

Are we doomed to repeat past mistakes?

Politicians owe it to the people to give dialogue a chance

Bangladesh seems to be stuck in that phase of a nation's life where—clichéd as it may sound—the more things change, the more they stay the same. The same dreadful history of confrontational politics keeps repeating itself, leaving in its wake piles of bodies, charred properties, and unimaginable public suffering. All because politicians cannot agree on the modus operandi of holding an election.

BNP's three-day "blockade" programme, coming hot on the heels of its October 28 rally in Dhaka that ended halfway amid violent clashes and dispersals, has come with little surprise, as far as violence or disruption is concerned. On the first two days, according to media reports, there have been at least four deaths, and many injuries, caused by clashes between BNP, Awami League, and the police. A number of vehicles have been torched. Long-haul bus services have remained mostly suspended. Streets in major cities have mostly worn a deserted look, although most offices have remained open. People are trying to come to terms with this dangerous addition to the constant struggle that life already is in today's Bangladesh.

It's really a rock-and-a-hard-place situation for them, and the fact that there is no hint yet about Awami League and BNP finding common ground in peace—not just in electoral matters—suggests that there will be no imminent relief for them. On Tuesday, the prime minister again snubbed calls for talks with BNP, reiterating her decision to hold the upcoming election under the incumbent government. Conversely, there is an air of finality in BNP's resolve as well, as it pushes ahead with its one-point movement demanding a neutral election-time government. The unwavering stance of both camps, and the measures they are taking to advance it, seem only to be contributing to further public suffering.

We must remind Awami League, as the ruling party, that the burden of breaking through the impasse falls primarily on it. It must help create the conditions in which the opposition feels welcome to engage peacefully. Indiscriminately arresting rival leaders or drowning them under legal cases does not exactly inspire confidence. But in the end, it needs the cooperation of both camps to resolve this crisis. We urge our warring political parties to give peaceful negotiation—not vitriolic rhetoric—a chance. They owe this much to the public whom they want so bad to represent and draw their power from.

Commodity prices again in overdrive

Authorities must answer for repeated failure to control market

At this point, there are no words left to express our frustration at the way the government has handled—or rather, failed to handle—the consistent price hike of essential items. We can barely keep track of how many times prices of essentials have spiralled out of reach of most people, only to spiral out of control even more over the following months. It is obvious that the sufferings of ordinary people, as well as the suggestions of experts, have had little impact on our policymakers, who would much rather boast about their development records than deal with the day-to-day struggle of people, many of them cutting down on their daily caloric intake because of high food prices.

According to a report by this daily, over the last seven days, the price of local onions spiked to Tk 130-140 from Tk 90-95 per kg. Imported onions were sold at Tk 120-125 a kg, up from Tk 70-80, due to the floor price imposed on onion exports by the Indian market. The price of broiler chicken has also shot up to Tk 200-210 from Tk 180-190 a kg. While the government has made promises to increase the purchase prices of paddy and rice, the real impact on the market remains minimal, with mill owners citing shortages of paddy as a reason for escalating rice prices.

Thus far, the government's half-hearted attempts to cap prices have failed miserably, in the absence of systematic monitoring or any real attempt to address the glaring market manipulations by syndicates. There seems to be a notable lack of urgency to neutralise these syndicates that are monopolising the market. Planning Minister MA Mannan decried at an event last month, "If we could see them, catch them, we could take action against them." Are we to believe that our all-powerful government does not have the capability to hold a few syndicates accountable, if it so desires?

In the face of the ever-escalating price problem, it is high time the authorities demonstrated their commitment to the well-being of citizens and took decisive actions to regulate major market players. Failure to do so will only deepen the ongoing economic hardship of the citizens, and further erode public trust in their ability to steer us out of this crisis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Working from home to beat traffic

Dhaka traffic is sickening. In addition to their working hours, people also lose significant amounts of their time, fuel, money, and energy due to having to deal with the traffic congestion on a daily basis. It also contributes to carbon emissions and higher temperatures in our capital city. I believe that working from home is a viable option for many professions and industries to lessen the exposure to the impacts of consistently bad traffic. We have seen examples of this working well only in the recent past. A hybrid system (combining working from home and in the office) would provide significant relief from daily traffic congestion. I urge all offices and companies to consider this as a policy going forward.

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Can bureaucrats be neutral in a win-or-lose-all battle?



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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Let me put it another way: is a fair election possible even if Awami League "allows" it? On Tuesday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina again snubbed calls for dialogue with BNP, reiterating her decision to hold the upcoming election under the incumbent government. This comes amid a countrywide "blockade" being enforced by the opposition demanding precisely the opposite: her resignation in favour of a neutral election-time government. However improbable it may seem now to picture a solution that satisfies both camps, imagine, for a moment, a scene where both have somehow found a way past their differences and are preparing for a fair election.

What then? Can we finally have that Holy Grail of our politics? An election is fluid by nature, a change in and of itself. Parties come and go (or they used to when there was still a functional democracy), the Election Commission can be formed and re-formed as needed, and the allegiance of voters and other pockets of power, local and foreign, is seldom guaranteed. Everything is in flux. If there is one constant in this sea of variables, it is bureaucracy, the executive arm taking care of the business end of elections. Barring the minor inconvenience of transfers for some, bureaucrats are the ones that remain firmly in place regardless of who sits at the helm of the election-time government or the one that follows it. And how they act may hugely impact the outcome of any election.

So, come January, will a fair election be possible if all the parties can resolve their differences? I would like to argue that it won't be—not at least to the degree that we have come to expect based on our experience of 2008, the last time when Bangladesh witnessed a relatively fair election. And it is because bureaucracy has gone through a sea of change since then.

Before 2008, bureaucracy went through a sobering—or rather cleansing—experience during a 23-month-long state of emergency, enough to shed any residual inhibitions about resisting political influence in elections. It helped the election. After 2008, however, no longer shackled by the military, it again moulded itself around the needs and desires of a political administration. Imagine what 15 years of constant moulding and politicising can do to a system or the people behind it.

To its credit, Awami League knows the long-term value of bureaucrats. Despite frequent objections raised about bureaucratic overreach and the



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overdependence on public officials, including by some of its own MPs, the party has done little to address them. On the contrary, it has continued to empower them, constantly priming them or programming their subconscious through various incentives and legal/administrative safeguards, and that has richly rewarded the party during the last two general elections. A quick look at some of these measures really baffles the mind.

Think of when the Awami League government passed the Public Service Act, 2018, preventing law enforcement agencies from suing or arresting government employees without prior permission, thus basically giving them indemnity against any crime or corruption committed. Its support for police or Rab, in the face of multiple allegations of crimes, has been swift and unconditional. It has also variously integrated state officials into the power structure, at times replacing local-level politicians as heads of various relief committees. Or think of how, during its three consecutive terms in office, the government has showered them with many perks and privileges including massive pay hike, easy loan terms, tax exemptions, and "gifting" of plots in some cases. This trend seems only to have intensified in the months leading to the 2024 election.

On October 12, The Daily Star reported a controversial move by the

returning officers, respectively, during elections—through such pleasing tactics so close to the election? Around the same time, we have seen similar, strategically timed provisions in the form of in-situ promotions at the public administration ministry, or supernumerary posts created at the top level of police. The question is: can public officials, especially those performing election-related duties, still act neutrally when the time comes?

Their likely reaction—doing Awami League's bidding on its behalf, even if they are not expressly asked to—can be attributed to three possible reasons. First, because of the numerous perks, privileges, concessions and exemptions many have received over the years, they may feel motivated to help out of their own selfish desires. Second, public officials associated with the police and other vital administrative wings, who have been involved in harassing and silencing opposition leaders and activists, may fear retribution should the latter come to power. This can be a powerful motivator for them to want to retain the status quo, especially given speculations that cops with records of political repression were being "listed." Third, the stringent political screening that usually precedes any recruitment or promotion in the public service, especially important government positions, means that a large number of officials are already

been found to be openly campaigning for ruling party candidates. Other times, like during the suspended Gaibandha-5 by-election in October 2022, their irregularities and wilful negligence in electoral duties were more impactful. There have been too many brazen displays of political loyalties to treat them as isolated incidents. If the past is any indication, it will be unwise to expect a different response come January, especially when the political stakes are so high.

We're already witnessing how the government is again using state apparatuses to clip the wings of arrested/accused opposition members, including by rushing trials through unprecedented night-time hearings, in a potential bid to keep them away from the election. Police are supplying fodder by arresting left and right. It almost feels as if bureaucracy has become an extended appendage of the ruling party.

So, before we talk about reforming the electoral process, or ask Awami League and BNP to hold dialogue over the composition of any interim government, perhaps what we should be asking is whether the interests of our largely pliant, grateful, and politicised bureaucrats are aligned with the public expectations for a fair and participatory election. We must understand how far the rot has spread in the last 15 years before seeking remedies for it.

UNEMPLOYMENT DECLINE IN JANUARY-JUNE 2023

Let's pause before we celebrate

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In developing countries, a decline in unemployment through job creation is desired because it ensures both economic growth and a rise in the welfare of the population dependent on income from labour. In Bangladesh, job creation can have a positive impact on wages and minimise the impact of inflation on people's living standards. In fact, economics says that a rise in inflation will have a negative impact on the unemployment rate. This article examines the changes in unemployment figures and other related indicators of Bangladesh's labour market during the first two quarters of 2023, and reflects on the implications of these changes.

For the last few quarters, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has been conducting Quarterly Labour Force Surveys (QLFS) and publishing summary reports. A few observations based on the last few rounds of QLFS, especially those related to employment and unemployment, can be highlighted to gauge the full implication of these changes.

Data for the two quarters of 2023 show that the number of unemployed individuals decreased by 90,000 between January-March and April-June. However, the number of employed persons in these two quarters also experienced a decline, from 71.10 million in January-March to 70.71 million in April-June.

These two observations imply that those who may have been counted as unemployed left the labour force altogether. According to the internationally accepted definition used by the BBS, a person would be considered unemployed if they did not work during the reference period and was engaged in active search for employment (for pay or profit). Persons who are not employed and give up job hunting, knowing that jobs are not available, are described as "discouraged workers."

When they re-enter the job search, they have to compete with new entrants in the labour force, as the population of those appropriate for the labour force (15 years and above) is growing at a rate of about 1.4 percent annually.

Sector-wise disaggregation of data shows that employment has shrunk in both agriculture and industry. A decline of industrial employment is less likely to be a seasonal phenomenon. Moreover, employment in industry in April-June 2023 was 12.12 million, compared to 12.4 million in the same

quarter in 2017, indicating a significant decline over a five-year period. The industry sector posted high GDP growth in most years but still failed to contribute to employment expansion. This should be viewed with concern.

To factor out seasonality, point-to-point comparisons are drawn for many other macroeconomic indicators (such as GDP growth and inflation). But this may be difficult to do for employment growth as the working age population is also growing. Assuming that 15 percent of them remain in school, about one million young persons enter the labour force every year. Even though total employment rose by 0.27 million between April-June 2022 and April-June 2023, about 0.7 million are yet to find employment or join the ranks of unemployed persons. Currently, they are considered "discouraged workers" and are not counted as being in the labour force.

Indeed, the limitations of the current definition of unemployment generates unrealistically low unemployment figures for Bangladesh.

One may wonder what the implications are of a growing pool of discouraged workers. The social repercussions can be disastrous. Temptations for illegal activities and attempts to go abroad via risky and illegal channels are rising. In addition, having more discouraged workers implies that the country is not being able to utilise its human resources

to enhance its economic growth and overall development.

If employment growth does not accelerate to match the growth of the labour force age population, those not in employment contribute to the pool of surplus labour even if they are not considered unemployed as per the limited criteria used by the BBS. This surplus can have a depressing impact on wages by reducing the bargaining power of those who are employed or seeking employment. The recent stagnation of real wages may at least be partially due to this factor.

The preliminary QLFS reports do not provide data on wages or salary. But this data can be very useful for analysing the performance of the labour market and is something that BBS should include in upcoming QLFS. The quarterly labour force reports of India and Pakistan, for instance, provide data on not only wages and salaries, but also on income from self-employment.

All in all, the decline in the number of unemployed between the first two quarters of 2023 is not reassuring, since there has been a simultaneous decline in the number of employed persons. Even more alarming is the decline in industrial employment during 2017-2022. There is no alternative to conducting a more in-depth analysis of the factors behind the slow growth of employment in Bangladesh and urgently adopt remedial policies.