

Metro rail operations must be resumed

Such a vital service cannot be held hostage to salary hike demands

It is disheartening to see the continued suspension of Dhaka metro rail services—now into its second month—despite earlier assurances about services resuming on August 17. On Sunday, the newly appointed adviser of the road transport and bridges ministry expressed hope that the metro rail would be operational within seven days. And an announcement in this regard may come as early as Monday when a reconstituted board of the Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL) convenes to discuss grievances of the employees who are refusing to return to work. What all this means for the commuters is a few more days of suffering before things get better.

The metro work abstention is but a reflection of the chaos and disruption being witnessed across the civil service after the fall of the Awami League government on August 5. At the Secretariat, for example, there have been frequent processions by civil servants who were previously denied promotions for political reasons or poor performance, or preferred placements or postings—all seeking personal benefits rather than better public services. Although the closure of metro services since July 18 was initially linked to the vandalism of two stations during the quota reform protests, it later transpired that around 700 DMTCL employees from grades 10 to 20 have been holding a strike since August 6, shutting any chances of prompt resumption.

Reportedly, the employees have six demands, including one for a salary hike. They argue that those in grades 1 to 9 earn 2.3 times the national pay scale, while those in grades 10 to 20 earn twice the pay scale. They see this as “discrimination,” and are demanding that it be rectified. This calls for a comprehensive review of the pay and benefits at DMTCL, which we hope the board will do soon. However, we cannot condone a total work stoppage for something that can be resolved amicably, especially when said stoppage has left thousands of daily commuters struggling with increased travel times, overcrowded roads, and higher transportation costs. The metro was designed to alleviate severe traffic congestion in Dhaka, and its absence is a significant setback.

Resuming its services, therefore, must be a top priority. The interim government's role in this regard is critical. It must ensure that the DMTCL management is supported in meeting the legitimate demands of its employees while also safeguarding the interests of the public. In the long run, the authorities must learn from this experience. Employee grievances should never be allowed to fester to a point where they disrupt essential services. On their part, the protesting employees, too, must understand that they cannot hold the public hostage for their own benefits. It is completely against the spirit of public service.

Extortion at slums, footpaths must stop

Govt must prevent political groups from exploiting public spaces

It is alarming that the evil politics of exploiting public spaces to extort citizens continues despite a regime change mere days ago. After the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, groups claiming allegiance to the BNP, now the central party in Bangladesh, are already trying to assert their dominance in slums and footpaths where AL-linked groups exerted their power for 15 years, according to a report in this daily.

Over the years, we have seen how unscrupulous political elements often took control of government land, built illegal shanties and shops, and sold unauthorised and often risky utility services at exorbitant prices in collusion with corrupt public officials. Similarly, such elements also took control of footpaths and extorted money from hawkers for conducting their business there. Even though a non-political interim government is now in power, pro-BNP elements, who had been absent from the politics of territory control for almost two decades because of AL's absolute dominance, could not wait for their term to wield their muscle power.

According to our report, they have already grabbed shanties, shops, clubs, and offices previously occupied by AL men in a number of places in Dhaka. Similar scenes have likely been unfolding in other cities as well thanks to the power vacuum created by recent events and the resultant mass escape by AL leaders. Thankfully, in some places, marauding cadres pulled away after receiving warnings from party high-ups. In other places, citizens' groups have intervened to thwart potential extortionists.

While we welcome BNP high-ups' effort to control their party activists, this is not enough. The political culture of allowing exploitation of public spaces to appease party activists and affiliates at the expense of the poor must stop. On the other hand, relevant government bodies including city corporations and utility companies must take stern measures to prevent illegal use of public spaces, properties and services. They should also mete out punishment to corrupt officials and law enforcers if found guilty of aiding political elements in such practices.

However, any measure to correct long years of wrongdoing should not lead to dispossessing and depriving anyone of a home or a means of living. We are talking about a proper rehabilitation of slum dwellers and street vendors. We hope that the interim government will initiate dialogue with experts and relevant stakeholders to address the underlying issues related to city slums and informal businesses on footpaths, and come up with sustainable solutions.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Hitler made leader and chancellor

On this day in 1934, some 90 percent of German voters approved a referendum that made Adolf Hitler *Führer und Reichskanzler* (leader and chancellor).

The education mission for the interim government



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In 1974, Dr Muhammad Quadrat-i-Khuda, head of Bangladesh's first education commission, outlined many goals for the country's education sector, from universal literacy at the primary stage to quality education in Bangladesh universities. These goals were never realised. A majority of children aged 10-14 years cannot read or count at a basic level, according to World Bank estimates, and adult literacy skills at functional level remain well below 40 percent, according to an Education Watch assessment.

The expectations from the interim government, headed by Prof Muhammad Yunus, are many and high. The burning education questions are the policy and action priorities for the interim government.

To the credit of the Awami League government, the 2010 National Education Policy, adopted by the parliament, was a broadly accepted guideline for development in education. However, 14 years later, we have not seen a comprehensive and coordinated implementation plan for the policy. Most key objectives remain unmet, such as: i) a core unified curriculum for all types of school education with a minimum common standard of school provisions for all students; ii) major change in the professional training of teachers, their performance standards, their status and incentives, and assurance of adequate numbers; and iii) decentralised and accountable education governance, planning and management. These goals were aimed at realising an inclusive and equitable education system that responds to the needs of changing times.

Many educationists saw education development as fragmented and partial. The government actions did not address the roots of the problems. Too often, the government pursued solutions that avoided rocking the boat—solutions that usually don't work.

Public investment in education has remained at or below two percent of GDP—one of the lowest among developing countries. And larger budgets, under the present structure of planning, management and

accountability, may lead to more waste, inefficiency, and mismanagement. One of the priorities should be a broad assessment of primary-level students' ability to read and do basic arithmetic, and actions based on the assessment to reach these targets. For example, Bangladesh could adopt the early grade reading and arithmetic survey, Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). It was pioneered by Pratham, an Indian NGO.



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FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

The past government claimed credit for a major expansion of student enrolment including girls, growth in the number of educational institutions, stipends for school students, distribution of free textbooks, and use of multimedia in classrooms. These have not produced satisfactory learning outcomes due to deficits in planning, school management, accountability, and pursuit of an education vision. We don't have enough teachers with professional skills, commitment to teaching, and a career path for them.

Comprehensive and coordinated planning has been obstructed by splitting school education into two ministries, unlike in any other country. As in other sectors, partisan political interests, rather than educational goals, have guided decision-making,

especially in recruitment of personnel. The new school education curriculum, launched in 2022 with much fanfare, has caused much anxiety and confusion among students, teachers, and parents.

The extraordinary recent events call for urgent actions. Students need to be in school and normal operations need to resume. At the university level, the University Grants Commission (UGC), in consultation with students and other stakeholders, should provide guidelines, but not seek to micro-manage. Each institution should consult students and teachers, and parents at school level, in implementing the guidelines.

With their sacrifice and maturity demonstrated in the popular movement, students have earned the right to have a role in managing the education and co-curricular activities

steps can be taken: i) textbooks already introduced in some grades under the new curriculum may continue and existing textbooks may be used for other grades; and ii) conventional end-of-year or public student evaluation based on written examinations should continue, separating formative and practical work-based evaluation in classrooms from summative written examinations. Pausing for a year or so should be used to review and rethink the curricular reforms, particularly student evaluation, a highly controversial aspect of the new curriculum, and effective implementation in classrooms. Experts and stakeholders should be involved in this rethink.

An education consultative group of experts and stakeholders should examine the status and the priorities in the education sector and advise the interim government. They would look at the issues and suggest actions on the matters noted above. This group may be turned into a permanent, statutory commission as recommended in the 2010 education policy.

The consultative group would also consider and advise on larger policy questions related to the Sustainable Development Goals and national goals for building an equitable, inclusive and quality education system for all. These larger agenda would include: i) promoting an equitable society through education; ii) a time-bound plan for equitable and inclusive early childhood development and K-12 school education of acceptable quality for all; iii) strengthening the teaching profession and the education workforce in respect of their professional skills, motivation, performance and adequacy of numbers as well as effective use of digital technologies; iv) establishing decentralised district education authorities for planning and managing equitable K-12 education in every community; and v) ensuring academic autonomy of the education system and education institutions, protecting them from partisan politics.

The interim government may not complete all needed reforms. It should at least set a course which all stakeholders can endorse. If the interim government realises at least some of the key reforms, we will have honoured Dr Quadrat-i-Khuda's aspirations.

The author acknowledges valuable comments received from Dr John Richards and Shahidul Islam, his co-authors of the book *Political Economy of Education in South Asia: Fighting Poverty, Inequality and Exclusion* (University of Toronto Press, 2022).

What the police reform requires



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For years, the police force has been used as an extension of the ruling party to control political opponents. Unfortunately, during the July uprising, the said opponents were the students and the general public who took to the streets. The abject lack of a moral compass from the leadership of the police, which made them mere puppets of an authoritarian regime, led to the killing of hundreds of civilians on the streets of Dhaka as well as across the country between July 16 and August 5. What followed was a deadly series of mob attacks that saw the killing of a number of law enforcement members across the country and the burning of police stations as they had become symbols of oppression of the previous regime. The topmost priority of the interim government is, of course, bringing the trigger-happy perpetrators in the police force and the members of the police leadership, who issued the order of shooting at civilians, to justice. But what comes after that? How do the general public and the country heal from an experience like this?

Like many other public institutions in the country, the police have also been enfeebled by successive political administrations over the last five decades in favour of political gains at the expense of the general public. Added to that is a general culture of lacking accountability, rampant corruption in recruitment, and overt political

inclination. Hence, an overhaul of the police is long overdue. The members of the police force very recently staged a protest and made an 11-point demand to the interim government, which is legitimate and the current government should take it into consideration.

There are arguments as to how this reform should take place. But above all else, what needs to be prioritised is the full resumption of the general operations of the police force to ensure that we don't go back to the utter lawlessness of the days following the fall of the AL government. As praiseworthy as the community volunteerism has been in safeguarding people's lives and assets, it cannot be the way of life in a civilised country. The state has a mandate to provide safety and security to its citizens and the interim government's legitimacy hinges on ensuring it. As far as a long-term reform goes, a veritable change in how the police function needs to be the goal, not just cosmetic changes like updating the colour of the uniform and logos. It goes far deeper than just a branding issue and needs serious soul-searching from the remainder of the leadership of the police, aided by an empathetic home ministry.

Police reform is a complex process and requires independent oversight, strong political will, and support from a coalition of a broad group of stakeholders; the citizens are a crucial

part of that process. There are successful global examples of how to initiate that reform, demonstrated by Singapore when they were trying to overcome their own problems of corruption in the 1950s, and also by South Africa in the post-apartheid era. There is no specific playbook to follow, and each country has its own way to achieve its goals, but there are a few steps which the interim government could follow.

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First, an independent commission should be set up to provide oversight and investigate corrupt practices in the force. The neutrality and jurisdiction of this commission is critical in curbing corruption and putting an end to the use of the police force for political gains. This could be done by strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), with an added emphasis on the oversight of the police. Second, a lot has been said about improving the salaries and working conditions of police personnel, with very little happening on the ground. There ought to be a fair assessment of compensation and general improvement of working conditions if we are to separate the reputation of corruption from the

police.

Third, the recruitment and training process needs to be revised to bring in more focus on integrity, community engagement, and ethical conduct. Finally, bringing the citizens and the police closer through community policing and public engagement is crucial to build trust and responsiveness to the needs of the people. There is an ever-widening trust deficit between the public and the police, further exacerbated by the recent events. A truly responsive and citizen-centric police force cannot function with little to no connection with the communities they serve. Police officers need to be encouraged to engage with the public and work collaboratively with the communities to solve local problems. It's also time to establish an effective public feedback mechanism to encourage reporting of problematic behaviours and concerns by the public.

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," is the immortal opening line from LP Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*. It should also accurately describe the gulf between what used to happen in Bangladesh up until August 5 and what should happen in the coming days. Let's not cast our minds to the past, sustaining the memories of violence and despair. Now is the time to unite the country, rising above the politics of division and the labels that we all quite comfortably ascribe to people all around us. The police are also our fellow countrymen; let's not shun them due to the action of a small percentage of trigger-happy enforcers. A purge is due in the police force, but let them also heal with the rest of the nation and bounce back from their sclerotic leadership.