

Some much-needed policy changes

Economic reforms should not end here though

Even if late, the three major decisions taken by the Bangladesh Bank could prove vital in steering the economy out of its current state. First, the central bank devalued the local currency against the dollar by Tk 7 to Tk 117—the highest slide in a day. Second, it loosened its grip on the taka and will now allow it to follow the crawling peg system—which, by definition, means the exchange rate will be more flexible. And third, it made the lending rates fully market-based, abandoning a treasury bill-linked formula for banks, which marks a major shift from the command-and-control system imposed on banks for four years.

Economists have been calling for all three of these measures for some time now. So, we welcome the central bank's decision to implement them at last. But the time lag effect could further delay their effects on the economy. Additionally, given that the exchange rate of the taka against the dollar in the spot market has been actually much higher than the previously set official exchange rate, how much the economy will benefit from taka officially being devaluated remains to be seen. However, it is likely that exporters will benefit from it, as their products will become more competitive on the international market. On the flipside, this will make imports more expensive, likely resulting in a decrease in the import of capital machineries and economic growth. Given that GDP growth in the second quarter of this year has already been the lowest in at least three quarters, its impact on the economy could be devastating. Therefore, the government should try to cushion that in other ways.

Scraping the SMART interest rate, and opting for a market-driven one instead, could result in interest rates to rise. As borrowing becomes costlier, demand for loans could dip and, consequently, inflation could come down. This, however, will negatively affect borrowers. And for the sake of good borrowers and the overall banking sector, the government has to go a step forward and initiate some much-needed banking reforms to clean up issues that have plagued the sector for years. On the other hand, an increase in the interest rate could finally provide depositors with some good news, as interest on deposits should go up.

The steps taken by Bangladesh Bank were necessary, but they could lead to some short-term pains. But those, too, could be minimised by ensuring greater efficiency and improvements in certain areas—which should be the government's focus now. Moreover, this should not be the end of economic reforms, but the beginning of it. The IMF, for example, has mentioned the need for certain banking sector reforms which the government should also heed. Aside from that, it should concentrate on increasing its revenue collection by ensuring that tax avoidance, particularly by the rich and powerful, is finally addressed.

Predictable poll, predictable outcome

Little surprise in the first phase of upazila elections

The first phase of the upazila parishad election has played out as it was predicted: with few voters and fewer upsets. In scenes reminiscent of the national election held on January 7, most of the voting centres across 139 upazilas wore a deserted look on Wednesday, while polling officials and law enforcers were seen passing idle time. Apparently, only 36 percent of voters have cast their vote—the lowest upazila turnout since the start of Awami League's reign in 2009. More predictably still, most of the winners, as per early estimates, were Awami League-affiliated candidates; almost all the relatives of ruling party MPs who contested the poll disregarding party high command's directives have won as well.

A comparison between the national election and this one in one-third of the upazilas, coming in just four months' time, is unavoidable. Whether it is poor voter turnout, or the absence of credible options, or the predictable outcomes, all appear to support the agenda of a "peaceful" extension of power while putting off disaffected masses. The transition from disenchantment to disenfranchisement is a subtle one, but that voters without credible options are hardly more than glorified dummies were not lost on most voters. To be clear, Awami League did want to avoid the stigma of overseeing another one-sided election amid opposition boycotts; it did not give party symbols to any of its candidates so that the election becomes competitive. However, its leaders in each upazila are still competing as independents, mostly against each other.

The question is, how does an election rejected by most voters qualify as a democratic exercise? Is the relative absence of violence enough to justify it? Will those elected through this process feel beholden to the people? For the upazila parishad polls, which once drew enthusiastic voters, to lose steam like this is nothing but a tragedy. We may recall that the voter turnout in the 2009 upazila polls was 70.57 percent. In 2014, it was 61.23 percent. In 2019, it fell to just 40 percent. A further slide was expected this time, especially given the perception about the futility of electoral exercises for both ordinary voters and opposition candidates.

We cannot but be worried about this state of affairs. The local elections, including city corporation polls, are where voters get to choose leaders that they can approach the most, people who live closest to them and know their realities better than anyone. The degeneration of this process is painful to see. One can only hope that the election authorities will do more to create an environment in which voters again feel empowered to participate.

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Why the hush-hush about MPs' perks and privileges?



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What makes an MP's job so attractive? Despite being a supposedly noble role in the service of the nation and constituents, it should not be judged solely on the basis of the rewards, financial or otherwise. However, the esteemed position they hold suddenly appears to be at risk of being discredited, at least according to Mujibur Haque Chunnun, the opposition chief whip, following the purported revelation of MPs' emoluments and allocations for individual constituencies by a newcomer.

Without mentioning the name of the newcomer in parliament, the Jatiya Party MP remarked, "We are all victims of what he said on his Facebook post." The accused in this case, against whom the opposition chief whip sought the speaker's intervention, is none other than the populist lawyer Syedul Haque Suman, who gained fame through social media, particularly Facebook live, and succeeded in entering

A closer examination of both claims about MPs' emoluments makes one wonder if both Suman and Chunnun could be correct. If Suman referred to remuneration and all other allowances as "salary," then the total could exceed Tk 1,72,000. However, if the opposition chief whip wants to differentiate remuneration from allowances, he too would be correct in claiming that Suman's quoted figure is inaccurate.

parliament as an independent member in the 12th parliamentary election on January 7. His victory against the official nominee of the ruling party, former State Minister for Civil Aviation Md Mahub Ali, raised many eyebrows. However, his populist politics is remarkably non-confrontational towards the government and the ruling party.

What was in Suman's offending Facebook post? According to Chunnun,



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

"He [Suman] said, 'Do you know how much MPs get in salary? They don't say it, they hide it.' He said he got a salary of Tk 1,72,000 [monthly]." Chunnun further added, "He [Suman] said within three months, he had received an allocation of Tk 28 crore. How did he get that money?" He then alleged that after seeing the Facebook post, many people wanted to know from him where that money was going.

One essential hallmark of populism is that beneficiaries of an existing system exploit its weaknesses or negative elements from within. They manipulate facts in ways that benefit them while harming others. While the perks and privileges that MPs are entitled to are generous and enviable, the discretionary allocations, especially in terms of transparency and fairness, raise questions. Each MP receives an allocation of Tk 5 crore for their constituency, which adds to the controversy.

When Suman remarked that he had known the entitlements were so attractive, he would have pursued becoming an MP much earlier, it did not shock anyone among the wider public. Instead, Chunnun's attempt to draw the speaker's attention to stop Suman from discussing known and unknown financial benefits

and power raises questions about what he wants to conceal. Some of those unknown financial gains come through influencing policies favouring businesses owned by MPs or their families. This huge accumulation of wealth was revealed in their asset statements given to the Election Commission during the nomination submission process.

and can easily understand how MPs' pay packages have grown, while the real wage in the country recorded a decline in 2017, and still remains behind the inflation rate. In addition to the healthy pay package, MPs enjoy perks such as residential plots at high-value neighbourhoods in the capital and tax-free automobiles. It's worth noting that some MPs have been

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MPs' salary and allowances were last raised in 2016, with some calculations suggesting that the total monthly earnings could be as high as Tk 2,89,325. The actual remuneration portion was increased to Tk 55,000 from the previous amount of Tk 27,500 awarded in 2012. Almost all allowances, from constituency to transport allowances, were raised by 80-90 percent. Interestingly, MPs' transport allowances are much higher than their remuneration. Unlike some parliamentary democracies, like the United Kingdom where an independent commission comprising various professionals recommend MPs' pay package, our MPs award themselves their remuneration and allowances.

By reviewing the footnotes in the Members of Parliament (Remuneration and Allowances) Order, 1973 (President's Order), one

convicted or faced prosecution for illegally profiting by selling those tax-free luxury cars. The provision of tax-free cars for MPs was first introduced by the late military ruler HM Ershad, the founder of Jatiya Party—the party Chunnun belongs to—and later expanded to allow more luxurious cars of higher capacities.

Reviewing the growth in MPs' rewards and other perks since independence, two critical facts emerge. First, the growth in the financial package of MPs over the last 15 years of Awami League rule was almost 350 percent, starting from Tk 15,000 in 2010. Secondly, parliamentarians' benefits and discretion for spending taxpayers' money without any accountability, in the form of special allocations for constituencies, have become a regular budgetary feature when democracy is at its weakest and the parliament's role in holding the executive to account has virtually disappeared.

Though ironic, people have very little faith in our political institutions and politicians compared to some social influencers, and the blame squarely falls on our political leaders. In this context, the opposition chief whip is right to realise that Facebook posts by one of his fellow MPs, who can influence public opinion, would further erode their credibility.

Concerted efforts can curb motorbike crashes



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Road crashes and their toll on human lives are, unfortunately, everyday news. In fact, they are so common that we have become inured to this tragedy. Usually, we do not pay attention to the news on accidents unless they happen to someone we know.

However, road crashes have escalated to a point where a safe return to home, even from a short visit to the nearest market, is no longer guaranteed. In busiest cities like Dhaka, the situation becomes even more perilous due to heavy, unregulated traffic, queuing of rickshaws, trucks, motorcycles, buses, private cars, and CNG-run auto-rickshaws on the same roads, and the scarcity of safe infrastructure for commuters, including pedestrians and cyclists.

A recent report by the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity gives a harrowing figure of road mishaps and deaths in the country. According to the report, 503 road crashes took place in the month of February 2024 across the country, causing 555 deaths and 1,031 injuries.

Notably, motorcycle accidents are the highest, causing almost 38 percent of the total accident-related

deaths. Adolescents and youths are at a higher risk of being the victims of motorbike crashes. This is because, in both urban and rural contexts, a substantial portion of motorbike users are adolescents, and they tend to drive more recklessly than other motorcyclists. In Dhaka city, more than half (52.65 percent) of registered vehicles are motorcycles, according to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). In upazilas and outskirts, many have no licence at all. The number of motorbikes is sharply increasing, so experts dread that deaths and injuries from motorbike crashes may also rise.

Of the victims of such crashes, many are the breadwinners of poor and vulnerable families. These families fall into a dire situation after losing their earning members—in some cases, the sole earner. Besides, the fatalities include a significant number of women and children. Needless to say, the injured and their families have to bear the brunt of the accidents for a long time, sometimes even a lifetime.

Sometimes, some accidents ignite public anger, and we stage protests, but to no effect. Overall, we are becoming comfortable with frequent,

fatal vehicle crashes. Last year, a total of 2,252 people were killed by 2,031 motorbike accidents in the country, according to Jatri Kalyan Samity's annual report. It accounts for 32.43 percent of total accidents.

In light of this grim reality, the question inevitably arises: who bears the responsibility for these crashes?

The reasons behind this situation are well-documented. A significant segment of motorbike users falls within the age range of 14-18 years. They often pressure their parents into purchasing high-speed motorbikes, driven by a desire to outshine their peers who have also acquired similar vehicles. Sadly, this trend has evolved into a competition among parents to demonstrate their capability to provide such luxuries to their children. Consequently, owning a motorbike becomes synonymous with pride and distinction among the youth.

The allure of speed is also a central factor. Many young riders take to local streets and highways at exhilarating speeds, often with fatal consequences. There is a dangerous fantasy associated with the thrill of speeding, exacerbated by the prevalence of racing videos and "moto vlogs" on social media platforms. These videos entice impressionable adolescents to imitate risky behaviours, sometimes leading to catastrophic consequences. Adding to the peril is the lax attitude towards safety gear, such as helmets, further endangering not only their lives but also those of pedestrians and commuters.

Addressing the current surge in hobby-driven motorbike use

and the resulting fatal accidents demands urgent attention from all actors involved to safeguard the lives of adolescents, youth, and future generations.

It is imperative for parents to recognise the gravity of the situation and refrain from enabling dangerous behaviour under the guise of fulfilling a hobby. Local bodies, including both government and non-government, must also collaborate to launch comprehensive awareness campaigns highlighting the inherent risks of adolescent motorbike use. Additionally, the government must commit to long-term strategies, such as adopting the "Vision Zero" approach pioneered in Sweden, which aims to eliminate road crash fatalities. This approach can include implementing structural measures, like dedicated lanes for motorbikes and three-wheelers on highways, leveraging innovative technologies, such as speed monitoring systems, and stringent enforcement of speed regulations and road safety protocols. Undertaking thorough research into addressing these recurring tragedies can yield invaluable insights for effective intervention strategies.

While Bangladesh progresses with ambitious, mega-infrastructure projects in the road and transport sector, the persistent scourge of road crashes, particularly involving motorbikes, threatens to mar these achievements. It is high time we confronted this crisis head-on, prioritising the preservation of lives and the well-being of communities across the country.