

## Maintain due process at courts

### Rushed trial proceedings raise concerns of political interference

Heightened activities are taking place at a number of courts in Dhaka as numerous cases of arson and violence against BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders/activists are currently being tried. According to a report in this daily, hearings in these trials are running beyond normal court hours, extending till about 8-8:30pm almost every day. This is a rare occurrence in the court system of Bangladesh, as defence lawyers representing the accused have pointed out.

Cases as old as even a decade, which remained dormant for long, suddenly came to life a few months ago. Recently, the law minister told this daily that the government had instructed the prosecution to take steps for quick disposal of old cases. He said the instruction was not specific to cases involving opposition leaders, but the reality tells a different story. A mid-level police officer revealed to this daily that the police have clear instructions from the government to finish off trial proceedings against members of BNP and other opposition parties before the upcoming general election.

Why this sudden rush? Up until July, the courts could not proceed with these cases because prosecution witnesses – all of whom are police members – did not show up to record their statements, even risking non-bailable arrest warrants. This raises the question: is the sudden desire to dispose of old cases merely for the sake of justice? Or is there an ulterior motive behind it? BNP leaders say that these court proceedings are being rushed to keep them off the streets during their anti-government movement, as well as to thwart any prospect of them contesting the election.

Their claims are not entirely unsubstantiated: in July, leaked minutes from an emergency meeting of the police top brass revealed that they had decided to pick “selective” cases to bring a maximum number of potential election candidates from the main opposition under conviction, as per a report by the daily New Age. Against this backdrop, the High Court’s recent observation – that no one sentenced to more than two years in jail can contest any election – bears special significance for opposition leaders now on trial.

The timing and political nature of these developments suggest that the ruling regime could be abusing the legal system to potentially gain an advantage in the upcoming election, should it occur as planned. This, we must say, goes against the spirit of our democracy, and hampers any chance of the nation having a fair and participatory election. We urge the authorities to ensure that due process is maintained in all legal matters, especially in political cases, at all times.

## How long will we ignore R&D?

### Investing more in research and development vital for future economic growth

At this age of technological advancement, it is crucial for Bangladesh to enhance its competitiveness and productivity through research and innovation. Without this, we won’t be able to sustain a steady economic growth. Sadly, Bangladesh still lags far behind its competitors in terms of investing in research and development (R&D). According to a study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a majority of industries in Bangladesh spend less than Tk 500 per year on R&D per worker, which is shocking. If we do not reverse this scenario, our hope of becoming a developed nation in less than two decades will remain a far-fetched dream.

According to the CPD, the country’s pharmaceuticals and allied industry spends the most among all industries on R&D, with its per worker expenditure standing at Tk 23,735. Among other industries, tobacco spends Tk 1,858, paper Tk 1,627, and textiles Tk 436. Conversely, there are some sectors such as recycling, beverage, wood, wood-based products, motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers, repair and installation of machinery and equipment that don’t spend anything on this. What’s most unfortunate is that the garments industry – one of the key drivers of our economic growth – channels only 2 percent of its budget to R&D.

The fact that the majority of manufacturing firms in the country do not have a digital presence in the form of websites speaks volumes about our aversion to change. The question is, how long will we ignore research, innovation, workforce development, and use of advanced technologies? How long will manufacturing and other industries keep hiring experts from abroad? How long will we remain overly dependent on low-skilled migrant workers when other countries are earning more by exporting skilled labour?

Our position in the Global Innovation Index 2022 – which is 102 among 132 countries – should have sounded the alarm bell for the authorities. It is high time they along with our industries took a more active interest in research, development and innovation, and built a competitive workforce for our future economic growth.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### What about homeless people in winter?

This year’s winter is coming soon, and it will bring misery to many people living in the streets of Dhaka, who have no roof over their heads and hardly any appropriate clothes to keep them warm. Many of the homeless people are the victims of climate change-related phenomena and/or the economic crisis the country is going through. It is the duty of our government to look after all of the citizens, including the homeless people. Although we see initiatives from individuals and also the state somewhat, they are not enough. We hope that the government will make a more robust and coordinated effort so that these people don’t have to go through extreme suffering this winter.

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# Why would anyone want to repeat December 10?



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Hearing the ruling party’s general secretary say that the BNP’s October 28 rally in the capital would face a similar reaction as did the one on December 10 last year, we can now gauge what the intention of the government is. Perhaps, many of us have already started adjusting our diaries, out of fear of violence or to avoid harassment in the name of heightened security. The possibility of another unannounced shutdown (better to be called a hartal enforced by the supporters of the ruling party) may also encourage them to leave Dhaka simply to avoid any additional suffering.

The warning given to BNP by Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader for its expressed intent is undoubtedly worrying and deplorable. On the other hand, it is also an admission that the government did crack down on the opposition on December 7, 2022, for which they had so far put the blame on BNP’s alleged subversive activities.

Many questions still remain unanswered as to why the government was so desperate to deter BNP from holding a mass rally in front of the latter’s central office, to the extent that police had to storm the party office in Nayapaltan, clear the whole area, and term it a no-go zone for about a week. Can anyone forget that a simple dispute over a venue had caused so much trouble not even a year ago?

In the end, the authorities did allow BNP to hold its grand rally on the day, only a few kilometres away. But in the meantime, one person had to die, tens of people were injured, and a couple of the opposition’s top leaders were imprisoned. It was then reported that police had fired at least 1,780 rounds of rubber bullets, tear gas canisters, and sound grenades during the clash. Instead of a supposedly day-long disruption to normal city life, it became such a prolonged nightmare for citizens that the restriction of their movement did not stop at random frisking/checking of people and vehicles, but also infringed their rights to privacy by way of law enforcers going through the contents of citizens’ personal



Instead of a supposedly day-long disruption to normal city life, the events leading up to December 10, 2022 resulted in a prolonged nightmare for citizens.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

mobile phones.

The violent suppression of the opposition’s protest also alarmed the international community. Expressing concerns over reports of intimidation, political violence, harassment by police, arrests of opposition party members, and restrictions on the ability of opposition parties to meet and hold peaceful rallies, the United States called for guaranteeing the right to peaceful assembly and refraining from using excessive force against protesters. The UN and a number of rights groups also joined voices in support of allowing peaceful protests.

Early indications, such as suing and detaining opposition activists on charges of alleged “subversion,” suggest that the threat of the December 10 situation being repeated should not be taken lightly. Despite the fact that the nature of our politics is historically confrontational, the current round of protests

a threat of “pouring uranium” on the head of BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir and not allowing him to return to Dhaka.

Many observers have hoped that the ruling party will change its strategy and strive to improve the political climate ahead of the election, since the government has been seen trying to convince the international community that it will deliver a free and fair election. Despite this pledge, the international community is far from convinced due to the controversies surrounding the elections in 2014 and 2018. The current Election Commission, too, has admitted that it’s been a victim of the fallout of those sham elections. Given this context, the US announced a visa policy regarding “individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.”

There’s little doubt that the government’s refusal to participate

to deny the opposition any space for holding protests.

It is quite perplexing why the government seems set to repeat the measures that led to horrifying consequences between December 7 and 11 in 2022. No one wants to see the SWAT being deployed in battle gear to tackle a political protest. If a political party wants to stage a sit-in protest, why should they be denied that right? Didn’t the Awami League itself stage such protests many years ago, and in order to demand the introduction of a caretaker government system, no less?

In any case, resolving differences over election management, instead of suppressing protest, would also be in the best interests of the country’s economy. The US visa policy, undeniably, has unnerved our business community the most as they can ill afford any penalty imposed on the economy, which has already been experiencing its devastating shocks.

# Integrating Bangladeshi diaspora into Bangladesh



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Diaspora has become a crucial developmental issue for many countries. The growing interest in and recognition of diaspora engagement were mirrored in the endorsement of the Dublin Declaration, which was adopted at the Global Diaspora Summit 2022 held during April 1-5, 2022. Diasporas play a special role in linking countries, including integrating new waves of immigrants, acting as conduits for knowledge and commercial exchanges, and creating investments and opportunities for the countries involved.

Diaspora policies cover a variety of government measures aimed at engaging, maintaining, or developing a relationship with the diaspora living abroad. The policies entail ensuring the rights and protection of diaspora members by reinforcing national identity or sense of belonging, fostering strong relations, and facilitating diaspora contributions to a country’s social and economic development. Diasporas impact national economies in several ways, through remittances, foreign direct investments, entrepreneurial endeavours, facilitation of trade, and

the transfer of knowledge/skills.

Bangladeshi diasporas from around the globe are contributing to communities in Bangladesh and abroad financially as well as with their specialised skills, knowledge, and technical capabilities. They have the potential to play an instrumental role in national development, contributing to both the economic and social dimensions. Country-branding, diaspora diplomacy, trade, diaspora tourism, and the establishment of diaspora networks are vital areas that can benefit significantly from the engagement of the diaspora, accelerating Bangladesh’s global standing.

The Bangladeshi diasporas’ diverse human, social, cultural, and economic capital represents new assets for national development in a connected world. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment has initiated a process of formulating the Bangladesh National Diaspora Policy 2023, which is in its final stage of getting the nod. The policy aspires to provide an inclusive and strategic approach to engaging the Bangladeshi diaspora.

In the draft policy, the diaspora has been defined as “Bangladeshi persons who have taken citizenship of another country or are in the process of getting it or living there permanently or those born or raised in another country as a Bangladeshi descendant.”

The policy envisions diaspora development as both contributing to the development of the Bangladeshi diaspora itself and enhancing the roles of the diaspora in the development of Bangladesh. The broad measures of the policy include: a) enhancing diaspora diplomacy and capacity building, b) mobilising diaspora socio-cultural capital, c) promoting diaspora human capital, and d) facilitating diaspora economic capital.

The policy lays the foundation for building a respectful, reciprocal, and resilient alliance with the diaspora. It recognises diaspora contributions, and paves pathways for their physical and virtual return to be integrated into Bangladesh’s development and for the endowment of domestic and diaspora resources for the welfare of Bangladeshis at home and abroad.

However, there are challenges ahead to implementing the policy. Sustainable mobilisation of diaspora capital dawdles due to gaps in understanding of diaspora needs, nominal acknowledgment of their endeavours, and unavailability of diverse and dynamic platforms and channels to streamline their potential and contributions to the development trajectory of Bangladesh.

The institutional-related challenges stem from lacking a guiding, facilitative, and responsive mechanism to support the diaspora endeavours

and proactively support them in case of vulnerabilities. Institutional systems are yet to adequately address dealing with diaspora return and reintegration in a mutually beneficial manner. It requires a formal system of regular, output-driven connection with diaspora networks. One core challenge is the absence of a well-coordinated diaspora-centric institutional mechanism.

Adequate funding for different measures and well-coordinated efforts from the public and private sectors are needed to make the policy effectively functional. While the public sector can extend leadership in critical areas such as legislation, diplomatic services, social protection, and cultural heritage, it will have to adopt a facilitative role to ensure a blend of public and private sector actors in order to accomplish the objectives of this policy.

To encourage diaspora investment, effective reforms of the national capital market should be made to ensure an orderly and safe capital market. Diaspora networks need to be created for safe migration, tackling climate change, and for utilisation of human capital. Bangladeshi diaspora will also have to show up for socioeconomic development with their engagement, investment, and technology transfer while harbouring a patriotic spirit.

The Bangladeshi government needs to design a holistic plan of action for developing a sustainable system of diaspora engagement, which will serve as the roadmap for strategic planning and action to address capacity and institutional arrangements from the domestic to the global level.