to be more reforms in the system(s) for the existing sanctions to be considered for withdrawal.

Finally, we can say that Lu's visit was a positive one as there was an exchange of ideas and expression of appreciation of each other's position for both countries concerned. But the visit did not bear much concrete fruit besides this.

(As told to Anupam Debashis Roy.)