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Identify perpetrators of Tejgaon train fire

We need an independent investigation, not more toxic political rhetoric

The torching of the Mohanganj Express, which led to the death of at least four passengers (including a woman and her three-year old son), is truly abhorrent. By all indications, it appears to be an act of sabotage which started the fire and engulfed three carriages of the train when it was in the Tejgaon area.

Firstly, the fact that the station master of the Tejgaon Railway Station saw no fire outside the train, only inside the train compartment, suggests that the fire did not originate from the train wheels. Secondly, according to members of the bomb disposal unit of police, primary investigation suggests it was not possible for the fire to spread so quickly without the use of petrol—which indicates that it was an arson attack. And on top of that, witnesses have also said that they saw the fire originating from the rear part of the coach and spreading to the entire compartment extraordinarily fast.

The fact that whoever was responsible started the fire while the train was in running indicates that they wanted to cause maximum damage. Such a heinous act must be investigated thoroughly and the perpetrators must be held to account. Disappointingly, the tragic event, it seems, is already being politicised as we see the usual blame game being played out even before a proper investigation has been carried out. Such rhetoric being spewed right after such a tragic event is disparaging, to say the least.

The timing of the attack, hours before the BNP's hartal and blockade programmes, does raise a number of serious concerns, especially since a bus was also set on fire in Gulistan hours after the torching of the Mohanganj Express. Does this mean that we are about to see another flare-up of arson attacks, sabotage, and violence, such as the ones we have seen previously during periods of similar political standoffs? We hope that is not the case, and that more innocent lives do not have to be lost as our major political parties continue to ramp up their hostile rhetoric and actions in their pursuit and greed for power.

Consequently, we call on our law enforcing agencies to diligently and independently carry out an independent investigation—setting aside the toxic political mudslinging—to identify who exactly was responsible for these terrible attacks, and to remain vigilant in order to prevent any further acts of sabotage being carried out.

Another failure in ADP implementation

On what basis are funds allocated if they can't be utilised properly?

Despite repeated promises to better utilise the allocated funds for development, this fiscal year's spending so far has been the lowest in eight years. Only 17.06 percent of the government's annual development programme (ADP) was implemented in the July-November period, as authorities managed to spend Tk 46,857 crore of the allocated funds.

While this is a new low, the trend of failing to spend allocations is nothing new. Even in the first nine months of the last fiscal year, implementation was the lowest in 10 years, and ultimately, the government could only utilise 84 percent of the ADP in the end.

According to an official of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), this year's shortcoming was due to austerity measures and top government officials being busy with the upcoming election. This raises the question: what data and analysis are taken into account when making these allocations? The election timeline is fixed, and the economic turmoil has been ongoing for years now. So, why were authorities unable to predict an appropriate allocation amount?

Contrary to the official's statement, analysts and Planning Commission officials said even after recovering from the Covid shock in 2022, government agencies failed to regain their full capacity to efficiently execute the ADP. This points to structural, not situational, problems.

Another question pops up: if government officials ignore such a crucial responsibility and instead stay preoccupied with election activities, are they actually serving the citizens? The government has prioritised infrastructural development, which is evident when looking at the total allocation, and we have seen how implemented projects have paid dividends. So, shouldn't these officials work toward this goal?

Development expenditure continues to be the lowest in health and education sectors, although there has been no directive to restrict expenses. For instance, the Secondary and Higher Education Division was the second worst performer during this period, spending only 9.85 percent of its allocation.

For years, experts have been reiterating the importance of strengthening these sectors. We have seen how inadequate our healthcare proved during the Covid and dengue outbreaks, while our ambitious education targets, like implementing the new curriculum, will be impossible if authorities don't invest accordingly.

It is imperative that the government be prudent in calculating and utilising the allocation. This slow disbursement usually leads to reckless spending at the end of the fiscal year, which just results in utter waste. The allocated amount must bring the maximum benefits, but if the government fails to address these issues, the goals set next year will also remain unfulfilled.

What future will young workers work for?



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Lured by the promise of opportunities, the young and jobless flock to Dhaka. Yet, a decade of touted development, with boasts of mega projects and GDP, has fallen short for this country's most promising generation. Beyond the 2.2 million graduates, a vast number of school and college graduates from across the country languish in unemployment. Many dropouts seek refuge in the informal economy, while the rural economy itself shrinks. This exodus drives young people from rural areas to become Dhaka's hawkers, tailors, domestic helps, security guards, bus conductors, and the like. And thousands find their way into the ready-made garment sector.

The tragic reality is that we've utterly failed to incorporate these young workers into our economic and political discourse. No mechanism exists to amplify their voices. Yes, they're allocated a share in the national budget, their employment woes are discussed, and they're granted some form of right to unionise. But for these individuals who are battling for a mere living wage, politics, the economy, and fundamental rights are beyond reach.

Their very right to vote has been effectively denied for the past 15 years. Excluded from the regular political process, these young workers have no platform to articulate their financial struggles. Their economic lives are held captive in exploitative structures, with no clear path to improvement outside of committing to long-term, arduous organisational or political processes.

The garment sector is the most powerful in Bangladesh. Millions of 18- to 30-year-old men and women make up the driving force of this industry. Naturally, it held immense potential for these workers to blossom into a collective force, organising and advocating for their rights in the workplace and beyond. Here, they could have risen to become a vital voice in the nation's political arena, championing not just fair wages but also affordable necessities like food, utilities, safe transport, and national healthcare—issues that are central to their lives and livelihoods.

Tragically, the RMG industry systematically suppresses its workers' most basic rights from their first day. Unionisation and effective labour organisations are stifled by a combined effort of factory owners and the government. Denied even a platform to air their minor grievances, these young garment workers remain silenced, let alone being empowered to fight for broader rights.

In Western democracies, labour unions played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape. They fought for workers' rights, improved working conditions, and ultimately contributed to the development of strong, representative governments. Why isn't this the case for Bangladesh?

Factories in Bangladesh are not



Any attempt by workers to organise has been met with swift retribution from the state, law enforcement, and factory owners.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

isolated entities. They exist within a broader political context marked by a culture of suppression and a decline in democratic values. Any attempt by workers to organise has been met with swift retribution from the state, law enforcement, and factory owners. These young RMG workers, despite their vast manual labour force, remain some of the most economically vulnerable and financially unprotected segments of the Bangladeshi population. Instead of harnessing their potential as a progressive force for economic reform and challenging the stark wealth inequality in Bangladesh, they have been reduced to tools for repression.

The Bangladesh labour laws clearly provide for the formation of trade unions, but the administration itself actively hinders this right. The legal requirement for a union is a 30-percent membership within a specific factory, and a list of potential members must be submitted to the labour office. However, upon receiving the list, the labour office promptly relays it to the factory owner. This information allows management to easily target those on the list for dismissal. Once fired, finding work in another factory becomes nearly impossible due to the stigma associated with attempting to unionise. Furthermore, government officials frequently demand substantial bribes when workers file applications for union registration. This pattern suggests a deliberate effort by the government to stifle worker organisation at its inception. This undemocratic practice has taken its root within Bangladesh's administrative culture, and until we put this structure on trial, the plight of these young people will remain unchanged.

In addition to these administrative barriers, being one of the most poverty-

stricken and economically vulnerable classes of people has capped workers' ability to become "vocal." The factory takes up almost all of their daily lives. A worker has to work at least 10 hours to manage the minimum cost of living. And a female worker has to spend even more of her time cooking and doing other household work. How will these workers get the time to hold meetings and rallies for their demands, get

conditions, let alone organise and form unions. In an environment where even formal institutions fail, there is no way for these youth—who are scattered across different sectors of the informal economy—to hold "dialogue" with the administration and demand protection for their livelihood.

Over the past decade, many of the institutions in this country have been destroyed. The structures that ensure

accountability have been weakened.

Every path for young people to participate in politics has been made difficult. The entire economic structure is oppressive. The environment for creating even the minimum political process for workers to demand their basic rights has been destroyed. There's no functional platform for negotiation with the government or the state machinery. Even when elections bring a change of authority, the plight of the working youth remains unaddressed.

There has been a lot of excitement about the 40 million first-time voters. There was hope that the youth of this country would be able to vote properly after 15 years. There seemed to be a positive environment to discuss human rights, the right to vote, and freedom of expression. But just like the possibility of a participatory election, this dream has largely died out. It is difficult to say what kind of politics awaits the youth of Bangladesh in the coming years. However, the most unfortunate thing is that even amid all this election hullabaloo, the majority of the youth in this country—the working class—has always remained neglected.

To include working class youth in political and economic decisions, it is necessary to make it easier for them to organise, make the institutions of democratic practice effective, increase government initiative and investment in creating employment, and create a strong culture of accountability against all forms of institutional repression. It is not possible to bring fundamental change in Bangladesh's politics if this young working-class population remains excluded.

Translated from Bangla by Naimul Alam Abi

Harvesting demographic dividends

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According to the 2022 census, the country's current youth population is 45.9 million, and as per the Labour Force Survey 2022, the number of unemployed graduates doubled in five years. The youth comprising such a huge percentage of the total population can be a great opportunity for Bangladesh if we ensure proper education and a good job market. However, insufficient job opportunities, lack of education and skills, and inadequate healthcare can result in a demographic burden rather than dividends.

It's clear that effective policies, strategies and timely action are needed to address the challenges facing our youth. Our motto should be to achieve full and productive employment for both men and women, including the youth and persons with disabilities, by 2030.

For instance, we can start by enhancing young people's interest in Bangladesh's agricultural industry. Encouraging young entrepreneurs to enter this sector can lead to innovation and advancements. Startups can focus on developing smart farming solutions and agricultural apps, while sustainable practices can contribute to the modernisation of agriculture. Organic farming, water conservation, and eco-friendly methods that are in line with smart agriculture should all be encouraged. There should be research centres and laboratories within universities to facilitate innovative research projects. More public investment in the agriculture sector can ensure the development of market infrastructures, which will ensure fair pricing and reduce post-harvest losses.

Additionally, forging global partnerships is crucial for the sustainable development of Bangladesh's agricultural sector. Agricultural technologies should be transferred from developed to developing countries through global partnership facilitates. International collaboration can also ensure fair trade practices, reducing barriers and ensuring market access for agricultural products from different regions.

It is important to educate the youth about banking services and financial planning. Credit facilities with flexible repayment structures can help young people invest in seeds, fertilisers, equipment, and technology.

The working age population is gradually exceeding the non-working age population. This demographic change can have a significant impact on the economy, as this working age population can be transformed into a productive workforce if we invest effectively in their development. This developed workforce can eventually lead to greater economic growth for Bangladesh.