

## The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

### Business-politics mix coming home to roost

#### Record rise in businessmen MPs raises concerns

Amid speculations about the composition of the new cabinet which will be sworn in on Thursday evening, it is worrying to know that at least 199, or two-thirds, of all members of the soon-to-be formed parliament are going to be businesspersons, mostly from Awami League. This marks a record rise in the number of businesspersons joining a parliament. In the 11th parliament, there were 182 businesspersons. While the increase is not surprising—since Bangladesh's independence, the count of businesspersons in each parliament has risen continuously, barring a few exceptions—its implications are quite grave.

Over the years, we have seen how the interplay of business and politics has affected the course of politics, policymaking and governance in the country. The rise of businessmen-turned-MPs has also changed the fundamental character of our parliament. While, ideally, parliament should be open to public representatives from any background, the dominance of businessmen emerging out of questionable elections represents a threat—a conflict of interest—that can hurt public interests. We have seen how collusive deals were inked, dubious banking policies were preferred over much-needed reforms, and market syndicates were allowed in order to protect business interests of the political elite and maintain the status quo.

That the new parliament would be filled with businessmen was a foregone conclusion when a review by Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) revealed in early January that 58.71 percent of all candidates for the election were businessmen. Analysing their affidavits, Shujan also said that at least 246 of the 265 Awami League-nominated candidates had wealth over Tk 1 crore while 177 of them had at least Tk 5 crore. Overall, AL nominees had an accumulated wealth of Tk 7,561 crore. There is an apprehension that so many businessmen-turned-MPs joining the parliament—with little prior grassroots engagement and having won largely uncontested—may not feel beholden to their constituents, especially those in the lower income brackets.

If the astronomical increases that many of them witnessed in their wealth over the past few years are any indication, the same trend may continue, raising critical concerns about corruption, misgovernance and widening economic disparity in the coming days. We urge the newly elected MPs, regardless of their background and likely role in the government, to make an active effort to prevent this scenario. As the prime minister has rightly highlighted, their greatest responsibility is to the people.

### Who will check health-sector graft?

#### CMCH drug theft issue again shows how bad the situation is

The health sector cannot seem to stay out of negative headlines for long. From procurement of medical equipment to recruitment of doctors and staff in public hospitals to providing treatment to patients—corruption and irregularities have permeated every level of our health sector. The situation has come to a point that even the High Court had to direct the authorities concerned to do their job properly. The most recent example of irregularities, as reported by this daily, is the stealing of life-saving medicines by a nexus of staffers at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH).

Reportedly, these employees have been directly involved in stealing medicines in connivance with outsiders and selling them mostly to pharmacies in remote upazilas and at the Hazari Goli, a wholesale hub of medicines in the port city. The CMCH authorities reportedly took legal action against some of the culprits over the past few years, and tightened security on hospital grounds. Moreover, at least 20 people, including 10 CMCH staffers, were caught red-handed with stolen medicines and sued in police cases. But as it seems, nothing could deter drug theft at the hospital. Which makes it evident that there are bigger players at play, who remain out of sight.

In recent years, we have come across some striking reports and studies revealing large-scale corruption in the health sector. For example, according to a 2023 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh, between 2014-15 and 2018-19 fiscal years, irregularities in budget spending by the Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD) caused the government to lose Tk 459 crore. There were also allegations against the CMSD of supplying medical equipment and machinery without any request by public hospitals and facilities. Moreover, crores of taka were wasted due to purchase anomalies in the early days of the pandemic.

The issue of drug theft at CMCH cannot be seen in isolation from this trend. Such irregularities will continue to happen unless we reform the entire health sector and ensure transparency and accountability at all levels.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Footbridge(s) needed at Kuril

The Kuril intersection in Dhaka—a nexus of the Kuril flyover, Dhaka Elevated Expressway, Purbachal Expressway, a four-lane rail track, and Airport Road—lacks a safe crossing for pedestrians, leading to frequent and often fatal accidents.

The intersection's complexity, with traffic flowing in multiple directions, poses significant risk to pedestrians. The curved rail track at this juncture makes it challenging to see approaching trains. And the recent addition of two more tracks has heightened the danger.

I urgently request the relevant authorities to address this critical issue by promptly constructing footbridge(s) from Airport Road to the rail tracks to Pragati Sarani. Equipped with multiple access points, the footbridges would facilitate safe pedestrian movement, mitigating the risk of accidents.

Mohammad Rashed  
Basundhara R/A, Dhaka

# 'There will be no effective parliamentary opposition'

Advocate Sultana Kamal, a human rights activist and the founder president of Manabadhikar Shongskriti Foundation, speaks with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star about Bangladesh's 12th parliamentary election and its ramifications for the country's political and governance landscapes.

**With BNP boycotting the January 7 election, and some of the parties who participated in it bargaining with Awami League for seats beforehand, how would you describe the latest election?**

I have been giving my comments on the election which was held on January 7 for months. Now that it has already happened, to me, the event of January 7 cannot be called an "election" by any definition, let alone "a participatory election." We all know the arrangements for distribution of seats between the contesting parties were settled amicably beforehand. The election was held in the name of fulfilling a constitutional obligation, which in reality turned out to be a ritual participated by friendly contestants.

**By boycotting the election, didn't BNP give AL a free ride? One could argue that the ruling party created a repressive environment for the opposition prior to the election, but by terming its movement as a movement to "oust the government," what sort of a reaction did BNP expect?**

Yes, BNP did.

As I kept saying since the 2014 election, BNP made a big (fatal for them) mistake by not participating in the election. True, they did take part in the 2018 election. But by then, they had already lost their position as a political party strong enough to influence the national political psyche. Insisting on terming their movement as a movement to "oust the government," without posing a viable alternative to the nation, was nothing but a blunder on their part. BNP must have expected considerable



Sultana Kamal

support from the general people in the context of Awami League's extremely repressive rule, lack of good governance, and democratic deficit. But its failure to provide a convincing picture of a better future did not yield the expected result for BNP.

**Given the election results, who do you expect will be the parliamentary opposition? Will that also be decided by AL? And what effect will all this have on the future of Bangladesh's politics?**

It is obvious that there will be no effective parliamentary opposition for at least the next five years as, without a few exceptions, all in the parliament are Awami League's people. It's an open secret that non-Awami League contestants were not only allowed to participate in the election at the wish of the AL leader, their winning a seat, too, was dependent on the same

factor. An opposition perhaps will be declared officially as a matter of rule. But there is no reason to believe that it will be without AL's knowledge. I am afraid I don't feel very optimistic about Bangladesh's future under the given condition. However, I will definitely be happy if I am proved wrong.

**How would you rate the performance of the Awami League government over the last five years? And do you expect any changes this term?**

The Awami League government over the last five years concentrated on heavy, visible infrastructural development, in which they showed considerable success. It was during this period that Bangladesh qualified

**Though Awami League consistently claimed to have run the country according to the spirit of our Liberation War and the ideals of Bangabandhu, ironically, strengthening of democracy, rule of law, zero tolerance for corruption, and respect for human rights of all, and efforts to create a common humane social culture, seem to have disappeared from their agenda.**

to graduate from being a least-developed country to a developing one. It has also made some progress in attaining a few of the SDG goals in the fields of women's empowerment,

enrolment of female students, extending community health services, etc. Bangladesh's GDP grew impressively. The number of ultra-rich in society increased at unprecedented speed. But at the same time, according to eminent economists, the country's economy plunged into uncertainties. This, compounded with a repressive, exploitative, and unethical political atmosphere, created insecurity for people in social, public, and personal spheres. Though Awami League consistently claimed to have run the country according to the spirit of our Liberation War and the ideals of Bangabandhu, ironically, strengthening of democracy, rule of law, zero tolerance for corruption, and respect for human rights of all, and efforts to create a common humane social culture, seem to have disappeared from their agenda.

As said by many, over the past few years, Bangladesh has been divided into two different "societies." One for the rich and the advantaged, the other for the disenfranchised and disadvantaged. This directly contradicts with our constitutional directives as well as what we stated in our Declaration of Independence. In short, Awami League rulers have failed to rise up to their own declared ideals.

However, during the election campaign, Awami League's leader Sheikh Hasina urged the people of Bangladesh to look at their mistakes leniently. I hope the Awami League government this time will take care not to repeat their past mistakes, which go against the spirit of our Liberation War and create an atmosphere of crisis for democracy and good governance.

## Russia and the economic consequences of war

M Kabir Hassan  
is a professor of finance at the University of New Orleans, US

Jose Antonio Perez Amuedo  
is a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans, US

M KABIR HASSAN and JOSE ANTONIO PEREZ AMUEDO

It has been almost two years since Putin decided to invade Ukraine. Since then, the consequences have been limitless; from thousands of deaths on both sides of the war to high inflation rates worldwide. Thus, after 22 months of invasion, let's evaluate the popular opinion about the conflict and whether it was worth it or not for Russia to invade Ukraine.

Unlike previous years, when Vladimir Putin appeared by himself for the end-of-year speech, in 2022, the Russian president showed up surrounded by military personnel. Throughout 2023, we saw how a war-like atmosphere was present in most of the crucial decisions made in the country.

If we examine domestic politics, studies show that most of the Russian population approves of the war, as it is not perceived as Russia's conflict against Ukraine but rather against the West. According to a poll by Russia's Levada Center, 75 percent of the Russian people support the war while 22 percent believe Russia should not cease the attacks. This clearly indicates that ordinary Russian citizens and their leaders have internalised the war.

The reality is that both countries are experiencing war differently. While Ukraine, partially occupied, has been enduring missiles and air attacks, Russia has encountered nothing more than some Ukrainian settlements along its borders. Even when Ukrainians attacked government buildings in Moscow, Russian citizens continued their lives as usual. Moreover, every month, fewer people are actively opposing the war since those who did so before were subjected to detentions, unfair trials, and incarcerations.

In terms of economic policy, it seems the government is significantly detached from the war. For 2024,



PHOTO: AFP

An advertising screen honouring a Russian serviceman in central Moscow.

Russia will allocate six percent of total GDP for military operations, the highest since its breakup in 1991, with almost 40 percent earmarked for the Ukraine war. Furthermore, the remaining components of the Kremlin's economic policy are tailored to meet the demands of the war and address the consequences of Western sanctions. The upside for Russian citizens is that this military boom has driven the unemployment rate to a record low of around three percent. Additionally, families whose members go to Ukraine to fight are generously compensated by the government, regardless of whether they return alive or dead. Therefore, the war has created an opportunity to earn substantial income that would be nearly impossible to attain otherwise in Russia, especially in the poorer regions.

Despite all the sanctions, Russia's

economy is predicted to grow by almost three percent, partly driven by government expenditure and substituting Western brands with Russian and Chinese ones. Profits generated from oil sales have also been a major contributor to this economic proliferation.

growth forecast to around five percent.

International relationships are also worth discussing, since war has monopolised them. Today, every single relationship with every country is evaluated based on whether that country can directly contribute to Russia's war interests. It is not surprising that, in 2023, China became the most important foreign partner for Russia, as it fulfils the latter's three main requirements: it can support Russia with military material, sustain the Russian economy, and assist in preventing the enormous growth of US influence.

Barring any surprises, Putin will be re-elected in March 2024 and will continue to rule Russia for six more years. It appears he is unwilling to halt what he initiated in 2022. His intention seems to persist, with operations in Ukraine and confrontation with the West. Russia's economy remains strong despite the sanctions it is facing, and Putin takes pride in resisting the tens of billions of dollars that the US has provided to support Ukraine. In his own words, "denazification, demilitarisation of Ukraine, and its neutral status" are his goals; and peace will not be achieved until those objectives are met.

Even though Putin feels secure in his position and Russia appears to remain strong as a nation, what is undeniable are the devastating human consequences of the conflict. US intelligence has expressed that the war has weakened Russia's army, with 315,000 Russian personnel killed or injured since February 2022, constituting about 87 percent of Moscow's pre-war force of 360,000. Leaders should take this into account and focus not only on the economic situation and ideological beliefs but also on the families that are being affected by deaths every day. We have learned from previous conflicts that the consequences and collateral damage after a war are never easy to overcome, and people always suffer the most. Additionally, we have seen how wars can trigger a domino effect when countries perceive no consequences for their actions.