

Attacks on BNP are condemnable

Govt must allow opposition to hold events without interruptions

It's alarming how violence in the service of political objectives has been increasing in Bangladesh, especially after a resurgent BNP launched countrywide street programmes with various demands. Saturday's attacks on BNP's union-level marches were only the latest example. The threat of violence could continue to escalate the closer we get to the 2024 national election. But here's the thing: we can have democracy and consequently a peaceful solution, or we can have violence and consequently a political deadlock – we cannot have both. How long before our political parties realise this truth?

Right now, that question must be directed at the ruling Awami League, which organised what it called "peace rallies" on the same day, essentially as a counter-move to BNP's programme. As a result, clashes were reported in at least 15 districts, leaving about 200-300 BNP activists injured. Many activists were arrested as well. For BNP, the plan was to march in every union parishad to press home its 10-point demand, including holding the next election under a caretaker government. But then, AL men, together with police in many places, attacked or obstructed the marches. Reportedly, BNP offices and houses of party leaders were also attacked in some areas.

We have seen the same disruptive tactics employed by the ruling camp ever since BNP started to mobilise support for its latest movement. Holding rallies and processions is a constitutional right of any political party. But countering an event with another – and thus impinging on it, under pseudo-legal pretexts – is not. What this demonstrates is a political bankruptcy, and an unwillingness to accept the moral backing behind the demands for change. It is also a downright denial of political space to the opposition camp which is so essential for the next election to remotely meet the expectations of voters. After two highly controversial elections in 2014 and 2018, which were also preceded by similarly acrimonious circumstances, things must change drastically to avoid a similar fate.

Unfortunately, there is no indication yet that the political atmosphere is about to change for the better anytime soon. BNP's Saturday programme followed mass processions held on December 24 and 30, sit-in protests on January 11, rallies on January 16, and rallies on January 25 and February 4. Those were also held under the shadow of disruptions. As well as the threat to street gathering, there is also the growing lack of confidence in the ability of the Election Commission to create the ideal environment for holding a fair, credible, peaceful, and participatory election.

All this is deeply frustrating. We urge the authorities to take a hard look at the present situation. To build confidence in the democratic process leading up to the election, they must allow the opposition parties to hold their activities peacefully and without interruptions. They must be engaged in dialogue to break out of the present deadlock. The spaces for politicians and citizens must be widened rather than shrunk. Without creating the ideal environment, we cannot expect to avoid a repeat of the last two elections.

Injured migrants deserve much better

Authorities must expand services to help injured or ill returnee migrants

Migrant workers are a vital part of our country as they provide us with valuable remittances that have been boosting our economy for the past few decades. However, as a nation we have done little to recognise their contributions. In the last five decades, over 12 million Bangladeshis – nearly one million of them women – have gone abroad as migrant workers, sending back a total of USD 275 billion in remittance earnings, according to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). However, many of them had to suffer terribly in the host countries as well as when they returned home, with little support offered by the state. Among them are those returning with injuries or diseases sustained abroad.

Even though the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) offers a variety of services to these workers, those are still very limited. At the moment, the board gives them only Tk 1 lakh as medical support, as well as the ambulance service to carry them from airports. In many cases, however, injured migrants are not even aware of these services. From 2010 to January 2023, the WEWB distributed about Tk 14.4 crore to 1,508 returnee migrant workers for treatment. Last year, 383 of them received financial assistance, the most in a single year. The Ovihashi Karmi Unnayan Program (Okup), a migrant rights organisation, also offered medical assistance to 228 returnee migrant workers between 2019 and 2021.

There are a number of reasons behind the illnesses, injuries or deaths of our migrant workers abroad. Employers' abusive and exploitative behaviour, occupational hazards, and chronic diseases that develop over time abroad, among other things, cause their health to deteriorate, resulting in some cases in the collapse of their immune system. Furthermore, their poor skill sets and lack of negotiating power prevent them from accessing basic health facilities or benefits. Okup has been requesting a unique social safety net system for injured and ill returnee migrants but so far to no avail. If such a plan could be put in place, medical assistance can be provided under the plan until these workers fully recover.

Globally, several governments have taken the initiative to repatriate patients from host countries to ensure that they receive care in their own countries. Another strategy to ensure improved health is to provide health insurance systems. Overseas Filipino workers, for example, pay for health insurance, which allows them to receive medical treatment when they return home. Bangladesh can follow a similar policy and make available services known to all migrant workers. We must be more compassionate and proactive in the care of our migrant workers. That is the only way out for the workers who are now living a life of pain and misery. The migrant workers have given so much to our country. It is high time we took better care of them.

For a smart Bangladesh, we need smart workers



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Good education and appropriate skills are basic requirements not only for reaping better opportunities for the youth, but also for building a prosperous economy. Bangladesh has made tremendous strides in economic growth over the last 50 years, which was driven by its people. However, its full potential remains untapped since many young people are still not able to contribute to the economy due to a lack of suitable skills and knowledge. This is depriving them to earn more for themselves and give more to their nation.

Bangladesh's greatest strength is its large young population. The size of the country's working age population is bigger than that of dependents. Many East Asian countries, such as China, Japan and Singapore, do not have such a demographic dividend, which has become a concern for them. Of course, in the latter half of the 20th century, the East Asian countries advanced rapidly due to their demographic dividends. However, the high number of working-age people in Bangladesh will not stay so for long – experts suggest our demographic dividend will decline by 2040. Therefore, we need to invest in our young population – on quality education and skills – now to reap the benefits.

Our current labour market is in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, many educated people are unemployed; on the other, employers are in search of qualified people. Youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh is 10.6 percent, though the national average unemployment rate is 4.2 percent. The Labour Force Survey 2016-17 revealed that unemployment among the youth with secondary-level education is 28 percent, while it is 13.4 percent among the youth with tertiary-level education.

This implies that higher education does not necessarily guarantee a job. Youth with higher education remain unemployed because there are limited job opportunities in the country. Many of them also do not want to engage in informal and/or low-paid jobs. On the other hand, employers are looking for a qualified workforce, but many youth who are looking for a job do not fulfil their demand for skills and capacity. So, despite being university graduates, these youth's employability is low.

Our education system does not



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

equip students with the necessary skills for the job market. The focus of our existing education system is mostly on theoretical knowledge, rather than practical skills. It does not focus on developing critical thinking among students. They do not receive a well-rounded education preparing them for the world at large, where they need to communicate, negotiate, exchange ideas, lead and defend their own ideas. At the school-level education, we see a race for GPA 5, golden GPA, etc. Authorities take credit for such achievements. Sadly, those results cannot take the students far since many do not even learn properly what is taught in class. Many such students cannot even write a sentence correctly either in Bangla or English. Their skills in mathematics and science are also found to be poor. Getting into good universities for higher education becomes a challenge for these students. Many get admitted into private universities since there are several such universities whose quality is questionable. But desperate students and their parents spend large amounts of money for a degree. Alas! These degrees become a liability for so many

A few universities have taken some initiatives to make their curricula more practical and provide their students with exposure to the world of work. But that is slow and limited. They are connecting students with businesses and industries to help them understand how the real world works and what type of skills they need. Such initiatives should be adopted in other educational institutions, and they should be expedited and scaled up.

Employers also have a critical role to play for bridging the skill gap among the youth. By providing on-the-job training and internship opportunities, they can help young workers acquire the skills they need to succeed in their careers. Indeed, addressing the skill deficit requires a collaborative effort from both the educational institutions and employers. The private sector should also provide skill development opportunities. They can extend apprenticeships and set up training institutes for our youth.

The government must invest heavily in human capital. It recently announced plans to build a "Smart Bangladesh." This dream can only be fulfilled through investment in the

higher spending should be bringing about tangible results.

Along with education, our youth should be given more opportunities for technical and vocational training. The expectation of employers is unmet in case of vocational and technical training as well. Many employers find those skills not very useful for their organisations. Skill development should be forward-looking and consider the market realities. The requirements and nature of our job market is changing very fast. So, training is needed not just for the present, but for the future as well.

There is also a growing demand for workers who have technical skills and expertise, since the use of technology at the workplace is increasing. The digital transformation of many industries requires a different skill set than those of traditional jobs. So, people who can adapt to the new technological demands will have a competitive advantage in the job market. So, the training centres should provide professional and technical skills to create a workforce that is equipped to meet those demands – a Smart Workforce for a Smart Bangladesh.

Why I'm not concerned about students using ChatGPT



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Over the last few decades, the field of artificial intelligence (AI) has seen a boom worldwide. The latest addition to the array of impressive AI tools is ChatGPT, a language processing model that has grown big. It is normal to be concerned about the impact such an advanced tool could have on academia.

During a lab class, when I asked my students to write a summary of a research work, they asked why they should write it up themselves when chatbots like ChatGPT were available. One of my supervisors also expressed concern about this issue; so have most of the teachers in my university. This AI tool displays excellence in creating full sentences, even essays that look pretty "thoughtful" – exactly what we expect from our undergraduate students in different courses.

But my concern is about how good it is in the first place. I asked some of the juniors, who said they got good marks for papers which were mostly written using ChatGPT. To test it myself, I asked ChatGPT to write about various AI-related topics, setting a minimum word limit. The

essay it generated was shorter than the word limit, but turned out to be quite impressive as an overview. If I were to grade that write-up, I would have given it 80-90 percent.

However, preliminary research already shows that we may get different answers for the same question from this AI tool, which raises a reliability issue. There is also a joke going around on the internet based on a real-life scenario regarding ChatGPT: someone asks ChatGPT, "2+5 = ?" It responds with "7." The user responds with, "No, you are wrong. The correct answer is 8." ChatGPT responds along the lines of, "I apologise for the wrong answer. You are right."

This makes the AI tool itself quite questionable. Even though the developers of OpenAI, who created ChatGPT, are already working to improve their AI, it still has a long way to go. I tried out different prompts in ChatGPT and found that the tool sometimes generated texts moving away from the specific context.

This AI tool sure has great potential and can assist students and teachers alike, but it is not still reliable enough.

If any students are using AI chatbot models to do their homework/assignments, I would suggest they double-check the write-ups they acquire from these tools. Depending entirely on AI tools is certainly not smart.

Being a student of a Bangladesh medium school, I am a stickler for

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relying on textbooks and official sources of information. And I think most students in Bangladesh are like me, even though the internet is more accessible now than before. So, I put emphasis on using multiple sources of information when learning anything new to get a broader view of any concept.

I should also highlight that university students generally lack the skill of writing. I see many students

not being able to articulate their ideas in writing, primarily because they struggle to translate their thoughts and ideas properly into words and write them down so that they can present them. University students should be trained to have basic writing skills in the first place.

The issue of plagiarism has also been a highlight in debates following the launch of ChatGPT. Every semester, I do come across a few in a classroom whom I suspect could commit plagiarism in their work. Even assuming that 25 percent of students (in a class of 35) are committing plagiarism (which is generally not the case), it does not seem ideal that I should deny 26 students the chance of bringing some refinement in their write-ups using such language models, for the sake of only nine students.

Considering the unavoidable influence that ChatGPT or such large language models (LLM) driven by AI will attain, I would urge students to figure out approaches to make such AI bots work for all of us for the greater good – without compromising academic integrity and committing plagiarism. Teachers can assist their students to develop such an ethical standing as well. As for those who aim to cheat, they are just causing themselves harm, and will suffer greatly if their instructors respond to their dishonesty by removing such writing-based assignments from their courses.