

Mass arrests of BNP activists alarming

It does not bode well for the future of democracy

Following the events of October 28, the government has intensified its clampdown on the BNP, and is reportedly planning even harsher actions in the coming days. According to law enforcement officials, at least 2,172 BNP leaders and activists have been arrested under 89 cases filed with 32 police stations under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), including Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, vice-chairmen Shahjahan Omar and Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, and Organising Secretary Syed Emran Saleh Prince. Over 9,000 activists have been arrested countrywide since the rally, with 1,600 to 1,700 detained every day in connection with various crimes such as arson, drugs, theft, etc. The Awami League would have us believe that the arrests are not “political,” but the alarming number of cases and the swiftness with which BNP activists have been apprehended suggest a different story.

We have noted with increasing alarm how the ruling party has used various state machineries to harass and intimidate opposition leaders and activists in the past, foremost among which has been the filing of “*gayebi mamla*,” or ghost cases, against them. We have also reported on how heightened activities are taking place at a number of courts in Dhaka, with hearings of opposition activists running beyond normal court hours, extending till about 8-8:30pm almost every day. It appears that the ruling party is now capitalising on the chaos and violence on October 28 to accelerate its tried-and-tested method of harassing the opposition. As per our reports, law enforcement agencies are making a list of “troublemakers” down to the grassroots and gearing up for more arrests. Alarming, in some cases, law enforcers have even detained and harassed family members, which is equally concerning.

While we do not condone the violence, arson attacks and loss of human lives, it is imperative that we call for impartial investigations into them. Mass detention of opposition activists at a time when the ruling party needs to prove its commitment to ensuring free, fair and inclusive elections does the exact opposite. It only proves BNP’s point that the ruling party and the state have become inseparable, and hence any election held under the current government is bound to be questionable. Furthermore, the targeted arrests of BNP’s top brass foreclose any possibility of a compromise in the near future, pushing the country towards greater uncertainty. It leaves thousands of BNP activists, who already have their backs against the wall, without proper guidance, which can make them increasingly more reckless.

Under the circumstances, the ruling party has declared that it will do “whatever is required if anyone tries to resist the election.” We call upon it to see reason—for the greater good of the nation—and abandon its politics of confrontation. Going forward, the goal must be to reduce tensions and resolve political differences through peaceful methods.

How long will we ignore our heritage?

Preserve Muktagacha Zamindar Bari and other at-risk historical sites

When it comes to preserving the historical sites of Bangladesh, we seem to be lagging far behind the rest of the world. Over the past few decades, a lot of our heritage sites have been ruined due to gross neglect from the authorities concerned and a lack of awareness from the local people. One such site is the Muktagacha Zamindar Bari in Mymensingh. Reportedly, the Department of Archaeology (DoA) took charge of this place in 1993 and started its renovation in 2012. However, halfway through the work, they abandoned the project. Now, nearly half of the palace is on the verge of ruin.

The Muktagacha dynasty was established in 1727 by Sree Krishna Acharya Chowdhury. The Zamindar Bari, established on a hundred acres of land, consisted of residences for the zamindars, a “*rang mahal*” (auditorium) furnished with a revolving stage, a big library, a temple and other facilities. The palace is a unique example of our ancient architecture, and attracts tourists from across the country. Unfortunately, the DoA seems to have finished its duty by placing a signboard beside the palace, and appointing only two staff members to look after this valuable site.

This is by no means an isolated incident, as many other heritage sites suffer from similar negligence and poor oversight. The question is, when will we learn to value our heritage? How long will it take for the authorities to come up with proper conservation plans? There are countless listed and unlisted heritage sites spread across the country, many on the verge of destruction. We witnessed how some heritage sites in Old Dhaka, including parts of the Boro Katra and Jahaj Bari, were demolished in the name of development in recent years. We also witnessed how the Mahasthangarh in Bogura was damaged by building new structures on the site.

The authorities must stop destruction or erosion of our historical sites and take proper initiatives to preserve them. This is not impossible. The renovation of the Lalbagh Fort is an example of how, with the right mentality and initiatives, we can save our historical sites. We urge the DoA to take note of this and complete the renovation work of the Muktagacha Zamindar Bari as soon as possible.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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New bridge needed on Kangsha River

Every day, countless people use the iron bridge over the Kangsha River in Guatala union of Mymensingh’s Dhobaura upazila. A part of the bridge has broken down recently and caused several severe accidents. It also has lots of potholes, which obstruct vehicular movement and injure pedestrians. The sufferings of the locals will not end until a new bridge is built replacing the existing one. I urge the authorities to take steps.

Md Shihab Akanda, University of Dhaka

‘Why don’t owners pressurise the buyers instead of workers?’

Kalpona Akter, a labour rights activist and president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, discusses the ongoing protest of garment workers, their circumstances, and demands for a liveable minimum wage in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

Can you contextualise the latest protests by garment factory workers in Bangladesh?

The minimum wage for ready-made garment factory workers was last reviewed in 2018, when workers demanded Tk 16,000 of monthly wage. The government and RMG factory owners settled on Tk 8,000; since then, the workers have received a mandatory five percent wage increment. Even with the increment, entry-level workers currently earn only around Tk 9,000 per month.

Since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have triggered a worldwide cost-of-living crisis, impacting everyone, including the RMG workers. Regardless of their wage level, workers are struggling to make ends meet, unable to afford basic necessities for themselves and their families.

Despite the five-year minimum wage review cycle, there seems to be no preparation on the factory owners’ end. Their proposal should have come earlier, but instead, they belatedly offered a disrespectful proposal in late October to set the minimum wage at Tk 10,400—not even half of the workers’ demand. This angered the workers, whose demand is now clear: either reduce essential commodity prices or increase wages.

But the workers’ voices are being suppressed. They are being beaten by law enforcement members and goons, fired at indiscriminately, and subjected to lawsuits. Some have been arrested, creating a climate of fear among workers and labour rights activists alike.

The owners accuse the workers of conspiracy, but how is it a conspiracy when eggs cost Tk 15 apiece, onions Tk 120 per kg, and potatoes Tk 70 per kg?

How long can the police suppress the workers? The owners may not be able to “afford” Tk 23,000, but the wage certainly cannot be Tk 10,400 or even Tk 12,000. It must enable the workers to survive, buy food, pay rent, and support their families. With stagnant wages, reduced capacity to meet basic needs, and no significant growth between entry-level and skilled workers, how long will the workers suffer in silence?

Factory owners argue that they are unable to increase minimum wages or overall wages due to competitive market pressure and the need to maintain low prices. What’s your perspective on that?

The factory owners claim they must produce low-cost products due to buyers’ low prices. They create a competitive environment both internationally and domestically. However, Bangladesh is the world’s



Kalpona Akter
PHOTO: SAIFUL HUQ OMI/UN WOMEN

second-largest apparel producer. If we still cannot strengthen our position and negotiate with our buyers, establishing a minimum price below which we will not go, it’s disheartening. We have powerful organisations like the BGMEA and BKMEA. What do they do? Why do they foster internal competition within our sector? What is the purpose of their association then? As long as they don’t learn to say no, they’ll keep producing cheap clothing and claiming no profit. Yet, we see many of them expanding their businesses and building new factories. If they don’t have the money, I’m at a loss as to how they find the funding to build these factories.

Why do you think factory owners redirect pressure from buyers onto workers when such demands arise, offering excuses that the buyers will not listen, rather than negotiating for better prices and subsequently better wages for the workers?

Because they can get away with putting pressure on the workers. Factory owners have embedded themselves within the government. If the legislators are the factory owners themselves, where can I go to seek justice? Where is the impartial body that will listen to the workers? The government is not neutral. A huge percent of MPs are garment factory owners. They are concerned about themselves, not the workers. Their “power” works to silence the workers, labour rights activists, and those who are part of unions. Their strategy does not include negotiating with the buyers.

They should have met with the buyers back in 2022. They should have informed them that the workers’ wages in Bangladesh would need to be increased the following year, and set a minimum price limit that the buyers must adhere to. Instead, whenever there has been a movement

to raise wages, the workers have been suppressed. Cases have been filed against the protesting workers; they have been fired from their jobs, and they have been blacklisted. The factory owners have managed to do this because they have the muscle, money and administrative power, none of which the workers possess.

However, there is hope for a solution. Many of the sourcing countries are working on laws for human rights due diligence. Germany, France and the Netherlands have already enacted them, and the European Union is also going to adopt one. One of the elements of such laws is to ensure a living wage for workers. We are trying to ensure that the question of living wage covers contributing countries, so

taking to the streets to demand wage increases and other improvements. Why does this have to happen so often?

The legal framework exists. The law clearly states that the owner, worker or the government can review the wage structure after three years if the inflation rate is high. It is only mandatory after five years. Workers should not need to take to the streets. The procedure should involve a wage board meeting every five years. Both parties will submit proposals, there will be discussions, and the wage will be announced.

I spoke with labour rights activists in Kerala, India; they were surprised to learn that our minimum wage review occurs every five years. They do



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

that sourcing countries cannot shake off their responsibility by saying the manufacturing countries will ensure the living wage of the workers. We are saying that no, the companies that are sourcing from manufacturing countries have to make sure that they are paying enough and that the money contributes to the living wages.

Another hope will emerge if the power is neutralised here. And to do that, you have to give the opportunity to form free unions in the factories. Only when there is an opportunity for free unions will the workers have power in collective bargaining agreements. They will be able to decide whether to accept the mandatory five percent increment or demand 10 percent, should the wage review be done every five years or should it be three years.

We see RMG workers frequently

it annually there, and workers don’t have to take to the streets for it. Wage review is the owners’ responsibility. They announce a wage that aligns with the inflation rate. If our neighbouring country can do it, why can’t we? Why wait five years; why not review the wage every year?

Repression can never silence workers’ voices or labour movements. It needs to be addressed systematically. We need to have discussions and provide workers with a platform for dialogue, such as a trade union. The second step is to move beyond the profit paradigm. If we don’t include workers in profit-sharing, this backlash will continue. Calling the workers a part of the owners’ families is a mere lip service if we don’t believe it wholeheartedly and don’t demonstrate it in our actions.

The hidden impact of patrilocality



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As I was growing up, I was always confused by our society’s widespread preference for sons over daughters. I encountered this bias when visiting my relatives or my village. You see, I did not have any brothers, and it seemed like wherever I went, outsiders would be overly concerned about who would look after my parents in their old age.

It was particularly confusing to me because, on paper, it seemed like men and women were allowed to do everything equally. As I grew up, the gender norms became clearer. Although women now have the freedom to get an education and earn their living, the major reason contributing to this preference for sons seems to be the culture of patrilocality, where the woman is expected to leave their parents’ home after marriage and move in with her husband’s family. Upon marriage, women become integrated into their husbands’ lineages, and their role within their original lineage no longer persists.

The main issue with this structure

of living arises from the fact that men in the family are expected to care for their elderly parents, and daughters similarly are expected to leave their homes to care for their in-laws. This tradition suggests that parents with sons will typically have the support of two caregivers in their later years, while those who only have daughters may not have any.

As I became more aware of this custom as a teenager, the question that kept evading me was its purpose and benefit in today’s society. However, I was confident then that by the time I grew up, the outdated custom would not be practised. As I witness my friends and acquaintances marrying around me, I often inquire whether moving to their husbands’ homes is a choice they truly desire. Some vehemently oppose the concept, but most respond along the lines that it’s a tradition they feel obligated to uphold. What appears to be lacking for the majority of women, even among the educated ones, is the autonomy to make decisions

for themselves regarding their post-marital living arrangements.

I think before delving into the whys, it’s important to understand where this stems from as well. The advent of agriculture created a significant incentive to maintain land ownership within clans and establish regulations governing its transfer. Friedrich Engels contended that the transition to an

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agricultural-based society played a pivotal role in subordinating women in matters of lineage and inheritance, leading to the emergence of the family as a new economic unit that allowed men to gain control over the newfound wealth in society.

However, in today’s context, with

the majority of the population working in corporate offices, is there really any merit in continuing this custom?

While co-living is frequently celebrated as a tradition that strengthens family ties, fosters enhanced social and familial support, and encourages respect for elders, the genuine portrayal of women’s status and roles within patrilocal or joint family dynamics remains a topic that often receives insufficient attention. Being told from a young age that the house that you are born in is not your real home and your real home is dependent on the husband you will potentially marry has its own psychological burden.

At the core of a patrilocal society lies the notion of women occupying a lower status than men. Perpetuating such a rigid family structure continues to exacerbate gender disparity and diminish the worth of women. With all the gender gaps that Bangladesh is bridging, this still remains a psychological burden that a woman born in this society continues to carry.

The role of the feminist revolution has always been to provide women and men the autonomy to make choices that suit their needs. In today’s society, it is imperative that we also expand the space for individuals to make choices regarding their family structure after marriage. It is important to remove the stigma that resides, particularly for women, in discussing where they might want to live after marriage.