

The most 'memorable' COMMENTS OF 2023

Throughout 2023, we have had the 'privilege' of hearing a series of controversial comments from our public figures, mainly politicians. From baseless theories about the economy to statements that gave away the nation's political machinery, these remarks have grabbed attention, often for all the wrong reasons. As this year comes to a close, The Daily Star has asked notable figures what their most 'memorable' comments were, and why.



'Everything settled behind the scenes'

Among the two comments—"Bangladesh has ensured abundant political space for the opposition" and "Everything has been settled behind the scenes"—which one do you think is more outrageous? It's tough to decide! The first one was part of Law Minister Anisul Huq's statement at the Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh's human rights records in Geneva on November 13, addressing diplomats from more than 110 countries. The second is from a speech by Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader, given to his party followers on October 12 while taunting his political opponents, the BNP, over the support it was receiving from the United States.



What the law minister told diplomats was quite the opposite of the reality in Bangladesh. By that time, attendants had already read media reports about the crackdown on the opposition, resulting in arrests of more than 10,000 BNP activists, including its top leaders.

Meanwhile, as Obaidul Quader, who has a postgraduate degree in Bangla, spoke in his mother tongue to a domestic audience, his choice of words had elements that are almost impossible to translate while keeping the full essence intact. "Tole tole aposh" may sound a bit rhythmic, but is detestable, especially when



it refers to a competition, may it be a sport or politics or even war. Quader said, "What would Peter Haas [US ambassador in Dhaka] do? Will he declare visa policy, impose sanctions? We had talks with Peter Haas' superiors. Talks have been held with the high-ups in the US. With everything already settled behind the scenes, doing this [waging movement] will not yield any results."

Whether and how far the US has been managed is yet to be known, but one may wonder whether Quader realised that his claim was a clear admission that his party's tactic was immoral. Can he blame us if we conclude that his party's "tole tole" dealing with the US is not an exception, rather a well-practised technique? His party's "tole tole" deals make the January 7 election a farce.

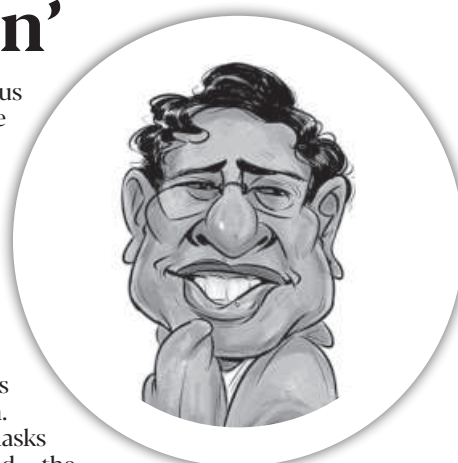
Kamal Ahmed
Independent journalist

Among our public figures, politicians have a tendency to make the most outlandish of statements, sometimes to their own detriment. The moment these remarks slip out, they make us think, 'Why would anyone say that?'

ILLUSTRATIONS:
BIPLOB
CHAKROBORTY

'Leaders will be released if BNP participates in election'

By far, the most outrageous and revealing statement made by a figure of authority was by Dr Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, the agriculture minister. During an interview broadcast recently on Channel 24, the minister said BNP was given the condition that its arrested leaders would be released promptly if it takes part in the upcoming election.



This Freudian slip unmasks the entire agenda behind the mass detention of opposition leaders and workers: either BNP will play ball under AL's rules or stay in prison for the whole election term. Now, there can be no doubt that the rule of law and justice has nothing to do with the mass arrests. It is just a politically motivated power play, which is as crude as it is unjust.

It is not that such manoeuvring was not telegraphed by AL already. We can see that clearly from the bail granted to Barrister Shahjahan Omar, who was in prison for the same charge as all other BNP leaders. He immediately switched allegiance after getting out of jail and was promptly granted a nomination to run with Awami League ticket at the Jhalakathi-1 constituency. This kind of brazen and crude electioneering just exposes the event for the circus that everyone knows it is.

Zillur Rahman
Executive director, Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)

'Corruption can promote development'

Outrageous remarks are often uttered by public figures, especially politicians nowadays. However, I was dumbfounded by a comment of Comilla University Vice-Chancellor Prof AFM Abdul Moyeen, made during a speech on July 31. To give an example of the importance of "critical thinking," he elaborately described how corruption could promote development!

I wish he had given a different example other than the virtue of corruption to prove his point. While speaking to young people, a negative instance should not be generalised and cited as a different mode of thinking. Moreover, a campus journalist was suspended later for quoting this in a newspaper report. Outrageous!

Dr Gitiara Nasreen
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'Critics know nothing about the economy'

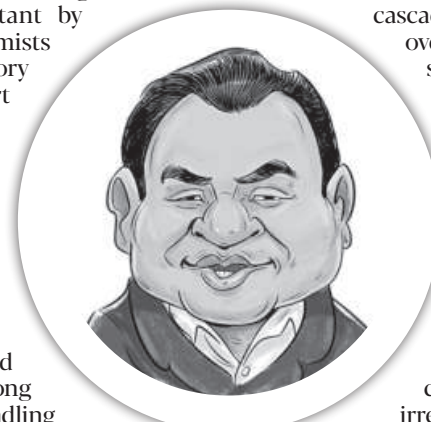
On August 31, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal opined that those saying the country's economy was in bad shape hardly knew anything about economics.

This invariably signifies that those who don't see the economy in a good state are not good economists. Kamal, an accountant by training, dared to evaluate economists and their knowledge in a derogatory way, while most economists assert that the economy, particularly the financial sector, has gone from bad to worse during the minister's very regime.

Defaulted and risky loans have engulfed more than one-fourth of the total advance, despite his efforts to make bad loans look good. Money laundering has peaked. Inflation remained stubbornly high for an unusually long time, contributing to the dwindling purchasing power of the poor and lower-middle class. Fiscal incapacity, measured by the tax-GDP ratio, weakened further during his time when it should have been higher. Both foreign and domestic loans ballooned during his period.

Foreign exchange reserves collapsed by 60 percent in two years, from a record high of \$48 billion in August 2021. The financial account dropped by \$17 billion due to massive withdrawals by foreign investors—never seen in Bangladesh's history. The taka's value cascaded down by more than 30 percent over the last two years. Remittances sagged and imports have been stifled due to a growing forex reserve crisis. Youth unemployment has remained high as before. The summed-up result is reflected in GDP growth, which is supposed to be 5.6 percent as per the World Bank projection.

Hence, the minister's claim of having a good economy is a mockery of the hard reality the country is facing. This type of comment is not only ridiculous and irresponsible, but also damaging for the government's image. This points to the right person not being in the right place.



Dr Birupaksha Paul
Professor, State University of New York, US

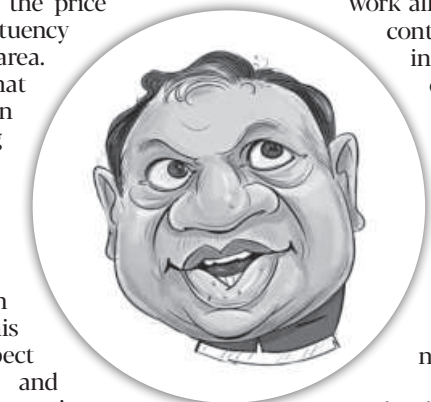
'Women putting on lipstick three times a day'

Just less than two months back, our Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi, when asked about how the price hike of essentials affected his constituency in Rangpur, said it did not affect his area. For this evaluation, the indicator was that women in his constituency are putting on lipstick three times a day and changing sandals four times a day!

Rangpur, as per government statistics, has 47 percent of households living below the poverty line. Even if his constituency had a miraculous change overnight, the statement borders on the absurd. The ridiculousness of his comment shows a total lack of respect for women, for poverty in general, and particularly for poor women who form a major bulk of his voters.

The majority of women in this country do hard, physical work all day. They really have no time to doll up, continuously putting on lipstick, while toiling in the fields, on roads and construction sites, or while facing the drudgery of domestic work. Let alone changing footwear four times a day, most women own just one pair of sandals.

The insensitivity of this statement only shows the mentality of those who are supposed to represent and work for the benefit of the people, particularly the less privileged. It angers me so much that I'm unable to laugh at the ridiculous nature of this statement.



Khushi Kabir
Rights activist and coordinator of Nijera Kori

'I won't let the judge do his job'

On March 14, Saimum Sarwar Komol, member of parliament from Cox's Bazar-3, while addressing an event of secondary school teachers in Ramu, said, "...a bench assistant managed the judge and the case was registered. As long as I am alive, I will not let the teacher land in jail... If the teacher has to go to jail, I will not let him [the judge] eat. I will not let him do his job."

Such a comment from a local MP might first appear like a hollow threat, but if we look at what transpired in Bangladesh's legal system over the last decade or so, we can identify how this comment symbolised the gradual erosion of the system's independence, and how justice for common people became illusive and for a specific group.

The MP's comment shows us how political henchmen have besieged the legal system by creating a reign of terror and tarnishing rule of law. Even if, for the sake of argument, I suppose the case filed against the teacher was false, I fail to understand why the MP was threatening a judge for taking a case into cognisance. Whether or not the judge succumbed to the intimidation is not the issue here; the fact that the lawmaker's arrogance went unpunished is important to note.

Komol devalued the separation of the legal system from politics, and his comment is emblematic of a regular practice by local political leaders. This has long-term negative implications for the human rights scenario and rule of law, which can be attested through the increasing levels of coercion, injustice and oppression burdening the opposition. If an MP can get away with such insults on the judiciary, where would general people seek justice?

Samina Luthfa
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