

Why such apathy for medical research?

We need to inculcate a culture of learning to better serve patients

We are shocked to learn that around 47 percent of doctors in four major hospitals do not have the required skills to do research. Skills include knowing how to conduct statistical analyses, writing papers worthy of foreign publications and writing manuscripts. The fact that such a high proportion of doctors lack such basic skills is truly alarming for a discipline that demands continuous study of various aspects of medicine.

The study, conducted by the Department of Public Health and Informatics at BSMU, also found that only 25 percent of the surveyed doctors authored research, while 29 percent were co-authors of research published in different journals. In a country where public health is constantly challenged by waves of diseases, the present dengue epidemic being a prime example, it is unthinkable that medical research is so grossly neglected.

So why are doctors so disinclined to conduct research? The study has found that six out of 10 physicians do research only to get promoted, which means they are not doing this for self-development or to gain more insight into their specialised field. Other reasons given for research included the desire to pursue a career abroad for higher studies, with 41 percent conducting research in order to be “praised”.

This lack of enthusiasm is largely affected by the generally unfriendly environment for such study. Most respondents pointed to professional pressure and lack of research-related knowledge as impediments; others pointed to having no prior knowledge of research and the dearth of grants. The lack of professional benefit, non-cooperation of colleagues and the idea that private practice was more profitable were also cited as reasons.

Research should be considered a mandatory part of medical studies and must be encouraged in all medical institutes. Senior physicians have a huge role to play in being mentors and facilitators of research by their juniors. As experts have said, it is essential that local universities and medical institutions collaborate to foster this research culture. In addition, existing funds available for research must be judiciously utilised, while allocations for research must be increased and monitored in all medical institutions.

It goes without saying that without continuous research, doctors cannot gain insight into what new medicines, procedures and tools can be developed to provide better treatments for patients. Without research, they will be significantly ill-equipped to tackle the formidable challenges of controlling outbreaks of deadly diseases.

Take action against big loan defaulters

Appellate Division’s observation on defaulted loans is right on the mark

Our apex court’s frustration at the present state of defaulted loans in Bangladesh is a sentiment shared by many people. According to a report in this daily, an Appellate Division bench, headed by the chief justice, remarked on Monday that those with loans worth hundreds of crores of taka were getting away with not paying their debts off, while farmers with small loans were being harassed for failing to make regular payments. We completely agree with the court’s observation and believe that, given the financial crisis that the country is going through, it is high time some tough actions were taken to redress this persistent problem.

Non-performing loans (NPLs) have been a thorn in our side for decades, but now it is turning into blight for our economy. And we have gotten into this situation because of the leeway that has periodically been provided to habitual loan defaulters. The result: Bangladesh now holds the second position in South Asia in terms of bad loan ratio, according to a World Bank report. We are behind Sri Lanka only, but that should not provide any comfort considering the collapse of Sri Lanka’s economy last year. The amount of defaulted loans in Bangladesh, which stood at Tk 120,656 crore at the end of December 2022, jumped by Tk 11,000 crore in just three months, rising to Tk 131,620 crore at the end of March 2023, according to the Bangladesh Bank. Experts have been raising concern over the upsurge in defaulted loans for years, pointing out the severe implications for both the banking sector and the economy overall.

We all know what the solution is: stop being lenient to big loan defaulters. The extraordinary lenience that the government has shown big borrowers through debt rescheduling and relaxation of rules has gotten our banking sector in a quagmire that it is struggling to pull itself out of. High volume of NPLs is one of the three major domestic risks that our economy faces, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – something that our own economic experts have been flagging for years. An overall reform in our financial sector is needed to instil good governance and strict regulations to check bad lending practices, but as immediate remedies, the government should put specific measures in place to stop lending irregularities in our banks, and make all big loan defaulters pay their debt off without exception. It is not fair that our banks keep getting bailouts from the government, using taxpayers’ money, due to defaulted loans and bad lending practices.

Violence cannot be the only language of politics



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The political deadlock we find ourselves in has been festering in the background for a very long time. The ruling party’s expected opposition for BNP’s demand for an election-time nonpartisan interim government is escalating the situation to the brink of chaos. And yet, we see no visible attempts at dialogue or de-escalation from either side.

In fact, it may be fair to say that there doesn’t seem to be much thought or tact behind the ruling party’s actions at all. Whether it be an acute case of groupthink or a desperate attempt to maintain party control, the current AL rhetoric seems almost entirely aimed at their dedicated supporter base. They seem to be ignoring the fact that a large segment of voters will not be loyal to any one party, instead opting to vote strategically depending on current circumstances and future predictions. In political science, these voters are called “swing voters.” We are a two-party state for all practical purposes, and so who the winner will be almost always comes down to who can turn the most swing votes on Election Day. Needless to say, expecting to turn swing votes based on voters’ sense of gratitude for past development work is not a savvy political strategy to build a campaign on.

The true fuel behind BNP’s current momentum is the wide-scale public disapproval of the government’s handling of rampant corruption, misuse of law, and general disregard for human rights. However, instead of trying to win back the trust of those who have become disillusioned, the incumbents seem to only be responding with force projection. The turnouts at the opposition’s rallies clearly indicate a large voter base who disapprove of the current regime’s policies and actions. But is the current regime even listening to them? The time is now ripe for targeted policy reforms and proactive public statements that address the main concerns of all people of Bangladesh. Instead of doing any of that, AL has allowed the opposition party to dictate the narrative. The AL response to the BNP rhetoric (of restoring voting rights to the common people) has been to try and paint the BNP as a party of



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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“terrorists” who are apparently only concerned with the destruction of Bangladesh. This, of course, is a total political non sequitur, which does not resonate with the demands of the common people at all. Labelling the other side as “evil” is undoubtedly a worrisome course of action for the future of a democratic nation.

Awami League has to bite the bullet and admit that there are serious concerns in people’s minds about whether a free and fair election is impossible under any one political party. Historical precedent is not on their side. However, it must be stated firmly that this is not the issue of any particular political party in Bangladesh. It is an issue for every single political party in Bangladesh. Despite the hollow claims made by our ministers during meetings with foreign diplomats, the truth of the matter is that, for the last decade, democracy has not been an option on the ballot table. Right now, as the system stands, the people of the Republic of Bangladesh have no real choice regarding who gets

that their political party could remain in power at the time. Therefore, even if BNP manages to get elected in the next term, if this issue remains unresolved, they too will face this roadblock and the people of Bangladesh will suffer.

For there to be actual change, there needs to be a drastic overhaul of the system. And the change must start with the way elections are held. History has shown that technocrats and intellectuals alone cannot restore democracy in our nation. The will to restore democracy must be political, and it must stem from the people. For democracy to exist, the people need to demand it without fear, and politicians must be held accountable for whatever promises they make. And if politicians fail, they must account for their failure in the halls of our democratic institutions. Violence, rebellion, and uprisings cannot be the ways to take back power.

Unfortunately, our history so far shows that major political shifts have only occurred as a result of violent uprisings on the streets. How can this be

for greater roles in the UN mechanism, as well as on the world stage. With multiple high-level visits from the US, an EU election exploratory mission, and election-related observations from all our biggest Western investors and development partners, these matters did not take shape in a vacuum. The world is keeping an eye on Bangladesh.

The Awami League has a real opportunity to set Bangladesh on the right track. Changes to the term limit and the introduction of a bicameral parliament can easily be preemptively executed by the ruling party, which would not only deflate a significant portion of the momentum behind the BNP’s demands, but would also send a message that they are listening to the people. Compromise can be a crucial first step in the dialogue process and can bring about positive change. However, this cannot take place if politics devolves into primitive stick fights on the streets. It is high time for politicians to put down the sticks and start talking compromise, for all our sake.

Enter ‘global boiling’



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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July was the hottest month ever recorded on our planet. It marks a clear turning point from the previous era of talking about global warming as something that will happen in the future to recognising that it is happening already. This is evident all over the globe; from heat waves in North America and southern Europe, to floods in China and India, to wildfires in Greece (which caused thousands of tourists to be evacuated).

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, recently declared, “The era of global warming has ended; the era of global boiling has arrived.” This is likely an allusion to the proverbial frogs swimming in a pot of water that is being heated so that the frogs are boiled and die without ever realising what is happening. But we humans are not frogs and can indeed tell when the temperature of our surroundings has gone up too high. In response, we need to take emergency actions.

Firstly, the leaders of countries need to recognise the emergency and take necessary measures to tackle the problem by pivoting to a business-unusual approach nationally and collectively.

This means taking immediate actions to help global citizens who are suffering from the adverse impacts of severe weather events around the world



A firefighter tries to extinguish a wildfire burning at the industrial zone of the city of Volos, in central Greece on July 26, 2023.

PHOTO: REUTERS

and from slow onset events such as sea-level rise. While each government is primarily responsible for assisting its own citizens first, there is also a collective responsibility to help victims in the poorest countries through international solidarity-based funding, as agreed in COP27 in Egypt last year. The proposed Loss and Damage Fund must be made functional at COP28 in December. This must be the first

developing countries. This will allow the adverse impacts to be minimised and reduce the inevitable losses and damages from climate change.

The third action would be to phase out the use of fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum, and natural gas and replace them with renewable energy sources such as solar and wind. Though this transition to cleaner energy is already happening, steps must be taken to accelerate the pace of the switch. In this

regard, there needs to be a moratorium on exploring for new fossil fuel reserves, as we cannot even afford to extract and burn the existing reserves. In my view, any new exploration for fossil reserves should be declared a crime against humanity. In fact, I would argue that it is a crime against our own children as they will be the ones to suffer from the consequences of this action.

The next item in the agenda would be to ban the development of any new coal mines, given that coal is the most polluting of the three aforementioned fossil fuels. This phasing out is also happening, but again not fast enough. Petroleum, which is mostly used in the transport sector, could be replaced by switching to increased usage of electric vehicles. The final fossil fuel is natural gas, which may still be a viable transition fuel for a few more years as it is the least polluting of the three.

The most important action that can catalyse our transition from fossil fuel-based economies to renewable energy-based economies is to discover new financial investment incentives, so that trillions of dollars can be shifted to investing in clean energy. This means getting rid of the most egregious subsidies that are still being given by governments to fossil fuel companies.

Finally, I would recommend for the UN secretary-general himself to appoint a special envoy for loss and damage to liaise between the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and national governments to ensure that we no longer impose the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change on the poorest and most vulnerable citizens. This should be the moral imperative of every thinking citizen of the planet.