

No hasty projects in times of crisis

Govt should be cautious about taking up new projects before election

With the current government's term nearing its end, there has been a flurry of activity in various public departments of late. According to a report by *Bonik Barta*, as many as 82 projects are set to be tabled at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) scheduled to be held today. If everything goes as planned, this would be the highest number of proposals tabled at a single Ecneec meeting, says a *Prothom Alo* report. Apparently, government high-ups are seeing the meeting, likely the last before election, as a chance to get something substantial for their respective constituencies.

Most of these projects are for infrastructure development. There are some involving deadline extensions for existing projects. In the previous three Ecneec meetings, a total of 55 project proposals were tabled and approved. Insiders say the main goal here is to get the projects included in the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for the current fiscal year.

We must say we are not surprised by the rush in getting Ecneec approval for projects—a last-ditch attempt by MPs and ministers to gain some brownie points with voters. What we find concerning, however, are the number and, in some cases, budgets of these projects. Some of them are estimated to cost thousands of crores of taka. Is it prudent to take such financial stress at a time when the country is struggling with a raging inflation—9.63 percent, as of September 2023—and dwindling foreign exchange reserves? Experts say we need to put unnecessary projects on hold to take pressure off the ADP, not add to it. We cannot help but agree. Additional stress on ADP means these projects will not get enough allocations on time and, as a result, will be at risk of time and cost overruns leading to more challenges and irregularities.

Over the years, we have seen many instances of localised projects—bridges, hospital buildings, etc—implemented and abandoned, resulting in a huge waste of money. We cannot afford more of that now, when the country is going through an unprecedented economic crisis. What we need is for the government to make judicious decisions to ensure that the resources at our disposal are used optimally and prudently. That will surely do more to gain voters' favour.

Are drug kingpins being protected?

Failure to 'identify' or take legal action against them is unacceptable

It is alarming to see law enforcers going only after petty drug carriers while the masterminds of narcotics trade and smuggling remain out of reach. According to a report by this daily, a total of 2,293 narcotics cases were filed by police in Barishal between July 22, 2022 and September 23, 2023, with charge sheets submitted in 1,829 of them. However, those who were implicated all happened to be drug carriers. The same thing happened with the cases filed by the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) from August 5, 2021 to February 28, 2023 in the same division. Its investigations too were unsuccessful in tracing the kingpins.

The question is, why are the relevant departments leaving out the masterminds? The explanation given by them is quite incredulous. Apparently, they questioned arrested drug carriers but the latter did not disclose names of the kingpins or those giving them drugs. For instance, in January, the DNC arrested a narcotic trader named Rafiqul Islam with 10,000 yaba pills and later submitted a charge sheet against him. However, the investigation failed to produce the identity of his supplier. Are we to believe that our law enforcers cannot extract such basic information from small-time criminals or by using other means available to them? Or are they protecting the identity of drug lords? At a time when so much money is being syphoned off the country by drug smugglers—with Bangladesh ranked fifth in the world and first in Asia in terms of money laundering from illegal drug trade—how can our law enforcers justify such gross failure?

Over the years, many drug carriers have been arrested across the country, but the illegal trade has not stopped. The 2018 nationwide anti-narcotics drive failed to yield any substantive results either. Clearly, there is something fundamentally flawed with how law enforcers are approaching the issue. We urge the authorities to undertake a critical review of this situation and ensure that law enforcers are better trained and insulated from corrupt influences. They must deliver results in the drive against illegal drugs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Clean the water of Hatirjheel

Hatirjheel is the largest water retention body in the capital and arguably the best transportation solution in the country. With water buses, circular bus service, and a serene walking path, this place attracts not only people seeking a natural retreat, but also thousands of people commuting daily. However, this once cleaned-up waterbody is polluted again. Especially when taking a stroll along the banks or riding the water bus, the smell of the water often becomes unbearable. The situation is also extremely hazardous for the ecosystem and people. I urge the authorities to take necessary measures to ensure that Hatirjheel remains clean.

Forhad Hossain
Badda

EVENTS OF OCTOBER 28

Where do we go from here?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The script had been followed to the tee. Long before October 28, we heard leaders of the ruling party reiterating how the opposition was going to resume its usual “*jhalao porao*” (carrying out arson) tactics, in reference to the 2014 incidents. They also vowed in public rallies how they would “protect” the public from such mayhem. Now, after images of violence have been circulating in mainstream and social media, violence that has left several people killed—including a policeman, Jubo Dal leader, and a conductor who was sleeping in a bus that was set on fire—as well as bloodied the faces of journalists and ruling party men beaten up by BNP activists, it seems that this round of the battle has been won by Awami League.

That there would be clashes and bloodshed was a forgone conclusion. The political rhetoric circulating in the last few weeks has been pointing to an escalation of hostility between the two major parties AL and BNP, with Jamaat chiming in to spice things up. While BNP has been steadfast in its demand that the government resign and that the elections be held under a caretaker government, AL has made it clear that they will do anything but that, with the ruling party's general secretary saying that the election-time government could only be headed by Sheikh Hasina. Thus, the possibility of coming to a compromise was actually zero. In fact, the quips of bringing sticks with flags on them and how “we will see how they stay in the alleyways” gave the impression that the characteristic brute force seen in the past would be used on the opposition.

But this did not happen the way it was anticipated, and it seemed AL had successfully created the apprehension of a ruthless clamp-down on BNP without the usual intensity.

So, on the face of it, BNP failed to keep its promise of holding peaceful rallies, and the ruling party apparently showed uncharacteristic restraint by concentrating more on celebrating the inauguration of the Bangabandhu tunnel over the Karnaphuli River. The optics were glaringly contrasted.

In Dhaka, the designated streets occupied by BNP looked like a battlefield, with opposition activists clashing with police, a fatally wounded policeman lying motionless



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

among the debris, and buses being burnt to a crisp. In Chattogram, a beaming prime minister and jubilant AL supporters inaugurated the most impressive modern infrastructure the country has ever seen—a tunnel under a river, promising unprecedented economic benefits.

But before we draw decisive conclusions, let us examine the facts—or at least what we know and don't know.

According to reporters on the field, the BNP rally in Nayapaltan on October 28 began peacefully. But around 3pm, police approached from two sides, opened blank fire, and hurled sound grenades and tear gas as they reached the rally venue. The BNP men threw brickbats in response and thus, the rally was foiled. Before this, according to police, BNP activists stopped two pickup vehicles and a bus carrying ruling party activists near Kakrail mosque and vandalised the vehicles, which caused a clash to ensue and prompted the police to get into action. This escalated when

the arrests of Mirza Fakhru and other BNP leaders and activists, who have been slammed with numerous cases including the vandalism of the chief justice's house in Kakrail.

Let us not forget, however, the other bits that make up the backdrop of this drama.

The indiscriminate number of cases made against hundreds of BNP men long before October 28 (cases accusing leaders of the arson incidents of 2014), the counter “peace rallies” called on the same date as each BNP rally, the arrests of activists coming to attend rallies, police going through mobile phones of BNP members trying to attend rallies—these moves by the ruling party give us an idea of how determined it has been to thwart BNP at every level. The incidents of October 28, therefore, cannot be presented as being so simple as AL is promoting them to be, and are instead a culmination of the vitriolic politics of our country—wherein the ruling party yields all the power, and must carry the bigger burden of

so lenient on Jamaat members who had declared they did not believe in any “man-made laws” and aimed to establish Sharia law in the country? Could the police have avoided breaking up the rally in Nayapaltan? Who were the “youths” on motorbikes wearing police vests who set fire to a bus in Kakrail? It is unlikely that there will be any objective government probe into unravelling these mysteries, since a status quo fits into the official narrative.

While reports have revealed that BNP men did beat up ruling party activists and journalists, and also injured law enforcers and vandalised vehicles, the instigators of other incidents of violence have not been unearthed.

In the wake of the announcement of BNP's “countrywide blockade” on October 31, and on November 1-2, with other parties joining in, and the government's heightened headline against BNP, the possibility of more violence and political murkiness is all that the public can be certain of.

Fighting on the streets cannot be the way of political parties



Khushi Kabir
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KHUSHI KABIR

BNP has been conducting largely peaceful political processions recently, but the violence and cruelty that erupted on October 28 were completely unacceptable. I don't want to put all the blame on the BNP, but I do blame it for the events of that day more than anyone else. Buses were set ablaze inside the Institution of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh, which is not a political institution. There were attacks on the residence of the chief justice—who doesn't have a political position; he is the head of the Supreme Court, an integral part of our judiciary system. Journalists were attacked.

Then, a police constable was killed. We have seen videos of how inhumanly he was beaten, with blows dealt to the head. This is not acceptable behaviour from any political party that claims to want to work for the people and believes in democracy and fair elections. Yes, the police interfered with the processions, fired tear gas, and disrupted the rally. But the BNP activists did also provoke them. Even if they did interfere in a biased way, which they have done many times in the past—despite being

a part of the state, they have acted on behalf of the ruling party—there are acceptable ways of responding to that. I call on the two main political parties, which have the largest support bases, to behave. The opposition can hold demonstrations and fill the streets with its supporters, but such violence is extremely problematic.

Then there was the ridiculous incident of a Bangladeshi-born US citizen posing as an adviser to the US president, who spoke at a press conference from the BNP office. How could such an incident take place in the office of a mature political party like BNP? His very claims were quite problematic. We are not a colony, nor a passive state of the US, that one would call on us like a child, saying that Joe Biden will “discipline” us. How could the BNP allow him to enter its office and participate in this press conference? How could BNP leaders sit with him and allow this to happen? The BNP claims that this was not pre-planned, but that implies that they have no chain of command or control.

The people around me, even those who were wondering if it is indeed

time for a change, are now saying that if this is what the BNP is going to act like, they do not want them. I don't know if what happened on October 28 was intentional or whether things simply spiralled out of control. But circumstances did go against BNP. Even if it claims that Awami League provoked it, I must ask BNP why it

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responded in such a way. The party leaders should have had enough control over their supporters, given that they had successfully gathered a large number of people. If the rally had been peaceful, the public could have had a much more positive attitude towards them.

I am worried about the future of our political system. The political parties have no control over their members. I am not just talking about the incidents of October 28; this has

been going on for a long time. In the Dhaka 17 by-polls back in July, Hero Alam was assaulted before the voting concluded. This is not the behaviour we expect from mature political parties.

Whenever there are strong allegations against any member of Awami League or BNP, both claim that those members are intruders. So why do they harbour “intruders” who do not belong to their parties or do not share their party's policies and principles? As such, BNP cannot brush off responsibility for the events of October 28 by merely calling those who carried out violence “intruders.”

If this is how both parties act, how can we ensure democracy? Have we learned anything in all our years of democratic practice? Has any political party ever displayed responsible behaviour? These are pressing concerns, not just in view of the upcoming election, but for Bangladeshi politics overall.

If we want democracy and democratic practices to thrive in this country, we need a strong opposition. The government will not agree with everything the opposition believes, and that is actually normal. Similarly, the opposition will point out the government's inaccuracies and failures, hold it accountable, and question its decisions. However, fighting on the streets cannot be the way of our political parties. The people of Bangladesh deserve respect and a much more responsible strain of politics—not the kind of politics we saw on October 28.