



Could the president have done more during his tenure?



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GOLAM MORTOZA

The president of Bangladesh, albeit with limited authority, has the highest honour in the state, as stipulated in Article 48 of our constitution. Other than appointing the prime minister and the chief justice, the president is stipulated to work on the advice of the prime minister.

He is also the chancellor of all universities in the country. That is the topic of this discussion.

On February 25, while speaking at the convocation of Jahangirnagar University, President and Chancellor Abdul Hamid made some instructive and critical comments. Most of the issues he commented on have been the subjects of debates and criticism over the last few years.

The president said the general public was not liable for even one percent of the defaulted loans in the country. He lamented that people now looked at student politics in a negative light. He also touched upon the issues of tender manipulation, nepotism, and others.

President Abdul Hamid has served for two consecutive terms, spanning 10 years. If we look at the state of student politics in the country during that period, it is marred by anarchy, extortion, hooliganism, looting and killings.

However, during his tenure, we did not see him speak on these issues. We know that the universities are directly run by their vice-chancellors, not the chancellor. However, the chancellor holds the power to appoint or replace the VCs. Some of those VC appointees indulged in unprecedented levels of anomalies and corruption, but the chancellor kept mum.

President Hamid is speaking up now, as his tenure comes to an end on April 23. Naturally, his silence back then and his comments now raise questions.

The political party that he represents, the party from which he was elected as a member of parliament, and speaker of the House, and eventually the president – why didn't he play a responsible role in preventing that party's student wing from raging anarchy, extortion, tender manipulation, and torture and sexual harassment of students?

Can the nation expect answers to these questions from the president?

It seems the going trend is to keep quiet during one's tenure and make some comments of concern before retiring, as parting words. We have seen many including the former IGP do so in the past. Is the president following suit?

Among the universities across Bangladesh, Dhaka, Chittagong, Jahangirnagar and Rajshahi operate as per the 1973 ordinance. The ordinance was penned by the then government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Under that ordinance, university teachers were not made accountable to anyone; as scholarly individuals, they

were expected to be accountable to themselves.

The rest of the universities are self-governed. But the president is the chancellor of all universities. And the chancellor appoints the VCs of all universities.

The incumbent chancellor appointed the VC of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur, who enjoyed all the state-sponsored benefits that came with the position, but during his entire tenure, he was mostly absent from the campus. On rare days that he did set foot within the campus, he caught a morning flight to go to the university and then returned in the afternoon. But his is a residential position – he is supposed to live in the university premises, where housing and transportation facilities for the VC are provided.

Having risen from grassroots politics, adorning the state's most respectable post, our incumbent president did not set any examples. Even for a general health-related consultation, he went to London and Germany – repeatedly. Many times, he used the national flag carrier to accommodate his foreign trips, which cost the taxpayers heavily. From what we observed, despite his limited authority, President Hamid had the opportunities to do certain things and say certain things, but he did not.

The VC of Rajshahi University made headlines by giving jobs to people in exchange for money. Even the Awami League-backed teachers spoke against him. He fled the campus at night, under police protection. In spite of all the complaints against him, the chancellor appointed him as the VC for a second term. What is the logic behind this appointment?

During the movement to oust the VC of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) last year, the students were assured by the education minister, Dr Zafar Iqbal and others that appropriate action would be taken as per their demands. One year has passed since then, but there have been no visible actions yet. Thus, the promise to replace the VC has not been kept. Here, too, we did not see any efforts from the chancellor.

There have been allegations of the Jahangirnagar University VC sharing "profits" with the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student front of the ruling party. In face of this allegation, the central committee of BCL was dissolved. Still, the chancellor kept mum.

Now, the Islamic University (IU) in Kushtia is making headlines with the torture of a new student, Phulpori, in the hands of BCL leaders in a residential hall, and how the VC, proctor, provost and house tutors took the attackers' side. The efforts to get the victim justice that we are seeing in this case is because of the High Court's directives – not

because of any initiative by the chancellor.

Thousands of similar incidents of injustice, anomalies, corruption and attacks have taken place in other universities, and they were reported by the media too. None of them were taken into the chancellor's consideration during his tenure.

In the case of a VC appointment, the president's decision is final. Due to his limited power, he may not have done much, but he could still play a vital role from the "moral authority" point of view.

Coming back to the issue of bad loans, when the Awami League came to power in 2009, the total amount of defaulted loans was Tk 22,500 crore. As of September 2022, that amount swelled up to Tk 134,396 crore, according to our finance minister. The real amount could be Tk 300,000-400,000 crore. In 2019, the defaulters were given a special opportunity to take off their names from the defaulters' list for 10 years by paying only two percent of their debt. This way, a legal way was created for such defaulters to not return people's money borrowed from the people's banks.

The president is now saying not

even one percent of the general populace is to be blamed for the defaulted loans. But he did not name those who are supposed to be blamed.

One might say this issue is out of his jurisdiction. If that is the case, then he cannot make comments about these issues now either. He may not have any authority to act against the loan defaulters, but as a national figure, he could have been vocal against them.

Corruption, irregularities in our financial sector, money laundering – the president stayed silent about these issues throughout both his terms.

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From what we observed, despite his limited authority, President Hamid had the opportunities to do certain things and say certain things, but he did not. The comments he is making now may leave a positive impression of him, but they are hardly likely to make any difference in curbing corruption, reducing bad loans or improving the current state of student politics in the country.

Translated by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.

WORLD WILDLIFE DAY Conversations with conservationists



Abida Rahman Chowdhury is a journalist at *The Daily Star* with interests in wildlife and biodiversity conservation.

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Located at the tip of the largest bay in the world, Bangladesh is crammed with a rapidly increasing human population. That, coupled with the nation's economic growth, means a huge clamour for dwindling resources, investments on highways, infrastructure, power lines and factories. While I do not believe that a growing population is the root of all evil, in a cramped landmass such as ours, it can take a heavy toll on resources, unless policymakers have the vision of a sustainable future.

Owing to its unique location in the Indo-Himalayan realm, the country boasts immense biodiversity in its varied landscapes. According to the latest available data as per International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Bangladesh has a total of 1,619 species that includes 138 mammals, 566 birds, 167 reptiles, 49 amphibians, 253 freshwater fishes, 141 crustaceans

and 305 species of butterflies. A vast majority of invertebrates, estuarine and marine fishes had to be left out of the survey.

If we look at it from the perspective of all the world's species, Bangladesh supports nearly 1.7 percent of the world's wildlife. How is that wildlife doing? Why does the chirping of birds no longer wake us up every morning? When was the last time a frog just showed up in our bathrooms?

Bangladesh has gone through at least two major geopolitical changes in the last century, and by the time we became an independent nation in 1971, we had already lost some of our most charismatic megafauna. According to Dr Reza Khan, the populations of many of our surviving megafauna – such as the gigantic Bryde's whales, Asian elephants, Bengal tigers, dolphins, clouded leopards, binturong, hornbills and gharials – are also dwindling. These species might disappear from our territory in 20-50 years.

So, what is the next step for Bangladesh, a country extremely rich in biodiversity, which also happens to be the ground zero of an impending climate crisis?

I caught up with some young conservationists working in the country's wild spaces to try and understand the challenges towards wildlife conservation in Bangladesh, and the way forward.

Is habitat loss one of our primary concerns?

The Covid pandemic was a stark reminder of how closely connected we are with wildlife. Viruses such as Sars-Cov-2 frequently jumps to humans from wild animals. As the onslaught of development continues, our last remaining wild spaces are shrinking, increasing the chances of human-wildlife conflict.

"Habitat loss is one of the biggest challenges for Bangladesh. To address that, we need proper management. But ensuring that is another big hurdle. On paper, we have many protected areas, but we have to widen and strengthen the net of protection. Even though we are such a biodiverse

nation, the status of our wildlife in one word is 'poor,'" says Sayam U Chowdhury, who primarily focuses on migratory shorebirds of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, and on developing tools to manage coastal habitats and identifying mitigation measures in response to climate change.

Almost all the conservationists I spoke to echo the same sentiments. The government last year handed over a part of Jungle Khuniya Palong reserved forest in Cox's Bazar to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) for building a residential training facility after de-reserving the 20-acre land.

Shahriar Caesar Rahman, whose work focuses on community-based conservation, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), lamented this de-reserving of forests. "I believe the biggest challenge for Bangladesh's wildlife conservation

is managing our protected areas. A lot of the reserved forests are being de-reserved and allocated by the government to other bodies. Even the football federation was allocated a part of the reserved forest to make a training centre. And many parts of where I work – the forests in the hill tracts – have been declared as union parishads, which means more development activities, settlement of human population and driving out the last of the wildlife that remains there."

The science and practice of wildlife conservation is still relatively new in Bangladesh, which means there is a lack of political will at the top

We need long-term and sustainable conservation finance to ensure continuity in work, because some of the interventions such as rewilding of turtles and tortoises in the CHT require decades of work. In the coming years, Bangladesh needs to mobilise businesses, corporate groups and the private sector to establish endowment fund for wildlife conservation for sustainable financing. We need to work on a site for years to ensure there is a tangible result, and this may be the answer to that," said another young conservationist who is working on the conservation of Bengal Slow-Loris in the northeastern forests in



PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

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Bangladesh has gone through at least two major geopolitical changes in the last century, and by the time we became an independent nation in 1971, we had already lost some of our most charismatic megafauna. According to Dr Reza Khan, the populations of many of our surviving megafauna – such as the gigantic Bryde's whales, Asian elephants, Bengal tigers, dolphins, clouded leopards, binturong, hornbills and gharials – are also dwindling. These species might disappear from our territory in 20-50 years. So, what is the next step for Bangladesh, a country extremely rich in biodiversity, which also happens to be the ground zero of an impending climate crisis.

level along with a failure to engage communities where interventions are needed.

For Alifa Bintha Haque, who works with marine and coastal fishers to protect sharks and rays, the biggest challenge towards conservation of marine species is a little different from others.

"We have a huge community of coastal and marine fishers in Bangladesh, and most of them have very little access to information or financial capacity to really understand bycatch mitigation. We need legal infrastructure and technical innovation to minimise interaction with sharks and rays. "As a nation, we need to strive for

the country.

"One of the biggest challenges to achieving our conservation goals lies in getting sustainable funding. Something that would ensure we get to work on one conservation site for a long time until we can achieve tangible results," says Marjan Maria.

The United Nations in 2019 reported that one in every eight plant and animal species in the world would be extinct in the next few decades unless we take drastic actions. Bangladesh has already lost some of its emblematic wild species; we cannot afford to lose more. As we observe World Wildlife Day today, it is time to take an inclusive approach towards wildlife conservation.