

Stop encroachment of Arial Beel

Authorities must act on High Court's directive to save the endangered wetland

We appreciate the High Court's intervention after reports emerged of a real estate-enforced transformation that Arial Beel, located in Munshiganj, is going through. On Wednesday, the court directed local authorities and environment officials to immediately stop illegal earth-filling and construction of structures on this wetland after a writ petition, based on a report by *The Daily Star*, brought the issue to its notice. The court also issued a rule asking them to explain why their inaction to protect Arial Beel should not be declared illegal. It also asked them to issue show-cause notices to the encroachers.

Our report, published on July 22, had showed in detail how the wetland – which once captured the imagination of citizens after local farmers united to protect their land from acquisition as part of an ill-conceived airport project – is facing another invasion by unscrupulous real estate companies. They have acquired large portions of it, filling them up with sand and promoting residential development through strategically placed signboards. The report also showed how this is already having a devastating effect, with the wetland's once-thriving ecosystem under threat, land fertility being lost, and fish production seeing a decline.

The importance of putting an end to the encroachment and giving the wetland a chance to recover and revert to its old, pristine self cannot be overstated. Arial Beel is one of the largest wetlands in the country. Aside from having wide varieties of flora and fauna, these water bodies have a very practical utility in that they, as natural reservoirs, help absorb excess water during heavy rainfall or storms, mitigating the risk of flooding. After having witnessed (and suffered) the consequences of filling up such beels and haors in other parts of the country in recent years, we really cannot allow another precious reservoir to fall into the "development trap".

We hope that the court's directive will propel responsible offices into taking necessary steps to prevent this scenario. However, some concerns remain given the chequered history of public officials with such directives on nature. Their inaction is not the only thing that worries us. Their alleged collusion with powerful encroachers in many cases has been equally troubling. We hope that, given the importance of Arial Beel for the country, those in charge will take the task at hand seriously this time.

A laudable initiative finally takes off

New pension scheme expected to benefit large segments of the population

We applaud the authorities for finally launching the long-awaited Universal Pension Scheme, which is aimed at ensuring income security for about 100 million beneficiaries. Such an initiative was long overdue given the increasing number of elderly people in the country. According to an estimate of the Finance Department of the Ministry of Finance, the number of people over 60 years of age were 12 million in 2020, which will be 31 million in 2041. Therefore, we hope that this scheme will help them have a financially secure life.

Reportedly, all individuals between 18 and 50 can participate in this scheme, including expatriate Bangladeshis. Those over 50 years of age will also be able to participate under special consideration. There will be different packages for different segments of the population, including Progoti, Probash, Shurokha and Samata. These packages are available to anyone except government employees. While the Progoti package is for the employees of private organisations, the Probash package is for the expatriates. The self-employed and informal-sector workers like farmers, rickshaw pullers and day labourers can participate in Surokha, and the ultra-poor can participate in Samata, with a monthly instalment of Tk 1,000.

All these seem to be quite well thought out, but we will have to wait to see how they work out in the long run. The Samata package, in particular, seems to be quite a good one since its beneficiaries will have to pay Tk 500 as a monthly instalment, and the remaining Tk 500 will be covered by the government. However, those participating in this package will reportedly not be considered for benefits under the social safety net programmes. This may potentially discourage a section of the ultra-poor.

So while we appreciate the authorities for rolling out the country's first-ever pension scheme, we urge them to proceed with caution, iron out all tricky and unresolved issues, and prevent the scope of misgivings and irregularities. They must ensure transparency and accountability in every step of the process for the scheme to be successful.

Is Bangladesh at a triple crossroad?



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Bangladesh has always battled and progressed through crises. But what future awaits us? The unknowns so outweigh the knowns. Familiar understandings have been upended. Political stability feels like political paralysis. Urgency for political renewal appears to be replacing the prognosis of political inevitability in the national mood. On the economic front, nervousness beneath the surface appears to have infected the dominant gung ho megaproject mindset within the government even as the distance between rose-tinted ruling group narratives and the real economy grows evermore stark. "Development" is spawning dramatically contrasting faces – relentless cost-of-living despair for the common millions and corrupt accumulation for few at home and abroad at unprecedented scale. Meanwhile, the politico-developmental calendar ticks on – SDGs in seven years, demographic dividend in 10 years, LDC graduation in three and a half years.

Is the credible sense of mission and demonstration of competence in place to realise these goals? Can the current arrogant-through-lack-of-accountability mindset and the sycophancy-driven governing culture deliver? After all, these milestones do not just fall in the category of "just a little more" on a business-as-usual scenario. A qualitatively different level of driving is clearly called for. Yet, what we see instead is an ostrich-in-the-sand attitude of the ruling group which gives rise to a complacent reading of the situation requiring nothing more than a tweak here and a tweak there, overlaid with make-believe sloganeering. Meanwhile, sycophants of all shades are busy scrambling to update their defensive "talking points" as political calculations undergo rapid and bewildering shifts.

Bangladesh is in a moment where Nobel-winning poet WB Yeats' dramatic imagery in *The Second Coming* has never felt more visceral: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold... The ceremony of innocence is drowned... The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." The issue, however, is not just a crisis. Bangladesh is truly at a crossroad. Not just one, but a triple crossroad spanning political transition, economic trajectory, and the least in focus, educational future.

Politics, economic outcomes and educational futures have become frighteningly intertwined to the detriment of the common masses. Such intertwining, to an extent, has always marked Bangladesh's development journey. But over the preceding decade in particular, such tendencies have morphed into an entrenched "politico-development" model that is imperilling Bangladesh's inclusive, sustainable and justice-defined development aspirations. With a possible political transition looming, Bangladesh may thus truly be at an inflection point in its politico-development journey.

Four disquieting features cloud our future and call for a path-altering resetting of national strategy and a political renewal that decisively breaks with the entrenched "politico-development" model. The first question that needs asking is where the benefits of economic growth have gone over the last decade. Statistics are clear. These benefits have not primarily gone to the working majority and not even

distinction of one of the fastest growth of uber-rich, not primarily through hard entrepreneurial labour but instead through corrupt "contact and contracts" on mega-scales. Finance, energy, infrastructure, ICT – key pillars of sustainable, inclusive and transformational development – have become beholden to narrow and entrenched vested group interests,

aligned with the simple demands of the people: fair opportunity, unbiased institutions, accountable rulers, guarantee of dignity and security. The rightful economic trajectory and educational future are both inextricably dependent on getting this alignment right. The politico-developmental model of the preceding decade has

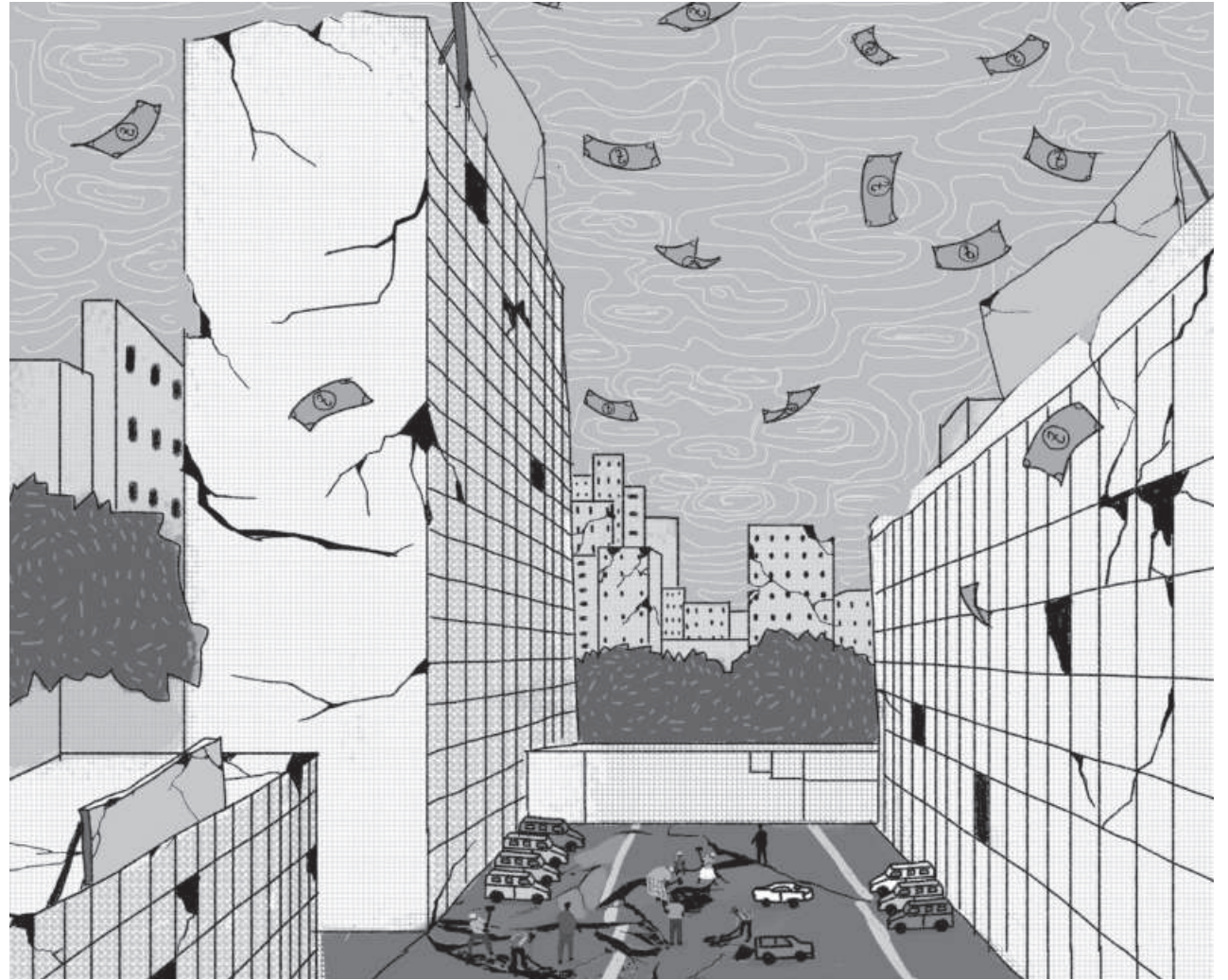


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to the bulk of the middle class. Gini coefficient of inequality has risen from 0.458 in 2010 to 0.499 in 2022. Urban female employment declined from 4.6 million in 2016-17 to four million in 2022. Youth's economic standing as captured in the NEET ratio – youth neither in employment, education or training – has risen above one-third of youth population. Instead of a deeper structural transformation of the economy, both industrial and service sector employment declined between 2016-17 and 2022 – from 20.4 percent and 39.0 percent to 17.02 percent and 37.65 percent, respectively. Agriculture absorbed the bulk of new employment even while its GDP contribution stood at 11.22 percent, raising a puzzle on productivity trends. Informalisation of employment, too, has increased while a sizeable share of formal employment is availed by persons outside of Bangladesh, leading to remittance outflow from a country that's critically dependent on remittance itself.

There is little to take comfort from the reduction in poverty rates too, because Covid impact has exposed the vulnerabilities above the poverty line – the "new poor" first brought into spotlight in the PPRC-BIGD panel surveys in 2020-22. The relentless cost-of-living crisis battering the poor and middle classes alike exacerbates this phenomenon of the new poor and shows signs of worsening, rather than improving.

Economic governance over the preceding decade has clearly not been focused on majority welfare, nor on a sustainable and structural transformation of the economy. Instead, a vicious cycle of three politico-developmental tendencies – corrupt rule-making, profligate public expenditure, and institutionalised corruption across the board – have earned Bangladesh the dubious

imperilling sustainable development in general, while empowering unprecedented corrupt accumulation and capital flight.

The consequence of the politico-developmental model entrenched over the preceding decade and a half has seriously eroded the competitiveness of the economy and left both the "good entrepreneur" and the inflation-battered working majority adrift in a world of deepening uncertainty. And yet, the policy process continues to be in the grip of the vested groups.

The second disquieting feature of the preceding decade has been the state of educational governance. In a recent multi-stakeholder workshop in a northern district, the reality check was particularly disturbing on the ground realities of education. Schools and colleges are no longer happy places that are able to keep students sufficiently engaged in the classrooms. *Tughluki* decisions from above about curriculum changes without sufficient teacher training and sudden impositions of exam/semester timings, extreme politicisation of management committees, little or no meaningful extracurricular opportunities except on paper, unwritten directive for "easy grading" making high pass rates, etc are the main focus. The innate drive and aspirations of our youth are so poorly being served by this state of education. Such ground realities give the lie to all the airy talk of demographic dividend. Today's youth deserve better. Much better. Bangladesh deserves better. A wake-up call for everyone.

The initiative energy and the resilient spirit of the people of Bangladesh have always been its greatest resource. But this is not enough if we are to realise the achievable future of middle income with quality and dignity. The state of political governance and institutional orientation of the state have to be

created three fatal flaws in the state of political governance. Firstly, extreme partisanship of critical institutions of the state has virtually banished contested politics, rendering a majority of the population deprived of the right of representation. Secondly, rampant sycophancy and patron-clientelism have near-completely sidelined merit and virtually closed the door on a sound supply chain of political and administrative leadership. Thirdly, the grassroots have been politically marginalised through the switch to party-based local government elections and the imposition of the MP *raj* on local government institutions. The political governance that has come to be defined by these tendencies not only imperil our economic trajectory and educational future, but make the state particularly ill-equipped to respond to and manage the rapidly transforming geostrategic and geoeconomic landscape and opportunities in the region.

The message, thus, is clear. If we are to reset the economic trajectory out of the iron grip of the vested groups, if we are to rescue our educational future, if we are to manage and reap the geoeconomic and geostrategic opportunities of a transforming regional landscape, a political renewal beyond the entrenched politico-developmental model of the preceding decade is not just a priority – it is an essential necessity. This means credible contested politics and the circumstances that can guarantee it. This means a meaningful reform agenda to restore the capacity and fairness of state institutions. This means political competitors who heed this call for change. This means a new unleashing of the morally-driven aspirational energy of the people, and a rekindling of the country's foundational quest for social and economic justice.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Install fire-escape facilities in every building

A few months ago, there was a fire in a high-rise building in Dhaka's Gulshan area. TV channels showed many people stranded on their balconies, screaming for help. To his horror, a friend of mine saw his family on the 11th floor, passing agonising moments. They were eventually rescued and brought down to a safe place after four hours.

And then, the other day, I saw some people

climbing down a rope to escape from a fire in their building.

In high-rise buildings, there should be fire-proof steel staircases for people to safely evacuate. Fire escape staircases exist in many buildings, but this should be the norm. Additionally, a flexible ladder made with fire-proof materials should be installed in every flat, and residents should also be trained on

how to escape in case of a fire.

In every flat, a specific fire-proof room can be built with ventilation for fresh air. In case of fire, residents can take shelter in that room and stay there till the fire is extinguished.

These would be much better than just throwing a rope to helpless people.

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