

How universal and egalitarian is the ‘universal’ pension scheme?



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Although pension schemes are considered safe and respectable across the world, its process and significance are different in Bangladesh. Millions of government officials and their families depend on pensions to meet the expenses of the family at the end of their lives. But the process of receiving and collecting pension has never been honourable or easy. Recently, the government has taken some steps to improve this situation with its “universal pension scheme.” Although it created much enthusiasm at the beginning, the pension scheme has not proven to be universal and respectable for all. There are plenty of frustration, apprehension and discrimination in the initiative.

Firstly, the word “universal” means this pension scheme should be applicable for all citizens of Bangladesh. The artificial process of creating hierarchy between different professions is by no means universal; it is rather discriminatory. This is why the call to withdraw the notification has come from various levels, including teachers of public universities across the country.

The government has announced the universal pension scheme as an alternative to the existing system of providing post-retirement financial and social security to government employees. Whether it is people-friendly and how reasonable it is considering the financial capacity

of people in this country are important questions, but what has disappointed and appalled everyone is that it is practically not universal. The scheme is not mandatory for some government bodies and sectors, especially bureaucrats. The outline of the new scheme and the notification says that those who will join the employment of self-governed, autonomous, state-owned, statutory or homogeneous organisations from July 2024 will be compulsorily added to the scheme. However, keeping certain professions out of its purview is not an indication of universality. To exclude the people of any profession from the scope of this scheme means either to deprive them, or to place them above all others.

The military, judiciary and bureaucracy have been exempted from this so-called “universal” scheme. While new employees joining the service of self-governed, autonomous and state-owned organisations after July 1 will be compulsorily covered under the “Prottoy” scheme of public pension, benefits—including pensions—will remain unchanged for military personnel, members of the judiciary, and bureaucrats. On the other hand, public university teachers will be deprived of pension benefits in the future if they do not register for public pension.

Questions arise as to why

the authorities of autonomous institutions like universities were not consulted before this decision was made. During the budget proposal for FY2024-25, it was declared that the government officials will be included in a new pension scheme called “Sebak” from July 2025. Nothing has been mentioned about the benefits of this scheme, or its

such discrimination. This disparity has greatly distressed the teaching community. The Federation of Bangladesh University Teachers Association has already demanded that the government reconsider the pension scheme. Various university teachers’ associations have made it clear in their positions that this discriminatory scheme is in no way

teachers today are concerned with their future.

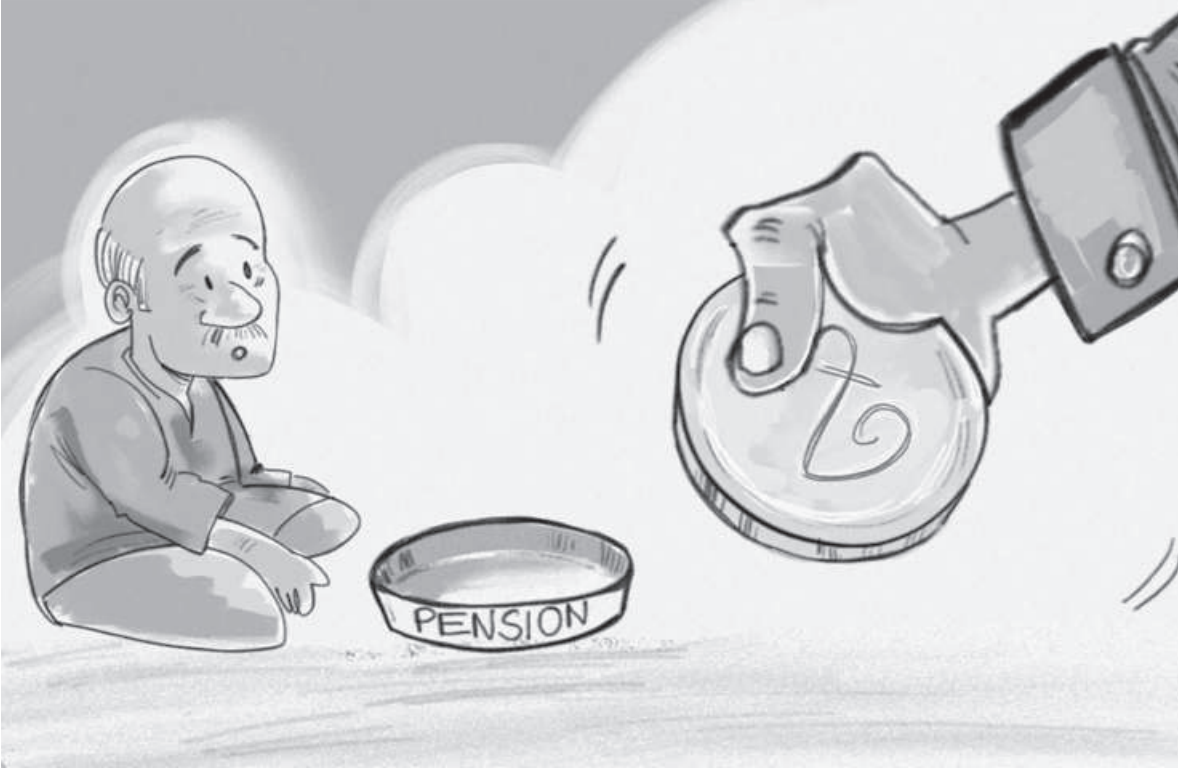
Although there was great enthusiasm in the beginning, the pension scheme has fallen into a state of collapse due to bureaucracy, ambiguity, and discrimination. Where 10 crore people were expected to come under the pension scheme, only a little over 100,000

be mandatory, and that after 8-10 years when people will understand its benefits, everyone will gradually register. What is the rationale for going back on that promise making it mandatory for new employees now?

The bottom line is that any laws and facilities of the country should be made applicable to all. At the same time, these systems cannot be imposed on people, they cannot be made applicable to some and not to others. Giving special importance to one group of people engaged in running the country and giving less importance to other, equally important sectors is not right.

The government has to be proactive in implementing policies according to the needs of the nation. In order to turn public universities into knowledge-based, research-oriented educational institutions, the government should play a leading role in establishing the dignity of university teachers in society. Increasing teachers’ salaries and other benefits is related to this. The government also has to play a necessary role in ensuring that the recruitment of teachers, appointment of vice-chancellors, and promotion of teachers, etc are done in a regular manner as per regulations. At the same time, university teachers, vice-chancellors and their associates should be brought under accountability even within the autonomy.

Likewise, the policy of demeaning and demoting teachers in public universities is totally incompatible with such a noble initiative as a universal pension scheme. We welcome this public welfare initiative of the government. But the initiative should not end up causing public anguish, fear, suspicion or discrimination.



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

difference with Prottoy. The work on Sebak has not even started. But in the case of others, Prottoy is planned to be effective from July 1, 2024. Why was this discrepancy allowed? What was the basis of this dual policy?

The scheme has been rejected by public university teachers due to

acceptable. They argue that as a result of this, talented individuals in the future will not feel compelled to become university teachers.

Universities will suffer if this discriminatory, bureaucrat-driven and special-purpose scheme is implemented. In such a situation,

people have registered in the first 10 months. Due to the exclusion of some sectors, it is not only the teaching community but also the public who now have doubts about this pension scheme. Moreover, when this was first presented, it was said that this scheme would not

JULIAN ASSANGE'S RELEASE

Exposing the craven media stable



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The WikiLeaks project was always going to put various noses out of joint in the journalistic profession. Soaked and blighted by sloth, easily bought, perennially envious, a good number of the Fourth Estate have always preferred to remain uncritical of power and sympathetic to its brutal exercise. For those reasons, the views of Thomas Carlyle, quoting the opinion of Edward Burke in his May 1840 lecture that “there were Three Estates in Parliament; but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all” seem quaintly misplaced, certainly in a modern context.

The media response to the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from his scandalous captivity after pleading guilty to one count of conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defence information under the US Espionage Act of 1917 provides a fascinating insight into a ghastly, craven and sycophantic tendency all too common among the plodding hacks.

Take, for instance, any number of journalists working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, official national broadcaster and devotee of the safe middle line. One, a breakfast news anchor for the network’s meandering twenty-four-hour service, has a rather blotted record of glee regarding the mistreatment of Assange over the years.

Michael Rowland, torturously insipid and ponderously humourless, had expressed his inexpressible joy when the Ecuadorian government cut off Assange’s access to the Internet while confined to the country’s London embassy. “A big gold star to Ecuador,” he chirped on March 28, 2018. Andrew Fowler, another journalist and far more seasoned on the rise of WikiLeaks, reproached Rowland on Twitter, as the X platform was then called. “Why would silencing a fellow journalist be supported?” For Rowland, the matter was as clear as day. “That remains a disputed opinion, Andrew. Publisher and activist yes. But you put yourself in a small camp calling him a journalist.”

These points matter, because they go to the central libelling strategy of the US government’s prosecution so casually embraced by mainstream outlets. In such a generated smokescreen, crimes can be concealed, and the revealers shown to be those of bad faith. Labels can be used to partition truth, if not obscure it altogether: a publisher-activist is to be regarded more dimly than the establishment approved

journalist.

The point was rather well made by Antony Loewenstein, himself an independent journalist keen to ferret out the grainier details of abusive power. When interviewed by none other than Rowland himself, he explained, with



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange gestures as he arrives in Canberra, Australia, on June 26, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

unflagging patience, the reasons why Assange and Wikileaks are so reviled by the orthodox scribblers of the Fourth Estate. Wikileaks, he stated with salience, had confronted power, not succumbed to it.

Rowland could only reiterate the standard line that Assange had admitted guilt for a “very serious offence”, refusing to examine the reasons for doing so, or the implications of it. Again, the vulgar line that Assange had “put US lives at risk” with the WikiLeaks disclosures was trotted out like an ill-fed nag. Again, Loewenstein had to remind Rowland that there was no evidence that any lives had been exposed to harm, a point made in several studies on the subject from the Pentagon to the Australian Defence Department.

The tendency is pestilential. While more

guarded in his current iteration as a professor of journalism, Peter Greste, formerly a journalist for Al Jazeera, was previously dismissive in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Assange’s contributions as he was brutally evicted from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. “To be clear, Julian Assange is no journalist, and WikiLeaks is not a news organisation.” An organisation boasting “the libertarian idea of radical transparency” was “a separate issue altogether from press freedom.”

While approving the publishing activities centred on the release of the Collateral Murder video showing the killing of civilians including two Reuters journalists by Apache helicopters, and the release of the

Greste displays the emetic plumage of someone who has done an about face. “It is worth pausing for a moment to consider all Assange has been through, and to pop a bottle of champagne to celebrate his release,” he writes distastefully, also reflecting on his own carceral experiences in an Egyptian prison cell. He also claims that the role of WikiLeaks, in checking “the awesome power that governments wield”, should be celebrated, while stating, weakly, that he never believed that Assange should “have been charged with espionage.”

In such shifting views, we see wounded egos, cravenness, and the concerns about an estate whose walls had been breached

by a usurping, industrious publisher. By all means use the spoils from Assange and his leakers, even while snorting about how they were obtained. Publish and write about them in the hope of getting a press award. Never, however, admit that Assange is himself a journalist with more journalism awards than many have had hot dinners. In this grotesque reality, we are now saddled with a terrifying precedent: the global application of a US espionage statute endangering journalists and publishers who would dare discuss and run material on Washington’s national security.

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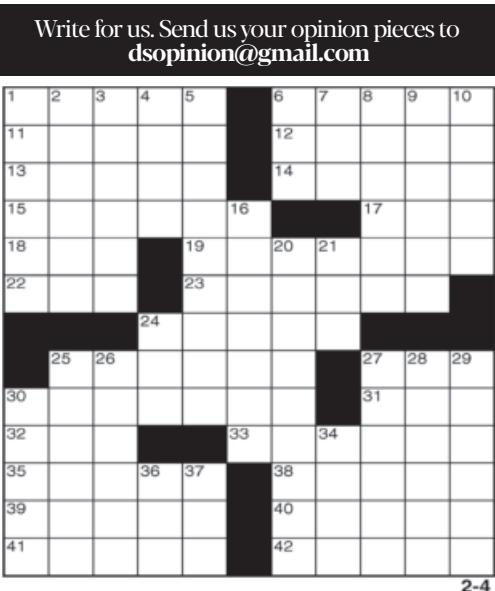
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 “Beat it!”
- 6 Stylishly uninhibited
- 11 Eucalyptus eater
- 12 “Hello” singer
- 13 “As You Like It” forest
- 14 Craze
- 15 Sword-making city
- 17 Harris and O’Neill
- 18 Hydrocarbon suffix
- 19 Ex-GI
- 22 Bright beam
- 23 Pageant toppers
- 24 Zodiac dozen
- 25 Senator Sanders
- 27 Gold unit
- 30 City of northern Italy
- 31 Gorilla, for one
- 32 Imitating
- 33 Lenin’s successor
- 35 Missteps
- 38 Key
- 39 Fork features
- 40 Flower girl, often
- 41 Bring to bear
- 42 Like some communities

DOWN

- 1 Axel performer
- 2 Solar halo
- 3 Boo — (“To Kill a Mockingbird” recluse)
- 4 Out of the wind
- 5 Making decrees
- 6 Toast spread
- 7 Writer Tarbell
- 8 Swiss city
- 9 Moves smoothly
- 10 Brewing need
- 16 Starts
- 20 Like some tigers
- 21 Cal. spans
- 24 Hit letters
- 25 Bungle
- 26 Galahad’s mother
- 27 Pavlova’s field
- 28 Individually
- 29 Signed a lease
- 30 Treat, as a turkey
- 34 Seoul setting
- 36 For each
- 37 Retired jet



SUNDAY’S ANSWERS

