

State is yet to answer for so many deaths

Why the silence around security forces' role in quota protests?

The government seems to be in overdrive to identify those involved in the violence centring the quota protests, which would have been welcome had it included in its assessment of "violence" the role of its own security forces, especially in the deaths of over 165 people (as verified by this paper) that occurred during those violent clashes. In this connection, more than 10,000 people have been arrested in 12 days, and at least 473 more detained in police raids till July 29, according to our reports. Many of the arrests and detentions, as highlighted by a recent editorial in this daily, have been taking place without following due process of the law.

Unfortunately, despite the gravity of the violence against students and the general population, the government's sole focus seems to be catching those who carried out vandalism of public properties, or clashed with security forces and members of ruling party affiliated groups—totally disregarding the role played by the latter in terms of instigation, escalation, and even the commission of killings. It is not for nothing that the students are now asking if the damage and destruction caused to public establishments, which we must condemn, are worth more to the current regime than the loss of citizens' lives.

By the home ministry's own count, at least 150 people have so far lost their lives in the recent violence over the quota reform protests. Would the ministry please provide an answer for how these people died? Was there really a shoot-on-sight order? If so, who ordered it, and why? And if not, why did law enforcers go out of their way to indiscriminately open fire on protesters? It is beyond comprehension that law enforcement would react the way they did when there are many options available to riot police to disperse protests in non-lethal manners. Verified videos, media reports, and eye-witness accounts have provided chilling evidence of the cruelty of the state apparatuses, which didn't even spare a four-year-old standing on his balcony.

Despite repeated calls for accountability and justice—not least from the students themselves who have lost their comrades—we have not seen any real attempt by the government to address the mass killings, even as it observed a nationwide mourning in remembrance of those killed in the recent violence. The judicial probe commission that was formed has confirmed that it will only investigate the six deaths that took place on July 16 for now. Who will answer for the blood that has since been spilled? And when?

As the government goes all out to quell the protests—by using the full force of the state—they seem to be missing the point altogether. Public anger and calls for accountability cannot be suppressed by mass arrests and crackdown on social media. By refusing to acknowledge the complicity of state apparatuses in the deaths, it is trivialising the sanctity of the lives of citizens and in the process further eroding its own credibility in the public eye. We can observe a national mourning day, but without unearthing what caused so many deaths, it will lack any moral authority.

Politically-motivated lending must stop

Take measures to rein in NPLs and reduce banking sector vulnerabilities

The World Bank's (WB) recent observation about non-performing loans (NPLs) and its connection to politically motivated lending in Bangladesh does not come as a surprise. We have repeatedly warned about the risks of bending banking rules to lend to politically connected special interest groups, which has led to default loans soaring. Experts too have called attention to this issue over the years to no avail.

Consequently, there has been a 20.7 percent increase in NPLs from 2022 to 2023, amounting to a total NPL of Tk 145,633 crores in December 2023, with almost half belonging to state-owned banks. When the Awami League assumed office in 2009, the NPL figure was Tk 22,481 crore. Over the last one and a half decade, while private commercial banks mushroomed (from 30 in 2008-2009 to 43 in 2024), NPLs grew by more than six times. Loans were given out without proper credit risk management, lending and recovery rules were bent or relaxed, and the independence of regulatory bodies further compromised all to favour certain politically linked borrowers, many of whom later became defaulters. Meanwhile, no big defaulter has been brought to book.

As the WB report rightfully points out, honest borrowers and businesses are bearing the brunt of the NPL burden, as interest rates continue to rise and ailing banks face liquidity crisis. Despite repeated warnings, no effective measures have been taken to rectify the poor governance, weak market discipline and low capital buffers in the banking sector. Capital adequacy ratio in Bangladesh's banking sector is in fact one of the lowest in South Asia, which means that in the face of unexpected losses, many banks may not have adequate capital to meet their obligations to depositors and creditors.

Unfortunately, the effort spent to understate NPLs by using poor accounting and disclosure standards and regulatory forbearance, was absent in the government's initiative to properly address the vulnerabilities of the financial sector. Before we thrust ourselves to a point of no return, the government must heed expert advice and warnings by the WB and other international financial institutions and put an end to political consideration in lending and default loan recovery. Lastly, authorities must ensure the autonomy of the central bank, not only on paper but in actual terms, upgrade its supervisory and regulatory capacity to fix the problems of the banking sector, and ensure that banks in the country are strictly adhering to internationally accepted banking guidelines and standards.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Fidel Castro temporarily hands over power to his brother Raul Castro

Because of health problems, longtime Cuban leader Fidel Castro handed over provisional power to his brother Raul; the latter served as the country's acting president until officially assuming the post in 2008.

EDITORIAL

KILLINGS DURING QUOTA REFORM MOVEMENT

Crossing the red line



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A recent example of what can happen if there is no minimum democratic and governance accountability in a country is the unprecedented brutality shown by the government and the killing of more than 200 people (according to *Prothom Alo*) during the quota reform movement this month. The agitation, which began following a High Court verdict on June 5 reinstating the quota system in government jobs, was limited to peaceful rallies. But the government did not give due importance to the students' demands and did not even try to negotiate with them, saying that it was a court matter.

The movement turned violent on July 15 when the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), attacked protesting students at several public universities, including Dhaka University. Even after the tragic killing of six youths on July 16 in attacks by police and BCL, the government did not budge. If it had removed the police and BCL men from the streets and had taken the initiative to negotiate with the protesters on their quota reform demand, the subsequent brutal killings could have been avoided.

Analysing 150 of the deaths, *Prothom Alo* found that students and workers were the majority of the victims of the fatal violence and clashes centring around the quota reform movement. As many as 113 victims (75 percent) were children, teenagers and young adults. Nineteen were children and adolescents including a four-year-old child. Ninety-four were 18-29 years old, 21 were 30-39 years old, and 16 were about 40 years old. At least 45 victims were students of different public and private universities, schools and colleges. Besides, a large number of the dead were labourers, petty traders, shopkeepers, drivers, and low-income earners. The analysis also revealed a horrifying reality: most of the dead bodies bore live bullet injuries, while marks of pellets, rubber bullets or other types of injuries were little.

Usually during a mass movement when thousands of people take to the streets, there is a belief among them that law enforcement agencies will not fire directly on them no matter what. If there is a large number of people in a protest march, there is no fear. One



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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

reason for this is the collective power of a large crowd. Another reason is the idea that no state force would open fire on large numbers of people. It is a red line that LEAs around the world would never cross—except those in countries that are ruled by military dictatorship or occupation armies. The LEAs and militaries of any modern state have a wide variety of weapons at their disposal—machine guns, tanks, fighter jets, helicopter gunships, etc—which can kill a large number of people in an instant. But law enforcement forces of any decent civilised and democratic country would never use these weapons on an indiscriminate, wholesale basis against their own people. They simply can't, because crossing this red line means breaking the people's contract with the state. The people give the exclusive power to use force to the state on the condition that this force would be used to protect the people, not to kill them.

In Bangladesh, the ruling Awami League-led government has employed the country's law enforcement agencies against the people before. They have been accused of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and violent suppression of the political opposition's activities. These are also red lines that no democratic government should cross. But this time, the line crossed by the government while suppressing the quota reform

only the demonstrators, but also the pedestrians, shopkeepers, rickshaw pullers, hawkers and even children standing on rooftops or balconies. No law enforcers of any democratic country would directly shoot at the chest, head or eyes of the common people, because they will be held accountable for every shot. Once this red line is crossed, a country's government loses its legitimacy and people's trust.

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university students, who have taken to the streets across the country for several days.

Even after so many killings, there is no credible action on the government's part to admit the wrongdoings or bring the killers to justice. Not only that, cases have been filed against hundreds of thousands of people without proper investigation, and activists and opposition party members are being arrested at a wholesale rate in block raids. This is indicative of more oppressive government action in the coming days.

If the government cannot be pressured strongly and effectively from all quarters for impartial investigations, trials and accountability of these killings, and if the perpetrators get away with killing so many innocent people, including children, the danger will increase even more for the people of the country.

Are we failing our own future?



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Students' protests against discrimination, law enforcers on university campuses, brutal crackdown by law enforcement personnel, shocking violence and rage against the citizens, complete internet blackout, and finally a nationwide curfew—this series of events have been overwhelming, to say the least, for the whole nation. The young generation of today is fighting and struggling, in countless ways and forms, in a free country. So, as we stand in 2024, after 53 years of independence, tagging those who hold a different opinion as "anti-state" and "anti-independence" has become an outdated and overused tactic. This tagging has caused widespread violence against students, leading to deaths and injuries.

This brings forth a series of questions. Who is fighting against whom? Why did the vice-chancellors of most of the public universities essentially disown their students? Why did law enforcement personnel open fire against unarmed students? Why did the authorities use such force against the students who want but the bare minimum of equity?

The answers to all these questions go beyond the current movement. The students know the system is becoming increasingly rotten. Still, they want reforms to ensure a just system, even after knowing that it may not make much difference because many a job is now for sale. As the movement got momentum and the students felt they were being insulted, they understood it was time to continue fighting, not only for the reformation of the system but also to find their voices because, apparently, no one else has the courage to do so.

Slogans heard during the protests was "proshason jobab chai," which is basically asking to hold the authorities accountable for their inaction and hoping for proactive steps. But the very authorities that are accountable for protecting us have failed to do so—be it the university authorities, the police, or the government itself.

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Bangladesh has a long history of student movements. The public

universities, especially Dhaka University, have their pride in leading the successful and justified movements that have always shifted the course of history. So, why did a student movement that started with a demand to reform a discriminatory and unconstitutional system get so violent?

Many are now attempting to satisfy their own agendas. But in this age of

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technology, countless video footage showed BCL and law enforcement agencies' brutality against the protesters clearly. It should not be difficult for them to find out the people who killed so many people and were involved in the looting and destruction

of public properties. This leads to another question: can the students and the nation expect transparency and justice from these very agencies responsible for this violent crackdown?

Even before the nationwide complete shutdown on July 18, the whole country was shocked to see the degree of police brutality when Abu Sayed, a fourth-year university student in Rangpur, was shot dead. Some ministers' comments during this crisis were neither responsible nor sensitive; rather they were provocative against students who were practising their democratic rights. During a crisis, the true face of both the people and the system comes out. This nationwide movement is not an exception, of course; it is rather doing an excellent job of revealing the failure of our institutions. The damage is bigger than it appears on the surface. Will the students who saw the police beat up their friends, or who got stuck in a place and saw armed people, along with law enforcement members, waiting to attack them, or simply witnessed their friends getting shot and die, get over this trauma that their very own government agencies brought upon them? The mistrust created among general students and mass people will have a long-term implication.

Now, the final question: was the situation unavoidable? The authorities eventually admitted that the students' demands were logical, and reformed the quota system. But why did logic require these deaths to be considered and applied? The cruelty that some agencies showed against the country's future generation is upsetting and terrifying. Will they ever be able to recover from that? More importantly, do they want to at all?