

## April in rural areas may get crueller

### Govt must take steps to reduce load-shedding

Despite assurances that there would be uninterrupted electricity supply during Ramadan, the government's summer plan seems to have fallen flat on its face. Recent news reports have shown that rural areas—including in Mymensingh, Cumilla, Rangpur, Bogura, Khulna, Sylhet, and Rajshahi—are experiencing six to eight hours of load-shedding a day. With April giving us an early taste of how hot the weather will be during the next few months, the prospect of prolonged power outages amid sweltering heat is daunting. The high demand for power during summer months is predictable, so it should have been reflected in the government's preparations.

What is more frustrating is that while load-shedding continues, the overall cost of power has inexplicably gone up, thanks to our under-utilised power generation capacity resulting in huge "capacity charges." The government has announced further increases in power prices. To the people in rural areas, who are being disproportionately affected by power outages, such increases are punitive and illogical.

Fuel shortage is a major reason why power stations sit idle despite the increase in demand for electricity. With an acute gas shortage, half of the gas-powered plants sit idle. The US dollar crisis, moreover, has led to the government not being able to import the required amount of fuel to get the power stations operating. According to a report by this paper, the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) generated about 12,700 MW of electricity on Thursday afternoon while the demand was 14,300 MW. This means that there was a 1,600MW deficit, which led to hours of load-shedding.

BPDB officials say that they are prioritising Dhaka and other divisional cities in case of electricity supply. This discriminatory approach is unacceptable. With temperatures reaching 35 to 38 degrees Celsius in many districts, the risk of heat-related illnesses is considerably higher there. Long bouts of outages severely hamper industry and agriculture as well. Already, Boro crops are being affected.

A lack of foresight in policymaking is to be blamed for the people's suffering this summer. The government's reluctance to phase out fuel-based power plants over the years has resulted in this bizarre situation where it is paying a huge amount in capacity charges but cannot provide the required electricity. The government must take decisive steps to bring load-shedding in rural areas down to a tolerable level. We hope the Eid holidays, when most people head for the villages, will not be hampered by such nuisance.

## Why is RHD forgoing road safety audits?

### A proactive, comprehensive approach to road safety is crucial

At a time when we should be leaving no stone unturned to improve Bangladesh's awful records of road crashes and fatalities, it is disturbing to know that the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) is bypassing a crucial safeguard against accidents. As per a report by this daily, the department has 12 ongoing projects to convert two-lane highways into four-lane ones. But most are being implemented without any safety audits, which would have helped identify potential design flaws and hazards as well as determine the required safety measures. Reportedly, safety audits were done at the design stage of only three of the projects.

The importance of such assessments in road construction and expansion projects cannot be overstated. Neglecting these can and does lead to deadlier roads, according to experts, with design flaws recognised as a major contributing factor in road accidents. Although the RHD chief engineer claims that they put more emphasis on post-construction audits, the truth is, even those are seldom done. The RHD has an extensive 22,476 km road network across the country, and so far it has conducted audits on only 1,055 km, meaning that over 95 percent of its roads have never been audited. This is unacceptable. While officials sometimes cite lack of funds and manpower for delayed assessments, we find the justification wholly unconvincing given the massive investment put into road infrastructure projects.

We need to keep in mind that the Road Transport Act 2018 recognises faults in road design, construction or maintenance as "offences"—and these offences, as well as a reckless disregard for road safety regulations prevalent across the transport sector, are costing lives on a daily basis. According to an official estimate, at least 5,024 people were killed in 5,425 crashes last year. Although the actual number is likely much higher, it shows the urgent need for comprehensive assessments and safety measures. Safety audits, therefore, must be integrated as a mandatory and ongoing aspect of all road projects from conception to post-construction phases. Equally crucial is the inclusion of independent auditors to ensure the quality of assessment.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

## VAT on Metro services?

There are ongoing discussions regarding the National Board of Revenue (NBR) potentially imposing a 15 percent VAT on metro services starting from July 1. However, our road transport minister, Obaidul Quader, recently clarified that the government has not yet made a final decision. The matter will be thoroughly discussed with the prime minister. As a regular metro user, I am deeply concerned. The cost of living is already skyrocketing, and the metro service fares in Bangladesh are generally higher than those in neighbouring countries. If the metro fare is further increased, it will undoubtedly burden the masses. I earnestly urge the government to prioritise affordability when making such crucial decisions.

Tazrin Tamanna  
Shewrapara, Dhaka

## 51 YEARS OF JATIYA SANGSAD

# The parliament of 1973 set an example we need to follow



Dr. Jalal Firoz is a researcher and executive director at Center for Parliamentary Studies.

JALAL FIROZ

Bangladesh's parliamentary governance system owes a foundational debt to the very first parliament established in 1973. The inaugural session began on April 7 of that year and marked a significant historical moment. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's extraordinary speech that day set the tone for the parliament's future. His vision was clear: to create a model parliament worthy of emulation. This ambition extended beyond mere words. He introduced practices and championed ideas that remain highly relevant today.

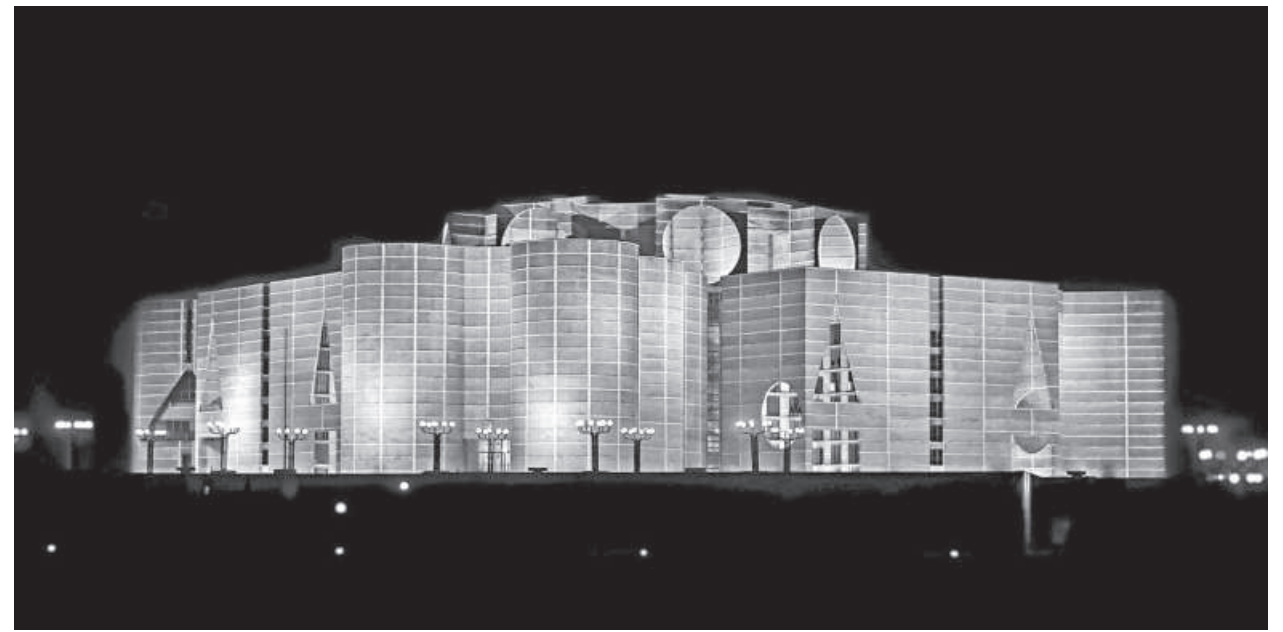
Bangladesh as a land boasts a rich parliamentary heritage that stretches back over a century and a half. The tradition began in 1862, laying the groundwork for parliamentary democracy in the region. This long and dynamic process, encompassing the British Raj, the Pakistani period, and the early years of independent Bangladesh, has significantly shaped the country's current parliamentary system.

The 1973 parliament emerged from an election in which, while the Awami League dominated the vote, the process itself was participatory and competitive. The newly formed Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and established forces like the National Awami Party (Bhashani), NAP (Muzaffar), Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), and others actively contested the polls. The Awami League secured 293 out of 300 seats, with the remaining seats being divided amongst other parties and independents.

The presence of an opposition voice was evident from the outset. Ataur Rahman Khan, a senior figure, served as a vocal opposition member. This mirrored the 1972 Constitutional Assembly (Gana Parishad) where Suranjit Sengupta stood as the lone opposition member, alongside two independents. Despite their limited numbers, Sengupta and Khan actively engaged in debates in the Gana Parishad and the first parliament respectively.

This highlights a key truth—the effectiveness of an opposition doesn't solely depend on numbers; the dedication and commitment of individual members also play a vital role.

While the opposition grew in number in subsequent parliaments, it's worth noting the seemingly greater impact of individual voices in the early years. Suranjit Sengupta's lone voice in the Gana Parishad and Ataur Rahman Khan's with other opposition party members and independent members in the 1973 parliament arguably had a more significant influence than some larger oppositions in later parliaments.



A well-functioning parliament would undoubtedly be a stronger and more successful institution. The first parliament set an example of that tradition.

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Bangabandhu played a pivotal role in shaping this early parliamentary culture. He recognised the importance of strong opposition, even with his party holding the majority. As both Prime Minister and Leader of the House, he actively encouraged opposition participation to solidify the parliament as a true institution.

Bangabandhu was adamant about creating a framework that fostered institutional development within the parliament. He prioritised logical reasoning, philosophical underpinnings, and discussions focused on long-term state-building.

This emphasis on participation and open debate was evident from the very beginning. Parliamentary committees were formed during the inaugural session, and voices from across the political spectrum were heard. Ataur Rahman Khan, representing the opposition, and independent member Manabendra Narayan Larma both delivered significant speeches. These early sessions were demonstrably lively and diverse.

It's important to contrast this with the current perception of limited freedom for independent members. That initial parliament was a space for genuine expression of opinions. Even members of the ruling party openly criticised the government and its ministers.

On June 21, 1974, a debate arose concerning the Health Minister's proposal to relocate PG Hospital from Dhaka to Tangail. The government argued that PG Hospital was originally a temporary arrangement in a hotel

facility, and they desired to transfer it to Kumudini Hospital in Tangail. Independent member Abdullah Sarkar, who later joined JSD, strongly opposed the idea. He argued that the relocation would harm both PG Hospital and Kumudini Hospital. Notably, ruling party member Nur Alam Siddiqui sided with Sarkar, and many other members of the ruling

Further solidifying its international standing, the parliament hosted distinguished guests. On January 29, 1974, the President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broze Tito, delivered a 12-minute address to the parliament. VV Giri, the President of India, spoke on June 18, 1974, giving a 17-minute speech. This tradition of hosting foreign dignitaries within the parliament began under

party even expressed support through table-banging.

The expectation then was that the government's decision would reflect the views expressed in parliament. This stands in stark contrast to the current situation, where the ruling party often appears to simply endorse the government's pronouncements.

In a healthy parliamentary system, a vibrant exchange of ideas takes centre stage. Backbenchers from all parties—opposition, independents, and even the ruling party—actively engage in debate with the government's frontbench, made up of ministers and senior leadership. This robust back-and-forth is a cornerstone of a functioning democracy. It transcends party affiliation; all members share the crucial responsibility of scrutinising the government's performance. The first parliament of Bangladesh exemplified this principle, demonstrating its success through a lively and effective legislative process.

Beyond individual voices, parliamentary parties also played a significant role in shaping this early parliament. In his inaugural address, Bangabandhu emphasised the importance of pre-parliamentary discussions with MPs from his party. He envisioned a "disciplined" parliament, similar to the British system with its "whipping" practices. The Awami League Parliamentary Party (ALPP) held regular meetings before sessions to discuss issues and allow for internal debate. This practice, unfortunately, seems to have faded in recent times.

Bangabandhu's leadership. In short, the first Bangladesh parliament marked an ideal beginning. It prioritised open debate, valued individual voices, and fostered a strong sense of institutional purpose.

The later parliaments, however, have deviated from this esteemed past. They have become overly focused on party loyalty and government agendas. It's crucial to remember that the primary function of the members of the parliaments is not development, which is the government's responsibility, but rather the creation of sound legislation and ensuring the government's proper execution of those laws.

A common misconception, both in Bangladesh and elsewhere, is that an MP primarily serves their constituency. However, as Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Anglo-Irish statesman and philosopher, famously stated: "Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests... but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest."

But today, many MPs prioritise re-election campaigns over legislative duties and holding the government accountable. A well-functioning parliament, dedicated to national interests and upholding legislative and governmental accountability, would undoubtedly be a stronger and more successful institution. The first parliament set an example of that tradition; we need to study and follow it properly to carry the torch forward.

As told to Naimul Alam Alvi of *The Daily Star*.

## Academic freedom is non-negotiable



Sakhawat Sajjat Sejan is lecturer in the Department of Law at Feni University.

SAKHWAT SAJJAT SEJAN

Academic freedom is a special concern of freedom of speech and falls within the periphery of Article 39 of Bangladesh's constitution. Generally, academic freedom is perceived as freedom of universities in terms of research, class lectures, and other professorial activities. As universities are considered the marketplace of ideas, radical or new thoughts are bound to emerge from there. The solemn duty of universities is to shape and refine these ideas.

We may classify academic freedom into two categories: 1) the teacher's freedom to conduct classes or research and 2) students' freedom to carry out innovative activities within the domain of their knowledge. From the perspective of teachers, there are three kinds of speeches, namely core academic speech, intramural speech, and extramural speech. Core academic speeches focus on discussions

regarding the syllabus, which we perceive as freedom of teaching. Secondly, intramural speeches are concerned with opinions relating to public issues. Lastly, extramural speeches concern political issues, wherein teachers convey opinions regarding political issues from a critical point of view. Core academic and intramural speeches come under the protection window of freedom of speech. Whether extramural speeches fall under the same purview remains a matter of discussion.

But in the current Bangladeshi scenario, even core academic and intramural speeches are not well protected by the constitutional regime. According to Unesco, there are four academic freedoms for teachers: freedom to teach and discuss, freedom of research and publishing the results thereof, freedom to freely express their opinion about the institution or system

in which they work, and freedom from institutional censorship. Allegedly, obstructions exist to three of these four freedoms in Bangladesh. Political influence on the appointment of vice chancellors, faculty members, or any other administrative officers has intensified these obstructions. Apart from this, teachers with differing ideologies or beliefs face backlash during classes. Is it possible to build a thoughtful nation and practice liberal democracy without unfettered academic freedom in the classroom?

Meanwhile, the Cyber Security Act, 2023, remains a hindrance to freedom of speech in Bangladesh. While media freedom was compromised by the CSA's previous form, the Digital Security Act, few talk about how the law also impinges on academic freedom in Bangladesh. Recently, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) took it a step further by ordering its faculty members to follow the Social Media Usage Guidelines in Government Offices, 2019 when airing any opinions on social media. These guidelines were supposedly adopted to regulate and monitor the social media activities of government officials. But KUET, being an independent body from the ambit of the government's direct control, could have protected the freedom of speech (intramural and extramural speeches)

of its faculty members. While the state does have managerial authority to look after the different activities of various stakeholders, it should never meddle with academic freedom in universities.

In the *Wiemann vs Updegraff* case of 1952, Justice Felix Frankfurter wisely defined professors as the "priests of our democracy." As such, teachers' academic freedom should remain unfettered, uncensored, and not interfered with by the state's managerial control. Only functional necessity can incur censorship or interference, but even that must coincide with the practices and principles of freedom of speech. Unfortunately in Bangladesh, the scenario is not so.

To ensure the independence of academia, Bangladesh needs to give special attention to the freedom of universities through the lens of Article 39 of the constitution. Otherwise, universities, teachers, and students may hesitate to ask controversial questions, crunch controversies, make inquiries, and search for uncomfortable truths. To encourage universities' role of nation-building and social reformation, the state should encourage core academic speeches among teachers. Through this, Bangladesh can free its academia of political, religious, ideological, and/or social influence.