

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Failed promises and futile policies

### Commodity prices continue rising as govt measures remain ineffective

It is frustrating that in spite of making numerous promises and the prime minister herself giving directives to bring down commodity prices, the government has failed miserably to give any semblance of relief to people. With prices of most essentials already through the roof, vegetable prices have once again risen over the last one week, which is especially disappointing as, historically, vegetables tend to be cheaper during winter.

Despite being the peak season, papaya is priced at Tk 30-50 per kg in Dhaka's kitchen markets. Yet, farmers who grow the produce are getting barely half of that. The same applies for other vegetables such as carrots, coriander and radish. Where is the rest of the profit ending up, then? Vegetable sellers allege that they are not making much after paying a high price for the produce to wholesalers. Meanwhile, wholesalers claim that they are not making much either after paying for transportation and other extortion fees to transport the goods to the market. The picture that we get from all this is that during their transit from the farms to the kitchen markets, the prices of almost all vegetables are doubling or tripling. This shows that a poor supply chain system is mainly to blame for the price hike—along with other factors such as extortion fees, lack of proper storage facilities, communication system, etc.

Parallel to this, prices of onions and eggs have also risen. Within a one-week span, local and imported onion prices have gone up by 23 and 26 percent, respectively. Ever since the Indian government stopped onion exports, its price in Bangladesh has been on the erratic side. It's unacceptable that despite importers getting the green light to import onions from other countries, its price has remained this elevated. The price of eggs has also risen with an increase in the Indian market, and importers have been urging the government to lower import duties so that the prices can be brought down.

However, as we have seen previously, in the absence of proper market monitoring by the government, even with lower import duties, businesses often take advantage of information asymmetry or any loopholes they can find to keep prices high and make killer profits. Therefore, the government must take a holistic approach to bring the prices of essentials under control. That includes improving the supply chain, getting rid of leakages—in the form of extortions, hoarding, and other corrupt practices—importing items before shortages occur, and making sure that import duties for essentials are brought down under the condition that domestic prices will follow suit. People have had enough of empty promises.

## Illegal brick kilns choking Bangladesh

### Surface-level steps will not resolve this crisis

If not for the devastating consequences, it's almost comical that the government, despite prohibiting the operation of illegal brick kilns, is failing to shut down these towering structures spread across the country. According to the Department of Environment (DoE), out of 7,086 kilns, 4,505 don't have environmental clearance, illustrating the authorities' sheer negligence. For years, we have been hearing about government measures to tackle pollution, but these steps have virtually become hearsay as we have seen no improvement in air quality. So, how many more years must we wait for actual change?

Despite DoE's efforts, brick kilns are mushrooming: in the last four years, almost 1,500 illegal kilns have been established. This implies that such efforts aren't bearing fruit. It has been repeatedly observed that when the department shuts a kiln down, the establishment resumes churning out bricks just days later. In numbers, out of nearly 1,000 shut kilns, 75 percent have resumed operation. And yet, our authorities have not changed their course of action.

As per our laws, no brick kiln can be established on slums, hills, forests, wetlands, and farmlands. But most of these structures are violating the rules. This inaction is allowing the kilns to envelop Bangladesh in smoke, taking air pollution to new heights. According to the World Bank, one of the major sources of air pollution in greater Dhaka is brick kilns. Let's not forget the dire impacts: air pollution is taking 6.8 years of life expectancy from citizens, while more than 175,000 Bangladeshis succumbed to it in 2019. Besides, kilns are permanently damaging the country's soil, putting our farmers in a crisis.

So, what can we do to divert from this path of environmental devastation? As we have seen, surface-level measures will not work. It is widely known that illegal kilns operate under the patronage of local politicians and influentials. Therefore, it's imperative for the authorities to tackle offenders behind the scenes. Besides, authorities must ensure alternatives for the long term, such as environment-friendly concrete blocks, which currently just meet five percent of construction needs. For our country to be free from pollution, the plague of illegal brick kilns must be eliminated.

## CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX 2023

# With the lowest score in 12 years, what's next for Bangladesh?



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IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023, released by the Transparency International on January 30, 2024, shows further worsening of Bangladesh's performance. The country has scored 24 on a scale of 100, the 10th lowest global score. This is also Bangladesh's lowest score in 12 years since 2012, when the 0-100 scale of the index replaced the earlier 0-10 scale. The score is one point less than that of 2022, when it was the 12th lowest, and two points less than the trend value for 2012-2023. In terms of ranking, Bangladesh is ranked at 149th compared to 147th from top, and 10th compared to 12th from bottom. Lagging way behind the global average score of 43, Bangladesh is grouped among countries where corruption is considered to be a "very serious problem."

Analysis of CPI 2023 data shows that although a "hybrid regime," as per the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, Bangladesh's score is not only 12 points lower than the average of 36 for this category, but also five points less than 29 for the class of authoritarian regimes. Our performance is also seven points worse than countries having "no electoral democracy," according to Freedom House research. As per regional analysis, Bangladesh's 2023 score is 21 points less than the Asia-Pacific region (45) and nine points lower than the average for the globally lowest performing Sub-Saharan Africa (33).

Bangladesh remains the second lowest in South Asia, above only Afghanistan. Bhutan continues to be the best performer in the region, scoring 68. In the rest of the region, scores remained well below the global average: India and the Maldives scored 39, Nepal 35, Sri Lanka 34, Pakistan 29, and Afghanistan 20. Trend analysis for 2012-2023 shows that Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are the only two countries in the region that have failed to improve, and lost two and six points, respectively. Afghanistan and Nepal have gained the highest during the period—16 and 8 points, respectively. Bhutan has gained five, India three, Maldives four (2019-2022), and Pakistan two. Bangladesh has the fourth lowest score among 31 Asia-Pacific countries, better than only Cambodia (22), Afghanistan and Myanmar (20), and North Korea (17).

As always, no country has scored 100 percent. Denmark, with a score of 90, has topped the list, followed by Finland (87), New Zealand (85), Norway (84), Singapore (83), Sweden and Switzerland (82), Netherlands (79), Germany and Luxembourg (78), Ireland (77), Canada and Estonia (76), Australia and Hong Kong (75), and Belgium, Japan and Uruguay (73). Other countries that have scored higher than 70 percent are Iceland (72), and Austria, France, Seychelles, and the United Kingdom (71). Among international heavyweights



ILLUSTRATION: ISRAT JAHAN/TIB

that have performed incommensurate with their global influence are the United States (69), China (42) and Russia (26).

Most countries have made little to no progress in 12 years since 2012. As many as 122 countries (67.77 percent) have scored below 50, which indicates "serious corruption problem." Meanwhile, 105 countries (58.33 percent) scored below the global average of 43, which means over 80 percent of the world's population live with a "very serious corruption problem." Compared to 2022, the score of 63 countries have declined, 62 retained the same score and 55 countries improved.

Countries that have scored lower compared to 2022 include some of the top scorers like New Zealand, Iceland and UK (-2), and Sweden, Netherlands, Germany and France (-1). Based on a 12-year trend analysis (2012-2023), 88 declined, 81 improved and 5 remained unchanged. Losers among prominent high-scorers are Australia (-10), Canada (-8), Iceland (-10), Sweden (-6), Netherlands (-5), New Zealand (-5), Singapore (-5), Switzerland (-4), US (-4) and UK (-3).

Somalia, with a score of 11, continues to be at the very bottom of the global list, followed by South Sudan, Syria and Venezuela (13). Other low scorers below Bangladesh include Yemen (16), Equatorial Guinea, Haiti, North Korea and Nicaragua (17), Libya and Turkmenistan (18), Myanmar, Sudan and Tajikistan (20), Eritrea (21), Cambodia (22) and Azerbaijan (23). Same scorers as Bangladesh are Central

better in corruption control.

With declining democracy worldwide, justice systems are getting weakened, causing deepened and widened corruption through reduced accountability. As justice is undermined, the corrupt get impunity. When bribery and politico-governmental influence infiltrate the justice sector, judicial processes are manipulated and the perpetrators are protected, while the victims suffer more. All these benefit the privileged sections of wrongdoers at the expense of public interest.

Exploring why Bangladesh has performed so miserably, it may be noted that the data period for CPI 2023 (November 2020-September 2023) witnessed no strategic initiatives to walk the talk to transform the pledge of zero tolerance against corruption into practice. Widespread public sector corruption intensified, especially in public contracting and project implementation. No effective action has been taken against money laundering, in which Bangladesh has become a global leader, while calls for accountability were met by lack or freeze of action.

State institutions mandated to control corruption, including the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), have been under political and bureaucratic influence. Bribery and misappropriation of public funds continued unabated. Nepotism and partisan influence in public sector appointments and business including contracting have been normalised, and there is also backlash for initiatives

against corruption. Protection and even rewarding of the allegedly corrupt have inspired further violation of laws. Overall, political and government positions or connections are treated as a licence for abuse of power.

Policy capture using lobby power, especially in the banking sector which is ravaged by loan default and related swindling, financial fraud and illicit

financial transfers, have flourished. Governance has become dependent on surveillance for targeted control and intimidation of media and civil society, driven by intolerance of criticism, disclosure and reporting on corruption.

If Bangladesh is to succeed in corruption control, impunity must be challenged, and the powerful in particular must be brought to justice—irrespective of status or identity. As naive as it may sound in a monopolistically controlled political and governance context, the government must demonstrate that it is truthful to the 2024 election manifesto of the ruling party. The question is whether there will be the courage to deliver some of the specific pledges of the manifesto, like confiscation of illegally earned income and wealth and accountability for trade-based and other forms of money laundering, for which cleansing one's own house is indispensable.

The biggest challenge is to depoliticise key institutions and processes to ensure professional integrity and effectiveness, especially the ACC, bureaucracy, law enforcement and the judicial services. The juggernaut of policy capture, conflict of interest and partisan political control will remain the main predicament especially in sectors like public procurement, banking, trade, power, health, education, land and infrastructure. No change is possible without the freedom of media, civil society and people at large for dissension, disclosure, reporting and commenting on corruption.

## Respecting boundaries and holding men responsible



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

A lot of Bangladeshis seem to have cats these days, so I hope my readers will follow this analogy. One of my cats was meowing loudly the other day, so I stooped down to pick him up. But he did not want to be held at that moment, and after eluding my grip, he nipped me in the ankle.

I have to hand it to cats: if they don't want to be touched, they let you know, and you ignore their message at your peril.

I do sometimes wish that we could use cats as trainers for men in terms of learning to respect boundaries. The same activity may be acceptable at one time but not another. It may be initially acceptable and then no longer so. It may never be acceptable. And here's a simple shortcut: no means no. Not just a loud, booming no. Women

are taught to be soft-spoken, and when intimidated it can be difficult to speak at all. Even some men, when faced with unwanted sexual advances, find themselves freezing up. It's a normal human response. That is why the new standard for consent isn't simply the absence of a no, but the presence of a clear yes. If the woman has not clearly agreed to the activity, then the activity is a violation. Period.

Oh, and intoxication is no excuse. Even if the woman is not in her senses, she cannot give consent, any more than a minor could. If the man is not sober, he is still responsible, as the aggressor, for his behaviour. If you don't like the rules, don't play the game.

Just to be clear, there are different types of sexual harassment and violence, from unwanted words to

forced physical contact. None of them are okay. They are harmful for women, leading to emotional and health problems, and can have lasting negative consequences. This is why HealthBridge currently has a project in Dhaka which, among other things, seeks to assist survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to find appropriate support.

Much as we might like to believe otherwise, sexual violence is a societal rather than an individual problem. We as a society send messages that reinforce behaviours that lead to sexual violence—things like blaming women for the way they dress or where they go, rather than blaming men for their behaviour. The very term "violence against women" distracts from the people committing that violence.

I wish none of this had to be said. I wish we lived in a society—or rather, given how widespread sexual assault is, a world—where people simply respected each other and did not engage in acts of violence against each other. I wish we lived in a world where the perpetrator, not the survivor, was blamed for their actions.

In a book about rape in the United

States, titled *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, a rape survivor says that her friend asked her (I'm paraphrasing), "What would the guy have had to do for you to feel that you could treat him like he treated you?" Indeed.

Just as a moment of carelessness while crossing the street shouldn't lead to death, so too the consequence for behaving, what some may consider, "inappropriately" must not be rape or other form of sexual assault. Regardless of how a woman dresses, or if you find it appropriate or not, it is certainly possible to refrain from making nasty remarks or, worse, grabbing or assaulting a woman. Anyone who tells you otherwise is simply insulting men.

Given how uncooperative cats are, it's unlikely that we can enlist them in this campaign. But every time we reach down to pet a cat who isn't interested, let's retain the clear reminder that respecting boundaries is important. And while we are at it, let's work together to change the way we talk about sexual assault—and for heaven's sake, stop blaming women for the actions of men.

New Message

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