

Legal manoeuvring can't hide ugly truths

Free all detained students, protesters without delay

The manner in which the government has dealt with the whole issue of the six coordinators of quota reform protests has legal irregularities written all over it. The six were finally released on Thursday afternoon, after nearly a week since being picked up between last Friday and Sunday. All through this period, top law and police officers defended it by using words that seemed carefully scripted. Even on Thursday, the law minister claimed that the six were kept in custody for their own security, and that it was they who had sought protection. But no one is buying it anymore. Legal experts have clarified that the safety claim, putting the onus on the detainees, is a cover for what was actually an abduction by police, which is illegal and unconstitutional. Citing the Appellate Division's guidelines, they said any detainee must be produced before court within 24 hours, which was not done in this case.

We have seen a similar legal manoeuvring in the case of the teenager detained in connection with the death of student protester Abu Sayed. The 16-year-old, Ali Shahriar Mahim, was apparently not even present at the site of the killing. But police still arrested him for murder, leading to him being held in Rangpur jail for 12 days. The manner in which police approached the whole issue—from bringing false charges against a minor to inflating his age in case documents to preparing a First Information Report (FIR) that totally contradicted with independently verified footages of police repeatedly shooting Abu Sayed, despite the victim posing no threat—indicates that they may go to any lengths to cover their tracks and absolve themselves of any responsibility for the nationwide killings that occurred since July 16.

Reportedly, Shahriar Mahim has now been released, even though he hasn't been cleared of the charges against him. Elsewhere, there has been a conspicuous silence from the otherwise vocal student leaders throughout their detention and afterwards (the only statement they made was through an alleged two-day hunger strike that preceded their release). What does their plight tell us about the integrity of the law enforcement officials? What does it say about the future of the nearly 11,000 people arrested in 673 cases across the country over the last 14 days? These mass arrests and the tenuous legal justifications provided for them make a mockery of our justice system. They also show that, despite recent government claims about being open to a fair and thorough investigation into the killings of so many people in quota-related clashes, the authorities are still unwilling to pursue accountability where it is most needed: its own security forces.

This has to stop. Legal manoeuvring can no longer hide ugly truths or delude citizens. While we want accountability for the destruction and damage caused to public infrastructure by some elements, we believe the investigative focus must singularly be on establishing accountability for those tragic deaths at the moment. And the higher authorities must prove their sincerity by immediately stopping the pointless mass arrests, releasing all victims of legal harassment, especially students and political activists, and aid in the process of investigating the role of security forces during the violent events of July 18-21.

Education suffering like never before

Its impact on the nation's future may be devastating

The ongoing disruption to school and university education and the resulting cancellation of public and school exams are deeply concerning. The government shut down all schools, colleges, and universities on July 16 as tensions began to mount following the crackdown on student protesters by members of ruling party affiliated groups and law enforcement personnel. However, activities at public universities have remained halted since July 1, when teachers went on work abstention to demand reinstatement of their previous pension scheme, followed by students against quota discrimination taking to the streets. As a result of these closures, the academic lives of students across the country have become mired in uncertainty.

It should be recalled that education across the board had been greatly affected for more than a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Experts say the setback suffered during that time is yet to be made up for. On top of that, during the first half of this year, classroom activities had already been disturbed because of heatwaves, flooding, and elections. Educationists have repeatedly expressed the need for the authorities to put greater emphasis on recovering from the learning loss caused by the pandemic. But even before that could be done, recent developments have hindered education again.

Admission tests for the cluster of nine agricultural universities for this academic year, scheduled to be held on July 20, have been postponed, along with admission procedures at other universities. And the same has happened in school admissions, too. The HSC and all equivalent exams, scheduled between July 18 and August 1, have had to be suspended. Similarly, half-year exams at secondary schools could not be held on time, along with other important activities, throwing the whole academic calendar into disarray. The education loss that is occurring as a result, coupled with the uncertainty being brought to the lives of young people, are simply impossible to measure. However, their long-term implication for the nation would likely be devastating.

Therefore, the authorities urgently need to create an environment in which schools and universities can reopen, ensuring the safety of all students. This will require all forms of harassment, intimidation and use of violence against our students to stop. Having done that, the government should consult with educationists and experts and figure out a way to recover the huge learning loss that students have had to suffer from since the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, the government should also talk to the protesting teachers, and ensure they return to classes as soon as possible.

Mindless killing changed everything

Blinded by unquestioned power, the government is refusing to accept the new reality

THE THIRD VIEW

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The prime minister and several ministers keep on asking: since the quota reform has already been implemented, why are the students still demonstrating? The repetition of this question only proves how blind to facts and disconnected with the people the government and Awami League leaders are. They are denying or seem to be oblivious to the fact that over 200 killed—the government itself admits to 150—and thousands injured by the indiscriminate firing by the police and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has totally changed the situation. In one eye hospital in Dhaka, during the violence, nearly 400 people who sustained eye injuries were treated, 300 of whom had to be admitted, and 250 had to undergo eye surgery. The majority of them had pellet (a particular type of ammunition used by police during the recent violence) wounds in one or both eyes. Imagine what the total figure could be like. We have no count yet of how many will have to amputate one or both arms or legs due to gunshots, and how many more will have to be operated upon. How many will really return to normal life? Everything points to mindless violence that cannot be termed as police action to quell unrest that emanates from usual demonstrations in our part of the world. The evidence is of a mindset of "shoot at sight," as announced by an AL leader.

Today's issue is seeking justice. Justice for the massacre of students and other citizens, the unleashing of a killing machine that the police and BGB turned out to be, the large-scale arrests, the "block raids," the house-to-house search, the false cases, and the insults of terming the demonstrators in general to be agents of destruction and anti-Bangladesh forces.

The all-encompassing issue that has alienated the students and enraged the people is the atmosphere of fear under which all students, youth, politically involved citizens, and people in general are having to live. (A father called this author and said, "I have a school-going son. I become tense with every sound of a car stopping near my house at night".)

The killings definitely stand as the most brutal retaliation by a government on any civic movement in the post-liberation Bangladesh history—and may be that of the subcontinent.



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PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

We shudder at the thought of how a civilian government could allow its law enforcers to attack its own people with such brutality. The killing was not just an event, but one that took place over several days. Wasn't there any reflection, any afterthought and reassessment at the end of the first, second or third day that such heartless and continuous killing of one's own people must stop?

What brought the party that led us through the Liberation War to this? Over 15 years of unaccountable power, greed, cronyism, wealth accumulation, abuse of authority, and the attitude that they are above the law.

Of all the deaths, the most heart-rending is perhaps the story of Riya Gope, a six-year-old in Nayamati, Narayanganj, who was playing on the rooftop of their four-storey building. On July 19 afternoon, when police started firing on the demonstrators on the street near her house, her father Dipak Kumar Gope rushed to the roof to get her; he was carrying his daughter back to their flat when a bullet struck the child's head. She died at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on July 25. How could a bullet hit someone on the roof of a four-storey building unless the police took an aim to do so? Was Riya a threat? The explanation will most likely be that it was an accident. But can that be acceptable when she was in her father's arms on the roof of

a four-storey building?

Use of helicopters to fire sound grenades and tear gas shells is a new element we saw in crowd-handling by the law enforcers this time around. However, there are disturbing accounts from the public, reporters and especially photographers that rifle shots were fired from these helicopters upon demonstrating crowds. On July 18 and

and their firing on demonstrators. While the judicial investigation to probe all deaths should continue, a separate and fast-track probe must be conducted to reveal the truth on this specific matter.

It must also be investigated as to what led to such a large-scale killing in the hands of law enforcers. Who made the threat assessment, and how? At what stage were they allowed to open fire on demonstrators, and who gave the orders to shoot? The rifles used were all modern and sophisticated. BGB used weapons meant to protect our borders. How could they be allowed to tackle student demonstrators with the same weapons? The investigation should also consider whether or not excessive force and disproportionate firepower were used against the demonstrators, none of whom have so far been seen to carry firearms. They were all carrying sticks and iron rods.

It is our considered view that the government and the ruling party continue to live in their own bubble and underestimate the depth of the people's grievances that has resulted from the killings of students and the public. We also feel that peace will not return to the campuses and the streets until justice is done and convincingly seen to be done. Force can be used to "calm" the situation, but it will be temporary. The lengthier the period of uncertainty, the more grievous will be its impact on our economy and the country's international acceptability.

Those who are used to using power to get their way are usually not aware of its limits. We have used Ansar, police, Rab, BGB and even the army, and an extreme measure like curfew. What has been the result? Yes, brutality, death, arrests and harassment can be further ratcheted up. But all that will generate more resentment, deeper hatred, and critical desperation. Such use of force may, at best, show a superficial show of calm, but will never solve our real problem of "power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely" (adopting Lord Acton's time-honoured observation).

We urge the government to no longer hide behind convenient narratives that stand totally contradicted by facts. We further urge them to examine the brutality with which the demonstrators have been treated and the death and injuries that ordinary students and the people have had to suffer, and respond to the call for justice. We also urge them to stop befooling themselves as facts are in people's hands due to modern technology. Yes, there could be a lot of false news and videos in the digital sphere. But there are many credible ones too. Wisdom should compel the government not to brush them aside, which it will do only at its own peril.

Are we failing to understand Gen Z?

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The generation of people born from 1995 to 2010 are commonly called Generation Z (Gen Z), following the alphabetical naming of their predecessors two generations prior, Generation X (Gen X). These young people are characteristically blunt and more aware of their rights with regards to what the market or society has to offer. Gen Z has long held a reputation for being attached to the virtual screen. In fact, for most Gen Z parents, screen time has been a growing concern as uncontrolled exposure to media has resulted in a disconnect from reality—or so we thought.

These "screenagers" have held a principal role in the quota reform movement. They have been successful in mobilising the entire nation's student body, the Bangladeshi diaspora, the generational parents and even the rickshaw pullers in fighting for their cause. So, maybe it's for us to take a fresh look at the Gen Z.

These young people have been using social media platforms, most notably Instagram, TikTok and YouTube from a much earlier age than their previous generations. In fact, 58 percent of surveyed teenagers expressed that they could not stay more than four hours without the

internet, while older generations can stay up to 24 hours. This statistic makes internet reliance seem like a weakness for Gen Z, but upon close examination, the habits developed out of this excessive rate of internet usage can be appreciated. With the advent of social media and the generation that has adapted to it, discourse has increased, alongside awareness. This is important because, unlike previous generations, Gen Z uses the internet as a bidirectional platform, where you not only consume but also create. They use this bidirectionality to their advantage by promoting their chosen narrative.

The ability to quickly create content that caters directly to their chosen audience was once a skill that only marketing professionals had. The rise of TikTok and Instagram reels has transferred this skill to every Gen Z member with a mobile phone. Gen Z Bangladeshis have used this specific ability to draw attention to their campaign and bring in international actors to the discourse. Their growing familiarity with internet resources allows them to find relevant contacts, write relevant emails and generate responses when necessary. Hence, their activism has taken a far different shape and can reverberate throughout

the population far quicker than before. They also receive and process information faster, which has both its advantages and disadvantages.

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this opinion becomes incredibly strong, it pours out of the echo chamber and takes the form of a movement like the quota reform movement. The constant access to information not only keeps them informed but also motivates them.

Gen Z has now developed their own form of communication, including new words that remain largely foreign

to older generations. This creates a disconnect between them and older generations—including lawmakers, politicians and people in power. But it cannot be avoided that this generation appears to be more informed and more actionable in their own right. So, their concerns surrounding different matters cannot be taken lightly. In fact, their insights might prove to be most useful in future development-related decisions.

Gen Z in Bangladesh and worldwide have expressed deep concerns with regard to issues such as mental health and climate change, both of which need to be taken seriously. They are already mobilising policy discourses on social media through activist groups that create discussion online without requiring a physical organisation or entity. The marketing world and even policymakers across the developed world are increasingly taking cognisance of their emerging choices and priorities. The same should be happening in Bangladesh.

This generation also has a fresh take on established ideas, such as creating work-space cafes to motivate student's learning which can take on conglomerates such as leading coffee chains in the near future. Their predominantly risk-taking nature has allowed them to introduce upcycling and thriving culture in Bangladesh, which was previously unheard of in the country. Most notably, this risk-taking nature is not simply a characteristic that fades as the generation ages, which is more apparent than ever. In fact, backed by experience and good judgement, their ideas are worthwhile investments.