

Failure to control prices is not an option

Govt measures have to be effective, not just for show

Before every Ramadan, we see prices of essentials rising in our kitchen markets, in ways that defy logic. At a time when commodity prices are already sky-high, and people are suffering at an unprecedented level economically, the government needs to implement well-thought-out measures to curb commodity prices from rising any further. It is in such a context that the president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) recently commented that deployment of joint forces to keep watch on the essentials market during Ramadan would not yield the desired results. We believe that his comment should be taken seriously by the government in the interest of both consumers and the business community.

The joint forces were engaged in monitoring the market during the tenure of the last caretaker government. We understand that the business community is genuinely apprehensive about being harassed in the name of market monitoring. But at the same time, and more importantly, the tendency to artificially increase prices of essentials right before and during Ramadan must be addressed.

The government needs to conduct careful and detailed market analysis to solve the problem, instead of spewing arbitrary measures, hoping they would work. As the business community has said, to control prices from rising exorbitantly, the government must ensure the adequate availability of all items in the market. For that, import of essentials and their supply chains have to be made smoother. If the price of the dollar rises quickly, it is most likely that the business-people will transfer the additional costs onto consumers. The government, particularly the commerce ministry, has to keep a close eye on that.

Extortionists often push up the prices of commodities in our markets. Such disruptive behaviours have to be reined in by the government. The hoarding of goods to fabricate their shortage must be stopped. Collusion among monopolists is another major reason why prices often go up more in the domestic market, as compared to the international market. The government has to try and increase the number of suppliers and increase competition to ensure commodity prices stay reasonable. Consequently, the government also has to make sure that its market monitoring mechanisms are well targeted. There have been times where we have seen traders colluding to artificially push prices up. Instead of harassing honest traders, the government's market monitoring objectives should be to identify such collusive behaviour and to punish those traders who try to manipulate the market.

The government does not have an easy task at hand here. Given our current reality, to prevent prices of essentials from increasing further, the government has to come up with a holistic approach. It should, therefore, involve experts, members of the business community, and all other stakeholders to come up with a comprehensive programme that takes all necessary factors into consideration.

Why can't children access Dhaka's playgrounds?

Create more open spaces, not restrict them

Playgrounds are necessary for the sound development of our future generation. However, due to various reasons such as occupation, renovation, and repurposing, Dhaka city has been fast losing the few playgrounds it has. Take the Lalmatia Block D playground, for example. Reportedly, for the past three months, the contractors in charge of its renovation have been saying that it will be open for all soon, but that day has yet to arrive. The deadline for finishing the project was June 2022. However, the subcontractors say that they have missed the deadline because of the pandemic. Currently, the caretaker of the playground refuses to let children in to play at the park.

Additionally, three other parks – Trikona Park in Lalmatia near Town Hall, Shahid Park, and Sonali Playground in Mohammadpur – are also “under renovation.” The project director had said that these three parks would be activated in the last week of February. However, when our reporter went to visit Trikona park recently, he found that development work was going on. The project director said that the delay was caused due to planning complexities. But, as the planners used up time pondering whether or not to build a footbridge, the children of the area (who came to know of this spot as their primary place for sports and recreation) suffered. Only the Sonali playground is now partly operational, giving some scope to the area's children for play.

Opportunities for sports and recreation are instrumental in the development of children. Without access to playtime, the physical and mental growth of children can be severely hindered. This has become worse due to the pandemic. Yet, 25 out of 75 wards under Dhaka South City Corporation and 10 out of 55 wards under Dhaka North City Corporation do not have a single park or playground, according to the new detailed area plan (DAP). Even where there are parks, there are also efforts to snatch them away. For example, last year, the Tetultala playground in the capital's Kalaban was being planned to be used for constructing a police station. Thankfully, the higher authorities stepped in due to vehement protests by locals. But is this sustainable? Do children and other locals have to go on strike every time a new decision of eating up an open space comes about?

One of the major reasons for urban planners and psychologists of saying that Dhaka is unsuitable for children is the city's lack of playgrounds. In the last 22 years, however, the number of playgrounds in Dhaka has come down from 150 to only 24. We urge authorities to save the playgrounds that are currently in danger and to also create more spaces where our children can play freely.

No change in tune for the EC in its first year



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It has been a year since the new Election Commission (EC) was constituted according to a law that has stipulated the qualifications of the chief election commissioner (CEC) and other commissioners, as well as their recruitment process – although the law itself is not above controversy. Since the new EC's appointment, the government and the ruling party have been relentlessly trying to pursue and convince everyone within the country as well as the interested international observers that this institution has the capacity and authority to conduct all elections in Bangladesh independently, ensuring fairness.

However, the functioning and the activities of the new EC, including the election of the new president, local government (zilla parishad) elections and a few parliamentary by-elections during the last one year, have been the least convincing of that idea. The lone issue where the commission has proven its resolve is its tireless but irrational

AL promptly argued that the decision proved the EC had always been in control of elections and the BNP's demand for a caretaker government was unjustified. The EC, however, ditched the CCTV project citing lack of resources, which only requires a fraction of the highly ambitious and exorbitantly expensive EVMs.

push for procuring Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), even in the middle of a severe economic strain that the nation has been facing. It appeared to be an attempt to please the ruling Awami League, which had been insisting on using EVMs instead of paper ballots in the next parliamentary election until



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they, too, accepted the reality that there was no money for it.

Putting this EVM debate aside, let's look at the records of the elections the new EC has presided over so far. It must be noted that the EC's firm handling of the botched by-election to Gaibandha 5 constituency on October 12, 2022 showed some encouraging bravery on its part, when it suspended voting amid widespread irregularities four hours after it started. Those irregularities included people either illegally supporting or forcing voters to cast ballots, polling agents wearing clothes bearing the symbol of their nominees, and illegal entry into restricted rooms. CEC Kazi Habibur Awal and his fellow commissioners watched all these violations taking place from the EC office, Nirbachan Bhaban, in Dhaka, hundreds of kilometres away on big monitors through CCTV feeds.

Though the Awami League leadership questioned the EC's decision, they promptly argued that the decision proved the EC had always been in control of elections in the country and the BNP's demand for a poll-time caretaker government was unjustified.

overlooked by the EC, which was a complete reversal of Gaibandha in 2022.

One of the worst failures of the EC, however, was not investigating the alleged disappearance of a candidate in Brahmanbaria and his agent. The alleged victim, Asif Ahmed, later told journalists that members of the ruling party were the people who would be able to explain his mysterious disappearance. The EC, however, chose to look away.

Before that, the disappearance of a contestant ahead of election day was unheard of in any election in the country. There are considerable concerns among observers and opposition parties that enforced disappearances for a shorter term could be a new tactic to be deployed in the coming general election. After all, from what the past experiences show, victims of enforced disappearance get so traumatised that they never dare to speak about their ordeals.

If these failures do not make one realise the new EC's inability to rise above partisan bias and its subservience to the government of the day, look at its latest goof-up in the election process

on February 13. Nobody is suggesting that the president-elect would have pulled out of the race at that stage, but the question of complying with its own time frame by the EC is not a trivial matter. The EC and returning officers are bound by the schedule, even if the election is uncontested. As the Representation of the People Order (RPO) provides the basic guiding principles for all elections in the country, strict abidance of the schedule is quite crucial.

What prompted such a technical but legally crucial failure on the EC's part? Doesn't it reflect badly on their competence? Was it their excitement for having an uncontested election for the top job of the republic? If ignoring election rules was not the result of negligence of its duty, the only other explanation that comes to mind is partisan behaviour.

Regaining public confidence and trust in the Election Commission, which have been systematically destroyed by two previous commissions, is undoubtedly a tough task. Unfortunately, it seems the current EC, too, is failing us miserably.

All hands on deck needed to beat poverty

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Over the years, alongside sustained economic growth, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in reducing poverty. The international poverty line is set at \$2.15 per person per day based on 2017 prices. This means that anyone living on less than \$2.15 a day is in extreme poverty. Based on the World Bank report titled Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018, the poverty line rate in Bangladesh decreased to 20.5 percent, while the below-poverty line rate decreased to 13.8 percent. Hence, life expectancy, literacy rates, and per capita food production have all concurrently increased.

The Bangladesh government has set different milestones for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In its 8th Five-Year Plan (8FYP), the government has targeted an eight percent average growth rate during the July 2020-June 2025 period, set the goal to reduce the poverty rate from 20.5 percent to 15.6 percent, and aims to further strengthen the existing social security system while eliminating poverty and narrowing inequality. Furthermore, it plans to increase public spending in healthcare from one percent to two percent of the GDP. The Perspective Plan (2021–2041), released in 2020, outlines the government's goal of bringing down poverty to less than three percent and its vision to achieve

a “Smart Bangladesh” by 2041.

Despite these achievements, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, the consequent price hikes and the global economic crisis have impeded the progress towards these goals. Moreover, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that a third of the global economy will be in recession this year. Due to the pandemic and the new socioeconomic crisis, the poverty rate almost doubled from 20.5 percent in 2018 to 42 percent in 2022, while the below poverty rate tripled from 13.8 percent to 28.5 percent. The rate tripled in both rural (33 percent) and urban (19 percent) areas compared to their respective rates in 2018, which also had a spillover effect on healthcare. The poor and disadvantaged have faced additional medical costs, poor management and negligence of healthcare facilities, which paint a bleak picture of the overall healthcare landscape of the country.

Additionally, most of the poor suffer from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and asthma/chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD). With the disadvantaged already suffering from economic vulnerabilities, the additional economic burden of having to avail medical treatment led to a crisis of catastrophic proportion. In recent years, the percentage of out-of-pocket expenditure (OOP) in healthcare has increased to about 73 percent from 67 percent. This indicates that they are mostly taking medical treatment from village or local quacks or pharmacies. More often than not, they consume an excessive amount of antibiotics, which invariably leads to antibiotic

resistance.

This paints a truly concerning portrait of the dual stresses afflicting the poor – financial and healthcare – brought on by the pandemic and the new socio-economic crisis. This has led to the creation of a new group called the “new poor.” Presently, their existing coping mechanisms against

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this new crisis include selling off their assets, working extra hours, dipping into their savings, and taking on the burden of debts. Failure to manage the basic necessities for survival has driven numerous poor families to leave the capital city and other urban areas and relocate to their village homes.

Most of these people also remain poorly underserved by government

services. Lack of livelihood skills and training, educational opportunities, inadequate and/or poor quality health and nutrition services all impose multiple burdens on the population that are already at or below the poverty line, and keep them trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

To mitigate this situation, the government and policymakers are trying to explore and implement new paths and strategies to improve the lives, livelihoods and healthcare of this vulnerable segment of population. Despite some laudable government efforts, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the private sector actors need to be called on for short-to-mid-term solutions, approaches and strategies with integrated interventions.

Increasing social safety net coverage and ensuring accessibility to the poor via service linkage would be a good start to this end. Equally critical are incentivising and providing opportunities for savings, disseminating direct grants or asset transfers, disbursing soft or interest-free loans to create new employment opportunities or facilitate recovery of existing livelihoods, and creating avenues to build livelihood skills. Furthermore, assuring holistic healthcare solutions, providing community-level healthcare, and adopting initiatives to ensure access to affordable, quality healthcare and reducing OOP expenditures will all play vital roles.

These integrated initiatives could facilitate quick recovery of the poor, not only enabling them to develop safety nets against current and upcoming socioeconomic crises, but also helping them achieve economic resilience, receive adequate health coverage, and lead improved lives.