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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

The poor need better budget support

Govt must ensure the most vulnerable get the assistance they need

It's disheartening to know that the government's allocation for social safety net programmes in the upcoming budget may see only a marginal increase amid a raging inflation. According to a draft plan of the finance ministry, there may be an allocation of about Tk 1.2 lakh crore for social safety net. This is slightly higher than the existing budget's Tk 1.13 lakh crore allocation. However, in terms of the percentage of total budget and the percentage of GDP, it actually marks a decline. This means that even though the cost of living has skyrocketed, there will be no additional support for the poor to weather the storm.

The government feels that the allocation is enough, and the apparent decline in poverty – as claimed by Planning Minister MA Mannan in April – could be used to justify it. This is only half the truth, however. Despite doubts over the veracity of any data from the state-controlled BBS, the real concern is less about the precise number of the poor, and more about the changing reality of poverty, the quality of the support given, and whether it is sufficient. There is no doubt that the exorbitant prices of essentials have had a disproportionate impact on the poor, including the "new poor" – who now form the majority of poor people in Dhaka – whose plight still remains unrecognised. The gap between their income and expenses is getting wider, and a business-as-usual approach to address this will only hurt more.

Questions can also be raised about the use of the social safety allocation. How judicious is it, for example, that a large chunk of it is repurposed to provide pension for retired government employees? Many of the poor are already being deprived due to the questionable method of selecting social safety net beneficiaries, which has left it vulnerable to exploitation. As per a 2021 World Bank report, eligibility criteria were not met by 26.6 percent of the beneficiaries of allowance for the elderly and 38.4 percent of those in employment generation programmes. If these issues are not addressed, the social safety project will fail to deliver expected results.

Addressing the inflation's devastating impact on the poor needs a holistic approach. We urge the government to take measures to stabilise prices, increase its social safety allocation, and ensure its maximum utilisation so that the poor receive the assistance they need.

Not a place for corruption

Investigate the allegations raised against BSMMU VC

It is unfortunate that BSMMU, the highest postgraduate medical institution in Bangladesh, has been suffering from various irregularities, particularly regarding recruitment. According to a recent report by *Prothom Alo*, at least 11 relatives of Vice-Chancellor Prof Sharfuddin Ahmed secured jobs in the university over the last decade. Seven of them were recruited after he was appointed as VC in March 2021, two when he served as pro-VC, and the rest when he was president of the BSMMU branch of the pro-Awami League doctors' association Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad. Among those recruited were his sons, his wife's nephew, etc.

These recruitments clearly fly in the face of meritocracy, and by allowing them the VC has enabled an environment of nepotism and corruption that may not only affect the quality of education in BSMMU or the medical services it provides to patients, but also harm its reputation. While the VC has claimed that the recruitments were made considering the merit of those involved, these were, according to insiders, actually in breach of rules as all his relatives got jobs without sitting for any exam.

Reportedly, during the tenure of this VC, a total of 1,857 people have been appointed in various posts including professor, associate professor, assistant professor, medical officer, accounts officer, administrative officer, nurse, ward boy, nanny, driver, sweeper, etc. However, only less than 500 of these appointments were made following proper procedure – through advertisements in newspapers and recruitment tests. More than 1,300 people got jobs as temporary staff, and they will be gradually made permanent, according to insiders who believe this is nothing but an avenue for corruption. Many of them have also alleged that each temporary recruitment has been made in exchange for money.

These are all serious allegations and particularly disturbing because these involve the highest authority of a university. We demand an immediate, fair investigation into the allegations and hope that proper measures will be taken if those are found to be true. Universities that create future leaders should never be a place harbouring corruption and nepotism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Even on Metro Rail, we don't follow rules

I have used the Metro Rail service quite a few times this year, and have been pleasantly surprised by its timeliness and the overall helpful nature of those working at the stations.

However, even to this new facility, some passengers seem to be carrying over negative public transport habits that seem to be ingrained in our culture. The first car of each train is reserved for female passengers only. However, some men often knowingly use these cars, even when there is space for them in other cars. When notified of the error, most turn a deaf ear.

The Metro Rail is a modern and efficient transport service, quite unlike the unfit and deadly buses that roam our roads. So why are we treating (or mistreating) the two services the same? Can women not hope for Metro Rail to be a safer, more respectful mode of transport? I hope the authorities will take notice and nip this regrettable practice of some male passengers in the bud.

Sabina Halim, Dhaka

DRAFT REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (AMENDMENT) ACT 2023

Setting rules of the game without parties' consent may prove unwise



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkal

KAMAL AHMED

When loan defaulting has become the most preferred option to get rich quicker for habitual defaulters, it seems they are so blessed that they can now contest the upcoming parliamentary election by rescheduling their loans or bills just a day prior to collecting nomination papers. The cabinet last week gave the final nod to the draft Representation of the People (amendment) Act (RPA) 2023 that will allow candidates to reschedule loans or bills on the day before collecting nomination papers, instead of the current rule of rescheduling them seven days prior to nomination paper collection.

There's little doubt about the magnitude and seriousness of the crisis that the accumulation of defaulted loans have caused in the country's banking sector. According to *Prothom Alo* (based on Bangladesh Bank data), whereas in 1990 the amount of defaulted loans was Tk 46.46 billion, in 2022 the amount reached Tk 1.3 trillion. The most loans have been defaulted in the past 14 years, when the dominance of businesspeople in parliament and in the government rose significantly. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), as part of its suggested reform plan, has set a deadline of September 2023 to implement changes in the Bank Company Act in order to be eligible for the next tranche of loan.

The government has also finalised the proposed draft amendment of the act which is now expected to be placed before parliament soon. The draft Bank Company (Amendment) Act, approved by the cabinet on March 28, 2023, (if and when it becomes law) will bar willful defaulters from travelling abroad, registering houses, vehicles and companies, as well as from being in committees of political parties.

It is, therefore, quite intriguing how the RPA amendment can be so accommodating to defaulters who are desperate to gain political power.

Doing business is not a reason for automatic disqualification from taking part in politics or in elections. But if politics becomes a tool for taking unfair advantages of power and



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

masking business failures, there's every reason to put in place preventative actions to desist such unethical practices. Questions about this group's ability to serve the nation becomes more important given that they are incapable of running their business projects efficiently and are defaulting in repaying debts and bills.

A good reminder about some of these businesspeople-turned politicians has perhaps come from an unexpected source. The State Minister for Industries, Kamal Ahmed Majumder, said, "I have been in politics for 50 years. Forty years ago, those who I used to see walking around the streets with briefcases, without money, are now the owner-managers of banks." Speaking at a seminar on the SME sector in Dhaka on May 11, he said that these people have become directors of private banks by taking money from government banks. The minister stressed that the names of

with the RPA amendment. If the draft amendment – as cleared by the cabinet – gets parliament's approval, the Election Commission (EC) will no longer be able to cancel an election in an entire constituency (as it had done in Gaibandha in October 2020). Instead, it will be allowed to postpone or cancel elections at one or more polling centres if it finds irregularities.

Election Commissioner Rashida Sultana tried her best to assure us that the amendment would still allow the EC to cancel or postpone elections, but had to concede that what the Commission sought was the authority to annul the result after it is announced by the returning officer. Empowering the EC to cancel voting for an entire constituency, even after results are announced, would have further ensured a fair election, EC Rashida Sultana added.

Despite any reservations that one may have against the current

certifications.

The Representation of People Act is the most important part of an election as the rules set by this act require an agreement between all major contending parties. We all remember how a consensus reached by the three alliances after the fall of military dictator General Ershad had helped draw up the rules for the 1991 election. Since then, the RPA (or its previous model, known as the RPO) has been updated quite a few times, as per consensus between all major parties until the abolition of the caretaker government system. At present, unless such an agreement is reached between the major players in the political powers game – which is clearly absent as reflected in the reactions of the opposition – these amendments, whether empowering the EC more or curtailing it, would make very little difference in terms of ensuring a credible and fair election.

Imran Khan's moment of truth



Zahid Hussain is an author and journalist. His Twitter handle is @zidhussain

ZAHID HUSSAIN

What is happening now is not unfamiliar to Pakistan's treacherous power politics. The signs of rupture are evident in its ranks as the PTI faces a massive crackdown.

Several prominent members – the latest among them Shireen Mazari and Fayyaz Chohan – have left the party and many others are lining up to exit. Former prime minister Imran Khan is paying the cost of taking on his powerful erstwhile patrons.

A protégé-turned-rebel has to be culled. The May 9 mayhem provided the establishment a justification to strike back with a severity not witnessed in recent times.

Several thousand PTI supporters have been detained in the clampdown. Almost the entire senior leadership has been incarcerated; some of them might be tried by military courts.

Imran Khan's bail may have been extended again, thanks to the courts, but the noose is tightening around him. The maverick leader is facing the most serious test of his chequered political career.

Despite the defections, his popular base seems to have so far remained intact. But his political fortunes depend on how long – and if – the senior leadership can defy the establishment's pressure and stand by him in his hour of reckoning.

The events of recent weeks have changed the country's political landscape. It has brought the stand-off between the PTI and the security establishment to a head. It is an ironic reversal of the period when Khan was in

power.

Some three years ago, speaking at a dinner for the then ruling coalition lawmakers, he had arrogantly boasted "we are the only choice" for the establishment. But the game has changed as he finds himself pitted against the same institution. The May 9 incident seems to have closed all doors to reconciliation.

Perhaps Khan believed that a show of street power could force the establishment to step back. He has singled out the army chief for his attack. In a recent interview to a foreign TV channel, he accused him of "attempting to impede his path to reclaiming power." He seemed to have gotten carried away by the perception built by his supporters on social media of a division within the top brass.

But that brinkmanship has boomeranged. The widespread violence targeting army installations, particularly the vandalising of memorials to martyred soldiers, has provoked an intense reaction, especially in the battleground of Punjab.

Notwithstanding the heightened anti-establishment sentiments in the heartland whipped up by Khan's narrative, the May 9 violence has changed the situation. A massive media campaign launched by the PDM government highlighting the destruction perpetrated by its supporters has also put the PTI on the back foot.

It has allowed the security agencies to launch a vicious clampdown on PTI supporters not witnessed in recent

times. There have also been reports of brutal violations of human rights. Even those senior members who haven't left the party are being compelled to denounce the violence.

Imran Khan, too, after resisting for days, finally decried the attacks on the military installations. But it has not helped ease the stand-off. The establishment is not willing to forget what has happened and the army has termed the events of May 9 a "dark chapter" in the country's history.

The intensified confrontation between Khan and the military establishment has given the shaky ruling coalition some space. Its entire effort seems to be to get the PTI declared a terrorist group or at least get Imran Khan out of the electoral field. This so-called minus-one formula to keep political leaders out of the arena has never worked in the past and will not work now.

Indeed, Imran Khan too has hit a dead end with his confrontational politics. His shifting narrative has raised questions about his credibility. He is now contradicting his initial claims of an American conspiracy for regime change. After bashing America for months, he is now seeking the help of American lawmakers to put pressure on the Pakistani establishment to stop the crackdown on his party.

There is no mention of a US conspiracy in engineering his ouster anymore. Khan is doing exactly what he has been accusing his rival parties of doing: seeking foreign intervention. His turnaround may not change his hardcore support base but his false narrative of regime change conspiracy has hugely damaged the democratic process in the country.

The latest crackdown on his party has narrowed Khan's options. The exodus, first of the second- and third-tier, and with Dr Mazari's departure the top level, has had a demoralising effect on party ranks.

The party may not disintegrate but the cracks can widen further as the stand-off with the establishment continues. With its main support base among the middle classes, the party cannot withstand this kind of repression.

What has worsened its plight is that the party has isolated itself from other political forces, refusing to talk to them. Perhaps most damaging for the party has been Khan's decision to pull out of the National Assembly and prematurely dissolve the Punjab and KP assemblies.

Earlier, Imran Khan had unsuccessfully tried to bring down the PDM government through street power. Instead of fighting his battle in parliament, he chose to take to the streets.

Khan tried to demolish the entire edifice thus weakening the democratic process and consequently strengthening the establishment. In his arrogance, he failed to understand that he could only return to power through a democratic process.

He may have succeeded in mobilising mass support largely because of his false narrative of regime change and the disenchantment of the public with the PDM government's flawed policies. But he failed to build a strong political structure on a solid programme.

He took on, simultaneously, rival political forces and the establishment, which has cost him dearly. And as he took on the establishment he also looked to it for support. Populism has its limitations, which Khan has never understood.

The way the party has crumbled in the face of state repression is unprecedented. It is the former prime minister's moment of truth. It remains to be seen if he can learn from his mistakes.

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