

Take concrete steps to address public anger

Call for discussion must be preceded by definitive action

We condemn the fresh set of violence that occurred in different parts of the country on August 2, leaving at least two people dead and almost 150 injured. The clashes reportedly took place in the capital's Uttara area, Sylhet, Khulna, Narsingdi, Chattogram and Noakhali during processions of the student movement against discrimination. Law enforcers and members of ruling party affiliated student wings allegedly tried to foil the processions at different locations, which led to the violence. On August 2, thousands of people from different walks of life joined the students in their march for justice. And they again came out in huge numbers alongside thousands of students yesterday, demanding investigations into the killings that took place in July following a government crackdown on students using state and non-state actors.

As we have repeatedly said in this column, the use of force to attempt to quell the student movement, from the outset, was a terrible mistake. Such attempts were totally undemocratic, and have now transformed the movement to a point where it is no longer restricted to the students only. People from all walks of life have extended their support to the nine demands of the students. And we hope the government understands the gravity of the situation, and the necessity to show restraint and create the groundwork for open and prompt negotiations.

In that regard, we see wisdom in the prime minister's willingness to sit with the protesting students and listen to them. The students, however, have so far refused to sit for dialogue with the government. The government's previous actions, which ran contrary to its own statements, as well as the expectations and hopes of the students, have created this situation where the students no longer seem to trust the government. The government's decision to arrest huge numbers of people—including students and ordinary citizens—while dithering about in regards to investigating law enforcers responsible for shooting at unarmed students and citizens, as well as various other questionable decisions, has naturally created immense misgivings about the government among students in particular.

As of now, while calling for dialogue, the government has not taken any concrete steps to address the grievances of the students or the public in general. Therefore, the government should immediately launch credible investigations into the firings. Those responsible for such atrocities and the killing and injuring of students must be brought to book. Additionally, it is high time to hold those who pushed for the student protests to be quelled using violence to account also. In their nine demands, the students have identified certain ministers for their role in the events that unfolded. These ministers should be held responsible for their actions.

These and other concrete steps are the only way forward for the government. The public anger that has taken hold should be understood, rather than undermined, so that the country can find a peaceful resolution to the ongoing unrest. And that is essential to prevent any further damage to our economy and society, and most importantly, to prevent any further violence and loss of lives.

Israel's actions a recipe for regional disaster

Global forces must urge for peace deal

When the world is pushing for peace in the form of a ceasefire in Gaza, the assassination of Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, Iran has derailed that hope. Analysts fear this event could have far-reaching consequences in the whole Middle East, leading to a full-on regional conflict. And such fears cannot be dismissed completely at this point, given the tensions that have built up in the region.

Senior officials of Hamas have said the death of Haniyeh, who had been a top negotiator in the ceasefire talks, means their fight against Israel would intensify. While Israel has not publicly acknowledged its role in the killing, *The New York Times* reports that several US officials assess that the country was indeed responsible. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden said the killing "doesn't help" efforts to secure a ceasefire. In almost 11 months, amid widespread destruction in Gaza, Israel has repeatedly thwarted talks of truce, clearly indicating that it has no intention of stopping the atrocities. If the reports are accurate, this is just the newest manufactured obstacle.

Israel is already facing global condemnation for its genocide, which has claimed the lives of over 39,000 people in Gaza. Besides such heinousness, it is also attacking people in foreign lands, beyond its jurisdiction, which is absolutely unacceptable and is a recipe for greater turmoil. A recent instance of this is Israel's airstrikes and artillery fire on Lebanon, leading to multiple deaths. Unsurprisingly, this has forced Hezbollah to resume rocket and artillery attacks on Israel. The group's chief Hassan Nasrallah has said that Israel "crossed red lines" after killing its top military commander earlier in Beirut. It's quite obvious: attacks lead to retaliation, and the cycle of violence continues. But this simple reality is being constantly ignored.

After Haniyeh's killing, US, Egyptian and Qatari mediators are desperately trying to salvage ceasefire talks, but for them to be successful, both parties have to be on the same page. They are, however, dealing with a country that does not want peace, for why else would it strike a school sheltering displaced Palestinians, killing 15, on Friday. Nevertheless, global actors must stand against this genocide, and continue to condemn and pressurise Israel, if they want to ensure peace for the Middle East. Given that the violence has kept expanding, it is high time for it to end before the entire region becomes engulfed in further turmoil.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Anne Frank is caught by the Gestapo

On this day in 1944, the secret annex in Amsterdam where Anne Frank and seven others were hiding was discovered by the Gestapo; all were sent to concentration camps, with only Otto Frank surviving.

Bangladesh's growth story lacks justice and humanity



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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The student-led non-political quota reform movement—calling for fair treatment towards all job seekers on the basis of merit—ended up being such a huge tragedy because of a total lack of sensitivity and understanding of reality on the part of the government and the ruling political party. The ongoing student movement, which began on July 1, 2024, is the manifestation of bigger problems that policymakers have overlooked for decades. The problems are economic, social and political in nature. Behind the quota movement is the suppressed anger and deprivation in various forms that have existed for a long time.

Despite economic progress during the last one and a half decades, for which the current government takes credit, there are not enough jobs for the young population in the country. With stagnant private investment which was 23.5 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in fiscal year (FY) 2024, the private sector cannot create that many jobs. Meanwhile, with the increases in salaries, perks, job security and power, government jobs have become the most coveted form of employment in the market.

Though the official unemployment rate is only 3.53 percent according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022, youth unemployment stands at eight percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The percentage of youth aged 15-24 years who are not in employment, education, and training (NEET) is 40.67 percent. In a skewed labour market, the opportunity for decent employment is limited, due to which 84.9 percent jobs are in the informal sector where income and job security are low.

Clearly, the economic growth in Bangladesh could not create enough jobs. This is also reflected in a downward trend in the employment elasticity of GDP. Employment elasticity is a measure of how employment changes due to changes in economic growth. The quarterly GDP estimates and LFS data indicate that in FY2022, employment elasticity was 0.38 percent, which has come down to 0.13 percent in the first quarter of FY2024.

The lack of employment opportunities, rampant corruption, cronyism, huge bank loan defaults, and lack of good governance have resulted in unequal distribution of economic opportunities and wealth across all strata of society. The top five percent of the population possessed 30.04 percent of the national income in 2022, which was 27.82 percent in 2016. On the other hand, the bottom five percent owned only 0.37 percent of the national income in 2022, which increased slightly from 0.23 percent in 2016. On the other hand, the average inflation rate in Bangladesh was 9.72

percent in June 2024. The failure of the government to contain high inflationary pressure during the last two years has squeezed the purchasing power of low and middle-income families.

The so-called "political stability," which has turned into a one-party system through multiple questionable national elections, has resulted in a lack of accountability in every sphere of public services. Hence, reducing inequality and empowering the people—particularly the young and the poor—through ensuring productive employment with a decent salary remained outside the development realm of the government, except for some lip service in national strategies such as the five-year plans. Bangladesh has not yet ratified the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122) of the International Labour Organisation



VISUAL: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

(ILO) on pursuing "full, productive and freely chosen employment." Among South Asian countries, India ratified the convention in 1998, and Sri Lanka did too in 2016.

An important change in governance during the past one and a half decades is evident through over-bureaucratisation and over-regulation of the economy. This has failed to provide skills and jobs to the people, leading to unabated corruption and huge resource misuse which has favoured the rich and privileged, and throttled the opportunities of the common people and the youth.

Though some government interventions helped achieve growth and improve average social indicators such as health and education, the quality and distributional issues of such advancements are questionable. Access to public facilities is unequal.

For instance, policies in the banking sector are dictated by powerful people who also incidentally receive licenses because of their political connections. Due to poor governance, the sector is overburdened with willfully defaulted bank loans, which rose consistently from Tk 22,480 crore in 2009 to Tk 156,039 crore in the fourth quarter of FY2023. Fraud and irregularities are also on the rise. An assessment of only 24 significant published irregularities that occurred between 2008 and 2023 revealed that a total of Tk 92,261 crore was taken out of the banking system, which is equivalent to 2 percent of the GDP of FY2023 and 12 percent of the national budget for FY2024.

For the less privileged, access to public services often depends on bribes to officials and connections with the ruling party's local cadres. For example, the government's beneficiary list of the SSNPs often ends up excluding the

empowering the youth through quality education, skills and employment.

Therefore, students have now termed their protest a movement for justice. Students' demands have touched millions across the country. The government's brutality was manifested in the heavy-handed manner in which it tackled the movement for a just cause. Display of more importance to the destruction of physical infrastructure over human lives is a cruel insensitivity to the students and common people who were killed and injured.

Alas, Bangladesh's growth story does not have a human face!

That is why the student movement has now transformed into a mass movement from where the call for political change is sought. Indeed, without a participatory political system and the establishment of people's voting rights, economic growth can neither sustain nor be just and humane.

An urgent plea for democracy



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The ongoing protest by students and mass people demanding justice has surfaced in a profound democratic void in Bangladesh. The government's heavy-handed response to peaceful demonstrations reflects a deep-seated intolerance for dissent. Rather than engaging with the students' legitimate concerns, the administration chose to suppress their voices, further exacerbating the democratic deficit.

Over the past 15 years, the ruling party has systematically eroded the democratic fabric of the nation, leading to widespread discontent and disillusionment among the populace. For the past decade and a half, Bangladesh has witnessed a systematic de-democratisation process orchestrated by the ruling party. This process has involved manipulating democratic institutions,

undermining free and fair elections, and consolidating power through various means. The ruling party has effectively used blame games and the rhetoric of development to mask its authoritarian tendencies, creating an illusion of progress while stifling democratic freedoms.

The last three elections have been marred by allegations of irregularities and manipulation, distancing the ruling party from the electorate. These questionable elections have not only undermined the democratic process but also alienated the party's leaders from the people. The gap between the government and the governed has widened, resulting in a significant disengagement that has eroded public trust in the political system. The creation of a parliament with a one-sided election that does

not heed the demands of the society, but benefits a select group has further entrenched this de-democratisation. The systematic interference in the legal system has undermined the rule of law, eroding the foundational principles of democracy and justice.

Surprisingly, the identity of a portion of civil society has become blurred as they aligned themselves with the ruling party and adopted behaviours and rhetoric that echo the government's stance. This co-optation of civil society further stifles independent voices and critical discourse, contributing to the democratic erosion. The parties not in power have also drastically failed the nation by ignoring the real challenges faced by the masses. Their focus has been primarily on regaining power rather than addressing the pressing issues that affect the everyday lives of the people. This neglect has further contributed to the democratic void and the growing disillusionment among citizens.

To address this democratic crisis, it is imperative for the ruling party to cultivate a culture of democracy within its ranks. This includes encouraging and allowing opposing voices, ensuring freedom of speech, and using administrative apparatus

for the benefit of citizens rather than for maintaining power. Free and independent media is vital for a functioning democracy, and steps must be taken to ensure that media outlets can operate without fear of repression or censorship. Listening to opposing voices with good intentions and understanding that protesters are citizens of Bangladesh, not merely supporters of opposition parties, are crucial. Representatives of the government should communicate through the media with the humility of public servants, not the arrogance of rulers. Sensible and respectful discourse is necessary to rebuild trust and confidence among the people.

The path to restoring democracy in Bangladesh requires a commitment to these principles. The ruling party must take concrete steps to re-engage with the people, uphold democratic values, and ensure that the governance of Bangladesh is truly for the benefit of its citizens. Only by embracing these changes can Bangladesh move away from autocracy and towards a future where democracy thrives. It is time to stop the authoritarian practices and begin showing respect to the people of Bangladesh, championing democracy in both word and deed.