

The human toll of political expediency

Aggrieved BNP families’ pleas deserve better response

There is a human cost to any political expediency, and right now, that cost is getting increasingly higher amid the ongoing crackdown on BNP leaders and activists. A street programme organised by the families of detained leaders and activists of the party has brought to light the human side of these arrests, with children, spouses, and parents speaking of anguish and uncertainty that have since plagued their households. Their stories—with accounts of police raids, arbitrary arrests, or forced hiding in fear of arrests, alleged torture in custody, denial of basic visitation rights to the detainees—deserve a critical reflection.

The fact is, what these families want—answers, justice, and the restoration of normalcy in their lives—will resonate with a lot of others who have been similarly pulled into the political whirlpool. BNP claims that about 17,000 leaders and activists have been arrested in 435 cases across the country over the past month or so. In the absence of reliable official data, that figure remains to be verified. But there is no denying the mass arrests, politically motivated prosecution, indefinite pre-trial detention, and rushed trials/convictions that we have witnessed over the last few weeks. BNP’s central office in Nayapaltan remains locked for a month now. As per a *Prothom Alo* report, 56 of its district offices also remain closed; four are marginally open and the remaining four have no offices. Local activists say they are not visiting party offices fearing arrests.

The manner in which a big political party like BNP is being incapacitated, abusing the legal system, is truly alarming. But the plight of those facing arrests or trial, as well as their families, is no less significant. The government is refusing to back down from the ongoing measures, saying “criminals” must face justice. But are the alleged transgressions of the arrested worthy of detainment without due process or the right to a fair trial? Can their families be harassed, threatened and left in prolonged uncertainty? While the imperative of justice is something that we wholeheartedly stand behind, what the government has so far done in the name of justice—while at the same time filling the void left by opposition leaders with made-up rivals of its own choice—seem to lay bare its true intentions: eliminating any real competition in the election. Such extreme measures will have far-reaching consequences for the nation.

We must also think: what sort of an image are we creating for ourselves and our legal system by using such tactics? What the families of BNP’s arrested leaders and activists are seeking is well within their rights as citizens of this country. Every citizen, regardless of their political affiliation, deserves a fair trial as well as protections from any abuse of power and authority.

Why can’t we contain child marriage?

Continued failure of relevant authorities is unacceptable

Despite achieving considerable progress in gender equality and women’s empowerment, it is unthinkable that Bangladesh still has the highest rate of child marriage in Asia—and among the highest globally—with a staggering 51 percent of girls being married off before they turn 18. The case of Veduriya union in Bhola, where over a hundred girls were married off in just one year, as reported by *Prothom Alo* recently, highlights how pervasive the crisis still is, especially in poor and marginalised communities.

According to the report, Veduriya saw these girls, including some from class 6, married off with the assistance of a local ruling party politician and his associates. It exposes the inadequacy of ongoing measures and initiatives, as even local government representatives have been found to be disregarding the law. In most cases, guardians fabricated birth certificates from the UNO to show their girls as being of legal age for marriage, in an attempt to evade scrutiny and legal consequences.

It is clear that the legal and institutional frameworks to prevent child marriages are not working as expected. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, makes aiding or forcing child marriage a bailable offence. It lacks provisions to nullify child marriages, even if the minor is abducted, kidnapped, or trafficked. Furthermore, the inclusion of “special circumstances” provision allows for girls under 18 to be married, but the term remains undefined. There is also a lack of dedicated social workers and monitoring mechanisms, especially in remote places like Veduriya.

Moreover, marrying underage girls still remains a deep-rooted patriarchal practice, which the government’s social awareness campaigns are failing to address. Currently, there are no modern mass social awareness projects similar to Meena. The school-level national curriculum does not comprehensively address child marriage’s adverse effects and prevention strategies. Remote areas also often lack social and religious institutions to conduct awareness campaigns. The national emergency number 109 for seeking help in preventing child marriages is helpful, of course, but how many know about this? On top of all these issues, the authorities have largely failed to recognise and properly respond to the disastrous fallout of Covid-19 on young girls and their families.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to recognise the crisis and take stern action to prevent underage marriage. Instead of undertaking ad hoc measures, a comprehensive approach is needed, including mass social awareness campaigns, robust legal and institutional frameworks to prevent such incidents, and proper support for those already affected.

What the HSC results mean for our youngsters



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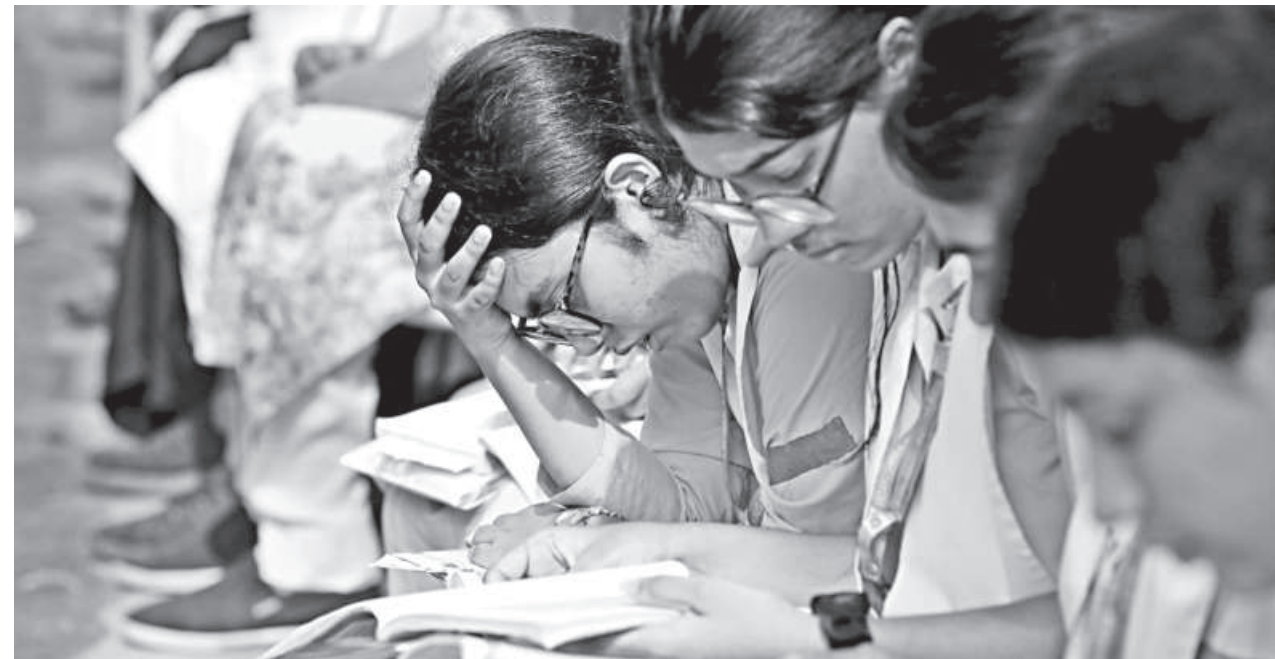
Results of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination, which signifies the end of 12 years of schooling, is a milestone in the life of young people who can reach the higher secondary stage. Only one in four of those aged 17-18 years have this privilege, and among them, a select minority with good enough scores will go for higher education, picking programmes and institutions in the face of intense competition for admission.

The internationally-proclaimed Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is to ensure free, equitable, inclusive and quality primary and secondary education for all by 2030. Bangladesh has accepted the SDG agenda, including the education goal, but there is no time-bound plan yet for extending quality education up to 12th grade, to the majority of youths who are deprived of this service, despite the rhetoric about smart citizens for Smart Bangladesh by 2041.

Of the 1.1 million students who appeared in the HSC exams in 2023 under the nine general education boards (except the technical education and madrasa boards), 75.9 percent passed, with 78,521 securing the highest score of GPA 5. Of the examinees under the technical education board, 136,751 or 91.25 percent passed. Under the madrasa education board, just over 86,000 or 90.75 percent passed. The overall pass rate for HSC and equivalent examinations was 78.64 percent, meaning a total of 1,067,852 students passed. The total pass rate this year saw a reduction by seven percentage points from last year’s rate of 85.95 percent. The number of those who got GPA 5 also dropped by half.

Several questions are frequently being asked now. Do the results indicate a dip in the quality of instructions and performance of students? If so, what may be the reasons? What can be done about it?

In the absence of adequate research-based evidence, various speculative explanations are being offered. The tests last year were based on a limited number of subjects and a shortened syllabus, whereas this year’s exams incorporated the full syllabus and all subjects. There are lingering effects of the pandemic-induced school closure, which led to promotion of students during two successive school years



The HSC results raise questions about the validity and reliability of the examination.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

without examinations and normal teaching and learning. Students did not have a chance to recover from the learning loss. And so, the consequences were evident when a regular examination with all subjects was conducted.

These explanations are not unfounded; they are supported by some studies and surveys undertaken. However, these do not quite explain the wide variation in the average results among the boards. Jashore, at the bottom, has a pass rate of 69.88 percent, compared to Barishal’s rate of 80.65 percent. Are Barishal schools on average that much superior to those in Jashore to merit an 11 percentage point difference? The technical education and madrasa boards have also shown pass rates higher by 15 percentage points. Can it be plausibly claimed that technical institutions and madrasas are significantly superior when compared with general education institutions in the country? The results raise questions about the validity and reliability of the tests; that is, they do not measure reliably the knowledge and skills acquired by students.

The tertiary-level institutions—the public and better private universities, general colleges and professional

institutions in the country to accommodate all HSC graduates who want to go for further education, but not enough places in reputed institutions to satisfy students’ choices. In other words, while institutions, both public and private, have mushroomed in recent decades, there are not enough with acceptable quality and management standards. Students as well as parents and prospective employers have no confidence that these institutions will prepare youngsters for decent employment or specialised, advanced or professional education later on.

The anxiety and questions of parents, concerned citizens and young people themselves about the pass rate, GPA, variations among boards, and overall life prospects point to serious policy and strategy issues in the education system. These call for a comprehensive soul-searching by the highest political and administrative level. The signs for such an exercise being launched are not evident. The least that may be done is to recognise that in our school education, three kinds of problems need to be probed seriously to find workable approaches to address these issues.

One, why do exam results vary so much, beyond the range of normal probability, among boards and streams

two years of schooling be better defined in the context of changing times? And what does this mean for better teaching-learning and better measurement of learning to enable a large segment of youths to move on to decent livelihood opportunities, and the others to advanced general and professional education and training? The issues revolve around both curricular offerings and the quality of instruction and training offered.

The education authorities will claim that an initiative to address these issues is the new school curriculum of “experiential learning,” being rolled out at primary and secondary levels. This project has given rise to controversy about whether too much is being attempted too rapidly without preparing the ground and ignoring the pre-existing weaknesses in the school system, especially in preparing the teachers. The higher secondary curriculum and its implementation in classrooms also have to be reformed, but that is a task that remains for the future.

Meanwhile, the HSC milestone is more a source of anxiety and premonition for the large majority of young people, rather than the exciting beginning of a new stage of preparation for life and livelihood.

Our shared commitment to Rohingya refugees



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As the concrete road leads to a brick-laden one, and the surrounding changes from old trees and crop fields to barbed wire fences and shelters of bamboo and tarpaulin, there lies a mass of humanity forsaken by many, at the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. Soon in sight though are bright-eyed children, men and women gathered in distribution centres, stalls selling daily ware, refugee volunteers in uniform and a general bustling community.

Returning to Cox’s Bazar after five years, I realise much has changed—some for the better and some not. What was a humanitarian emergency in 2017-2018 has lapsed into a protracted situation. My memories of brown dusty hills, shorn of cover, are only memories, as they have now been re-greened—a demonstration of human efforts to return the natural cover of the area. Makeshift home kitchen gardens abound on top of the shelters’ plastic roofs. There are now learning centres, improved sanitation, and sturdier albeit handmade bridges.

The visible masses of United Nations and NGO staff, teeming earnestly for the refugees, is more structured and organised, joining Bangladeshi organisations—all working towards

the shared goal of refugee protection together with the authorities, whose well-established government camp-in-charge offices dot the place.

The soothing breeze announces the arrival of the Bangladeshi winter, made more pleasant with the canopy above. The refugees’ sighs of home across the hills, though, remain the same. The ardent desire to repatriate when it is safe to do so is visible, amid tenuous hopes with the re-flaring of conflict in Myanmar.

As the incoming representative of the UN Refugee Agency in Bangladesh, I am humbled and motivated by the possibilities and responsibilities of this role, only made possible through collective action across humanitarian and development sectors.

Over decades, the people of Bangladesh have shown long-standing generosity in sheltering the Rohingya people fleeing violence in Myanmar. I remember how Ukhiya and Teknaf families opened their doors in solidarity to the persecuted arrivals. This kindness and prevalence of humanity marks Bangladesh, where there exists the living memories of over 10 million uprooted in 1971.

In search of solutions, and having

had little to no self-reliance since 2017, Rohingya refugees continue to be aid-dependent. Global crises have further limited humanitarian resources impacting each family, as food rations reached a record low of \$8 per person per month. Multiple complexities emanate from a life in limbo, most critical of which are safety risks to those vulnerable.

The Rohingya’s indomitable desire for education and skills development has supported their core resilience against tremendous odds including indignity and risks that many in the camps are subjected to. Constructive livelihood opportunities can support the refugees and enhance the local economy. A coordinated humanitarian development-peace approach is essential for sustainable solutions.

Until this is possible, urgent and collective efforts are needed to enable refugees to go about their daily lives without the threat of murder, threats, abduction and extortion—all of which are increasing concerns. We also see an increase in dangerous sea journeys by the Rohingya people.

The UNHCR convened high-level regional consultation on the Rohingya in October brought together governments, refugee-led organisations, private sector, development actors, think tanks, UN agencies, and NGOs, reaffirming collective solidarity with Rohingya refugees and the countries hosting them, particularly Bangladesh. This collective approach to refocus efforts in the region is essential.

This includes upholding the right of refugees to return safely and voluntarily

to Myanmar when the situation there is conducive to return, as well as support to hosting countries and communities through continued humanitarian resources, resettlement places for the most vulnerable, and complementary pathways, such as through education and labour mobility.

At the upcoming Global Refugee Forum organised by UNHCR in mid-December, a dedicated session on the Rohingya situation will be possible despite the competing and multiple refugee crises across the globe. This multi-stakeholder dialogue is an opportunity to retain attention on the protection and solutions needs and a multistakeholder pledge dedicated to the Rohingya people.

I also see the dramatic and tragic barriers between the Rohingya refugees and the local communities, some of which are physical, and others emotional. The experience of refugee management across the world has taught us that bridges across refugee and host communities are essential for all to thrive and be at peace and harmony, equally benefiting from the facilities and attention that the Cox’s Bazar region is receiving.

As discussions on sustainable return possibilities continue, the volatile situation in Rakhine and Myanmar must be watched closely. The international community remains in support of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. As a “returnee” to this challenging “operation” in a beautiful country and people, in my own familiar neighbourhood, I urge us all to continue our coordinated efforts to ensure that refugees live in safety and dignity, and maintain hope for a better future.