The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Chhatra League must be reined in

Will AL ever do anything about the criminality of its student wing?

There seems to be no end to the criminality of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). In its latest display of atrocities, two BCL leaders of Islamic University (IU) in Kushtia have allegedly tortured a female student for hours. The two accused are Sanjida Chowdhury, vice-president of the IU BCL unit, and Tabassum Islam, an activist of the same unit. The victim, a first-year student, said she was at the Sheikh Hasina Hall when the accused took her to one of the gono-rooms (common rooms) at around 11pm on February 12, mercilessly beat her, insulted her using obscene language, forcibly stripped her naked, and took videos of her.

According to a written complaint submitted by the victim, after torturing her till 3:30am, the accused threatened that she would be driven out of the hall, and the video would be circulated, if she told anyone about the incident. A report by *Prothom Alo* revealed that this was not the first time that such an incident happened in IU. On the condition of anonymity, a number of students alleged that another female student was tortured similarly by BCL last year. They further alleged that Sanjida controls a group perpetrating such heinous offenses at the university.

According to another *Prothom Alo* report coming out on the same day, a male student of Rajshahi University also alleged that BCL members had locked him up in a room and mentally and physically tortured him. He said he had been threatened by the university's BCL General Secretary Naim Islam and 7-8 of his followers to vacate a dorm room that was allotted to him recently. When he refused to comply, they took him to Naim's room, and beat him up.

As the avalanche of media reports on BCL will suggest, its unchecked operation on nearly every university campus in the country has led to similar incidents of harassment and torture – and even murder, as in the case of BUET's Abrar Fahad – of ordinary students and rival political activists alike. We are treated to such horrific news almost every day. Just the day before, for example, this newspaper reported how BCL members are now increasingly getting involved in mugging-related activities in Dhaka University. After over a decade of establishing total control over all campuses – through torture, barbarities and collusion with university administrations – it seems the BCL has now turned into a full-blown criminal gang.

And why wouldn't it, when the ruling party itself has provided it with constant patronage to the effect of making university administrations and law enforcement agencies totally unwilling to take meaningful action against BCL atrocities? Instead of discipling BCL, whose members have been involved in some of the most serious crimes as per the law of the land, ruling party high-ups have blatantly defended it, despite the ever-growing list of victims and protests from all sections of society. We call on the ruling party to abandon this strategy. It must show its commitment to democratic principles as well as establishing the rule of law for everyone.

A good incentive for primary students

School feeding project must be quickly and efficiently executed

We welcome the news of a government plan to introduce a new school feeding programme for students of all state-run primary schools starting July. According to a report by this daily, the primary and mass education ministry is set to complete a feasibility test for the mid-day meals project this month, and will start preparing a Development Project Proposal in March. Feeding programmes for government schools have existed in various forms since the country was liberated. They have always been an important part of the school system, ensuring that students not only consume a chunk of their required daily calories in school, but also stay at school.

As per data of the primary education ministry, attendance rose by 6.6 percent and dropouts fell by 6 percent in schools covered by the last government feeding programme (which ended in June last year). However, given the patchy track record of the planning and implementation of government feeding programmes, we also feel the need to be cautious in our optimism.

One may recall that the last proposed large-scale school meal project had made headlines for all the wrong reasons. In August 2020, the primary and mass education ministry had proposed a Tk 17,290 crore undertaking to feed 1.41 crore students of 65,566 government primary schools for five years. Controversy arose when the planning commission identified several unnecessary expenses in the proposal. The allocation for foreign trips by officials to "cook khichuri" – or as in the ministry's words, to "gather knowledge about implementation of mid-day meal programmes at schools" – was criticised. The proposal was ultimately rejected by the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (Ecnec) headed by the prime minister. But it now stands as an example of how important projects like school feeding programmes can be derailed due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and mismanagement. This, we hope, will not happen with the latest feeding project under consideration.

It is also crucial that the new programme is implemented as soon as possible. The government's last school feeding programme ran from 2010 till June 2022, under which the authorities provided 75 grams of fortified biscuits to nearly 3 million schoolchildren in 104 upazilas. But it has already been almost eight months since public school students have been deprived of free meals provided by the government. This cannot go on – especially at a time when difficult Covid recovery and global inflation have strained the economy, making dropout seem like an unavoidable choice for many poor students and households.

We urge all relevant authorities to come up with a proposal for the mid-day meals programme that will be sensible. A speedy and efficient implementation is key to ensuring that students, especially in the most poverty-stricken areas of the country, will not only receive proper nutrition but also will stay focused in school.

Presidential election, AL strategy and the next polls

THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Although there was much speculation about who would become the next president of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, and although some had reported about the "frontrunners," no one knew what was about to happen. The name Md Shahabuddin as president was not even muttered under the breath so far as the media was concerned. Not just every news outlet, but most of the country, including senior ministers, appeared to have been in the dark.

But then, the ruling party stalwarts could not really express discontent for not being involved in the decision. The entire leadership of the Awami League willingly and happily relinquished any authority they had and to allow the party president, who is also the prime minister, to nominate the next president of the country.

The nomination of a president is not to be taken lightly. The next parliamentary election is due to take place early next year, and the newly elected president will be in office at that time.

When the 2014 election was held, the BNP and other opposition political parties boycotted the polls to make them questionable. But the ruling party employed a strategy whereby 153 constituencies saw their MPs elected uncontested, which meant that even before the election was held, the Awami League had secured a mandate to form the government.

And then in 2018, the general election was also highly questionable with widespread allegations, including from lawmakers and diplomats considered "friendly" to the ruling Awami League, that the election was held "the night before." The Awami League returned to power with an overwhelming two-thirds majority.

Now that Bangladesh is less than a year away from the next parliamentary election, everyone is speculating about the ruling party's strategy to win for the fourth consecutive term.

This nomination showed that the Awami League president is fully capable of pulling off a surprise without even the party stalwarts finding out. Not only was Sheikh Hasina able to evince her political shrewdness, but also that her party's strategy for the next election would most likely be a surprise as well – one that will ensure another five years in office for her party. On the face of it, this presidential nomination should at least boost the morale of the party loyalists and reassure them of another electoral victory.

Although the post of the president is mostly ceremonial – the president acts as advised by the prime minister, except when appointing the premier and the chief justice – it takes on some significance during elections when the president assumes more of an executive role, issuing directives to the Election Commission.

According to Section 5(2) of the Representation of the People's Order, 1972, all executive authorities of the government shall assist the Election Commission in performing its functions, and for this purpose, the president may, after consultation with the commission, issue such directions as they may deem necessary.

VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

So, while the BNP and other opposition parties have been staging demonstrations demanding elections under a non-partisan government, threatening to boycott the polls (if held under the ruling government), coupled with the mounting pressure to hold an all-inclusive election, the role of the election-time president will be crucial.

Speaking to *Prothom Alo*, senior Awami League leader Matia Chowdhury said the prime minister had chosen a person (for president) who had full faith in the country and the principles of the constitution, and would also have a strong stand against unrest and anarchy.

The newly elected president, Md Shahabuddin, in a television interview said it was not only the desire of the government, but also the desire of the whole world that the next general election in Bangladesh be held with the participation of all political parties.

"If there is a national disaster or if there is any anarchy regarding the election, or if there is a deliberate attempt to sabotage the electoral environment, the president has some work to do," he said. "I am not going to back down from that. I am a freedom fighter; I liberated this country. We gave so much blood for the country. So if there is an attempt to create anarchy, I will play my role in making the election fair. But I would like to exercise my power judiciously and fairly so that there is no bias. So that people realise that their president has done his part for the country."

Predictably, the president has been quite the talk of the town over the last few days, as well as the likely strategy the Awami League may adopt in the run-up to the election. But as the ruling party president has shown, all those speculations could well turn out to be mere conjecture.

Clean energy will reduce our fiscal burden

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SHAFIQUL ALAM

Bangladesh's energy and power sectors continue to experience the pinch due to its reliance on expensive imported liquefied natural gas (LNG), coal and oil. This is increasing the country's fiscal burden, eventually prompting the government to pass the cost on to the consumers. For instance, amid the high fossil fuel costs, the government raised the price of electricity twice in a span of 20 days in January 2023. Between these electricity price hikes, the government increased gas prices from 14 percent to 179 percent for different sectors.

While the government cites fiscal reasons for such price hikes, the country's average power generation cost will increase considerably without any major overhaul of the imported fossil-fuel-dependent energy system. Moreover, high fuel and electricity prices will affect industries, and the power sector may still struggle to ensure an uninterrupted electricity supply.

This situation makes clean energy investment an even more compelling case for Bangladesh to reduce its fiscal burden.

The new gas price for power generation, effective from February 1, costs the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) an additional Tk 9 per cubic metre (CM). Analysing the BPDB's gas-based power plants' average generation costs, based on FY 2021-22's revised annual report, the incremental gas-based electricity generation cost is Tk 2 per kilowatt-hour (kWh).

In the same breath, coal remains costly at USD 245 per tonne in the international market, 88 percent higher than USD 130 per tonne considered in FY 2021-22 by the BPDB. Hence, the average cost of coal-based power generation will shoot up by the end of FY 2022-23.

On the other hand, BPDB's average electricity purchase cost from independent power producers (IPPs) in FY 2021-22 was Tk 11.55 per kWh.

In all likelihood, Bangladesh's average power generation cost will cross double digits in taka during FY 2022-23, compared to Tk 8.84 per kWh in FY 2021-22. Therefore, the BPDB, despite recent electricity price hikes, will have a huge revenue shortfall. Notably, the subsidy burden of the power sector during FY 2021-22 was Tk 29,700 crore, which may further rise in FY 2022-23.

The government will ultimately feel the exigencies to pass the additional costs on to the consumers.

Following the unprecedented gas price hike, the government resumed LNG import from the spot market for the first time since July 2022. It recently ordered one LNG cargo, costing Tk 850 crore, and intends to purchase up to 12 LNG cargoes in 2023. Even if the next 11 cargoes are 25 percent cheaper, the total cost of 12 LNG cargoes will be more than Tk 7,850 crore.

Apart from gas, there are other areas of concern. For instance, the government needs funds to keep coal-based power plants operational to circumvent load-shedding. Reportedly, outstanding bills of the Payra coal-fired power plant against coal purchase reached USD 168 million. Banks declined opening Letters of Credit (LC) for further coal import. The waning foreign currency reserves earlier caused a delay in loan repayment for the Payra plant.

With the annual requirement of four million tonnes of coal to run the Payra power plant at full capacity, the government requires substantial foreign currency to keep the plant operational throughout the year. Although the current coal price stands at USD 245 per tonne, considering a reduced coal price of USD 200 per tonne, the cost of fuel to operate the Payra plant from February to December 2023 will be a whopping USD 733 million.

Moreover, due to coal shortages, the first of the two units of the Rampal power plant suspended generation after just 29 days of commercial operation.

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Keeping both power plants operational would heavily burden foreign currency reserves because of coal imports. If electricity production in Payra and Rampal power plants at full capacity cannot be ensured, Bangladesh will again opt for electricity rationing during the summer of 2023.

Industries have been the hardest hit due to gas shortages as they use this fuel in process and captive generation. As such, owners of textile industries previously expressed interest in paying around 40 percent higher gas price, provided that the government imports additional LNG to fill the demand-supply gap. However, an 88 percent increase in gas prices has made captive power generation considerably expensive. The cost of gas per kWh of electricity from a captive unit now stands at Tk 6.58 against roughly Tk 3.5 in January 2023.

Similarly, two rounds of increase in electricity tariffs mean the cost of grid electricity for large industries, if purchased at a flat rate, is now Tk 9.32 per kWh compared to what was Tk 8.45 per kWh in December 2022.

With rising production costs, the apparel sector, which contributes to more than 80 percent of our export earnings, will lose its profit margin unless it can transfer the additional cost to international buyers or receive cash incentives from the government.

The cost of grid electricity has reached a level that it now provides a strong market signal to industries to promptly increase rooftop solar systems to reduce operational costs. Similarly, the rapidly rising average cost of electricity generation in the country makes a compelling economic case for Bangladesh to enhance deflationary renewable energy at the grid scale to rein in the soaring power generation costs and contain the challenges of imported fossil fuels.

Alongside this, energy efficiency measures on the demand side would reduce significant energy consumption and thus cut down on the import of LNG, coal and oil. High energy prices also demonstrate the strong financial viability of energy efficiency interventions.

While enhancing the share of renewable energy and optimising energy consumption through energy efficiency sound ambitious, these are achievable with proper action plans.

Both renewable energy and energy efficiency will immediately impact Bangladesh's energy and power systems. This is why the government and private sector should direct capital investments on the ground towards promoting renewable energy and enhancing energy efficiency.

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