

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

When the powerful prey on the vulnerable Alleged abuse of power by Benazir must be investigated

In what can only be described as a gross abuse of power, ex-IGP Benazir Ahmed allegedly used his position to intimidate and coerce members of a Hindu community out of their land—their primary source of income—for a fraction of its worth in his hometown in Gopalganj. The Anti Corruption Commission (ACC), which is currently investigating Benazir, has so far found Benazir and his family to have bought at least 613.41 bighas of land in different districts, including 605.77 bighas in Gopalganj and Madaripur that once belonged to minority communities.

A recent report by this daily has revealed disturbing details of how the former police chief engaged Taimur Islam, an inspector of a police station, to acquire the farmland to build his resorts. The Daily Star spoke to at least 40 people in Machkandi, Bairagitol and Patikelbari villages of Gopalganj Sadar and Borokhola village in Rajoir, who insisted that they would have never sold their land at reduced prices had it not been for direct and indirect threats from Benazir's people. Those who refused to sell initially were targeted by using other tactics, from blocking access to their land to filling them up with sand, ultimately forcing them to part with their property. According to locals, Benazir also engaged several police and Rab officials to supervise the construction work of one of his resorts until he went into retirement in 2022.

The ACC has confirmed that he procured and built most of his assets while he headed Rab and police. It is terrifying that a man constitutionally mandated to protect citizens would use his power so blatantly against vulnerable populations for his own gains, leaving them helpless to seek recourse from the law. After all, he was the law. That he used members of the law enforcement agencies to do his dirty work for years on end points to a bigger crisis within state institutions—one where checks and balances as well as systems of accountability have long ceased to exist.

It goes without saying that this case demands a thorough and transparent investigation. Those responsible, from Benazir to those who facilitated his actions, must be held accountable and the victims compensated financially for the loss suffered. And while it is commendable that the ex-IGP is finally being investigated for his crimes and corruption, we cannot help but wonder how it is possible that he carried out these unlawful activities under the nose of the administration with such impunity.

How many more officials, tasked with protecting the public, are doing the same right now? How many more such helpless communities have been terrorised into selling off their land? The government has the responsibility to prevent any kind of abuse of power by those it has employed and empowered. It also has a duty to protect the rights of vulnerable communities, which includes safeguarding their land.

DU admission woes must end

Why must freshers suffer so much to pay fees?

It's a wonder why university freshers would need to stand under the blistering sun for three days just to enrol into the very institution they have been accepted to. This is exactly what happened during the just-concluded admission process at Dhaka University (DU). Students said they had to struggle with a slew of tedious and repetitive steps just to pay their fees, going from one building to another and waiting in queues for hours on end. Surely, one of the country's top educational institutions could've thought of a better, easier alternative?

Amid the lack of coordination among DU's offices, some 6,000 admission-seekers only had three days, beginning on Monday, to complete the whole process. Unsurprisingly, these many people standing in lines, desperate to finish all procedures, will lead to delays, sufferings, and utter chaos.

This process, in this day and age, seems truly ancient. Reportedly, students had to pay the admission fees online, but then take the receipt to their respective department, which handed them a pay slip to deposit a development fee at the nearby Sonali Bank branch. Accomplishing this after trudging in line for hours did not bring relief, as they had to bring back the pay slip and get their documents signed from the department head, who by then likely left the premises. This whole process had to be repeated for paying the dorm fees.

When the country is striving for digitalisation, is this how a university, recently ranked as the best in Bangladesh, should be operating? Apparently, the admission committee had requested department heads to ensure that students could pay all fees online, but the latter ignored the call. Some heads weren't even aware of the request, such is the level of dysfunction and mismanagement. According to a professor, from the 90s till now, the admission process has remained the same, pointing to the DU's lack of progress, while the vice-chancellor himself has admitted to the dismal coordination.

We urge the DU authorities to address the ordeal students have to go through annually just to get admitted. This issue can easily be solved through the use of digital platforms and proper coordination among university bodies, and we hope to see just that next year.

We need humility, not hubris, to turn the economy around

THE OVERTON WINDOW

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ERESH OMAR JAMAL

While a privileged minority, sitting in their high castles, continue to enjoy a larger and larger share of the fruits of "development," it is becoming obvious that the vast majority are increasingly struggling. Worryingly, economic growth is slowing down. On April 2, the World Bank revealed that it projects Bangladesh's real GDP growth to remain relatively subdued at 5.6 percent in the current fiscal year and 5.7 in the following year, lower than the average annual growth rate of 6.6 percent over the decade preceding the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, the IMF, for a second time, revised down Bangladesh's growth forecast for the current fiscal year to 5.7 percent in its World Economic Outlook report released on April 16.

On May 20, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) released its periodic data projecting that the economy grew by 5.82 percent in the outgoing financial year, which is far less than the initial projection of 7.5 percent made in the budget speech for FY24 and the revised projection of 6.54 percent made in a meeting of the coordination council in December—but is much closer to the World Bank and IMF's projections.

This raises a very critical question: why were the government's projections so far off and why couldn't it come up with more accurate estimates like the World Bank and IMF? Given that government officials often outright refuse to accept reputed organisation's data—without presenting their own evidence to counter it—it is perhaps time for the authorities to get down from their high horses, particularly in light of their own poor record of coming up with correct estimates.

Be that as it may, some economists have even questioned the BBS projection of GDP growth based on the fact that there is "no positive indicator" to explain it currently. For example, even though BBS data shows the agriculture sector this year recorded a growth similar to last year, the industry sector, which accounted for more than one-third of the country's GDP, grew at 6.6 percent in FY24 compared to 8.37 percent in FY23. And a large part of that had to do with the import of industrial raw materials and machinery being affected by the dollar crisis, and energy price hikes having substantially increased industrial production costs for businesses.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much



PHOTO: BIPOLO CHAKRABORTY

the government could do in that regard, as it had to take certain policy measures to try to rein in inflation which, on the flipside, was bound to negatively affect growth. However, as a Centre for Policy Dialogue survey in partnership with the World Economic Forum (WEF) found, 67.6 percent of respondents complained about high levels of corruption as another major problematic factor for doing business. So, the government should have tried to reduce corruption, which could automatically improve our business environment and perhaps encourage more businesses to set up.

Meanwhile, persistent inflation has been weighing on private consumption growth, and combined with rising interest rates and financial sector vulnerabilities, the World Bank expects investor sentiment in Bangladesh to dampen. Consequently, it believes that an efficient resolution framework for non-performing loans (NPLs) is urgently needed. However, since most of our banking sector issues are somehow tied up with political considerations, the government till now has shown no sign of mustering up the political will or courage to

result, the country is failing to make the most of its demographic dividend.

Even among those who have jobs, the majority are seeing their wage growth being significantly lower than the inflation rate for more than two years. According to BBS figures, wage growth remained below the inflation rate for the 26th consecutive month in March.

The combination of these factors has prompted some to ask whether Bangladesh is entering a period of stagflation—a phenomenon that combines slow growth, high unemployment and inflation. But that does seem a bit premature, as the economy is still growing, albeit at a slower rate, and unemployment is still not exceedingly high—even though the official unemployment figures are clearly too good to be true.

However, the cost-of-living crisis is a serious problem which is drastically reducing the standard of living for most people. The erosion of purchasing power has already led to around five lakh people falling into extreme poverty between FY2022-23 and FY2023-24, according to the World Bank. Unless things turn around quickly—which does not look

by the ultra-rich, many of whom, according to media reports are now running for or occupying government offices at different levels.

With their wealth surging, most policymakers and politicians have become oblivious to the current economic sufferings of the mass people. As a result, policies have been insufficient at addressing the crisis. In fact, many government policies nowadays are no longer formulated with the aim of easing the ongoing crisis, but to continue filling the pockets of vested interests, at the expense of the majority and the country's economy as a whole.

In other words, the rich and the powerful are in the process of slowly killing the golden goose that they have been benefitting from. This can cause social unrest while the share of the benefits that the oligarchs fight over could decrease, leading to more infighting. Since both these factors could destabilise the economy further, one could only hope that common sense (in the oligarch's self-interest even) prevails before we get to that dangerous tipping point—but how wise is it to expect humility, from where there has only been hubris?

Don't children have the right to privacy?

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LAILA KHONDKAR

At the registration desk of a private hospital in Dhaka, an employee loudly asked for personal information, including phone number, address, etc., of everyone who came to take service there. At that moment, it occurred to me that many people do not understand the importance of privacy protection in our society. This becomes more evident when we observe attitudes of adults towards children.

Children have the right to privacy. According to the article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, "No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation." Unfortunately, awareness about this is very low in Bangladesh.

Nowadays, people of all ages use the internet for education, work, communication, and entertainment. Social media has also become a part of many people's lives. This has positive aspects, but child protection

and privacy are at risk.

Children can be harmed in many ways in the online world. One of these is the production, distribution, and use of images and videos of child sexual abuse. Online "grooming" is another serious issue, where abusers harm children after gaining their trust. Apart from this, children get information on various negative topics including militancy, drugs, and suicide through the internet.

Besides, many parents post on social media about their children's likes and dislikes, achievements and problems in academic and other domains, almost regularly. Disclosure of children's personal information including location, name, date of birth, and school name puts them at risk. Anyone with malicious intentions can misuse this information to cause different types of harm.

And who keeps track of how the children feel about parents sharing their everyday lives with the rest of the world without their consent? Children are not property of the parents that they can treat them in whatever way

they want. Children are individuals with rights and their own sense of dignity.

It is the responsibility of parents to guide children to stay safe online. They should also ensure that none of their behaviour puts the child at risk. Dr Victoria Nash, Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, provided some advice for parents to keep children safe online:

Children should enable privacy settings on social media. They need to know where their information is going and how it is being used. Even if a picture or video is deleted from the internet, it can still be viewed, or someone may have already taken a screenshot. Children need to be reminded of this. Parents have to know what apps, games, and social media platforms their children are using.

Besides, parents have to consider whether their posts will cause their children to feel ashamed, embarrassed, anxious, or upset in the future. Can it harm their children? It is important to take care that no one can know about the daily routine from the posts. Geotagging (through which the physical location of a person can be derived from the internet) needs to be stopped. Privacy settings will be such that posts can only be seen by trusted friends and family members. They should be told not to share the posts.

Online activities mirror real life in most cases. If parents spend time with their children, listen to them actively,

and know about their lives including their interests and friends, they will be able to provide appropriate guidance and support to children for staying safe in the real and online world.

Helping children develop social and emotional skills, making them confident, asking them to use devices in open areas of the house, setting time limits for device usage can be done by any parent. It does not require much technical knowledge.

It is the responsibility of the state to formulate and implement the necessary laws and policies for child protection online. In Bangladesh there is a need to harmonise laws relevant to protecting children online, which includes Children Act 2013 (amended 2018), Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (amended 2013), Digital Security Act 2018, and Pornography Control Act 2012.

Internet service providers, mobile phone companies, and all those involved in information and communication technology must consider the best interests of children with utmost importance while developing products and providing services. States should hold them accountable for their actions and non-actions.

It is our responsibility to ensure that using the internet is a positive experience for children, that it contributes to their development and empowerment, and that children are not put at risk because of parents and other adults' actions.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Historic meeting between North & South Korean leaders

On this day in 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in a summit that marked the first meeting between heads of the two countries, helping earn Kim Dae-Jung the Nobel Peace Prize.