

Legal actions must follow due process

Allegations of crackdowns must be addressed

We're alarmed by the reckless and selective manner in which law enforcement authorities are going about arrests and cases in response to the recent violent clashes. While we certainly support appropriate legal actions to ensure accountability for the violence—which killed at least 156 individuals as per this daily, and destroyed or damaged dozens of public infrastructures and installations—it is absolutely essential that the accountability process remains unbiased and above board from start to finish. Otherwise, it may again slide into the kind of witch-hunt we saw after some of the protests and clashes in recent years.

According to a report by this daily, at least 3,425 people have been arrested in the five days between July 20 and 24 in connection with the clashes, attacks, vandalism, and arson witnessed in different parts of the country. Of them, 1,380 have been arrested in 154 cases filed in Dhaka, while at least 75 cases were filed in six other districts. A Prothom Alo report, which presents a more comprehensive picture of the cases and arrests over eight days across the country, says many of the arrestees were BNP-Jamaat men. This seems to align with the government's declared position, even before any investigation, that BNP was responsible for orchestrating the violence—an accusation that it denies, claiming that this is but a cover for the government to crack down on dissent. The truth of the matter will only be determined through fair and unbiased investigations.

The question is, will that at all be possible? Why are old cases against BNP-Jamaat men being revived? On what basis are the police and Rab preparing their lists of culprits? And why is so much of the investigative focus on vandalism in public properties? What about the indiscriminate police shootings that led to so many tragic deaths? In today's charged atmosphere, ensuring that all legal actions are conducted transparently and impartially is crucial to maintain public order and trust in the justice process. This will be harder to achieve if the present trends hold. Despite the government's admission that students participating in the quota reform protests were not involved with the vandalism and arson attacks—and its subsequent assurance that no legal action would be taken against them—a number of cases have been filed by police and even BCL leaders against students. This directly contradicts with the government's promise, and may further exacerbate prevailing tensions.

In all likelihood, many factors and elements may have been responsible for the unprecedented violence that has ensued since July 18, not excluding an outburst of popular anger over growing economic hardships, governance deficits and lack of democratic space in the country. Against this backdrop, it is paramount that the authorities do not indulge in mass arrests and cases targeting certain groups. Every arrest or prosecution must be grounded in solid evidence, and the judicial process must be transparent and free from political influence.

Jailed abroad for protesting

We urge UAE, our government to resolve the matter

The decision by the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal to sentence 57 Bangladeshi nationals to long prison terms is regrettable. The court gave life-term prison sentences to three Bangladeshis, 11 years' imprisonment to one, and 10 years' imprisonment to 53 others for protesting in public—which is prohibited in the UAE. While we do not condone the breaking of any law in foreign countries, we feel the context behind the actions of these Bangladeshis should be considered when deciding on their punishments.

Reportedly, on July 19, groups of mostly Bangladeshi nationals who live in the UAE carried out peaceful protests in multiple locations across the country in solidarity with the student protesters in Bangladesh. At that time, students on the streets of Bangladesh were being met with significant violence. Due to restrictions on the flow of information, these individuals were concerned about the plight of their fellow countrymen. Their own loved ones might have been put in harm's way. And so, their decision to peacefully protest was purely motivated by their own conscience.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) verified six videos of the protests. From these videos and others analysed by HRW, none of the protesters were found engaging in any violent acts or using language to incite violence. So, to grant them such long prison terms would be unreasonable. And as the HRW argued, the long prison sentences which appear to have come after only one court session and within 24 hours raises concerns about the fairness of the judicial proceedings.

The UAE court also ordered that the defendants should be deported upon the completion of their prison terms. While we accept that these Bangladeshis broke UAE's laws, we believe that deportation itself is punishment enough. For simply acting upon their conscience—and for demonstrating love for their countrymen—they should not have to spend the rest of their lives, or any significant portion of it, away from their own country and loved ones. So, from a human rights point of view, we request the UAE authorities to consider sending them back without imprisonment.

In that regard, we also urge Bangladesh authorities to immediately engage with UAE officials. In 2022, UAE became Bangladesh's third biggest migrant destination. In the first 10 months of the last fiscal year, Bangladesh received the highest remittance from the country. Migrants working in UAE have massively contributed in providing significant buffer to our economy at a time of serious crisis. Therefore, it is incumbent upon our government to not abandon them during their time of need. We hope this matter is urgently resolved through diplomacy.

Are we going to learn from our mistakes or keep repeating them?

What is said by the power and what is believed by the people may not be the same



THE THIRD VIEW
Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

At the outset, we want to express our unambiguous condemnation of the mayhem created by ideologically and politically motivated groups whose aim was to destabilise our country, use the general discontent to instigate violence, and try to “topple the government”—as claimed by some ministers and which, if true, we vigorously denounce. This has made us realise that our country faces internal enemies opposed to our development and overall success. The destruction of public property and the setting of fire to essential government offices, transport facilities and part of internet infrastructure that greatly crippled trade, manufacturing and the daily life of citizens need to be highly condemned, and the perpetrators exposed and punished within the law. We in the media will assist the government in unearthing this move against Bangladesh. Those who opposed our birth in 1971 must be resisted, defeated and destroyed.

However, there is something else that concerns us. What we are witnessing right now is a classic struggle to control the narrative. The battle is on to direct the “truth” with all the state machinery at play to establish it. The regime beneficiaries are joining the parade to justify the charade. George Orwell, welcome to Bangladesh. Sorry you have been here many times before.

Slowly but surely, the story of the student movement for quota reform is fading from the official narrative and that of the BNP-Jamaat conspiracy to destabilise the country is gaining currency. In our view, both stories merit coverage and in-depth analyses. Why one is fading and the other is becoming bigger is because one suits those in power and the other embarrasses them. The blame game is on; demonising the other is in full swing. According to the new narrative, the students were mere “pawns” from the start and the whole episode was a part of an elaborate plan to destroy the economy and even “topple the government.”

We are back to our old habit of never analysing events that shake us all and learn from our mistakes. How can we not immediately investigate how more than 150 people could be killed within a few days? We will perhaps never ask how the peaceful student movement went out of hand; why the government did not take steps in time to resolve the crisis; what triggered the students' anger; if there were any mistakes in handling the situation; why there were so many deaths; if the police made any attempt to control the crowd; if they had to shoot students when they did and if the shooting had to be so brutal; if bringing the “Razakar” issue was at all relevant; if anyone asked the students not to give that anti-liberation slogan (which they stopped the moment they realised their mistake); why with the deployment of BGB the death toll shoot up; if the BGB were given wrong instructions or if they turned out to be “trigger happy.” On the political front, couldn't the Awami League—a party with such a long history and experience—have reached out to the students, instead of unleashing the Chhatra League to “take care of them”? Was the call to shoot at sight necessary, and did the police firing not inflame the situation further? Why were helicopters used to fire upon demonstrators? There are many more such questions that must be asked and answered through impartial investigation. Otherwise, we will never learn from our mistakes and keep on repeating them.

So much blood, such mindless brutality, such indiscriminate beating of students demanding quota reform, such twisting of narratives and dangerous and fallacious tagging of general students as “Razakars,” attacking students in hospitals when they were receiving urgent medical assistance, such reckless shooting of demonstrators, and the ongoing indiscriminate arrest have created such ill feelings and deep suspicion that to expect an outright acceptance of the government's offer is unrealistic. Students' trust must be regained. A difficult task, but it must be attempted with sincerity and earnestness.

Simply put, there are two distinct phases of the story of the student movement for quota reform that we

have been seeing till date. The first phase started on June 5, when the High Court set aside the government decision to abolish the quota system completely through a government circular, and lasted till July 19. The second phase started on July 15, when the BCL started violently attacking the demonstrating students that triggered violence, which spread throughout the country resulting in large-scale killings by the law enforcement agencies.

What distinguishes the two phases is violence: there was none in the first and tragically plenty in the second. The first was totally peaceful and in the hands of the students, and the second highly violent with political elements having entered the movement, especially members of Jamaat and Shibir (the student front of Jamaat) as emerging evidence indicates.

The government's attempt to totally ignore the first phase and put all its focus on the second is, we think, not reflective of what is uppermost in the public mind and, as such, not the most judicious of decisions. While attempt to unearth the deep conspiracy in the second phase must continue with utmost vigour—which we in the media will support and promote as long as

should not underestimate the depth of this feeling of the students of having been seriously wronged.

Our reporters and photographers met so many parents, relatives and guardians who have lost their dear ones. Their stories bring out the deepest sense of anguish and disgust at the needlessness of it all. So many of the students have such vivid memories of friends and fellow demonstrators being killed or severely beaten up and injured by BCL and law enforcement members; that emotional and psychological wound cannot be expected to be healed overnight. That healing will occur only if the subsequent attitude of the authorities is one of genuine understanding, concern and care backed by a credible commitment of total exoneration of the students from legal harassment. This needs to be so because many quota demonstrators of 2018 had to face police investigation, court appearances and bail formalities for years, at significant legal expenses that many could not afford. Students know it and remember it, and fear its repetition.

That anti-state elements riding on the shoulder of only a two-week-old student movement can destabilise us raises concerns as to how this could happen under a government that has been in continuous and unquestioned authority for the last 15-plus years. That a pro-liberation government, enjoying supreme power for a decade and a half, suddenly finds that anti-liberation forces have become such a threat that it needs the army to save itself—police, Rab and BGB having all failed—worries us immeasurably and raises the question as to whether the

power of the ruling party cadres. The “shooting in the foot” policy of BNP to boycott elections made election manipulation easier by the rulers.

The obvious result of controlled elections was a controlled parliament that never saw any lively debate on any of the vital challenges that the country faces.

As power consolidated and elections became largely predictable, the bureaucracy, police, intelligence community and all other state institutions—in fact, everyone holding government jobs—knew which side of the bread was buttered and acted accordingly. Favouritism and cronyism in business led to Bangladesh's corruption index hitting the roof and the rich-poor gap widening as never before. We saw the gradual but alarming erosion of accountability of state institutions, transparency of administrative processes, and politicisation of institutions of the state that crippled good governance.

None of the above crucial questions will be asked and the business-as-usual attitude of the “enemy” doing it all will dominate our thoughts and narrative. The only way the situation will be handled will be more arrests of the same clang and repetition of what we have heard over the years.

At this crucial moment, we must understand that “what got us here will not take us there” (borrowing from the title of Marshall Goldsmith's book), meaning to the higher level of development. We must change the way we think, act, and engage with people, especially with the younger generation. They are smarter, more knowledgeable,



We are back to our old habit of never analysing events that shake us all and learn from our mistakes. FILE PHOTO: STAR

it is evidence-based—ignoring the mistakes made in the first phase and not investigating how such a large number of deaths, injuries and physical assault on students occurred and not punishing those responsible will be a blunder of enormous proportions.

When the movement started, it was only about quota reform. By the time it ended, many issues became added due to the government's incompetent and harsh handling of the situation. When there was not a single death, not a single instance of violence, when thousands of students were holding peaceful demonstrations on their respective campuses throughout the country, when students were inviting quota reform talks—that was the time when any government would have reached out to the demonstrating students. Ours did not.

Instead, we saw more than 150 deaths, including that of demonstrating students, BCL cadres, police and the general public, in less than a week—highest ever in the history of independent Bangladesh—more than 3,000 injured (both highly conservative figures), and widespread beating of students and demonstrators under one guise or another. The government and the ruling party

ruling party and the government need to revisit their policies and actions of the last 15-plus years, whether or not its own high-, mid- and lower-level leaders have served the party well, and whether cronyism and corruption inside the party needs a thorough looking into.

This period needs to be assessed as much for the sake of the people as for the ruling party itself. In our view, it was during this period that the greatest party in the history of Pakistan and Bangladesh combined, and the one that lay at the heart of all democratic movements here, lost its way and became a money-making machine whose stature at the grassroots level is a pale shadow of its glorious past; whose leaders frankly admit that their survival is guaranteed only by muscle power and no moral power of ethics, honesty, patriotism, and values of our freedom struggle.

It was during the same period that saw greatest harm being done to the most pivotal institution of democracy: free and fair elections. The last three elections—2014, 2018, and 2024 (the last one was a bit more competitive as AL dissenters were allowed to participate)—were mere rituals where voters were the least important elements, far outweighed by police, bureaucracy and money, and muscle

more tech-savvy, and far more confident than we ever were. They are citizens of the 21st century and will live and compete in the world of artificial intelligence. Our prime minister wants to build a “Smart Bangladesh.” We all support her in that effort. But is killing, torturing, injuring, threatening and making students live in fear any way of making them proud participants of that “Smart Bangladesh”? We must be among the biggest fools in the world to think that we can beat them, torture them and frighten them into submission. We have to win their hearts and minds and not bang their heads. The way we have handled the student protesters of the quota reform movement will greatly exacerbate brain drain. The AI world will make a global village of talents and no oppressive measure can hold them back.

Focusing on the narrative of “conspiracy” and ignoring the one that involves students and the many lives lost may give some respite, but it is no way of creating confidence among the students about our future here. We really need to change our mindset. Otherwise, we will keep on repeating our mistakes. And given the fast-moving and competitive world, we are not likely to get too many chances.