

Mass arrests causing mass suffering Govt risks further alienation by continuing crackdown

We fail to comprehend what the government thinks it can achieve through its continued crackdown, which has so far seen at least 10,947 individuals arrested in 674 cases filed in Dhaka and 51 other districts between July 18 and August 1. Is it to pursue justice for the violent events of July 18-21? Is it to buttress its narrative of BNP-Jamaat orchestrating the unrest? Is it to punish students, activists, and anyone who dared to stand up against its security forces and party cadres? Is it to disabuse citizens of the notion that those security forces—including police and BGB—were to blame for the killing of over 200 people? Or is it simply an attempt, ludicrous as it may be, to force-restore public order?

Whatever it is, it is not working. It is not the right way. And it is backfiring, if the rising backlash against government handling of recent events is any indication. So far, the law enforcement focus has been mainly twofold: conduct raids and arrests for the July 18-21 events, and suppress public outbursts at the killings. Even yesterday, shots were fired during protests demanding justice for the killings, with a hearing on a writ petition seeking court order to prevent firing delayed earlier. If we are to stick to the legal measures taken by law enforcers, many disturbing trends about their arrests and case filings have also come to light.

From conducting “block raids” to illegally abducting six key coordinators of quota reform protests to bringing trumped-up charges against listed political rivals to inflating the age of minors implicated in cases to falsifying First Information Reports (FIR) to grossly violating Supreme Court guidelines for arrests and remand to allegedly engaging in “arrest business”—the list of objectionables reported in the media is quite long. This runs in the face of claims by the home minister that the arrests are being made “based on evidence,” and not as part of any mass arrest campaign. We have earlier commented on how the mass arrests and block raids, often targeting students involved in quota reform protests, have created widespread panic. Now, the legal hassles facing the arrestees and their families will no doubt add to the overall environment of anger and distrust, further alienating the government.

The recent change in government tone—as evidenced by the slowdown in lamentation for destroyed public infrastructure, shifting focus to the unprecedented tragedy that accompanied it, and signalling openness to international cooperation in investigations—is still seen suspiciously by the protesters out there, and for that, ongoing legal measures by the government are largely responsible. Clearly, building trust has to start from the grounds up. The wounds from those days of reckless firing cannot be healed by reckless arresting. If the government really wants the public to keep faith in its sincerity to conduct a fair and thorough investigation into the July tragedy, it must stop these law enforcement excesses and make way for an independent probe of international standards. It must bring the light on the role of its own security forces in killings.

Take steps to clear port backlogs

Return of regular export-import activities at Ctg port is vital

The deep scars left on our economy by the ongoing curfew and five-day-long internet shutdown (along with internet disruptions that have lasted much longer) are slowly emerging to the surface. Almost all business sectors have been hit hard, including import-export. As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, international trading activities at Chattogram port, which handles 87 percent of the country's import-export activities, are yet to return to normal, causing continuous business losses and reducing government revenue collection.

For nearly a week, internet blackout hampered the customs clearance process of both export and import consignments. Although internet services have been restored of late, the backlog of activities, which came to a halt between July 20 and 22, will reportedly take at least 10 to 15 days to be cleared. Currently, cargo ships are having to wait three to five days to enter the port instead of the usual one-day delay. It's increasing the cost for importers, who have to pay \$10,000 to \$50,000 per day for such delays. This not only increases import costs, which are ultimately transferred onto consumers, but the late arrival of imported raw materials to the factories means a delay in manufacturing as well.

For the RMG sector, the long-term implication is failure to meet delivery deadlines and thus the risk of losing buyers to other competing countries. Previously, we warned that the government's repressive way of handling the quota reform movement and subsequent violence would tarnish Bangladesh's image as a stable investment partner. As trade activities struggle to return to normal, and businesses continue to take the hit, the fear of losing our hold on foreign markets is turning into a reality. Even retailers selling imported goods are not spared. The late arrival of a huge amount of stock all at the same time might push the price of products down. Plus, the quality of perishable goods, when released late from the port, is also bound to be compromised.

Thus, it is essential that the authorities take all steps necessary to clear port backlogs urgently. Immediate remedies may include increasing manpower not just at the Chattogram port but all other ports handling cargos, making the customs clearance process faster and easier by reducing interim steps, and increasing the capacity of customs officials. The government also must acknowledge that its ability to reduce tensions by addressing the grievances of protesters properly and to keep the economy afloat through supportive measures is being seriously questioned in the business world, too. It must rise to the occasion and take lessons from its failures for the sake of the nation's future.

Death without weeping



BLOWIN' IN
THE WIND

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We enter the mournful month of August, a time burdened with the memory of excruciating tragedy. The unseen amount of bloodshed witnessed in July has also left an indelible mark on our collective consciousness. As a nation born through the legacy of blood, violence is not unfamiliar to us. However, the recent deaths during the ongoing student protests are grotesque, marking a significant turning point. To paraphrase Lenin, decades have happened in the last two weeks that otherwise would not have happened in decades.

Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose death alongside his family members we mourn in August, was a spearhead of many student movements that have pierced through our national history. The estimated death tolls in the Language Movement of 1952 were 12; in the 1969 Mass Uprising, it was 61; in the Dhaka University massacre of March 25, 1971, it was over 220; and in the anti-Ershad protest of the 1990s, it was around 50. In the first three instances, the perpetrators were occupying forces or outsiders, and in the last, a dictator turned against his own people. This time though, witnessing at least 200 deaths, mainly students, in two weeks at the hands of our fellow citizens adds an unprecedented layer to our sorrow. This occurred under the leadership of a prime minister who had earlier survived a devastating grenade attack that claimed 24 lives in one fatal August. The moist soil of freshly buried July victims and the earth under which the deceased victims of past violence rest highlight the urgent need for peace and stability. Enough blood has been spilt. Now we need water to wash away the sins, the guilt, and the blood.

We require compassionate individuals like Muddho, who bravely made his way through the crowd to distribute water bottles to the protesters, asking, “Does anyone need water?” His water bottles emptied our hearts and moistened our eyes. His death, among many, urges us to escape the cycle of violence and demands a critical engagement with the triangle of violence defining this moment. To climb out of this hole, we must retrace the steps that led us here.

Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung's theory of the interconnected triangle of direct, structural, and cultural violence offers an explanation. The most visible tip of the triangle right now is “direct violence,” epitomised by the



We must seize this moment to build a more equitable and just society where every young person has the chance to thrive.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

police brutality leading to hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, and numerous arrests. Despite attempts by police and government spokespersons to blame hidden forces exploiting the situation, citizen journalism empowers us to see clearly and form our own conclusions. While it is true that students became aggressive in response to police violence, this does not justify the use of live ammunition by law enforcers, hyper-incarcerations, and cyber-surveillance. Indeed, unidentified mobs vandalised state property, but real-time efforts to safeguard national property appeared insufficient. The high number of casualties in the streets underscores one brute fact: the authorities and their auxiliary forces unleashed unprecedented violence to quash these young protesters across the country.

This leads us to the unseen origin of the scourge that Galtung speaks of: “structural violence.” In this context, “structure” denotes a pattern of collective social action that has achieved a degree of permanence, while “violence” signifies the suffering and injustice deeply ingrained in ordinary, taken-for-granted patterns. The Students against Discrimination

movement dared to challenge the system that rendered life predictable, secure, and comfortable for a privileged few. For the majority outside the inner circle, poverty, insecurity, ill health, and violence are prevalent. For them, the only way out was through collective social action aimed at changing the system. The allocation of 56 percent of government jobs under different quotas, including 30 percent for descendants of freedom fighters, was symptomatic of underlying structural violence. The introduction of over 100 universities and thousands of colleges over the last three decades has created a desire for upward social mobility. In an emerging economy, the myth of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, international jobs, and startups fostered the aspiration that a peasant's son need not remain a peasant. Therefore, they perceive the quota system as a hindrance to the recognition of meritorious individuals. The soaring unemployment rate exacerbates this issue. Sixty-six percent of national university students are jobless. The official unemployment rate is 3.51 percent, while the World Bank puts it higher at 4.7 percent in 2022. They see that the private sector is much more receptive to candidates with better communication skills or family backgrounds. They observe that elites send their children to English medium schools and pursue higher education abroad. The deep-seated anger is not random. That's why a rickshaw puller or a street hawker fights alongside a student for a cause

is fighting a two-pronged war: direct violence and cultural violence. It is no coincidence that the manipulation of identity politics has come to light. The vilification of rightful demands for justice and equality is prevalent. The authorities employ political language to dehumanise demonstrators and rationalise their violent response. This cultural violence will perpetuate the cycle of oppression, creating a narrative that obscures the legitimate grievances of the underprivileged and normalises their marginalisation.

How do we exit this self-made hole? First, we need decency and prudence to tell the truth. Then, we need to ensure justice and reparation. Only then can we achieve reconciliation. Reconciliation cannot occur without truth-telling, accountability, and a commitment to dismantling the structures of violence that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Like the pandemic, this moment of crisis presents an opportunity for transformation. We can access change through this portal. We must seize this opportunity to build a more equitable and just society where every young person has the chance to thrive. The lives of the fallen students must inspire the change we so desperately need.

Will a normal day ever come?



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After finishing her lunch, six-year-old Riya went to play on the rooftop of her family's home in Narayanganj. Tragically, her innocent moment was abruptly shattered when a bullet from a law enforcement raid struck her in the head. Similar tragedies have unfolded across Dhaka: four-year-old Ahad was shot while standing on his balcony with his parents, just as he was closing a window—everyday activities violently interrupted by the chaos of violence.

These incidents underscore how even the sanctuaries of home, like balconies and rooftops, are not immune to the reach of violence. This situation calls to mind the experiences shared by Bisan from Gaza, whose Instagram reels poignantly capture the mass-scale violence and disruption in Palestine.

Veena Das, a prominent anthropologist, offers profound insights into how violence permeates and affects everyday life. Her work emphasises that violence is not merely an event, but a process that deeply influences daily routines, relationships, and the broader social fabric.

Das explores the concept of “everyday violence,” illustrating how acts of violence, whether state-sponsored or otherwise, are not

isolated incidents, but rather deeply intertwined with the daily experiences of individuals and communities. In her studies, she highlights how violence can reshape the very essence of daily life, creating a climate of fear, insecurity, and disruption that affects everything from personal interactions to community cohesion.

The recent violence in Dhaka and the rest of the country has fostered an atmosphere of pervasive fear and insecurity. Students are increasingly subjected to raids, with many being rushed to hospitals with serious injuries. A recent report in *The Daily Star* highlighted the case of Mehedi, a student who was shot and injured. His father's poignant remark, “I will never tell anyone to send their kids to school again,” captures the profound mistrust and anxiety that now pervade the community.

These incidents extend beyond temporary disruptions; they inflict lasting psychological scars. Veena Das's concept of “everyday violence” provides a framework for understanding this issue. She asserts that violence permeates the routine aspects of life, embedding fear deeply into the daily experience. The state's pervasive violence in Dhaka permeates

the social fabric, eroding trust and safety. This atmosphere of fear significantly affects social interactions and community cohesion, making it increasingly difficult for people to feel secure in public spaces.

The frequent block raids and the mistreatment of individuals, exemplified by the unlawful arrest and brutal handling of 17-year-old Hasnatul Islam Faiyaz, who was bound with ropes, intensify this sense of insecurity. Such actions inflict immediate harm and contribute to a broader climate of fear, destabilising the sense of safety and stability in everyday life.

My room that once served as a sanctuary of personal expression, marked by yellow curtains and cherished books, is now overshadowed by the omnipresent influence of the authorities. The incessant noise of helicopters and the constant use of sound grenades, purportedly for protection, pervade our private spaces. What were once havens of safety have become zones of fear and control. The enforced immobility, isolation due to internet shutdowns, and the unyielding noise disrupt the peace and safety of our homes. Conversations with friends reveal this unsettling reality: one struggles with the rising cost of living, another cannot sleep without leaving the door open, feeling trapped and vulnerable.

This transformation is not merely physical, but profoundly psychological. James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* provides a useful framework for understanding this impact. Scott explains how states impose their vision of order and control on society, often disregarding the complexities

of local contexts. The deployment of helicopters and the relentless use of sound grenades, framed as protective measures, exemplify how the authorities' control extends to personal spaces, turning them into extensions of their surveillance and power.

Reflecting on the idea of normalcy amid this reconfigured time and space, it becomes evident that both public and private spheres are profoundly affected by pervasive violence. A return to normalcy seems increasingly unattainable. As Das notes, there is a “mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary” in such contexts, where violence intertwines with the everyday, anchoring the event to the ordinary in specific ways. This intersection underscores how acts of violence permeate and redefine the ordinary, embedding fear and instability into the fabric of daily life.

Acknowledging these impacts is crucial for moving forward. The community requires systemic change to restore safety and normalcy, ensuring that personal spaces retain their privacy and public spaces are free from fear and violence. The act of witnessing, therefore, becomes vital—not merely as an observation but as a way to understand and address the intertwining of violence and ordinary life, seeking to unravel the pervasive influence of government-imposed disruptions.

Will this trauma ever be cancelled? Can we envision a future where such pervasive violence and control are no longer defining elements of our daily lives? How do we move from this deeply fractured state of existence to a place where normalcy, safety, and privacy can be truly restored?