

## Healthcare staff must return to work

Doctors should rise to the occasion, fulfil their duties

We are concerned about the sweeping absenteeism of doctors, as well as other medical and administrative staff, in healthcare facilities across the country following the fall of the Awami League government. According to a report by daily *Samakal*, about 45 percent of the 93,834 staff—the total workforce in medical colleges, and specialised and autonomous hospitals under the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS)—have not been coming to work since August 5. This is quite alarming. Although absenteeism is an old problem in the public healthcare sector, compared to normal times, 12,000 more medical professionals have remained absent from work during the last week, according to the report.

Our health sector is already plagued by a number of problems including manpower shortage, corruption in recruitment and medical procurement, inefficiency, poor quality of services, high treatment costs—to mention just a few. In addition, the weeks of violence that the nation witnessed recently increased the number of patients who need urgent medical attention. In such moments of crisis, the culture of doctors and nurses staying away from work without any formal leave is causing disruptions in both regular and emergency healthcare services.

Political appointments and nepotism in the appointment process have also given rise to the current situation, as those who gained undue favours from the previous regime now fear reprisals and even replacement by their more deserving colleagues. Sadly, it is always the patients that have to pay the price for such crises. The situation is worse for the rural populace for whom accessing quality healthcare is difficult even during normal times. So we can only imagine how the lack of medical service outside the capital—caused by the wilful absenteeism of doctors, directors, assistant directors, and civil surgeons in district hospitals—is exacerbating their suffering.

We, therefore, urge the health adviser to take steps to ensure that absentee doctors and other staff in public hospitals join work without delay. Physicians must be reminded of their Hippocratic Oath to not harm their patients and perform their professional duty, or face consequences. In the long run, we expect the interim government to initiate reforms in the healthcare sector so that similar disruptions do not occur in the future because of irregularities and corruption. The administration should try to build a system where patient care comes before everything else, and people can receive prompt, quality and low-cost healthcare without having to travel abroad for treatment.

## Address the crisis of stolen firearms

It is a matter of not just law and order but also national security

The looting of firearms from at least 22 police stations in Dhaka—a number that may increase as assessments continue—is deeply concerning. Following Sheikh Hasina's resignation, many police stations across the country were attacked by mobs aggrieved by the actions of police personnel during the student protests that led to her downfall. Beside the damage caused to police stations in the process, the extent of the looted weaponry also remains unclear. We hope the new IGP will soon provide a detailed account of the number of weapons stolen and the measures being taken to recover them.

In Cumilla, we are told that police have recovered 28 firearms and 667 rounds of ammunition. We hope that more missing firearms will be recovered in the near future. It has become evident from the incidence of looting weapons that certain factions are attempting to undermine the nation's stability, and the risk of criminal and political elements exploiting the situation remains a major concern. Given the country's volatile state at present, the possibility of these weapons falling into the wrong hands is extremely troubling. We urge law enforcement agencies to focus their attention on recovering these firearms as quickly as possible—before they can be used to cause further harm to people or property.

The dangers of these firearms remaining untraced are multifaceted. During the quota reform movement, as well as on multiple occasions before, we have often seen individuals connected with power using firearms—sometimes even legally acquired ones—in broad daylight. With an unknown number of weapons missing from the police arsenal, a new law and order crisis could be created by saboteurs.

With the vast majority of police stations in the country now operating again, even if partially, law enforcers need to take fresh initiatives to account for all the legal and illegal firearms in circulation. We urge the new IGP to take strong and comprehensive steps in this regard. Additionally, the entire process of licensing possession of weapons should be reviewed, and the supply and procurement of illegal weapons must be completely halted. This may prove to be a tall task given the circumstances, but it is one that our security forces must undertake urgently.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



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# EDITORIAL

## Principles, party, power or politics?



### THE OVERTON WINDOW

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### ERESH OMAR JAMAL

There are many takeaways from the sudden fall of Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League government, which for 15 long years projected an air of invincibility. We all know how the AL suppressed dissent and movements that it perceived as threats, often resorting to extreme and criminal measures. Yet, despite the gruesome violence, intimidation, and threats, countless people took to the streets—even on the day Hasina fell—without any guarantee that they would return home alive.

The student movement's ability to inspire people to stand up to a vicious oppressor was truly remarkable. How did the students manage to achieve this? Clearly, the oppressor's behaviour played a significant role. However, the more I hear these young people speak across various media platforms, the more I want to give them credit for the unity we recently witnessed.

As a society, we are divided along many lines. However, what became evident during these protests—especially if you were present in them—was that the majority of Bangladeshis share some core values, such as the sanctity of life, the belief that killing is wrong, a commitment to justice, etc. Through their actions, the students staunchly upheld these principles, inspiring people to unite.

On the day of Hasina's ouster, one of the student coordinators mentioned something interesting on television. When asked if he wanted to see a new Bangladesh where people have freedom of speech, he replied that he wanted people to have the freedom to dissent. The nuanced difference between the two is important. Most of us claim to believe in freedom of speech when it comes to speech we agree with. However, it is precisely how we react to speech we don't agree with that reveals whether our claim is genuine.

All of us claim to believe in justice. However, following the fall of the AL and the vengeful violence

that ensued against its activists, these students reminded us of the importance of pursuing justice in a morally and legally correct way. After all, everyone, regardless of their crimes, deserves their day in court, because the concept of "habeas corpus" is a monumentally important civilisational discovery. Equally crucial is the principle of "innocent until proven guilty," which is larger than any individual as it originates from the Magna Carta, a cornerstone

up in the 90s, I remember hearing about attempts to erase him from the history books in earlier decades. Yet, the damage that Hasina and her AL have done to Sheikh Mujib's legacy and that of the party is unmatched.

As she and other key AL leaders fled the country, they left thousands of their party activists in a terrible state. This should serve as a warning to us all: when you prioritise a party over principles, you risk facing a similarly tragic fate.

Without downplaying the crimes of Hasina and the AL, one must admit that the other political parties in our country have not proven to be much better. We have seen them attempt similar atrocities and power grabs before. Perhaps the difference is that they never managed to hold onto power for as long, and the state machinery did not have the same capacity to enable them to wield so



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FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

of justice for which humanity has paid an immeasurable price. To punish those responsible for the crimes of the AL government in ways that violate these principles would transform us into the very monsters from which we seek to distance ourselves.

The downfall of Sheikh Hasina is a tragic story, not only on a personal level but also for Bangladesh. Regardless of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's governance failures, there is no denying his crucial role in our country's independence. Growing

much power. The longer the AL stayed in power, the more power it acquired.

As the saying goes, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Therefore, we can't say for certain whether another party in AL's position would not have abused it in a similar way. This is why we must reform the structure of our state institutions, so that no party can acquire such unquestioned power again. But how do we do that?

When the student protests were happening, the AL kept trying to

connect them with a conspiracy involving BNP and Jamaat. Meanwhile, we in the media and others kept saying these students were "ordinary students" who were "not involved in politics." One of the student coordinators, Sarjia Alam, recently said something interesting.

He said that for years, people avoided getting involved in politics because those engaged in it were seen as corrupt and dishonourable. It is true that politicians in Bangladesh have often been perceived this way—and for good reasons. However, the only way to reform our corrupt political and governance systems is through politics. Therefore, it is crucial for honest people—individuals who do not compromise on their principles—to enter the political arena.

Not only that, as Aristotle said, "Man is a political animal." There is no way around this, because humans are social creatures with the power of speech and moral reasoning—both of which greatly affect the state they live in.

Therefore, if we are to truly become a "democratic society"—within a "republican state structure" that functions properly—ordinary people must also become politically conscious. And there is no reason why this cannot happen.

Since the student movement began until today, ordinary Bangladeshis have shown significant political maturity. Yes, there have been mistakes, and the road ahead will also be filled with pitfalls. However, the people must not believe they can simply hand over the fate of their future to someone else and then go about their business without concerning themselves with politics. If we are to truly have a democratic society where power belongs to the people, then the people themselves must be willing to take responsibility for wielding that power.

For most of our history, those who have wielded power have used it to serve themselves and their parties or to gain even more power and wealth. However, when power is properly utilised, it can inspire hope. That is what the student movement did: it gave people hope for a better future. What happens to that hope now depends on the choices we make. What will we choose? Will we choose to remain politically involved? If so, for what purpose: for power, for party or for principles?

## The case for an ombudsman in Bangladesh



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### MUHIBUL ISLAM

Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, grappling with a political crisis that threatens the very foundation of its democracy. The resignation of Sheikh Hasina, amidst massive protests and widespread violence, underscores the urgent need for mechanisms that can restore public trust in governance. One glaring omission from Bangladesh's political landscape is the absence of an ombudsman—a constitutional institution designed to uphold transparency, accountability, and democracy by investigating whether or not administrative officials are legally exercising their jurisdictional powers.

The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, discusses the ombudsman under Article 77. This article does not mandate Parliament to establish the office of ombudsman but rather leaves the decision to Parliament's discretion and wisdom. However, Section 3 of The Ombudsman Act, 1980 clarifies that Parliament has indeed made the establishment of the ombudsman office mandatory by using the word "shall." This legal framework outlines the ombudsman's functions, powers, and responsibilities, including the authority to investigate actions taken by ministries, public officers, and statutory public authorities. Yet, despite the legal framework being in place for over four decades, no ombudsman has ever been appointed.

Implementing the ombudsman institution in Bangladesh could have transformative effects. It would provide citizens with a formal channel to voice grievances and seek redress, potentially reducing public discontent and unrest. Additionally, the ombudsman could serve as a check on the executive branch, deterring corruption and abuse of power, and

This failure to operationalise the office deprives citizens of a critical tool for holding public officials accountable and addressing grievances related to governance.

Globally, the ombudsman institution has proven effective in enhancing transparency and accountability. Sweden, where the ombudsman institution originated in 1809, serves as a good model. The Swedish Ombudsman oversees public authorities, ensuring compliance with laws and regulations, and can investigate complaints and prosecute officials. New Zealand's Ombudsman, established in 1962, investigates complaints against government departments and agencies, often leading to significant reforms. India's Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act of 2013, and South Africa's Public Protector, also demonstrate the potential impact of an ombudsman in curbing corruption and ensuring accountability.

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strengthening the rule of law.

The resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina plunged the country into political uncertainty. The protests and violent clashes that took place in the days leading up to her resignation were symptomatic of deep-seated frustrations with the previous system, where public trust in government institutions had eroded over time. After the resignation, Dr Muhammad Yunus took the oath as head of Bangladesh's interim government on August 8, facing the daunting task of stabilising the nation and restoring public confidence.

The new leadership is well-positioned to spearhead efforts to establish the ombudsman institution. Leadership at this time is crucial in navigating the challenges posed by the current political crisis. The new government must prioritise transparency and accountability, addressing the root causes of public discontent.

The government should make a public declaration of its intent to establish the ombudsman office, emphasising its role in restoring transparency and democracy. This should be followed by allocating the necessary resources to operationalise the institution. The Ombudsman Act of 1980 may require updates to clarify the ombudsman's jurisdiction and powers, ensuring it is robust enough to address contemporary governance challenges.

The new government should lead the efforts to amend the Act to reflect current realities. It should establish a non-partisan committee to oversee the appointment of the ombudsman. This committee should include representatives from civil society, the judiciary, and other independent bodies to ensure the ombudsman is

impartial and capable of carrying out their duties effectively. A campaign should be launched to educate citizens about the ombudsman's role and how to file complaints. This will be crucial in building public awareness and trust in the institution. Civil society organisations should be involved in the establishment process, providing input and supporting citizens in accessing the ombudsman's services. This will help ensure the institution is responsive to the needs of the people. The government should seek technical assistance from countries with successful ombudsman institutions. Additionally, the ombudsman's office should be subject to regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure it meets its objectives.

The previous governments were often criticised for their reluctance to limit executive power and their failure to implement key constitutional provisions, including the ombudsman. This inaction contributed to growing public dissatisfaction and weakened the checks and balances necessary for a functioning democracy.

In contrast, the current government, focused on stabilising the nation, has both the opportunity and the moral imperative to establish the ombudsman. By doing so, it can set a precedent for future governments, ensuring that transparency and accountability remain at the forefront of governance.

By learning from global examples and addressing the challenges ahead, Bangladesh can create a governance system that is more responsive to citizens' needs and better equipped to uphold justice and fairness. This will restore public trust and lay the groundwork for a more stable and democratic future.

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