

## Make central bank fully independent

Absence of autonomy has proven disastrous

It is heartening to see the government acknowledge the importance of having an independent central bank. Reportedly, the authorities are set to amend the Bangladesh Bank Order, 1972 to supposedly align it with global best practices and give it more autonomy. The development comes at a time when the economy is going through one of the worst downturns in recent memory, with inflation continuing to break new records. As experts have pointed out, failed government policies have been a major factor for the runaway inflation and other economic problems we are currently experiencing. And the role of government-controlled Bangladesh Bank in this debacle is particularly notable.

It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that many of our problems could have been avoided or better addressed if we had an independent and courageous central bank. The government-imposed interest-rate caps on both the lending and deposit rates—at 9 and 6 percent—is a perfect example of this. Perhaps a more independent central bank would have realised—and indeed listened to experts—that this was a flawed policy that would only end up fuelling inflation. The decision to artificially inflate the value of the taka was another disaster that, too, could have been avoided.

Even before the recent economic crisis began, the unchecked “looting” of our banking sector—under political patronage—had damaged our economy beyond comprehension. Those cracks are widening today as the government, including the central bank, fails to curb default loans with the policies for defaulters continuing to be relaxed. The government’s decision to provide continuous loan rescheduling facilities and interest rate waivers to loan defaulters has not been beneficial whatsoever. Therefore, we hope the Bangladesh Bank is given autonomy to pursue stricter policies with regard to willful defaulters, without political interventions.

In its technical assistance report regarding the Bangladesh Bank, the IMF said that the bank “order needs to be substantially amended so that price stability is the overriding objective of the new monetary policy regime, and governance arrangements are aligned accordingly.” We cannot agree more. What’s concerning, however, is that a provision of the order called for establishing a council comprising finance and commerce ministers, the bank governor, and others. This will ultimately constrain the bank’s actions in times of pressure.

Therefore, while the amendment initiative may sound good, its success in terms of making prudent economic decisions will be determined by the degree of autonomy ultimately granted to the central bank. Previously, despite talks of providing it with autonomy, we have seen the government do the exact opposite. Hence, we hope the amendment is not simply an eyewash amid pressure for reforms. It must be able to address longstanding concerns about the bank’s function and mandate. An expert-driven Bangladesh Bank that protects the nation’s best interests is the need of the hour.

## DSCC must respect court order

Ensuring rehabilitation of Harijan families facing eviction is vital

We are troubled by the recent actions of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and a ward councillor at the Miranzilla Harijan Colony in Bangshal that seem to defy a court order preventing eviction of the Harijan families who reside there. According to media reports, despite the High Court stay order on eviction, the DSCC made moves in contravention of it while local councillor MD Awal Hossain and his men antagonised colony residents, leading to a clash that left 16 injured.

It may be recalled that the DSCC, on June 10, had tried to evict several Harijan families saying they are “illegal residents” as they no longer work for the corporation. Later, on June 13, the HC issued a one-month status quo on eviction proceedings and ordered the DSCC to arrange accommodation for the affected residents. The DSCC, then, filed a leave to appeal petition with the Appellate Division, challenging the order. However, with the appeal pending and the status quo still in force, the DSCC on July 9 sent letters to its chief executive officer and the commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police for conducting eviction proceedings and deployment of police force.

Then, on Wednesday, DSCC Executive Magistrate Md Moniruzzaman went to the colony apparently to check the utility problems of a new building there, as reported by this daily. At the same time, the councillor and his men entered the colony seemingly to help DSCC employees, who got allotment of flats at the new building, to move in. It triggered colony residents who resisted them leading to the clash. All this is quite alarming.

The HC’s June 13 order clearly directs the DSCC to make alternative living arrangements for the Harijan families facing eviction. These people have been living there for generations and have no other place to go. Why then did the DSCC find it urgent to install the new flat allottees, ignoring the court order on eviction and rehabilitation? Furthermore, who authorised the councillor and his men to enter colony? While we hail the Appellate Division’s direction on Thursday to extend the status quo until further order, whether the DSCC can be trusted to follow the new ruling remains a question. We urge the DSCC and all relevant officials to respect court directives. Any eviction in the future must be preceded by proper rehabilitation of the affected.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY



#### Birthday of Pablo Neruda

On this day in 1904, Chilean poet, diplomat, politician and the winner of the 1971 Nobel Prize for Literature, Pablo Neruda, was born.

## The quota question

*In comments shared with The Daily Star, three experts shed light on the legal, political and policy-related arguments about the existing quota system in Bangladesh’s civil service.*



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

### Quota should exist for the marginalised only



Ali Imam Majumder is a former cabinet secretary.

ALI IMAM MAJUMDER

When the protests for quota reform first began in 2018, the government agreed to negotiate with the students. However, there was a sudden derailment in how the matter was proceeding.

As I have stated before, I am personally against the quota system; I believe it should only exist for marginalised groups. If the percentage of those coming through the quota system is that significant, many meritorious students will be deprived of opportunities. It is not merely the BCS exams; the quota system determines the recruitment of teachers, doctors and various other jobs. It has an impact on many facets

of life, and students are naturally struggling to accept this system which can harm them directly. Overall, this system will disadvantage many.

The matter was in the government’s hands in 1972, after Bangladesh had gained independence. It was Bangabandhu who had introduced the quota system for freedom fighters in 1972, and primarily for the BCS exams. The system was mostly for freedom fighters who would get jobs based on a 100-mark oral examination. We are now learning from different ministers of state that the number of freedom fighters at present, compared to that during 1971-1972, has tripled. There is, of course, a responsibility we bear

for the freedom fighters. However, it is debatable whether these benefits should extend to their descendants, and if so, for how many generations.

Many jobs remain inaccessible to many individuals because of the quota system; it is even said that if certain jobs designated for individuals under the quota system remained unoccupied, they would stay vacant. The intelligent students are falling into hopelessness. This is only natural.

In my own experience, I have seen that those who come through the quota system come through a kind of uneven competition, and they often fall behind those who have come through on their own merit. The number of those certified as freedom fighters is less than three lakh and there is still some uncertainty regarding the number. At the end of 1971, we knew the number to be around one lakh, and over the years, this has been gradually increasing. Even if we assume the number is currently three lakh, and then we further assume there are five people in each family, that means 15 lakh people are receiving opportunities that the rest of the 17 crore people are not. In

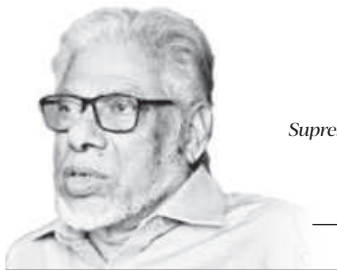
reality, this has disparaged freedom fighters, diminishing their immense role in our liberation.

In the National Integrity Strategy 2012, the government was committed to rationalise the quota system, and meritorious students would also receive opportunities. However, no concession was reached. Our job sector in general is not ideal. The government continues to be one of the largest recruiters, and our private sector has not developed to that extent where jobs can be made available for a significant portion of the population.

We need to remember that though the blockades may inconvenience many segments of the population, it is not unique to the quota reform movement, with our roads becoming blocked even with the Gonojagoron Moncho or even Pahela Baishakh celebrations.

Quota reform should not be an issue. We don’t want the respect owed to freedom fighters to diminish in any way, and this matter threatens to do so. I would hope that the Appellate Division looks into this.

### A system need not be perpetual



Justice M A Matin is a retired judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

M A MATIN

Just because the quota system in government service has historically been in place, does not necessarily mean it cannot be discontinued. When the quota system was initially implemented, it was necessary at that time, but I believe it should be removed now. The court should consider what is logical and best for the people. The constitution always advocates for equality of rights, a principle that is universal in most countries. Regarding the promotion of marginalised groups, we can take necessary actions in times of need, which is why the quota system was established initially.

However, just because a system was implemented once, does not mean it must be perpetual. Honouring freedom fighters should not come at the cost of merit. This will not be beneficial for the country. It will break people’s spirits.

When we were working on the quota, we requested for a list of freedom fighters, but the list was not properly provided. Since then, the list has been frequently updated. That leads to the question: is the current list complete and valid?

We know that some individuals have forged freedom fighter certificates to claim benefits as descendants of freedom fighters. When hard-working and meritorious people see such individuals getting appointed and receiving benefits and priority over them, it destroys their confidence and leads to the waste of their merit. The government needs to ensure the best service to the people. If the quota system remains forever, we will not get the best people in the government service; sometimes, there may be underqualified people filling positions that are more deserved by meritorious individuals. A person who feels undervalued for their merit will harbour resentment towards the system.

### Govt has a duty to resolve the quota debate



Dr Asif Nazrul is a professor of law and researcher on constitutional and environmental laws.

ASIF NAZRUL

Equality of opportunity in public employment is a fundamental principle of state policy in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Article 29 (3), however, allows the state to make special provisions, such as reserving quota for “backward” sections of the citizens, in public employment. But these provisions cannot be made perpetual; they may be retained only until securing “adequate representation” of those sections. The current dispute on quota in public service centres mostly around the “freedom fighters’ quota” (in practice, freedom fighters’ generations’ quota), and it should be addressed according to constitutional provisions.

Our Liberation War was a jonojuddho (people’s war)—participated, assisted, helped and supported by the overwhelming majority of the population, although the list of freedom fighters comprises only those who were trained and directly engaged in the war. Can the freedom fighters be termed “backward,” compared to the rest of the supporting population, among which millions lost their lives or limbs or suffered immensely in doing this? If yes, what percentage of quota do the listed freedom fighters deserve, and when can we say that their “adequate representation” is secured?

Our first government under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman partly addressed this question when the Interim Recruitment Rules were framed in September 1972, and accordingly a few hundred freedom fighters were appointed through the quota system in 1973. The freedom fighters did not have equal comfort, mindset, and preparation when they sat for the competitive exams right after the

Liberation War and, accordingly, this interim provision should be considered justified. But the successive governments continued this provision without much dissent in society, until the Awami League government made a number of decisions to extend this quota and delimit merit-based appointment. Among those, the freedom fighter quota was extended first to the children of freedom fighters in 1997, and later to the grandchildren of the freedom fighters in 2011. In addition, it was decided that if the quota cannot be filled up by qualified freedom fighters, it would be kept vacant and would not be filled up from the merit lists.

In response to a massive movement against these provisions for the freedom fighters’ descendants, the government in 2018 hastily scrapped the quota system, although the demand then was for reform, not abolition. The High Court has very recently set aside the government circular of abolishing the quota system for freedom fighters, and this order has been suspended only for one month by the Appellate Division, pending disposal of the case which may take an uncertain period of time given the backlog of cases there. The student protesters, however, have demanded that this issue be resolved by the government, and based on that they have decided to continue their movement for the quota system reform.

I believe the government has at least one thing to do now. The government still has the option to issue a new circular reforming the quota system abolished in 2018. The reformed system, for example, can keep a quota for the generations only of physically disabled or martyred freedom fighters (as a disadvantaged group of citizens), physically disabled persons and small ethnic groups, which I believe should not exceed 15 percent in total. Nothing can bar the government from amending its policy decision if it does not contradict with the constitution.

We must remember that the quota in the constitutional scheme is not a “reward.” It is a special provision to secure equality among the unequal, but not for creating more inequality.