

Degradation of our political culture

No sign of a reversal in the take-all attitude of AL and BNP

As political rhetoric and action continue to heat up in the country, we are again reminded of the fact that in our political culture, the more things change, the more they stay the same. With our biggest political parties – the ruling Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – increasingly ramping up their street programmes, all in the name of democracy, neither side has so far shown any significant willingness to compromise an inch. Rather, it is becoming ever more obvious that both parties will stick to their positions regardless of the cost to the nation and its political future.

The AL, on the one hand, says it has softened its stance about allowing opposition rallies to take place; on the other hand, using various state machineries, it has been blatantly obstructing the process of holding rallies/programmes on every occasion. It has already attacked BNP rallies using its activists allegedly backed by law enforcers, which is not a good sign, as the chances of such violence boiling over will likely increase as we get closer to the national elections. The use of all sorts of dirty tactics to thwart opposition programmes – despite promising to create a level playing field – is unbecoming of a party that claims to believe in the democratic process. The fact that following the outbreak of violence law enforcers have arrested, and filed cases against, only BNP activists – even though both parties were responsible for the violence to some degree – clearly demonstrates that the field is anything but level.

At the same time, we must also condemn the violence coming from BNP, which allegedly includes setting vehicles on fire. While the opposition has all the right to conduct political programmes, those must be done peacefully, and not through violence that harms people and property. Given that all their political programmes are being conducted mainly in the centre of Dhaka, which is already a congested city, we would ask the BNP to consider holding their rallies on weekends, so that people do not have to suffer during workdays.

Ultimately, however, it is difficult to see the ongoing political conflict reaching an end or the country benefiting in the long run without some compromise on both sides. For democracy to see some sort of revival in the country, both need to be willing to disengage from violence and participate in dialogue to end the ongoing deadlock. Unfortunately, the take-all attitude being demonstrated by the AL and BNP, as well as the weaknesses of the Election Commission and other relevant state institutions, are pushing the prospect of a fair and participatory election further away. We must do all we can to avoid that eventuality.

Spike in drug abuse should worry us

Concerted efforts needed to prevent drug trafficking

We're deeply concerned by the spike in drug abuse and trafficking in the country after a period of relative decline. According to a report by this daily that analysed data released by the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), the year 2022 saw a substantial increase in the smuggling of narcotics including cocaine, Phensedyl, marijuana, and crystal meth. Equally alarming is the surge in drug seizures compared to the previous year, indicating a worrying trend of rising demand and trafficking.

Apparently, one major contributor to the spike was the easing of restrictions that had been in place during the pandemic. The restrictions, which had helped reduce narcotics trafficking, were withdrawn in 2022, making it possible for smugglers to operate more freely, leading to an increase in the flow of drugs. The local demand for drugs also rose in tandem, exacerbating the problem further. There was a relevant decline in the seizures of yaba, however, but that is of no solace as the synthetic drug continues to be in circulation thanks to online sales, plummeting prices and ingenious smuggling methods. All this paints a grim picture that should worry the authorities.

It has been known for some time that international drug syndicates are using Bangladesh as a smuggling route. The fact that a significant portion of the cocaine consignments seized in 2022 originated from distant countries like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, and were headed for Europe and North America, illustrates the level of threat we face. As a deputy director of the DNC said, "the consignments enter India and since we share a porous border [with it], they get into Bangladesh." This is significant because the transit of illegal substances through Bangladesh is as much a failure of our law enforcement agencies as the countries that we share borders with – India and Myanmar – which shows the complexity of the problem. We cannot make significant progress in preventing narcotics smuggling and abuse without a multi-faceted response involving all stakeholders.

As well as securing greater international cooperation to dismantle drug syndicates, the government must further tighten border security as well as ensure swift trials for drug-related offenses. Currently, despite an increase in the number of cases filed by the DNC, the percentage of convictions remains disappointingly low. This must change, because proper justice serves as a deterrence. Moreover, there must be greater access to rehabilitation centres for addicts, including child addicts. Finally, addressing drug abuse requires collective efforts from all sections of society. Families, educational institutions, and community leaders must work hand in hand with law enforcement agencies and government bodies to create a drug-free environment.

Amid inflation, pre-elections, and dengue, Bangladesh is in a fix



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The people of Bangladesh are currently facing several crises. On the one hand, the prices of commodities are increasing, with no moves from the authorities to bring them down. Different ministers have different things to say about this – while one says the people of the country are well, another says they don't have a way to interfere with the syndicates. Yet others are implying that the situation is unavoidable. All this means that the people will not see an end to their financial woes anytime soon.

Now, what does it mean when the prices of commodities increase like this? It signals a decrease in people's real income. But real income was quite low as it was. Take the salaries of garment workers, for example, whose minimum monthly salary was Tk 8,000. If adjusted for inflation over the last couple of years, that money now has a real value of around Tk 5,000. So, in order for a minimum-wage garment worker to have the same purchasing power as before, they would need to be paid a salary of Tk 11,000 or more. The government has hinted at a five-percent increase in government workers' salary to battle inflation. But we need to keep in mind that 90 percent of the population doesn't fall under this category.

The second crisis is the country's current political atmosphere. Namely, the immense political instability and aggression we are witnessing. No one knows how far this will go. Due to different international players like the EU, the US, China, and Russia all taking different stances, the situation is becoming ever more complicated. The US and the EU, for instance, are exerting pressure from multiple directions to ensure that Bangladesh holds a truly neutral and fair election. How sad that even after 52 years of our independence, foreign nations have more of a say about the fate of our electoral process than the people of this country! What is even sadder is that none of this would have been necessary if our own legislative authorities were functioning properly. If the Election Commission were able



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

to ensure the bare minimum voting rights of citizens, then these other states would not have felt the need to interfere.

This is not the only instance of external pressures bearing more fruit than internal protests. The people of Bangladesh staged various protests to stop extrajudicial killings, and to abolish the draconian Digital Security Act that is used to harass people and suppress freedom of speech. But this barely had an effect on the government. Yet, when the US imposed sanctions and visa restrictions, we saw a decrease in the number of atrocities.

What can be more pitiful than the people's wants falling short while outside pressures lead to results?

Finally, and most recently, there's the dengue situation. The condition in Dhaka is dire and has spilled over to other parts of the country fast. The urgency that was required from the government and particularly the health ministry to deal with the dengue epidemic cautiously and keep it in control is absent even now when the cases of infection and deaths are

development activities, there are always potholes and waterlogging in the area. And even when dengue wasn't an issue, Jurain residents were exposed to a number of other diseases. This has happened because the city corporations and other government agencies failed miserably to do their jobs.

The health ministry, too, should have been proactive given how there are not nearly enough beds to accommodate the increasing number of dengue patients. Lower income groups, who were already suffering because of inflation are now even worse off due to the uncontrolled spread of dengue. As such, the tests and treatment for the disease should have been made free of cost for all by now.

So, the people of Bangladesh are uncertain about their right to vote freely in a fair election, and they are in an insecure financial state in an economy headed towards recession. Furthermore, the people are at risk of not having the bare minimum defence against a health crisis like the current dengue situation, and the lack of sensible government effort in

the government, without supplying any electricity. The banks, too, despite being continuously "looted," and with the overall banking sector weakening, are receiving more and more support. Garment manufacturers are also reaping huge profits due to the taka weakening against the dollar. Meanwhile, the working classes' real income keeps declining.

All this needs to change soon, and the change must come from within. Many are looking towards international bodies, particularly the US. But it would do us well to remember that progressive change won't happen if we depend on other countries. Be it the US, China or Russia, they all have their own agendas and interests that they will prioritise over the interests of the people of Bangladesh. This is why, unless the general population of our country engages in claiming and protecting their political rights, the right to health, and the minimum rights associated with living as a human being, these uncertainties, sufferings, and exploitation will continue with no bounds.

Education endowment funds for a knowledge-based society



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Bangladesh has a rich, centuries-old tradition of endowment funds and of donating land as waqf (endowment) for the spread of education. We even had a concept of *mustir'chal* (keeping aside a portion of rice grains before each day's cooking), which was used for social purposes such as feeding the needy, building schools, libraries, healthcare, and roads. Recently, during a seminar on industry-academia linkage, the honourable chief guest, Education Minister Dipu Moni, lamented for the loss of this tradition. She added that now, the people's participation in development work is decreasing day by day as these are mainly carried out by government organisations and NGOs. However, government and NGO funding are not sufficient to meet the massive demand for quality higher education in Bangladesh. In this context, she emphasised the revival of endowment funds in order to promote a culture of research and innovation to take us towards being a knowledge-based society.

So what is an endowment fund and how can it help build a knowledge-based society? An endowment fund is a sum of money given by a donor or a group of donors as the principal, which is held in a fund in perpetuity and managed by

a trustee. The principal is then invested to produce a profitable return and that return is used for the specific areas and purposes designated in the endowment fund. Since an endowment fund is perpetual in nature, it is suitable for sustainable and long-term investments to generate significant benefits relative to short-term investments.

In today's world, the endowment fund concept has been one of the largest financial assets and a perpetual source of support for universities. For example, Harvard University has more than 14,000 individual funds that are invested as a single entity and the returns of the endowment are used to provide financial aid for various programmes, scientific research, and professorships for various academic fields.

Education endowment funds can help universities avoid income volatility and run smoothly, especially in developing countries where the governments lack the resources to allocate adequate funding for universities. The Unesco prescribes an expenditure of four to six percent of GDP in the education sector. According to one statistic, in Bangladesh, this amount was only 1.83 percent in FY2023 and even lower at 1.76 percent

in FY2024. In Bangladesh, public universities are heavily dependent on government funding, donors, and tuition fees. Although government support has been significantly increasing for public universities in Bangladesh over the years, we still lack funding to facilitate all the programmes that any university of the developed world usually offer. In this context, the endowment fund can play an effective role in enabling our universities to run high quality education programmes and conduct innovative research.

In setting up an endowment fund, Bangladeshi universities may face several challenges at the initial stage. As of now, Bangladesh does not have a legal framework for an endowment fund within the education sector. This will be necessary to create certainty and encourage many stakeholders and shareholders to embark on the journey of education endowment. If we can maintain transparency and soundness of legislation, it will encourage wealthy non-resident Bangladeshis and international educational organisations to establish education endowment funds in Bangladesh.

We see that many corporations and organisations who wish to support the education sector under the corporate social responsibility (CSR) are not aware of the concept of an education endowment fund. To rectify this, an awareness campaign should be carried out, by initiative of the Ministry of Education. Building a bridge between industry and academia is crucial in order to overcome this issue. Industry can establish an endowment fund at an academic institution to create a specific talent pool, whose members can then join the workforce under the industry.

We also see that there is a disconnect between alumni and academia. Due to lack of communication, alumni show no serious interest in donating to education endowment funds after their graduation. Universities need to be proactive in expanding education endowment by capitalising on their alumni networks. For this, universities and education providers need to maintain an updated database of their alumni so that they can be contacted for contributions to the university's endowment education fund.

In the past three decades, Bangladesh has achieved a great expansion in higher education. Meanwhile, the country's economy has grown to and is set to achieve developing country status by 2026. Now, we need to build a world-class higher education system that will help us transform our production-based economy into a knowledge-based economy, so we can also achieve developed nation status by 2041.

As government spending on higher education alone is not enough for ensuring quality higher education, education endowment funds can help to stabilise the financial conditions of Bangladeshi universities. It is high time for the Ministry of Education to take a holistic approach through mass awareness programmes to raise endowment funds for our universities. In the early stages, it will be challenging for Bangladeshi universities to establish endowment due to lack of legal framework and other cultural constraints. However, if these institutions are ready to take up the challenge and learn from international best practices, endowment funds can bring about a paradigm shift in education financing in Bangladesh.