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A poll-time govt without BNP?

A fair election will require much more than token initiatives

We appreciate what appears to be the first sign of flexibility about forming a poll-time government ahead of the national election. The prime minister on Monday hinted that a poll-time government with parties having representation in parliament could be formed. By the same logic, however, she rejected the possibility of BNP, whose MPs had resigned from parliament last December, being a part of it. She also ruled out any dialogue with BNP.

There are a number of takeaways from the PM's statement. First of all, the apparent willingness to bring opposition elements in the government marks a departure from the bellicose posturing that we have come to expect from ruling-party politicians. But that hardly rises to the level expected in the present environment of distrust, with BNP edged out of the process on a technicality. Also, the PM's tone, alluding to "our generosity" for forming such a government, leaves doubt about how impactful it might be. One thing that we don't want to see is token representation without real power.

Secondly, BNP remains the biggest opposition party regardless of its representation or lack thereof in parliament. So, how judicious is it to exclude it from a potential poll-time government or any dialogue on said government and the election in general? Dialogue at the top level may not be on the cards right now, but mid-ranked leaders from both parties can, and should, start the process. Dialogue is essential for any solution to the current political impasse.

Thirdly, formation of a poll-time government is but a means to an end, which is to ensure that those in charge have the trust of all political elements and the general public, and can deliver a fair and credible election. So how should that be formed? The PM offers a way, but it cannot be the only way. Any poll-time government without the representation of main political elements will not solve the pressing issues we face. Also, how will it perform? Will it be unidimensional, where everything is decided from the top, as it is now? These things must be considered going forward.

As the chief election commissioner has repeatedly said, the commission alone cannot hold a fair election without the help of the government. Without taking away from the responsibility of the EC, we think some sort of a credible power structure in the driving seat is a crucial precondition for any fair election.

We must curb rising inequality

Reforms as per IMF conditions should not harm disadvantaged groups

At a dialogue organised by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, speakers rightly emphasised the need for the government to balance economic reforms – some of which are preconditions for accessing the IMF's \$4.7 billion loan – in a way that can rein in economic disparity in Bangladesh. As the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2022 has demonstrated, inequality is indeed rising in the country. According to data, the Gini coefficient related to income rose to 0.499 in 2022, up from 0.482 in 2016 and 0.458 in 2010. A combination of this with the ongoing global and domestic economic challenges, and the obligation to meet IMF conditions through various spending cuts, could lead to faster inequality growth.

By now, numerous studies have shown us that inequality tends to rise during IMF programmes or as a result of IMF conditions. Therefore, it is crucial to adjust its conditions in a way that can contain inequality. Experts, for example, have urged the government to allow specialised and subsidised credit schemes for those involved in agriculture and cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSME), and for women and youth, while maintaining flexible interest rates as per the IMF recommendations. Additionally, while the government needs to reduce tax exemptions to meet loan conditions, it should do so in a way that does not hurt small and medium enterprises.

How the government plans and implements the upcoming national budget will also be a big factor, as far as inequality is concerned. Allocation for disadvantaged groups should not suffer as a consequence of the government's fiscal constraints. If anything, the government should ensure that much of its limited resources is directed towards the needs of these groups. It also needs to ensure greater accountability and transparency in its budgetary allocations and delivery, so that corruption – which always hits disadvantaged groups the hardest, while benefiting special interest groups – is reduced.

As the planning minister himself has admitted, there are many tax evaders and defaulters in the country. Taking action against them, however difficult that may seem, is a must for any reform to be sustainable.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rising prices are suffocating us

I am responsible for feeding a family of five. With rising food prices, we have cut down our food consumption, particularly protein-rich food items such as fish and meat, as we can't afford them like we could before. This is putting my two small children's development in jeopardy as they are not getting the nutrition they need. Now I'm hearing they may raise the price of gas further. I am the sole earner in my family, and my salary isn't increasing like the prices are. How am I supposed to keep my family alive and well?

Mohammad Hasan
Rayerbazar

Biman never fails to disappoint



A CLOSER LOOK
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TASNEEM TAYEB

Biman – flamboyant, glamorous, carefree – seems to be flying high on the back of unbridled corruption, reckless nepotism, shameless mismanagement, and belligerent malpractices. It also seems to have become a magnet for the wayward and the corrupt, ensnaring them with endless possibilities of thriving on the common people's taxes and national resources.

Take, for instance, Biman's puzzling decision to send about a hundred officials to Saudi Arabia this year on a 37-day, fully-paid-for trip, at a tentative cost of about Tk 8-10 crore, to "supervise" hajj pilgrims and assist them. In what capacity these Biman officials are going remains a mystery, since the "work" that they are supposed to do involves tasks that are already carried out by others – carrying luggage, wheelchair management, ticketing, cleaning aircraft, etc.

For instance, these officials (from the customer service directorate, marketing sales, engineering and material management directorate, and IT, among other departments)

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are supposed to help in carrying the luggage and Zamzam water bottles/containers to and from hotels. However, the president of Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh, M Shahadat Hossain Taslim, said to this daily that, under the Makkah Route Initiative, Saudi-appointed employees carry the pilgrims' luggage between the airport and their hotels, and they also carry Zamzam water containers.

Moreover, the national flag carrier already has a General Sales Agent (GSA) in Saudi Arabia and station offices in



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Jeddah, Madinah, and Makkah. Despite the hollow and puerile justifications given by Biman authorities, this entire programme looks like a leisure trip for the officials at a time when the country is facing perhaps the worst forex crunch of recent times, and in spite of the prime minister's straightforward directive to avoid unnecessary foreign trips. Interestingly, Muhammad Nizam Uddin Ahmed, a key accused in the recent question paper leak scandal during Biman recruitment, is also a part of the entourage.

Unfortunately, Biman's misadventures do not end here. On May 3, its board of directors in principle decided to procure 10 Airbus planes, including the two freighters, to expand its fleet. This decision has left some aviation experts baffled, since Biman is only using six percent of its current freight capacity. In 2022, Biman carried about 28,000 tonnes of freight in the cargo hold of the planes making international flights, against a capacity of 498,000 tonnes. There is another challenge: Biman's seasonal cargo transport demand is west-bound when it comes to exports, and in-bound cargo mostly comes in from countries in the eastern region, such as China, Japan, Hong Kong, etc.

Given the reality, how is Biman planning to ensure a two-way goods traffic during these flights? Or are

international flights, and had a concerning 700,000 seats vacant, which translates to an underutilised capacity of 24 percent. This inability to utilise existing capacity has been attributed to shortages of pilots and cabin crew members, and poor planning and management.

At the executional level, too, Biman seems to be struggling incessantly, putting passengers' lives at risk. As recently as on May 13 this year, a Biman flight coming in from Kuala Lumpur at the Dhaka airport got stuck at the end of the runway while taking a U-turn, resulting in flight operation suspension at the airport for about an hour and causing about six international flights to be delayed. Unsurprisingly, neither of the two captains flying the aircraft managed to register the incident in the air safety report, which could have been a deliberate attempt to hide the incident from official reporting channels.

What is even more alarming is that the Boeing 787 Biman aircraft, which dropped off the prime minister at Tokyo airport on April 25 during her recent visit to Japan, on its way back to Bangladesh had to navigate a "minimum equipment list" flight, as both its weather radar systems had stopped functioning. Imagine this happening during the flight to Japan, instead of the return leg. This could

had to make a technical landing at Dhaka airport two and a half hours into the flight, as its weather radar system was not working. Now, coming back to the incident involving the aircraft that carried our prime minister to Tokyo: if, as Air Commodore Moazzem Hossain, director of engineering and material management at Biman, said, it was only a "small problem" and did not "pose a safety hazard," why did the Riyadh-bound flight suffer the same problem?

Unfortunately, these incidents are only the tip of the iceberg. It is a well-known and generally accepted fact that Biman is a cesspool of corruption and mismanagement. It does not have the capacity to run like a professional, commercial airline – despite its officials drawing corporate-structure salaries – let alone creating its competitive edge in the global aviation industry. It is a blackhole that keeps devouring national resources and gives nothing back in return except scandals. The airline has zero accountability and no regard for any form of governance, compliance, or internal (or even external) control measures.

While it is understandable that Biman serves the financial interests of vested quarters, the only solution to its malady is privatisation. The sooner the policymakers and decision-makers come to terms with this fact, the better.

Role of MPs in tackling climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

I had an opportunity to address a meeting of Bangladeshi parliamentarians, under the leadership of Speaker of the House Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, organised by the UNDP, on the outcome of COP27 and the role of parliamentarians going forward.

Let me share some of my remarks to the parliamentarians and also some of the outcomes of the event.

The main positive outcome of COP27, held in November 2022 in Egypt, was the agreement to set up a funding mechanism to address loss and damage from human-induced climate change. This was a major breakthrough agreement and the result of some very effective advocacy and diplomacy by Bangladesh as part of the climate-vulnerable developing countries' group.

The activities of the Transitional Committee on funding loss and damage need to be geared up to get a result in COP28, which is scheduled to be held in December 2023 in Dubai. We must keep a close eye on the work of the Transitional Committee before COP28.

Regarding the role of parliamentarians, there are three levels of action they could get involved in – namely the global, national, and local levels.

Bangladeshi parliamentarians have already been playing a leading role for

a number of years. MP Saber Hossain Chowdhury, who has chaired the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) for many years, and Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, who has chaired the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), both raised the issue of tackling climate change from their respective positions. More recently, under the presidency of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) also set up a new parliamentarian forum, in which all our parliamentarians should join and participate in their deliberations and global advocacy, together with their counterparts from other vulnerable developing countries.

At the national level, the parliamentarians – as part of their membership of the different parliamentary standing committees – have a constitutionally mandated role of overseeing the activities of different ministries of the government and need to sharpen their role in monitoring their activities in tackling climate change, especially the allocation and disbursement of the climate budget under the Ministry of Finance. The climate budget has been an excellent initiative of the finance ministry. But merely announcing the budget allocations without providing information on the actual

expenditures will not ensure their usefulness. Hence, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance must take a greater responsibility to oversee the climate budget allocation, as well as expenditures, as they are constitutionally mandated to do.

The third level of activities of parliamentarians was vividly illustrated

At the national level, the parliamentarians have a constitutionally mandated role of overseeing the activities of different ministries of the government and need to sharpen their role in monitoring their activities in tackling climate change, especially the allocation and disbursement of the climate budget under the Ministry of Finance.

in real time as we met just as Cyclone Mocha was approaching Bangladesh (before moving on to Myanmar). The cyclone preparedness programme of Bangladesh – which involves everyone from scientists, who track the cyclones, to government agencies responsible for preparation to volunteers letting everyone know about the coming event and helping them get to the shelters – was particularly pertinent as every parliamentarian in the meeting had

considerable experience to share on tackling cyclones and other weather-related disasters.

All parliamentarians in Bangladesh, and indeed globally, need to become aware of climate change and about their specific roles in helping their constituents tackle its impacts through effective local adaptation. However, the MPs rightly pointed out that every constituency is different with respect to which climate change impacts need more attention and what they need to do to prepare themselves. Hence, a constituency-by-constituency set of data and information could be developed by the government and experts.

At the same time, a set of parliamentarians from the most vulnerable constituencies could form a special group to get more deeply involved regarding the climate actions needed at the local level in their constituencies.

Finally, I recommended that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Climate Change take the lead in learning more about and then implementing the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP), along with the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and the Bangladesh Delta Plan. I am pleased that the speaker endorsed this recommendation and asked the UNDP to follow up on it.

It is now clear that every group of citizens in Bangladesh must learn about their respective roles in tackling climate change and then carry out their tasks urgently and at scale. I was pleased to see that our parliamentarians seem to have gotten the message and have taken up their role in earnest, and I am happy to help them in any way I can from hereon.