

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## A great tragedy for Iran

Iranians have lost not only a president, but also a tested leader

We express our deepest condolences over the passing of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on Sunday, along with Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the governor of Eastern Azerbaijan province, and others. With his passing, Iran has lost not only a great president, but also a tested leader who worked his way up from prosecutor and deputy prosecutor in Tehran all the way to attorney general and later chief justice, before being elected president in 2021. Bangladesh, as a friend of Iran, shares its grief over this immense tragedy.

The world has naturally been shocked by the death of President Raisi, who was touted as a possible successor to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Messages of condolence from world leaders have been pouring in for Iran. According to local media, Raisi was on his way to the city of Tabriz in north-western Iran after visiting the Iran-Azerbaijan border area. He travelled to the border region after joining Azerbaijan's President Ilhan Aliyev on Saturday to inaugurate a dam. Raisi had pledged to visit each of Iran's 30 provinces at least once a year, and regularly travelled around the country. He was travelling in a US-made Bell 212 helicopter when the crash happened.

Afterwards, low visibility and the impassability of the area made search operations difficult. Reportedly, rescue teams finally managed to locate the crash site on Monday morning with the help of Turkish surveillance drones. Unfortunately, once the wreckage was discovered in a wooded area on a mountain slope, it was found that the aircraft was severely damaged and charred, and there were no survivors.

At this tragic hour, our sympathies lie with the people of Iran. First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber has already been announced as the interim president of Iran. We hope he will succeed in maintaining the country's stability following the tragic death of his predecessor. We also hope that Iran's government will continue to operate "without the slightest disruption" under his leadership, as pledged by an Iranian cabinet statement. Iran has a massive role to play in maintaining stability in the Middle East, and its firm stand in support of the people of Gaza is laudable. Therefore, we urge other countries of the region—as well as the world—to provide Iran with all necessary support during this time.

## Why are officials wary of RTI requests?

Stronger commitment to transparency is needed

One of the issues that trouble RTI activists in Bangladesh is its culture of official secrecy as well as bureaucratic resistance to attempts at ensuring transparency and accountability. It is, therefore, not surprising to learn of the reaction of state officials to information requests made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, as revealed by the Information Commission's 2023 annual report. According to the report, compared to 2022, last year saw an increase in the instances of officials delaying or denying RTI requests, especially about development projects and fund allocations. Overall, 686 complaints were lodged by applicants who were denied information.

The annual report also contains details that help us understand how the RTI law is faring. For example, a total of 8,747 information requests were submitted to various public offices in 2023. Of these, 7,950 were granted. The numbers are admittedly small relative to our total population, which suggest that citizens in general are still not aware of their rights under the RTI act and the procedures for filing requests. What's more concerning, however, is the continued practice of evasions and obstructions in disclosing critical information. This bears particular significance for journalists who are usually the most active group when it comes to making RTI requests and complaints.

Some of the instances in which journalists faced resistance have recently come to light. In one, a journalist based in Khagrachari sought information about some projects under the Roads and Highways Department (RHD). But not only were his request and subsequent appeal ignored, the relevant official even made undue demands for fees. Later, after investigating the case, the Information Commission ruled that there were indeed deliberate obstructions. Sometimes even harsher treatments are to be expected, such as in the case of a journalist in Sherpur who, in March, faced arrest and even imprisonment following his application for information.

True, most of the RTI requests today are still fulfilled, but those are mostly related to matters for which the RTI act is not exactly necessary. It is the pursuit of critical information about public projects where its role and intervention are most urgent, and where the challenge for the authorities lies. Public officials, experts say, are often reluctant to share such information because of irregularities and corruption. The government, therefore, must ensure that it does not happen. It must facilitate unrestricted access to such information and help ensure transparency and accountability in public sector.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



First nonstop solo transatlantic flight made by Charles Lindbergh

American aviator Charles Lindbergh completed the first nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean on this day in 1927, traveling from New York to Paris in the monoplane Spirit of Saint Louis in about 33.5 hours.

# What is wrong with the proposed bank mergers



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun  
is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue and Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the Atlantic Council.  
Views expressed in the article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

The conversation around bank mergers seems to have taken a back seat within a short period of time since the idea was first floated. Based on the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of the \$4.7 billion loan programme, the government of Bangladesh has been implementing various measures in an attempt to improve the health of the economy, including reduction of non-performing loans and improving the banking sector's performance in general.

In December 2023, the Bangladesh Bank established the Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) Framework. Under this framework, the concerned bank has to carry out a schedule of corrective actions directed by the Bangladesh Bank based on selected parameter indicators including Capital to Risk weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR), Net Non-Performing Loan (NPL), and Corporate Governance. Later, in February 2024, the Bangladesh Bank presented a roadmap for bank mergers.

As part of bank merger initiative, Exim Bank has shown interest to take

**The temporary pause on the merger initiative may be good because mergers are lengthy and difficult processes for which adequate preparation and transparency are needed. Mergers cannot be based on the arbitrary decisions of authorities. This amounts to an imposition of the liability of poor banks on well performing banks.**

over the scandalous Padma Bank, formerly known as Farmers Bank, which was on the verge of collapse due to liquidity crunch in 2017. The government came forward to rescue the bank and injected more than Tk 700 crore through four state owned banks in 2018. However, Padma Bank is still bleeding and waiting to be rescued. Meanwhile, other banks

which were supposed to undergo the process of mergers have shown reluctance to be merged with weaker banks. Employees of some banks have expressed resistance towards merger as they risked job cuts.

The temporary pause on the merger initiative may be good because mergers are lengthy and difficult processes



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

for which adequate preparation and transparency are needed. Mergers cannot be based on the arbitrary decisions of authorities. This amounts to an imposition of the liability of poor banks on well performing banks. Good banks will be apprehensive of taking such a burden on their shoulder for which they are not responsible.

Besides, the guidelines of the merger mention that the directors of the weak banks will be allowed to become board members of the strong bank after five years. However, the central bank should have identified and held accountable those responsible for the banks' weakened conditions. The provision of reinstating them on the boards of strong banks is an unearned reward.

For a merger to be successful, accurate financial reports are essential. It is crucial to objectively identify weak banks and undertake comprehensive due diligence. It involves thorough assessment of the proposed banks' financial health, profitability, asset quality, liquidity, capital, liabilities,

legal issues, and cultural compatibility. Mergers should be guided by economic rationality. A strong bank should have the option to proceed with a merger with a weak bank only if it anticipates clear benefits through comprehensive financial and non-financial analyses. If the Bangladesh Bank compels a strong bank to merge with a weak bank and in return, the strong bank is provided any special policy and regulatory support, then those banks will be interested. This will create a new problem in the banking sector as the focus will be shifted to short term gains from the government.

Another issue is that bank mergers cannot result in good outcomes without streamlining operations, which involves eliminating duplicate

another bank.

Bank mergers are difficult and can come with mixed results. The key to a successful merger lies in clear strategic approach to integration that prioritises both operational efficiencies and customer satisfaction. Bangladesh has some lessons from past bank mergers where there are both successful and failed cases. The lessons learned from those initiatives have to be considered which are regulatory, technological and cultural in nature. An important issue to keep in mind is that the merger of one bank with another is an exercise of integrating two separate ecosystems, even though they belong to the same sector. Navigating this regulatory landscape requires meticulous planning. The central bank must take these into account.

Mergers should not be seen as a mechanical process. The ultimate objective of mergers should be the improvement of the health of the sector, which continues to be weakened. Though the sector has expanded in terms of the number of banks, financing instruments, and volume of assets and credit, the overall performance of the sector has been deteriorating. The poor health of the banking sector in Bangladesh is manifested through the number of high volume NPLs, which continues to rise. According to the Bangladesh Bank, as of December, 2023, the amount of total defaulted loan in the banking sector was around Tk 145,633 crore, which was equivalent to 9 percent of total outstanding loans, compared to 8.2 percent in December 2022.

Such weakness in the banking sector is the result of weak management, malpractices, and corruption in several banks, particularly those which were given licenses to operate without any feasibility assessment but on political grounds. According to the Bank Company (Amendment) Act of 2013, the central bank is tasked with granting licenses to new commercial banks based on the need for such banks, and the overall economic conditions. However, this principle is not adhered to in Bangladesh. Political influence often outweighs economic rationale. Consequently, over time, the issuance of licenses for new commercial banks has seemingly become a means for the misappropriation of public funds.

While successful mergers can bring along positive outcome in terms of reduced NPL and improved efficiency, the key issue of the banking sector remains the improvement of corporate governance, and establishment of accountability.

# The pedagogy parameter: How we teach matters

EDUCATING EDUCATION

Rubaiya Murshed  
is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She is also a lecturer (on study leave) at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka.

RUBAIYA MURSHED



One of the works by Nobel prize-winning economist couple Esther Duflo and Abhijeet Banerjee that I personally find very interesting is the "market math" study. Taking into account evidence that most children in India perform poorly in arithmetic operations typically taught in school, the study explored the arithmetics skills of children from poorer families who work in informal markets, selling fruit for example, and find that these working children seem to perform relatively complex arithmetic operations mentally during work when they count the goods they're selling or when they're calculating the payments due or the change to give from the transaction. This finding raises crucially important questions. Could it be that these working children develop their arithmetic skills because they are practically learning by doing? If same-aged school-going children are being taught arithmetic in classrooms with their teacher and textbooks, why are they struggling to perform and to learn what they are expected to at their level?

If we know what to teach, if we

have people to teach that, then could part of the problem be that we do not know how to teach? Indeed, pedagogy matters. It's an important cog of the machine that is an education system. Pedagogy may very well be what makes or breaks the effective delivery of a lesson. For a lesson to be effective, capturing and holding the interest of the audience is key. I myself have been a student in classes where, bored, I simply doodled in the open *khata* in front of me. What we were being taught were distant concepts, with little relevance to our realities, to the real world we saw around us. What a waste of time because I hardly learnt anything in these classes that I remember today. Multiply my experience to thousands around the country, and we have a problem worth giving national-level attention to.

Indeed, there is so much scope for research on learning outcomes in Bangladesh and it is a tragedy that we are so late in building a database of evidence on this. For one, we have no baseline to assess whether things have been improving over the years. If we find today that school-going children

of a particular grade are not being able to solve the math problems they should be able to solve, we cannot know whether this has always been the case. If education is to translate into actual learning, we need to start building a database so that we can determine what works in improving children's learning outcomes.

Fortunately, attention is being given to pedagogy at earlier levels of education in Bangladesh, especially for early childhood development in terms of "learning by playing" and "learning by doing." Even so, enough attention is perhaps not given to the pedagogy of education for underprivileged children and to the fact that teaching children with different lived realities also requires a certain sensitivity. I realised this even more from my own experiences, on one hand, teaching homeless street children and, on the other hand, teaching children studying in a leading English medium school. Teaching these two different groups required different pedagogical approaches because the children led distinct lives. Often, I wished I had some training—to learn not what to teach, but how to teach. After all, it's not just what we say but how we say it that matters.

Then there were the pre-conceived notions and "biases" in education, or miseducation, as sociologist Diane Reay calls it, that I needed to actively battle when it came to teaching lesser privileged children. People often think: "Just teach them the basics needed to survive, they won't go far anyway" or "Privileged children will go on to

become scientists and economists, but underprivileged children will become bus drivers, maids." Education researcher Jean Anyon writes about these biases—"The ways in which students are taught, even more than what they are taught, prepare them to occupy their respective class positions. Working class kids are heavily disciplined and instructed by rote; the sons and daughters of professionals get creativity and self-expression; the children of the business class are taught authority, mastery, and self-control."

We need to begin thinking about, talking about and challenging these issues. We need to invest in teacher training in terms of how to teach, especially in the case of school teachers who teach our young children. For university teachers, the solution lies with the teachers themselves—in each of their individual will to do better. If anything, university classrooms are platforms for interactive learning, open discussions and debates, and it is the job of university teachers to facilitate such an environment for learning in their classrooms. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, educator and philosopher Paulo Freire describes the ideal pedagogy of universities as treating the student as a co-creator of knowledge and traditional pedagogy, the type we're sadly used to, as treating students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Freire strongly argues for a change from the traditional to the ideal. For the sake of our education system, we must too.