

Govt should reform the quota system

Public service recruitment should be based primarily on merit

The revival of the student movement for reformation of the quota system in public service was wholly predictable, given the way the government had reacted to the previous movement in 2018. Since, in totality, 55 percent of government jobs used to be reserved under the quota system—including 30 percent for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren—the protesters had legitimate grounds to demand a reevaluation of the system. The glaring lack of good jobs in the country and the need to ensure that the majority of public-sector recruits enter the service on merit warrant such a demand.

During the initial stages of the 2018 movement, the government refused to have an open dialogue with the protesters, labelling them as being involved with vague conspiracies. Once the students refused to budge from their position, we saw how Chhatra League cadres unleashed severe beatings upon protesters, with law enforcers often acting as bystanders. When the protesters still refused to back down, the government decided to do away with all quotas altogether—which the protesters had never asked for. The decision was regressive in nature given that it failed to reserve any seats for marginalised groups that are necessary for their upliftment.

On June 5, 2024, the High Court declared the circular that cancelled the quota system as illegal. After the government appealed the ruling and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court upheld the HC directive, students once again were forced to launch a movement. While we cannot condone the blockades being implemented by protesters, we do find their demands rooted in logic. Reserving 30 percent of government jobs for the children and even grandchildren of freedom fighters goes against the spirit of our independence. Our valiant freedom fighters laid down their lives for equality; and although we honour their memory and hold the deepest respect for them, continuing to provide such a huge number of seats for their grandchildren makes little sense at present.

But that's not all. The government needs to reevaluate—as it should have the last time around—the whole quota system. We have heard previously that many of the seats reserved for marginalised groups used to remain vacant, another fault line in the erstwhile quota system. So, the government should involve all stakeholders in dialogue to find a solution that suits the needs of our time. Neither doing away with all quotas, nor simply continuing with the previous quota numbers, are appropriate solutions. The government needs to figure out suitable quota figures for marginalised groups, while reserving the majority of seats for meritorious students. We cannot steer the nation towards greater heights without having efficient and committed public servants at the helm.

Another public project gone awry

Abysmal pace of progress in hi-tech parks project raises questions

It is totally unacceptable that a project that was slated for completion in three years has achieved only 14.34 percent of physical progress after seven years. This glacial and, frankly, ridiculous pace of work has been noticed in an undertaking meant to build 12 hi-tech parks in various districts. Considering its nature, you would have thought a government so intent on bringing about the country's digital transformation would take it more seriously, especially when most of the budget is being borrowed from outside the country, indicating its significance. But this is how the project has ended up, like so many others before it, according to a report citing findings of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED).

The government initiated the project in April 2017, with the strategically placed hi-tech parks envisioned to prepare the nation for the future by fostering a skilled workforce in the information technology sector. It was originally scheduled to be complete by June 2020, but has since seen its deadline extended multiple times. The latest proposal is asking for a 2027 deadline, and an increase from the original budget of Tk 1,796 crore to Tk 2,000 crore. Even though project authorities claim more progress than shown by the IMED, current physical progress still varies widely among the parks, with some barely even started.

How will the authorities justify this abysmal pace of work? As per our report, it has been attributed to various financial and logistical issues, including insufficient allocations, COVID-19 pandemic, land acquisition issues, etc. But this is hardly convincing. Those behind the project should have accounted for potential challenges and have contingency strategies in place to deal with them. A proper feasibility study would have resolved many of the issues that arose. Clearly, what has really slowed the progress is systemic neglect and mismanagement which, combined with a lack of accountability for public officials, have undone so many projects before. The economic implications of such cost and time overruns cannot be stressed enough.

The hi-tech parks project was meant to be a cornerstone of Bangladesh's vision for a digital future. Instead, it has become a cautionary tale of how ambitious plans can falter without effective execution. We urge the authorities to put their foot on the accelerator and resolve all issues preventing the timely execution of this project.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India

On this day in 1497, Vasco da Gama sailed from Lisbon with a fleet of four vessels, and he ultimately opened a sea route from western Europe to Asia by way of the Cape of Good Hope, ushering in a new era in world history.

What options are left for us to fight unbridled corruption?



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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In recent times, allegations of serious corruption against a number of government officials have come to light. From former army chief Aziz Ahmed, former IGP and Rab chief Benazir Ahmed, and former Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia and his family members, to public servants working in much lower positions in the government, corruption seems to have spread its tentacles across the country's public service sector.

During the Covid pandemic, we learnt how a driver of the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS) named Abdul Malek acquired crores of taka through corruption. At the same time, graft allegations emerged against former DGHS chief Abul Kalam Azad as well. These two stories illustrate how corruption has become institutionalised from the very top to the very bottom echelons of our government.

Another recent case of sensational corruption involves a National Board of Revenue (NBR) official named Md Matiur Rahman, and his wife Laila Kaniz Lucky, chairman of Narsingdi's Raipura Upazila Parishad. What's interesting about their case is how they came to light. Matiur's corruption was revealed only after a video of Matiur's son buying a goat at Tk 15 lakh for Eid-ul-Azha went viral. Ironically, even the sellers of the goat were allegedly involved in corruption in the selling process as well as in other operations. Matiur's wife Lucky even submitted her tax files to the Election Commission (EC) before the upazila parishad polls earlier this year. But the commission failed to unearth the corruption of Lucky and her family at that time.

This brings into question how well our public institutions are doing in terms of identifying and addressing corruption. How is it that the EC failed to notice that Lucky had understated her wealth? In fact, prior to the last national election, this newspaper had reported how this election witnessed the highest number of candidates with movable or liquid assets of Tk 1 crore or more. A number of ministers

saw their wealth increase by more than a few thousand percent. And the EC showed no curiosity as to how these ministers managed to multiply their wealth by such absurd amounts. Are they just that good at business and investment? If they are such financial geniuses, why isn't our economy doing as well under their leadership?

And the same absurd wealth increase was seen among candidates during the upazila parishad polls. Again, the EC showed the least bit



What can ordinary citizens do to put a stop to the rampant corruption taking place in our government institutions?

SOURCE: TTB

of interest to find out how these candidates managed to acquire such massive wealth, similar to the national election candidates.

Far from addressing corruption, our public institutions seem to be doing the opposite. For example, right after the reports of alleged corruption concerning former law enforcement high-ups came out, the Bangladesh Police Service Association (BPSA) released a statement which seemingly threatened the media against reporting on corruption by law enforcers. Without being able to identify a single victim who was maligned by the media reports,

the BPSA labelled the reports as "partial, motivated, exaggerated, and misleading."

The BPSA also claimed that the reports were "tarnishing the police's image," while ignoring the damage done by the alleged corruption of its former members. Such claims have become the go-to tactic whenever allegations of corruption are raised. For example, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader recently alleged—as many of his party members had previously done—that corruption accusations were being brought forth to portray AL as a corrupt party. Making such claims, without verifying the authenticity of the allegations, can often be seen as the most commonly used tactic in kleptocracies around the world.

And this is what the Opposition Leader and Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader recently pointed out

But the fact remains that it is his party that has weakened the law when it comes to identifying and preventing corruption by public servants—through the Government Services Act, 2018, for example, which even AL leader and lawmaker Mahbubul Alam Hanif said could be "considered a law to protect criminals."

Through an amendment to the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985, the authorities in 2018 included "reprimand" as a penalty for corruption that has been proven through investigations. Before this amendment, the punishment was either "compulsory retirement," "removal from service" or "dismissal from service." To simply "reprimand" a public servant who has been found to be involved in corruption, while allowing them to remain in "service," is a slap in the public's face. And since 2018, numerous public servants proven to be involved in corruption have continued to remain in service due to this amendment, with only a slap on the wrist.

And it's not only the AL, but the BNP too, which through the 2002 amendment to the Government Servant (Conduct) Rules, 1979 relaxed the anti-graft rules for public servants. This only demonstrates the mindset of our political class in general: their primary motivation is to curry favour from public servants, rather than ensure transparency and accountability in public service for the sake of the public.

The only way to change this mindset is to get honest politicians into positions of power and hold to account those who are not truly serving the people. Unfortunately, all the mechanisms meant to do so seem to have been weakened, if not completely destroyed, one after another in recent decades. That's why the AL managed to make such an amendment to the public service rules, which can easily be argued to have breached Article 20 (2) of the constitution, while no other branch of government stepped in to prevent it.

So, ordinary citizens have only two options now: 1) allow corruption to run rampant and cost them in every sphere of life as a result; or 2) form mass movements that are strong enough to force politicians, public servants and other government authorities to not only rectify the legal issues that they have created, but enforce them to the letter, which will automatically deter government employees from getting involved in corruption.

Bangladesh's way forward to biodiversity conservation



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The global biodiversity is in a bad shape and a couple of numbers can confirm that: 12.5 percent of the world's eight million species will be lost forever in the next few decades; and between 1970 and 2020, big animals' numbers reduced by 68 percent. For Bangladesh, the numbers are not any better. Two studies led by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Bangladesh and the Forest Department, and supported by the World Bank, showed that 24 percent animal species (data of 2015) and 39.4 percent of plant species (data of 2023) of the country will be extinct soon, if no measures are taken to save them.

Although these numbers are relatively recent, biodiversity loss was recognised as a problem much earlier. That's why the Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted by the world in 1992, the 2010 Biodiversity Targets were set in 2002, the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity (2011-2020) and Aichi Biodiversity Targets were adopted in 2010, and in 2015, the world agreed upon the 14th and the 15th Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming at biodiversity conservation.

In the same vein, in December 2022 in a meeting in Montreal, Canada, the countries adopted

the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to save the world's remaining biodiversity by 2050. This most ambitious ever global plan to conserve biodiversity is also known as the "Biodiversity Plan" and has two main parts. The first part has four global goals to be achieved by 2050—protection and restoration of biodiversity, prosperity with nature, fair sharing of the benefits from biodiversity, and enhanced investment and collaboration. The second part includes 23 global targets to be achieved by 2030. The first eight targets refer to reducing threats to biodiversity, the next five talk about sustainable use and benefit-sharing to meet people's needs and the final 10 outline different tools and solutions for implementation and mainstreaming biodiversity conservation.

While many of these targets are qualitative in nature, some have ambitious numbers to fulfil. For example, Targets 2 and 3 talk about restoring 30 percent degraded ecosystems and conserving another 30 percent of diverse ecosystems, respectively. Target 18 wants to reduce harmful incentives every year by at least \$500 billion, while every year \$200 billion should be allocated for biodiversity from a wide range of

sources as envisaged by Target 19.

I believe Bangladesh is already a part of this new global plan. Our recent legal instruments, for example, Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) Management Rule, 2016, Protected Area (PA) Management Rule, 2017, and Bangladesh Biodiversity, Act 2017, are in line with the Biodiversity Plan, and these also have provisions to create new funds for conservation actions. Species conservation action plans, such as those on vultures (2016-2025), gharials (2016-2015), tigers (2018-2027), elephants (2018-2027), dolphins (2021-2030), and sharks and rays (2023-2033), also indicate our progress in conservation planning. Numerous projects implemented since late 1990s underscore Bangladesh's participatory and co-management experience—one of the oldest and latest examples are Management of Aquatic Ecosystem through Community Husbandry (1998-2003) and Protibesh (2021-2026) projects, respectively.

I also think, in some cases, Bangladesh exceeds the Biodiversity Plan's expectations. In 2011, the 15th Amendment of the Bangladesh Constitution confirmed that preservation of biodiversity is the state's responsibility. In 2019, Bangladesh Parliament unanimously adopted a motion on "Planetary Emergency" bringing biodiversity loss and climate emergency together. In the same line, the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (2022-2041) and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP2050, 2023-2050) have integrated biodiversity conservation and climate change actions for dual benefits.

To take the Biodiversity Plan forward over the next decade or

so, Bangladesh could take three specific actions. First, we need to contextualise it in our own way. The Department of Environment and environment ministry are currently updating the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), which should align with country's recently adopted Green and Climate Resilient Development Policy. It should mainstream our 30 years' experience of co-management of ecosystems by strongly adopting the ECA and PA Rules in all projects in and around biodiversity-rich areas. To maximise our financial resource utilisation, we should blend our climate and conservation actions. As the NAP2050 has strongly adopted Nature-based Solutions (NbS), the updated NBSAP should appreciate the climate emergency.

Second, Bangladesh should adopt evidence-guided policy making. To do that, it can establish a conservation portal for Bangladesh managed by the Forest Department to map out the portfolios of all recent past and on-going conservation projects. In this way, we will know what to fund, where to fund, and how to fund, in real time. Finally, we need sustainable financing for conservation. By using the experience of climate budget and gender budget, the government should prepare a conservation budget through a collaboration between finance and environment ministries. Similar to Bangladesh Climate Fiscal Framework, (2020), they should also prepare Bangladesh Conservation Fiscal Framework to guide the country's conservation funding. After all, national finance will be crucial for implementing the updated NBSAP.