

The Daily Star

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What does the future hold?

Compromise, not violence, must be the way out

It seems what we feared ahead of the rallies in Dhaka has, in fact, come true: our capital city turned into a battlefield on Saturday as BNP activists and police clashed, leading to at least three deaths. Subsequently, BNP and Jamaat called a countrywide hartal separately, during which more violence ensued and one AL activist died in a clash. We offer our condolences to the victims, and condemn the unwarranted violence, which has now pushed the country towards a greater uncertainty. Unless the political parties see reason and abandon their politics of confrontation, we fear the situation will only get worse in the coming days. This is in no way desirable for the people, or the economy, which is already reeling from multiple internal and external shocks.

According to our reports, following clashes earlier on Saturday, police opened blank fire and hurled sound grenades as they approached the BNP headquarters in Nayapaltan from two sides at around 3pm. While we in no way condone the violence and vandalism carried out by BNP men throughout the day, we see no justification in the law enforcement completely dislodging the BNP rally, attended by tens of thousands of people, after the elaborate drama in granting permission to hold the event. The close proximity in which the BNP and AL rallies were held—with members of both parties running wild on adrenaline—was a recipe for disaster to begin with, and the government should have been prepared to handle any possibility of a clash breaking out between the two sides calmly and without major disruptions. That it was unable—or perhaps unwilling—to do so speaks to their failure. The government has categorically refused to recognise BNP's right to organise as a political party and found different ways to thwart its demonstrations over the months, while, ironically, it had no issues allowing Jamaat to hold its programmes peacefully at its desired venue on Saturday.

As for the BNP, it seems to have walked right into the trap set by the ruling party. By partaking in violence—including the death of a policeman and brutal attacks on journalists—the BNP members have dented their moral high ground and given the ruling regime an excuse to arrest and harass their leaders and activists—many, no doubt, on trumped up charges. We are also concerned by reports of arson attacks on buses during the hartal on Sunday. We do not want the BNP to revert to its pre-2014 tactics of launching widespread violence, in which ordinary people were the worst sufferers. It must remember that the key to a successful mass movement lies in taking the public along with them—not in alienating them. Meanwhile, there should be an independent investigation into whether the BNP is responsible for the attacks to begin with.

Both parties must share the blame for their refusal to engage in a constructive dialogue to end the current impasse regarding an election-time government. Saturday's violence may only be a premonition of much worse days to come if they don't resolve the differences in a civil manner. We have repeatedly urged our political parties to reconsider their uncompromising stances, for the greater good of the nation, and we are frustrated that they are bent on pushing the country and its people towards an uncertain and violent future.

When women are left behind, progress becomes stunted

Prioritise increasing women's participation in the workforce

The latest data coming out of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 paints a worrisome picture for our country's workforce, particularly its women participants. According to the survey findings regarding the state of unemployment in Bangladesh, out of the total eight lakh unemployed graduates in the country in 2022, 3.36 lakh were women. That means the unemployment rate among our female graduates was nearly 19 percent last year—considerably higher than the overall unemployment rate of 12 percent among people with tertiary-level education. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), which conducted the survey, did note an improvement: the unemployment rate among female graduates decreased in 2022 from 21.4 percent in 2017. But that is mainly driven by more women with higher secondary education participating in agricultural activities in rural areas. In the urban areas, the scenario is grimmer.

This consistently high unemployment rate among women is the result of a number of reasons, which are mainly sociological. It is unfortunate that, in this day and age, our society is still not able to create an environment where our female graduates, who are growing in number every year, can find an equal footing in seeking and acquiring jobs in the service and formal sectors. An array of obstacles—which our male graduates never face—stand in their way, such as family pressure to give up jobs after marriage or after having children, lack of child care facilities at workplaces, lack of a safe, conducive work environment, safety in public transport, etc. These issues also create a bias among recruiters against potential female employees, further compounding the problem. The Covid-induced shock to the country's job market has not helped either.

As a consequence, nearly one-fifth of our educated female population is left out of our workforce. Given proper opportunities, these women could potentially make significant contributions to the country's overall growth. This means a significant number of women are kept from becoming financially independent, which is crucial for them to become empowered.

This state of affairs is not only disappointing, but very concerning. In the journey towards becoming a developed country by 2041, Bangladesh cannot afford to spare any usable resources—be it material or human. We cannot expect to have steady economic growth when a significant part of our educated population is not able to take part in the process. As a society, we need to rethink our priorities and create the required space for our women so that they can take equal part in driving this country's growth upwards.

Violence prevails yet again



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Our worst apprehension, which we so desperately wanted to escape, has tragically become reality with an avoidable loss of lives—of a policeman and an opposition activist. With the government's change of heart in allowing the BNP to hold its grand rally in front of its party office in Nayapaltan, Dhaka, we thought the tension that had risen due to the ruling party's vow to keep a hold on the city streets would be eased. Despite reports of several obstructive measures being put in place to restrict a huge flow of opposition supporters entering Dhaka, there were little chances, until midday, that the protest would become violent.

Observers were rather worried about how the stand-off between police and Jamaat-e-Islami activists over the latter's vow to hold an unauthorised grand rally at Shapla Chattar would turn out. Instead of any trouble, Jamaat was allowed to have its rally, just a few hundred metres away from their planned spot in Motijheel. It was so content with its apparent success that the acting Jamaat ameer, Mujibur Rahman, thanked the police in his speech for the permission to hold their rally.

The contrast between the two rallies

The biggest burden, however, lies with those politicians who had specifically instructed partymen to bring in poles and oars on October 28 and warned the BNP of repeating December 10, 2022, the day remembered for a similar grand rally of BNP, for which its office was raided and ransacked, one valuable life was lost, and dozens of its leaders and activists were put behind bars.

could not be starker as the deadly violence, which foiled the BNP's grand rally, was not only due to the clashes between police and BNP activists, but also because it was bolstered by Awami League supporters. A number of reports said the first sign of trouble



Neither police nor the leaders of the ruling party can shrug off their responsibilities for the loss of lives and the mayhem.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

emerged when a minitruck carrying AL activists on the way to their "peace rally" was trying to pass through BNP supporters already assembled on the road between Kakrail Mosque and Shantinagar. Later, when clashes between the police and BNP activists spread to Bijoynagar, another group of AL activists joined police in fighting their political rivals.

Whoever had initiated the actual fight is a subject of proper, lawful investigation. But neither police nor the leaders of the ruling party can shrug off their responsibilities for the loss of lives and the mayhem. Why didn't police divert and direct the vehicles carrying AL supporters to a different route from a safer distance? Were those large contingents of law enforcement forces deployed throughout the city, and in particular the venues of the opposition parties, scared of the ruling party and could not direct them to an alternative route? Or was their presence on those spots only meant to tackle the opposition supporters?

lost, and dozens of its leaders and activists were put behind bars. Earlier, the politicians also coined "khela hobe" ("the game is on") for showing off its muscle power to suppress the opposition.

Despite appeals from the civil society for toning down inflammatory speeches and initiating dialogue to avoid bloodshed on the streets, the ruling party has upped the ante. No wonder a Bangla business daily, *Bonik Barta*, in its headline on the day asked whether it would be a "repetition of logi baitha or peaceful assembly." The reference of *logi baitha* is nothing less serious than the December 10, as it is a reminder of one of the deadliest political violence in our country that left about a dozen people killed.

Unfortunately, it was not only a repetition of history with loss of lives, including that of a policeman, and the crisis over political dispute on election management has become even worse. The rigidity of both the ruling party and the opposition seems to have come to a point where the prospect

a political party be taking up the policing role? The ruling party should stop organising parallel programmes and fuelling confrontation. Hasn't it already lined up a series of campaign programmes of its own?

Though rights of association and expression do not depend on the Election Commission's registration, allowing Jamaat to hold its meeting despite an ongoing case at the highest court and without prior permission may raise eyebrows among some observers. The events of the day, however, indicate that the ruling party's sole objective is to deny any space to its nemesis, the BNP.

It's ironic that some of our ministers rubbish foreigners' concerns over political violence, but the advisory note issued by the US embassy to its citizens, that "demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence," has become a reality in less than 48 hours. We can only hope that our politicians will soon realise that further escalation needs to be avoided.

What's even the point of having a cricket team?



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AZMIN AZRAN

I know an octogenarian whose wife passed away two years ago and most of his children have grown up and settled abroad. I happen to see this person once or twice a week, and while it's often difficult to find topics of common interest to have a conversation with him, I always try. The difficulties evaporate, however, whenever there's cricket on the TV. I love cricket, he loves cricket, and after we're done discussing the game for anywhere between 20 and 30 minutes, I like to think it makes both of our days a tiny bit more fulfilling.

So, is this the point of having a cricket team? Allowing fans to enjoy a sport they love, giving them a team they can get behind, and connecting people on the basis of a common interest are reasons enough to sponsor a sport on a national level. The reason cricket has become that sport in Bangladesh is because it gets the job done better than anything else. The national team and its sporadic successes count among some of the biggest "positive" national moments in the last two-three decades, giving us, as a nation, the confidence to expect more positive things from them.

But that's only part of the reason cricket is what it is in our country. The attention and the expectation surrounding cricket has commercialised the sport, and driven professionals to unprecedented levels of stardom. Shakib Al Hasan being the world's best all-rounder is good for Bangladesh cricket, but it's great for the brands that he endorses. There is money to be made from having a cricket team and having people watch that team. The broadcasting fees alone that are charged by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), theoretically at least, trickles down to every level of cricket. Thousands of clubs and hundreds of thousands of young cricketers fight to ascend this spire. The closer they get to the pinnacle, the more glory awaits them. Cricket is an industry, and in Bangladesh, this industry is top-down. It's a business, and until recently, it was doing well.

Like any other business, this structure only works when each and every one of its components are functioning and healthy. Right now, however, cricket in Bangladesh is starting to seem like a dwindling trade. Those in the know would probably say

that none of this was unexpected, but as a top-down industry, it does take some abysmal cricket on the part of the national team to get everyone's attention.

Bangladesh's loss against the Netherlands in the world cup is not going to gut the sport in our country, but it does get people asking

Long-term fixes take a long time to work, and cricket as a business needs to bounce back quicker than that. A change in the coaching staff, maybe a new captain, some notable retirements, and a bunch of new players later, Bangladeshi cricket will definitely look very different after this world cup, but it's safe to say that it won't change fundamentally.

questions. Trust has gone out of cricket in Bangladesh. Fans still like one or two cricketers; they might even fight each other over who is more deserving of the public's adoration, but very few people trust the team to go out there and give it their all. This breach of trust possibly began in the aftermath of the 2019 World Cup, but it definitely solidified in the lead-up to

this world cup. The hope was that the team had isolated itself from all the noise, but as it turns out, it didn't.

Going forward, the lack of trust from cricket fans won't contain itself to the national team. The business of cricket may suffer, and this industry that has grown for the last two decades may start to shrink. The way out of that is progressive thinking, turning this top-down enterprise into one that is bottom-up. Investing in the grassroots, building up domestic leagues, giving domestic cricketers the means to pursue the sport they love while maintaining a sustainable and acceptable standard of life—these things will help. But knowing the trends in Bangladesh cricket, the fixes that will be implemented after this world cup may well be short term.

Long-term fixes take a long time to work, and cricket as a business needs to bounce back quicker than that. A change in the coaching staff, maybe a new captain, some notable retirements, and a bunch of new players later, Bangladeshi cricket will definitely look very different after this world cup, but it's safe to say that it won't change fundamentally.

Here's the thing though, if the point of having a cricket team is to serve fans, this jig will be up at some point. Fans have limited patience, and cricket fans are being pushed dangerously close to the limit. But if the point is to keep the industry alive enough to make sure the shake-up never becomes seismic for those who make the big bucks from cricket, we are in for a whole lot more suffering.