

The Daily Star

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Stop police culture of implicating rivals

Fabricated FIRs, arrests without evidence deplorable

After the fall of a repressive political regime, we have entered a new era of governance. However, police still seem to be trapped in the old culture of looking at things through a partisan lens. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, police are arresting Awami League leaders and activists as accused in cases they had filed before August 5, when the regime fell, although it was BNP-Jamaat men and general protesters who were initially accused in the First Information Reports (FIR) of those cases.

The newspaper cited 34 such cases filed between July 17 and August 1 relating to the murder of 64 people, where BNP-Jamaat men and protesters had been shown as accused. The initial FIRs of three other cases filed by victims' families also mentioned the same coterie of suspects, although they later claimed they didn't file those FIRs. For example, the mother of one victim, who was fatally shot on July 16 in the New Market area, denied accusing BNP-Jamaat men although the initial FIR implicated them. But after the arrest of Awami League leaders Anisul Huq and Salman F Rahman on August 14, a revised FIR was submitted to court replacing the names of previous suspects with "unidentified accused". Anisul Huq, Salman F Rahman, and another person were also shown arrested and taken on remand under that case.

This indicates that police did not carry out due diligence and probe into the killings before arresting anyone. Moreover, they just randomly replaced the accused, calling the whole exercise into question. Such laxity only weakens the legal basis of court cases and denies victims their right to a proper trial. At the same time, there is a risk that actual perpetrators will go scot-free. Besides, the plethora of cases being filed against Awami League leaders and former MPs and ministers without evidence is making a farce of the judicial system, with legal experts saying these cases will not last in court or even pass the initial stage.

What's equally concerning here is the police's culture of always accusing the opposition. Before August 5, it was BNP-Jamaat men who were their favourite scapegoats, and now it is AL men. This is not only undermining the spirit of the anti-discrimination movement that led the mass uprising; it is also eroding public confidence in police. When discussions of freeing police force from the shackles of politicisation are going on, the above pattern of police behaviour shows where the priorities of any reform initiative should be. The legal system must not be used as a tool of retribution under any circumstance. Rather, to ensure justice, police must investigate any cases without bias. They must come out of their mindset of appeasing those in power, and instead vow their loyalty to the people.

We need better data governance

For success in modern times, there is no alternative to reliable data

Data discrepancies among different government departments continue to be a significant concern, with the most recent mismatch arising in revenue collection and expenditure figures. According to a report in this daily, data from the finance ministry showed that Tk 277,925 crore was collected during the July-April period of FY23-24, while the National Board of Revenue (NBR) reported collecting Tk 289,376 crore, resulting in a discrepancy of Tk 11,451 crore. Similarly, regarding expenditure under the Annual Development Programme (ADP), the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) estimated that ministries and divisions had spent Tk 125,315 crore during July-April of FY23-24. However, the finance ministry's data shows an expenditure of Tk 92,126 crore, which is Tk 33,189 crore lower than the IMED's figure.

Last year, a similar discrepancy was observed between the tax collection figures published by the finance ministry and the NBR—a Tk 4,031 crore difference for July-April of FY22-23. Additionally, the ADP spending data showed a gap of Tk 41,136 crore between IMED and finance ministry figures. Apparently, the ministry calculates tax receipts based on reports from the Office of the Controller General of Accounts (CGA), while the tax administration accounts for revenue collection by including outstanding dues. This, officials say, is a major reason for the gap. But why are different departments using different methods of calculation? Why haven't they developed a uniform system of data evaluation that would ensure accuracy?

In April, Bangladesh Bank discovered that exports during July-April of FY23-24 were nearly \$14 billion less than the shipment value of goods previously reported by the Export Promotion Bureau. The sheer margin of difference shocked everyone. These discrepancies and others highlight the poor state of data governance in the country. As economists have noted, if the finance ministry does not receive accurate spending data, it hampers the process of debt planning. Similar issues arise with other data inaccuracies that we seem to encounter frequently.

Given the circumstances, government institutions need to place greater emphasis on proper data governance. A systemic change to streamline the process has become essential so that flawed data doesn't lead to flawed policies. Experts say data mismatches may occur for two reasons—deliberate manipulation or accounting errors. There is strong suspicion that previous governments often deliberately manipulated data to enhance their image. We, therefore, hope that the interim government will take comprehensive actions to improve data governance among all relevant public institutions.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Civil rights march on Washington

On this day in 1963, some 200,000 people marched on Washington, DC, a high point of the civil rights movement, especially remembered for the famous "I Have a Dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Jr.



A good national address to start with



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TANIM AHMED

The chief adviser's much-awaited address to the nation came a little over two weeks after Dr Muhammad Yunus had taken over the helm of Bangladesh under unique circumstances. The Nobel peace laureate was on his way back from the Paris Olympics when people back home had already chosen him to lead the interim government. It rarely happens that a leader is chosen by national consensus because of adulation and respect. That was three weeks ago. In the meantime, there were a couple of questions that made the rounds: the interim government's mandate and tenure.

The Yunus-led government is a result of a student protest for reform that turned into an anti-government campaign and culminated in a people's uprising that toppled an iron-clad regime of 15 years. Sheikh Hasina's dictatorial regime had destroyed the institutions necessary for a functional state with respect for law and order. The 84-year-old professor of economics, renowned around the world for his social business concept, was a victim of the previous regime himself. Hence, reforms were always going to be a priority for the incumbents. There was a slight indication to the nature of reforms as Yunus mentioned them briefly to a reception of diplomats earlier this month, and some isolated mentions from some of the advisers. But this was the first time that the chief adviser elaborately laid out his vision of the reforms, for which he must be commended.

Dr Yunus also touched upon certain challenges and urged the people to bear with him and have patience. As for the reforms, he predictably stressed on judiciary, law and order, administration, Election Commission, and the media. But the de facto prime minister also mentioned agriculture, health, and education. He mentioned a police commission and a banking commission. One of the advisers had previously mentioned media commission, but the chief adviser said



Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus addressed the nation on August 25, 2024.

PHOTO: PID

he would carry out reforms to ensure free flow of information. He said the incumbents would take a strong stand against corruption. There is wholehearted agreement from most quarters that we need these reforms desperately. But there is also little doubt that all these reforms would take years, if not decades.

Having laid out his vision of reforms, the chief adviser rightly left it up to the political forces and the people. He mentioned twice in the same breath that his tenure and mandate would only be a reflection of the people's will, and that his government's tenure was entirely a matter of political decision. One can only interpret that as the incumbents' attempt to secure political as well as social acceptance of the government's

reforms as well as its tenure.

One might venture to say that while Dr Yunus laid out his elaborate vision of reforms, he sought the people's mandate to endorse it—or rather, that he would like the people to set the limit, hence his mention of "the bare minimum that must be done." We recognise that the 170-plus million people of this country do not

winner-take-all culture, engagement with the full spectrum of current political forces would still not mean full representation of the electorate. The chief adviser has only spoken to centre-right-leaning parties in his attempt to engage the political parties. Surely, the absence of leftist progressive liberal forces among his audience was an accidental omission.

2024 FLOODS

Facts, feelings, and the art of engineering diplomacy



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SHAFIQUUL ISLAM

Just weeks after mass protests toppled Bangladesh's long-serving prime minister, the country is now grappling with a new crisis: devastating floods that have claimed lives and affected millions. With communication lines down and vital infrastructure damaged, the interim government faces the dual challenge of managing the disaster and combating the surge of misinformation.

In times of crisis, feelings often overshadow facts. Yet, distinguishing between the two is crucial for effective disaster management. This is where the art of engineering diplomacy can make a difference. By fostering cooperation with India, Bangladesh can develop a more reliable flood forecasting system. This collaboration can also help rebuild trust with India, shifting the focus from blame to exploring joint solutions for many shared problems.

The 2024 floods in Bangladesh didn't just happen by chance—they were the result of a perfect storm of climatic events. Firstly, we're in the thick of the monsoon season, which is hitting harder than usual this year. Add to that the Madden-Julian Oscillation, a powerful force driving warm, moist air from the Bay of Bengal toward the coast. To top it off, the jet stream over Central Asia has been positioned in a way that funnels even more rain into both Bangladesh

and India. The combination of these factors has led to a series of intense rainfall events since late May, causing unprecedented flooding in many parts of both countries.

But not all floods are created equal, and this year's have been particularly early and severe. In late May, Cyclone Remal hammered southern Bangladesh and eastern India, with widespread floods leaving nearly 30 million people without power. Then, mid-June brought relentless rains that submerged Sylhet and Sunamganj, areas that received 242mm of rain in a single day—well above the monthly average. Southeastern regions didn't fare much better, with additional storms causing severe flooding in places like Feni and Cumilla.

On August 21, Feni recorded an unprecedented 312mm of rain in a single day, causing several rivers in the region to swell beyond danger levels. While extreme rainfall has been the primary catalyst for these floods, there is also speculation that the release of excess water from dams and barrages may have contributed to localised impacts. However, these releases are unlikely to be the main cause of the widespread inundation.

For context, consider the Dumboor Dam on the Gomati River in Tripura, India, which has a capacity of around 670 million cubic metres. By comparison, the rainfall over

have a mechanism at their disposal through which they may express their opinion. Hence, it would perhaps be most prudent for the incumbents to achieve this through dialogue with experts, interest groups, researchers, academics and practitioners of the field. These people will then be able to set the ceiling.

At the same time, there is the important question of the interim government's tenure which, as Dr Yunus rightly said, has to be a purely political decision. But one must caution that his understanding of political acceptance must stem from having listened to the whole cross-section of the people.

Since many people are frustrated with predatory politics and the

One can only presume that the omission of the 14-party alliance was out of practicality.

Hence—short of a referendum, which has its limitations and may well prove to be impractical under the circumstances—this regime would do well to engage with a broad range of stakeholders to ascertain public opinion. These could include professional bodies, businesses, students, trade unions, and the wider civil society.

Most Bangladeshis see this transition as an opportunity to rebuild the country. They are eager to cooperate and help the government in any way they can. These dialogues must begin soon before the exuberance subsides.

crucial. It's not just about constructing physical infrastructure—it's about building trust and cooperation, both within our borders and beyond.

Two recent developments highlight this approach in action. First, the remarkable relief efforts led by students at Dhaka University, who mobilised to provide support to flood victims, demonstrate the power of grassroots action in the face of a disaster. Second, Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus's proposal to establish a high-level mechanism between Bangladesh and India to jointly tackle emergencies like floods signals a significant step towards regional cooperation.

The interim government has a unique opportunity to leverage this moment, not only to enhance flood forecasting systems, but also to address broader issues with India. By adopting a principled pragmatic framework, Bangladesh can develop solutions that are technically sound, socially acceptable, ethically responsible, and politically feasible. Some key areas for collaboration may include: developing a shared flood forecasting system that integrates processes, people, and politics, operationalising agreements to protect the Sundarbans, exploring infrastructure projects that enhance regional connectivity through Bangladesh, and addressing economic disparities and trade imbalances.

The floods of 2024 have shown us that it's time for a new approach—one that combines technical know-how with diplomatic skills. As M Inamul Haque correctly pointed out in this daily, "This situation needs to be handled diplomatically... we must avoid panicking, even though it's difficult. Panicking often leads to more problems." In these fast-moving and uncertain times, we need to be both principled and pragmatic.