

Denial, intimidation won't solve the crisis

Ensuring students' safety should be a key priority

We are dismayed at the steps the government is taking which, in an already volatile situation ensuing from the brutal crackdown on protesters, can only serve to intensify public distrust and fear. Let's focus on the way students are being dealt with, leaving aside the violence and destruction caused by groups taking advantage of the situation. According to reports in the media, including our paper, police have picked up three key organisers of the quota reform protests—Nahid Islam, Asif Mahmud, and Abu Baker Majumder—from a city hospital before taking them into the custody of the Detective Branch. Nahid and Asif were still undergoing treatment after being picked up and tortured earlier.

Meanwhile, police have filed a First Information Report (FIR) regarding the death of university student Abu Sayed which completely contradicts the widely circulated video footage of him being shot by police within a short distance. The FIR accuses 2,000 3,000 unidentified men, including BNP and Jamaat-Shibir activists, of the killing. It is incredible what lengths are being taken to distort the facts. The Amnesty International has independently verified the video footage using satellite images to geolocate the positions of Sayed and responsible police officers, and found that they were about 15 metres apart during the shooting. As seen in the video, Sayed posed no threat to the police. Yet they repeatedly shot him, leading to his death.

In addition to these repressive measures, we have heard of various cases being filed against university students along with the arrests of thousands of other people suspected to be members of BNP, Jamaat and Shibir. For example, on July 21, according to a report by this daily, police sued 20 students of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, along with many unnamed people, for demonstrating unlawfully and assaulting police.

If the government is trying to "normalise" the situation through such legal actions, it is the wrong way to do it. No matter what kind of counter-versions it creates, the government cannot ignore the concerns of the public regarding the unprecedented number of deaths centring on the quota reform movement. Instead of trying to mitigate the severe deficit of trust, of the students in particular, the government has decided to take the hardline once again. Picking up student organisers while they are undergoing medical treatment is illegal, and will only serve to further corrode students' faith in its sincerity to solve the crisis and harm any prospect of dialogue with them in the future. Similarly, denying the role of law enforcement and other security forces in the deaths of students and other people and arresting student protesters will further add fuel to the fire.

This is not the time to try to control the situation with fear, intimidation, and distortion of facts. The government must immediately release the three student organisers and allow them to get treatment. It must ensure their safety and that of all other students, put a stop to legal harassment, and discard the FIR in question (and others that may follow) that deliberately falsifies truths. It must own up to the fatal mistakes it has made and sincerely try to heal the deep wounds inflicted on the students and the public as a whole.

Restoring confidence among expats is vital

Recent events, if unaddressed, may impact remittance inflow

We are concerned about the growing effects of the recent violence and subsequent disturbances through curfew and internet shutdown on our economy, which was already grappling with consistently high inflation, falling exports, and a dollar crisis. Over the past few days, the media has highlighted the risks and losses in various sectors owing to the unrest and forced closures. One key sector where a similar impact could be expected is remittance from migrant workers. After a return to growth over the months since March, which saw the lowest remittances sent in 2024, the country, according to a report, could again be in for a rough ride thanks to a campaign by a section of migrant workers to halt remittances through formal channels.

Many migrants, disturbed by the brutal crackdown on protesters amid a total internet blackout, which largely cut off communications with their families back home, organised rallies and protests in various countries including in Europe, Asia, Middle East, and the UK and USA. Some of these rallies even called for a "shutdown" of remittances in solidarity with the quota reform protesters' call for a "complete shutdown" since July 18. In the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal already sentenced 57 Bangladeshi nationals to long prison terms after they carried out protests in multiple locations. Protests in some other countries, especially in Middle East, were more muted because of local restrictions. The government has already sent letters to our missions in foreign countries asking about those involved in such protests and the reasons for their agitation.

In all likelihood, the fallout of recent events may rumble on unless the government takes steps to restore confidence among our migrant workers. A Bangladesh Bank official, while acknowledging the campaign to boycott formal channels and use informal channels like hundi to send remittances, has expressed hope that migrants will not respond to such calls. It is understandable that remittances were down during the recent bank and internet closures, but since many expatriates receive their salaries at the end or beginning of a month, the true effect of the resistance against formal transactions, which crucially add to our foreign exchange reserves, can be determined over the next week or so.

These developments come at a time when the government's initiatives to encourage formal transactions and investments by Bangladeshi nationals living abroad are being criticised for being inadequate. Even though the government hopes that recent events will not discourage foreign direct investment, the fact is, such concerns go long back thanks to preexisting issues like corruption, systemic barriers, anti competitive environment, etc. It is crucial that our expatriates and foreign investors do not turn away from us at this critical economic juncture. To restore confidence among migrants perturbed by recent violence and internet shutdown, we urge the government to do everything necessary, including ensuring uninterrupted communications, ensuring those who have been jailed abroad for protesting are released, listening to migrants' other grievances, and addressing the root causes of recent unrest with complete transparency and accountability.

An entity showing serious cracks



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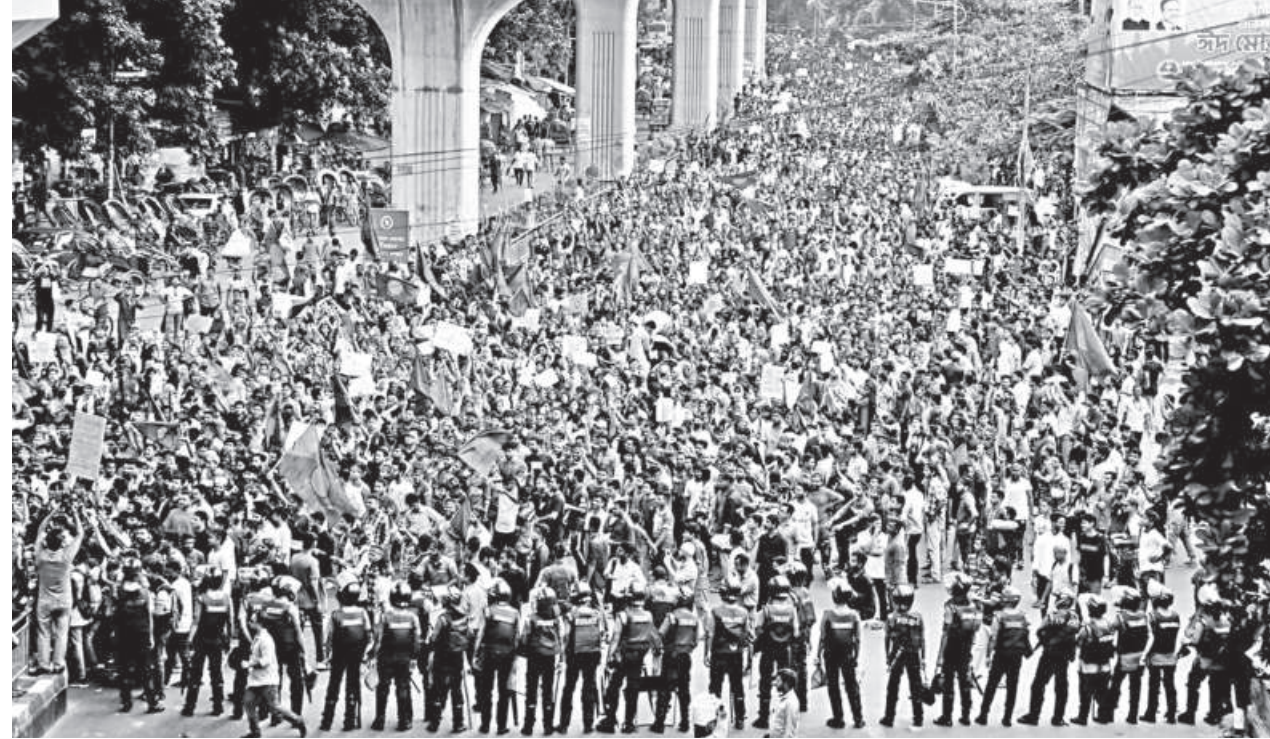
It began as a simple protest: reform the government job quota system—a basic demand arising from a fundamental problem. Young people in Bangladesh are facing unprecedented levels of unemployment, while reports from February indicated that more than a quarter of the 1.9 million government job seats remained vacant. Adding fuel to the fire was a controversial high court verdict to restore the highly unpopular 56 percent job reservation system. Thus, you have the recipe for a massive nationwide student mobilisation demanding a solution to a broken system.

The answer to this growing unrest was simple. The government is no stranger to angry students on the streets. Whether that be the earlier road safety movement, the movement opposing VAT on private universities, or the previous movements against the quota, the answer was always the same—clear and non-antagonistic channels for dialogue. Who could have guessed that the government could fumble the ball so hard? Who would have imagined that such a

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simple demand would end up with the blood of hundreds on the streets?

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

grenades at crowds of people. Tanks rolling past burnt-out remains of vehicles. Security forces clearly using lethal weapons against unarmed protesters. And scores and scores of other atrocities, too numerous to list. Accounts and websites have been created solely to document and preserve these recorded atrocities. These resources are a mere Google search away for anyone who needs a quick, sobering dose of reality. At the time of writing, the number of dead is over 200, according to what some media outlets could verify. Who knows what the real count will turn out to be. But that is not all. Nearly five thousand have been arrested in over a week. Mothers and fathers helplessly roaming hospitals to find their missing children. Emotional eulogies of brothers and sisters who have been martyred in the violence. These are the images that will be burnt into the collective psyche of our nation. There will be no cover-up. We will not forget.

This monumental failure of the government to control the situation cannot simply be analysed as a monolith. If we peel back the surface of this failure, we see the incompetence, arrogance, and ineptitude unfurl like some kind of rotten onion. The first

complete shutdown of the internet in Bangladesh, decimating Bangladesh's already faltering economy, as if to cut off the nose to spite the face.

There are many more layers to this chain of failures. Using tanks, vehicles, and helicopters—few of which were clearly marked with the UN logo—to subjugate the incensed masses. A complete failure to protect the nation's key point installations, such as the BTV building, metro rail station, and BRTA headquarters, etc. A comically weak attempt to convince the population that the internet shutdown was not a clear government overreaction. And a continuous and embarrassing disregard of our leaders for the bloody elephant in the room, which is the pile of dead bodies of our children, our best and brightest, who had to give their lives simply to earn the opportunity for a possible government job.

You know, I know, they know. This was a total and utter mess of an affair. Words simply fall short of describing its magnitude. It is such a mess that perhaps the government might even feel ashamed to admit it. Enemies are being invented out of thin air to justify using the military to quell the unrest. Perhaps if they try hard enough, they might even

There has been an ongoing trend of both the ruling party and the opposition to regard the government as some kind of omnipotent political entity capable of exercising incredible amounts of control over its population with the aid of foreign surveillance technology. Clearly, this has not worked. All it took to shut down Bangladesh's digital infrastructure was one building fire in the capital and a cut wire. Or perhaps the true mechanism of control was never sophisticated intelligence apparatus or assistance from foreign powers. The government has so far solved all its problems through force. Either through official institutions, the student political wing, or security forces in plain clothes, time after time, they have resorted to force their way out of all political hurdles.

However, the key strategic takeaway for the government from all of this should be to take a good, hard look at the means by which they have been ruling so far. Times are changing, and they may realise that the foundation of their rule is not as solid as they might have fooled themselves into believing so far. A closer inspection might reveal the true nature of their political entity. And this entity is now showing serious cracks.

We cannot let ourselves become comfortably numb



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The toddlers of the current generation are called the "reels generation", as they cannot be fed without a screen in front of them showing them seconds-long reels on social media websites. From little kids to adults, all are now addicted to scrolling through these short videos. They also tend to lose interest if they cannot find something newer and more interesting in every scroll. So, the race of being on trend has become a real competition for the social media influencers.

It probably started with the game "Guess the Goat" and continued with Argentina's victory in the Copa America final. In between we experienced some significant movements like the university teachers' strike over the new pension scheme, and the beginning of the quota reform movement by students. Within a week, those movements lost their position on the list when news of question leaks in Bangladesh Civil Service exams, along with the tale of the millionaire driver, came out. When it seemed that we would almost start to forget that

those issues are real and not reels, our young generation made sure that this time they are not leaving the streets until their demands are fulfilled. People around the world witnessed Bangladeshi students suffering on the streets for days in order to ensure reformation of the quota system. And then, we lost our internet connections, at a time when many of those young protesters were being brutally killed on the streets.

I remember when we didn't have cable connection; we used to wait eagerly for Friday afternoons to watch a movie on BTV or a drama in the evening. Nowadays, entertainment channels are so abundant that the excitement has left us. We are buying subscriptions for Netflix, HBO and other streaming platforms. Similarly, our national issues are so numerous at this time that it has become difficult to pay attention to a single one. Without reaching the resolution of a single issue, we are asked to wait for a bit longer so that we get bored of the news that is starting to get stale and start looking for something

newer and more exciting. As the internet has been restored in a limited capacity across the country recently, we are eagerly waiting for things to get back to normal even at a time such as this, forgetting what abnormality we experienced a few days ago. Will the martyred young minds be forgotten as they are not drawing enough attention anymore?

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Even though we don't want to admit it, we must come to terms with the fact that we have thickened our skin over the years and now we have almost become numb to the blows we get from the news. We did not speak when lower income people had to stop buying meat and fish due to unbearable price hikes. We did not look for any resolution when we got to know about people who loaded their bags with black money and ran away. We were not loud enough when another group of people were on the same

Ambani wedding videos.

This country is now desperately in need of optimistic and creative minds. This time, people must not forget the past. Showing respect to the lost lives, we should hope for better future leaders among today's unbeatable young blood who won't say "it is what it is" and move on, who won't get tired of waiting for the rights they deserve, and whose voices cannot be silenced because "it does not concern them", and who won't let us get too comfortable with our numbness.