

## Only fair justice can restore order

### Govt must allow independent probe into deaths of protesters

Try as it may, the government can no longer circumvent critical questions about the role of security forces and ruling party cadres in the deaths of protesters. Five trends that have emerged from the law enforcement measures taken in response to the violent events of July 18-21 are blaming the violence squarely on BNP Jamaat (without evidence); mass arrests, often through block raids; gross violation of Supreme Court guidelines for arrests and remand; making destruction of public properties—rather than the deaths—a central focus of investigation; and suppression of student organisers and protesters through various tactics. All this has reaffirmed doubts about the government's sincerity to ensure justice for the horrific tragedy that befell our nation.

Against this backdrop, the prime minister's statement on Wednesday about seeking cooperation from the United Nations and other international organisations to conduct a "fair and proper investigation" into the nationwide violence offers a ray of hope. This comes after repeated calls for credible investigations into the deaths. Even the UN and the European Union also demanded a thorough and impartial probe. The PM, we may recall, earlier said the government would seek "foreign technical assistance" for the judicial inquiry committee. It has already indicated that the commission—initially tasked with investigating only the six deaths of July 16—can now probe all the killings that have since occurred.

Where does it all leave us? We have no details yet about the extent of any possible UN involvement in the process or how it will sit with the ongoing investigations by police. But we have to be reasonable about our expectations. With the entire law enforcement machine keyed to political manoeuvres, how much help the judicial commission or any team headed by the UN will have from relevant state departments in, say, collecting or verifying evidence remains to be seen.

As things stand, there is a huge gap between what's being said or sought publicly and what's being done on the ground. Leave aside the widespread panic caused by arresting nearly 11,000 individuals, including many students, over the last 13 days. Even while the PM made her UN probe call, there were reports from different parts of the country about security forces violently disrupting the protesters' "March for Justice" by charging batons and using other heavy-handed tactics. Many protesters were held, many injured. Clearly, protesters continue to be targeted as they were before. Now consider the fact that no legal steps have been taken against any member of the security forces involved in the killings. The disparity couldn't be more obvious, indicating that the government is still in denial, and without a complete turnaround in current practices, justice may continue to elude us.

To this day, the number of people who died varies widely—at least 163 as per this daily, 150 as per the government, 211 as per *Prothom Alo*, 266 as per the student platform. The actual number could be much higher. So many deaths cannot go unaddressed or unpunished. The government must realise that nothing short of a fair investigation into its own forces—who shot indiscriminately at the protesters, aided by party cadres—will restore public order or give credibility to its efforts. Any investigation also must delve into how the conflicts became so violent in the first place, and lead to accountability for those truly responsible. The government should also stop harassing the protesters and ordinary citizens immediately.

## Stop the downward economic spiral

### Fresh sovereign rating downgrade shows much remains to be done

S&P Global's downgrading of Bangladesh's long-term sovereign rating from BB- to B+ is but another indication that while the nation's focus has been trained on ensuring justice for the lives lost in recent violence, the economy continues to take a hit because of the government's failure to resolve this crisis. Following the unrest that resulted in the death of so many individuals, a five-day complete internet blackout, and subsequent curfew imposition, many economic sectors have struggled to bounce back even after the situation has become less tense. The lack of internet connectivity has particularly hurt IT and business-processing outsourcing firms and export-oriented industries. Even the S&P, alongside citing persistent pressure on Bangladesh's external metrics, particularly the decline in foreign exchange reserves, also mentioned in its report how the government is grappling with widespread protests, and that the "highly concentrated political environment" may undermine the predictability of future policy responses.

The S&P downgrade is significant as it may erode confidence in our economy among investors and businesses, and could directly affect Bangladesh's foreign direct investment (FDI) prospects. It may also result in interest rates for foreign loans rising. This means that the economy faces a double whammy as it tries to stay on the path to recovery from a 9.7 percent inflation and a 35 percent reduction of foreign exchange reserves over two years. This path has been beset by problems predating the recent unrest.

For example, on the back of a statistical mismatch of export data between two major sources, Bangladesh Bank published revised figures in early July, and the S&P report mentioned that exports have declined 5.9 percent in FY24. While remittance inflow grew by 10.7 percent in the same period, the most recent data from the central bank shows that remittance inflow in the first 28 days of July was 16 percent lower compared to the full month of July a year ago, and 35 percent lower compared to June this year. Recent events have but exacerbated all these longstanding issues, highlighting once again that the economy is structurally unprepared for instability.

One may recall that Moody's previously downgraded Bangladesh's sovereign credit rating in May 2023, citing heightened external vulnerability and persistent liquidity risks, as well as institutional weaknesses. Another global credit rating agency has now downgraded Bangladesh a year on, which indicates that the authorities have failed to take lessons from the previous setback. As things stand, any economic recovery cannot be even started without first resolving the ongoing crisis through ensuring justice for those killed in the protests. So the authorities must take the latest rating downgrade with the seriousness that it deserves.

# What does our labour market look like for educated youth?



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The student movement for the reformation of the quota system in government jobs highlights the importance and urgency of re-evaluating the current labour market scenario in Bangladesh. The reason behind the educated youth's overwhelming preference for public sector jobs, particularly those in Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS), must be understood in a greater detail and also through a critical lens of youth unemployment.

In this context, we should also keep in mind that Bangladesh is going through a demographic transition with the youth (15-29 years old) constituting 36.7 percent of the total labour force (LFS 2022). However, according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 data, the rate of unemployment among the youth (eight percent) is much higher than the national average (3.53 percent). Among the unemployed (reported to be unemployed for more than two years), as many as 14.7 percent are also found to have received tertiary

**Our educational institutions, starting from the primary level, do not offer such skills with due importance and, as a result, a large mass of the youth population, especially those from the rural areas and underprivileged backgrounds, seriously lack such skills in most of the cases. In addition, skill mismatch due to poor academia-industry linkage is also partly responsible for shrinking the domain of private sector employment for graduates.**

education. This poll of educated unemployed is certainly a serious concern for the country's labour market. Besides, as many as 22 percent of the youth are found to be NEET (not in employment, education and training), with the male NEET



FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

BCS aspirants queue up in front of the central library of Dhaka University, waiting to get in to study for the exam.

being 16.2 percent and the female NEET being as high as 27.1 percent. With such a large proportion of our youth not being in the mainstream labour market activities and another significant proportion being unemployed, one of the most crucial challenges of Bangladesh's labour market is to effectively utilise our favourable demographic profile.

However, from the demand-side point of view, if we explore the employment opportunities for the educated youth in particular (those with tertiary level of education), there are basically two broad streams: public sector jobs and private sector employment. In addition, there is a separate stream comprising different self-employment activities, including entrepreneurial activities, freelance work, and digital platform economy-based jobs. Although all such jobs require a common set of eligibility in terms of education and skills, it is obvious that each of these categories requires different skill sets of its own. In this context, high skilled private sector employment in most cases requires strong interpersonal communication skills both in the native language as well as in English, along with computing and data management skills and teamwork in many cases.

linkage is also partly responsible for shrinking the domain of private sector employment for graduates. Therefore, it can be argued that a "push factor" is working for a significant mass of educated youth searching for high-skilled jobs with decent salary and benefit structure. In addition, there are also complaints and accusations of nepotism and favouritism, which discourage the young people coming from underprivileged backgrounds to compete for them.

On the other hand, we can say that there is a "pull factor" for public sector jobs and it is not only due to the reasonably decent salary and benefits, but also for the stability and job security associated with employment in the public sector. In addition, public sector employment is traditionally considered prestigious, with high possibilities for climbing up the occupational ladder, and is also seen as a source of power and social status. It is therefore not surprising that a young graduate will consider public sector jobs, especially the BCS cadre ones, as the most desirable.

It is not only in the context of salary-based employment but also for different self-employment ventures that there exist several challenges, all of which again "pushes away" the potential young graduates from such ventures. On the one hand,

we should put greater emphasis on specialised short courses, diplomas and technical and vocational education and training (TVET)-based employment instead. However, to attract more young people to TVET-based education and employment, we need to deal with the social stigma attached to it, and at the same time we must work on modernising the training programmes.

The government also needs to re-evaluate the overall labour market scenario for the youth and take necessary steps to broaden the horizon of their employability. In this regard, greater collaborative efforts of industry and academia are required to deal with the issue of skill mismatch and due emphasis should be given to develop soft skills of students through a wide range of initiatives. In this connection, the importance of quality education focusing on basic language, analytical and computing skills, especially at the primary level, cannot be overemphasised.

Finally, with a view to facilitate the entrepreneurial activities of the young graduates, availability of cheaper sources of credit, market linkages, suitable digital infrastructure, budgetary incentives, etc must be ensured, and a favourable ecosystem for the graduates seeking self-employment activities must be built.

## In the aftermath of violence



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"Are you okay?" Friends, family and relatives from abroad all share the same concern. They keep asking while I keep reassuring them that I am okay, at least physically. That was more than enough to be grateful about, I explain. These days, they ask more questions, difficult ones, and one of these questions keeps ringing in my head.

One of my school friends from Delhi asked how I felt and I had no answer to that.

In my mind, I kept rewinding time to figure out when was the last time I really felt something. I tried very hard to remember the last thing I felt. Was it the annoyance of traffic jams caused by the quota protests? Or the deep-seated shame of being unable to empathise with the plight of my peers? Perhaps it was the shock of witnessing violence unfold on my own campus, or the momentary relief of our halls being freed from student politics. Maybe it was the anger at a system that demanded martyrdom before acknowledging legitimate grievances, or the frustration of being unable to stand in solidarity with the protesters, and the sorrow of

being feeling so much and so little at the same time. There are things I feel a little more these days, like helplessness and vulnerability. And then there are things I no longer feel, like sleep and hunger. I spend hours on social media seeking updates and then regret being so adamant. The desire to stay informed is matched by an equal desire to escape the relentless barrage

every day and how I can no longer keep up with remembering their names. I realise that the victims have formed a closer circle around me, from strangers to people I know. How do I label this feeling that seems to be strangling me every day, embracing me in a cloud of remorse and contempt?

So, as I refresh my news feed for the hundredth time, I realise another day has passed and I still do not have the answer to their question. There is nothing much I do these days, except for sharing these stories and saying a silent prayer. The weight of grief is suffocating, and I cannot imagine how long I can endure it. I carry the burden of shared loss because this is where I belong. I do not remember the last time I felt like this, all of it seems very new. It started with an excruciating pain which has now given way to numbness. My tears have dried up and are replaced by a sense of emptiness. I feel hollow if that is something you could feel, and I know that it is here to stay for a while.

All this while I realised that we are capable of feeling way more than our hearts can contain. Yet, amidst the despair, a flicker of hope remains. This makes me feel strong and alive when everything else is falling apart. It is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, a force that united thousands of us in the face of adversity. This hope, fragile though it may be, is the only anchor in the storm. No matter what lies ahead, I want this hope to persist. It is probably the only feeling that makes sense right now.



A parent holding a placard that reads, 'Why would my children get killed for asking for their rights?' in front Dhaka Medical College Hospital entrance on July 30, 2024.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

scrolling through countless obituaries on social media? Was it the fear of becoming another victim, or the pride of belonging to a generation that had etched its name in history?

I do not know. The truth is I have

of distressing news. I cannot sleep in the comfort of my own home knowing what my peers are going through. Their dialogues haunt me as nightmares, pulling me out of a slumber of despair. I keep thinking how the list gets longer