

Ensure fairness in civil service tests

News of PSC question paper leaks deeply alarming

We are dismayed by the revelation of a question paper leak racket operating within the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, six officials of the commission and 11 others have been arrested by law enforcers for allegedly leaking question papers of various exams organised by the PSC. The group, according to Channel24, which broke the news after a sting operation, have sold question papers of at least 30 recruitment tests including Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams for over a decade.

At a time when students across the country are demanding quota reforms in public service recruitment to make it more merit based, the PSC scandal deals a heavy blow to our objective of having qualified professionals in public institutions. The leak shows how the system is still largely rigged against meritocracy, often allowing candidates to exploit the preferential quota system or use bribery or political influence to secure a government job. Even the lengthy process of the BCS recruitment cycle works against meritorious students. Under such circumstances, how can we expect general students to feel hopeful about their future in the country? How can we expect honest and dedicated public servants when unethical practices and undue barriers haunt the entire recruitment process? And how sincere will those coming out of compromised tests be to rein in the corruption that is plaguing nearly every public sector?

Shedding light into the PSC scandal, investigations have revealed that Tk 2 crore allegedly passed between two racket members, both PSC officials, to obtain and sell the question paper of the Bangladesh Railway recruitment test held on July 5. Furthermore, a former driver at the PSC, who allegedly lost his job for leaking question papers in 2014, has reportedly amassed wealth worth at least Tk 50 crore. This raises the question: how is it possible that the PSC administration was unaware of the operation of this criminal network for so long? Who else were involved? How high up does it go? Where were the institutional checks and balances that are supposed to prevent this kind of scenarios?

The candidates of the July 5 recruitment test have demanded its cancellation—which is only logical—but those who unfairly missed their chances in the previous 30-something recruitment tests can no longer be compensated. Neither can we perhaps expect anything happening to those already recruited through this compromised process. This is as sad as it is alarming. The only way the government can ensure justice to those thousands of deprived candidates is by ensuring that the accused are brought to book, and the entire public service recruitment process is revamped to make it more merit-based.

Continuing flood exposes fault lines

Authorities must prepare better, more wisely

Bangladesh is in the middle of its annual monsoon, so the news of flooding along with the deaths and destructions that come with it is more or less expected, even though the pain of witnessing so much suffering doesn't go away. What's harder to accept, however, is when the suffering is exacerbated by things that are within our control. Two developments that have become synonymous with the flood this year, and natural calamities in general of late, are the crisis of relief supplies, especially for those stranded in remote villages, and the fragility of embankments and polders.

As the floods hit new areas, with as many as 20 districts and two million people affected so far, as per an estimate released on Sunday, the cries for aid are getting louder. Many have complained that they were yet to receive government assistance. This could be partly because of transportation and distribution challenges, with the upazila and union parishads in charge of aid deliveries, and partly because of the quantity of provisions allocated. The local administrations and public representatives have a big task here: they must ensure not only sufficient provisions but also proper distribution. And while at it, they must give special attention to those who could not make it to the temporary shelters.

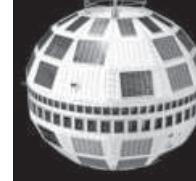
The other development that caught our attention is how prone to damage many of the embankments and polders are, giving away at the slightest nudge, metaphorically speaking. We have had reports of crude materials like sand-filled geo-bags being dumped to check water flow through some of the collapsed dykes. While the pressure of floodwaters can be intense, especially when rivers flow above danger levels, any structural defence should be designed to withstand the pressure. What's the point of having them then? We must resolve these and other longstanding issues—including the largely ineffective river-dredging programmes that are supposed to help manage water flow and erosions—so that vulnerable communities do not have to suffer so much.

In some of the worst hit districts, water levels are decreasing but the overall flood situation has not improved yet. In Kurigram and Lalmonirhat, over 1.60 lakh people have been marooned. Farmers have suffered significant losses, with around 6,500 hectares of agricultural land including Aman seedbeds and vegetable fields submerged in Kurigram alone. Meanwhile, over 1,000 educational institutions remain closed in Sylhet and Rangpur regions. At least 10 have died, including two in Jamalpur on Monday. The growing human and economic tolls of the flood are becoming clearer as days pass. The least we can do in such a situation is prepare better, and wisely.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Telstar 1 launched

On this day in 1962, Telstar 1, the first communications satellite to transmit live television signals and telephone conversations across the Atlantic Ocean, was launched inaugurating a new age in electronic communications.



EDITORIAL

Anti-graft drive: How has Awami League fared in first six months?



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY



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The Awami League-led government completes six months of its fourth consecutive term in office today. Generally, six months is not enough time to assess the performance of a government. But for an incumbent government in seat since 2009, whose comeback was accompanied with many promises, it seems a good enough timeframe to evaluate its deeds over the last six months in the context of its 15-year rule.

In the past six months, the issue of corruption has truly come to the fore, and the government has acted in a handful of high-profile cases. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently vowed that no one indulging in corruption will be spared, irrespective of their identity, and that the ongoing drive against graft will continue. At the maiden cabinet meeting on January 15, she also gave strict instructions to not tolerate corruption and irregularity.

However, there are as yet no indications that the government is ready to tackle corruption holistically. No policy reforms have been suggested, no directives have been issued to concerned agencies, nor have law enforcement authorities been bolstered to act against those deemed corrupt. Instead, what seems to be clearer as days go by is that the government is cherry picking certain individuals who may no longer be in favour, and conducting isolated drives against them, while others go scot-free.

The Anti-Corruption Commission is currently investigating the accumulation of illegal wealth by former inspector general of police Benazir Ahmed and his family members, former National Board of Revenue (NBR) official Matiur Rahman, immediate past NBR first secretary Quazi Abu Mahmud Faisal, customs commissioner Enamul Haque, former NBR commissioner Wahida Rahman, former additional inspector general of police Shamsuddoha Khondoker, Rajdhani Unnayan Kartirpakkha (Rajuk) director Mobarak Hossain and his wife, among others.

The amount of assets that the initial investigation by ACC has unearthed is mindboggling. It found illegal assets worth Tk 43.5 crore belonging to Benazir Ahmed, his wife, and two daughters. But the actual price of his wealth is many times higher than the amount shown in the documents.

Meanwhile, former NBR official Faisal has accumulated about Tk 1,000 crore by taking bribes for transferring income tax officials, intimidating taxpayers and resorting to other irregularities, according to ACC documents submitted to the court.

But the question that must be asked is, why is ACC investigating them now,

rather than when they were at the helm of power? Does the ACC truly deserve compliments for acting on command, rather than doing its constitutionally mandated duty? While the AL throws its sacrificial offerings to a crowd thirsty for blood, the one prickly issue getting sidelined is whether the AL government can escape responsibility for such unbridled corruption.

There have been innumerable occasions when the party has quite blatantly used the state machineries for political benefits. There has been widespread immunity for overreach of influential individuals and institutions,

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which has given many the illusion of unbridled power—a perfect breeding ground for corruption and tyranny. The flurry of corruption allegations that have been raised against some former and incumbent government officials in recent times is nothing but an outcome of that situation.

Even a portion of AL leaders believe the government has failed to ensure accountability of government bodies, and is predominantly responsible for giving corruption its current institutional shape. On June 25, AL joint general secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif told the parliament that corruption is overshadowing all the government's achievements and that despite its policy of zero-tolerance against corruption on paper, corruption remains out of control in reality.

The very next day, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader said it isn't just government officials who are corrupt, but politicians too. But then, in the very next minute, he tried to justify corruption in the country by saying it is a common phenomenon across the globe.

Such contradiction, unfortunately, seems to be the very mantra of the party's professed commitment to tackling corruption. The Awami League, in its manifestos before the

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On June 10, ACC Chairman Moinuddin Abdullah accused ministries of fostering corruption by not including anti-corruption clauses in their regulations. The former bureaucrat also stated that all ministries have opened the floodgates to corruption. Meanwhile, ACC Commissioner (Investigation) Md Jahurul Haque said, "Those in power in society are the ones who commit corruption. The CIP and VIP individuals, whom you try to honour, are involved in corruption."

The corrupt, indeed, are running the country with impunity. Around Tk 92,261 crore has been plundered from the country's banking sector in 24 major scams over the past 15 years, as a result of irregularities, misuse of power, and potential money laundering, according to a report of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The figure can only confirm the ineffectiveness of the Money Laundering Prevention Act and the futility of the government's commitments to safeguard the banking sector.

The AL, in its manifesto, promised to recover default loans through enforcement of laws, but the total defaulted loan in the banking sector stood at Tk 1,82,295 crore as of March, highest in the country's history. But in 2009 when the AL-led government came to office, the figure of total defaulted loan was Tk 22,000 crore.

We see the same impunity in the stock market. Low-performing stocks

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frequently appear on lists of top gainers or highest traded volumes in the stock market due to manipulations. Even when the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) detects such manipulations, the BSEC's punishments are too lenient, discouraging effective deterrence. For instance, in 2023, the BSEC fined Abul Khayer Hira and his associates only Tk 5.25 crore for manipulating the stocks of NRB Commercial Bank and Fortune Shoes. This fine pales in comparison to their estimated gains exceeding Tk 68 crore, according to BSEC enforcement records.

Data suggests this may be a recurring issue. In 2022, the BSEC uncovered manipulation in several stocks, where the perpetrators gained an estimated Tk 253 crore but were only fined Tk 21 crore. In contrast, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) identified 16 individuals involved in a stock manipulation scheme in June 2023 that generated over \$35 million in illegal profits. Consequently, the SEC imposed collective fines exceeding \$75 million, as reported on their website. This example highlights the significant disparity in how market manipulation is penalised in Bangladesh compared to the US. Instead of strong deterrents, we seem to be encouraging such practices by either turning a blind eye to them or letting perpetrators off the hook with a slap on the wrist.

Meanwhile, the success of every development project in the country is tainted by cost overruns and innumerable project extensions due to corruption at every level for which no one is ever held to account. All this comes at a tremendous cost—the burden of foreign debt, which has now crossed \$100 billion, a nearly four-fold increase compared to \$25.3 billion in 2009.

And while the corrupt hoards wealth beyond our wildest imagination, ordinary people are barely surviving the onslaught of rising costs. The AL's top promise before the January 7 national poll was to address inflation and ensure a smooth supply chain to bring down commodity prices.

But food inflation stood at 10.76 percent in May, a seven-month high. In June 2009, when the AL formed the government, the point-to-point inflation was 2.25 percent, while the average inflation rate was recorded at 6.6 percent.

The finance minister, while placing the proposed budget for FY 2024-2025, hoped to bring the inflation down to 6.5 percent. But given the country's current economic health and in the absence of any clear policy directives, it appears nothing more than a lofty assurance.

The party also promised to take strict action against illegal wealth acquisition in its election manifesto. The government, however, has taken the opposite position by once again deciding to allow black money holders to legalise undisclosed wealth without any scrutiny by paying a 15 percent tax.

The AL has long promised to establish a humane society by reducing social inequality, but the latest data of Household Income and Expenditure Survey reveals a totally different picture. Income inequality is at an all-time high in the country, with the top 10 percent of the wealthiest households now holding 40.92 percent of its total income.

The above scenario paints a depressing picture of the first six months of the government's tenure. We can only hope that morning does not show the day. Sheikh Hasina has proven to be the strongest leader of the country and we want to have faith in her to clamp down on corruption, regardless of affiliation, with greater vigour and steer her government to prioritise the welfare of the people.