

VISUAL: STAR

## Transitions, coins, and lenses



KNOT SO TRUE

Dr Rubana Huq  
is vice-chancellor of Asian  
University for Women.

RUBANA HUQ

I am glad I left my glasses at home today. For many years, I thought that I would not be able to live without them. Today, after almost 20 years, I am reading and writing without having to resort to my lenses. True, my vision is blurred; true I cannot read and write without comfort. But I do know that I now can exist without my lenses.

Working through a lens is probably good for our sight, but learning to survive without them is probably more rewarding for the spirit. So, point is, who do I love more? My soul or my sight?

I would rather be blind than soulless.

Hence the rant below....

Filter less and lens free transitions are often uncomfortable but necessary. Transitions also give many constituencies the opportunity to speculate, confuse and divert the conversation considering that any transition is a grey area that does not come without a blur.

Once upon a time, the state was super powerful. There was a time when the developing world operated through interventionist state model. If there were successful economic transformation, state took the credit as state was then capable of

court jesters routinely changed masks to adapt to the needs of the times and the business leaders shamelessly changed faces.

Elections in multiple business associations in the past have been controlled by the centre of power. During most of the association elections, rigging has been a standard practice. One association doesn't even have an accurate voter list. Non-manufacturers are voters. In spite of many attempts, this hasn't changed as it gives the contenders a chance to use the "sick" factory votes and reward them in one way or another. Instead of focusing on what's really needed for the sector, instead of policy directives, what has gagged the sector's growth is lack of focus on key areas and excessive stress on political alignment. Pictures with political leaders and advertisements on newspapers have been the focal point of any trade discourse.

"Onar shathey link bhalo", "onake PM pochonodo koren na"... were the only discussions that were mostly heard. Presidents have also been seen falling on their knees on airplanes and addressing the ex-PM for reducing source

**When private sector became powerful in Bangladesh, the morals of the business sector came crashing down like a house of cards. The formula was easy. Being seen with "power" was important. A picture was necessary. A Facebook post was essential. Getting in and out of the "office" of power mattered the most. Very quickly, instead of addressing issues related to business, the prime consideration was always to flaunt the proximity to power.**

dominating social groups, including business. Gradually, in place of the states, significant trends of privileging the private sector were noticed to be on the rise along with a substantial increase in business power resulting in ultra-invigorated business associations.

Globally, businesses yielding significant influence in governments is not unusual. In the US alone, according to Center for Responsive Politics, businesses donated over \$7 billion to candidates and committees in the 2022 election. University of Chicago published a study in 2023 where the school spotted that companies with political ties experienced a 15 percent average decline in stock prices as a result of corruption scandal. Ethical lapses surfaced and the companies lost confidence. American consumers, too, have become sceptical about investing in companies that compromise public interest and serve the interests of the politicians and donors.

In Bangladesh, we have gone the other way. When private sector became powerful in Bangladesh, the morals of the business sector came crashing down like a house of cards. The formula was easy. Being seen with "power" was important. A picture was necessary. A Facebook post was essential. Getting in and out of the "office" of power mattered the most. Very quickly, instead of addressing issues related to business, the prime consideration was always to flaunt the proximity to power.

In association elections, the positioning of political leaders on the stage became critical for victory. In most cases, the faces of the business leaders became the faces of the government. Most leaders after having served in the business associations moved to join the parliament. Parliament started to look like a tiered corporate sector, where wealth would be produced on a daily basis. One word from the leader of the parliament would rescue a sinking ship; one glance or a smile would salvage any ruin.

Thus, we rolled on. For years, faces popped up in the royal court to sing praises. For years, the

tax. Yours truly bears witness to one of those occasions.

In all honesty, the business associations have been subjected to an endless game of masquerade where garlands, pictures and faces changed with the direction of the political wind. The fact that this country is not ready for LDC graduation, the fact that sector diversification is needed, the fact that in terms of economic complexity, Bangladesh is lagging behind—these issues have never made it to the trade headlines. To be seen with the "centre" had always been the priority. To be travelling with the centre was key. To be delivering eulogies was essential. And...this has gone on...

Doing business while in politics is a risky proposition. While potential benefits exist, the potential for reputational damage, loss of trust, and legal challenges are significant. For most, the risks likely outweigh the rewards. Let's remind ourselves that we ought to weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks carefully before embarking on this path. Let us also not forget that there are demands on transparency and ethical conduct from both business leaders and politicians. Let us also not forget that prioritising good governance and acting in the public interest both MUST be key while navigating this demanding intersection.

What can we do to separate business from politics? Maybe build a few goals and acknowledge that "transparency" matters, that there must be an ethical compass and that there needs to be a clear wall between business and political activities. Maybe have independent watchdogs to ensure all of the above?

And yes, the road where we stand today is one of uncertainty. But let there not be a single coin to mar our journey. A democracy needs a full field filled with players ready to jump into a fair game. The game need not be dominated by a toss of a coin, where both sides look the same, and come with the same baggage and consequences. Let the change that's sweeping the country today not be a sole discourse on power, rather on the rewarding journey of self-correction.

## We must be bold with health sector reforms



Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury  
is convener at Bangladesh Health Watch, and professor  
of population and family health at Columbia University,  
New York.

AHMED MUSHTAQUE RAZA CHOWDHURY

The health sector holds an important place in a nation's development. The past few decades have witnessed some remarkable strides in Bangladesh's health sector. However, this has largely stalled since 2010. Between 1990 and 2010, Bangladesh reduced its maternal mortality ratio from 600 per 100,000 live births to 194, an astonishing achievement. After almost a decade, however, there has been little improvement. Such stagnation was similarly observed in several other indicators of a nation's development.

It is said that we harvested the "low-hanging fruits" well. Bangladesh is committed to reducing the maternal mortality ratio to 70 by 2030, but given the current situation, this seems like an unachievable target. To attain progress, we need to focus on the more difficult, "high-hanging fruits." Civil society activists and health experts repeatedly highlighted this challenge to the previous government, but sadly, serious efforts were not made. Instead, a sense of complacency prevailed. The result was that any idea suggesting reform faced resistance.

The anti-discrimination movement has inspired the nation and sparked hope among the masses. It has given us a chance to rethink our future. In the health sector, we now have an opportunity for comprehensive reform. If we want to move forward in line with the times, we must be ready to tackle some difficult tasks.

We know, for instance, that good governance is a major issue for development in Bangladesh. Poor governance leads to many problems, and the health sector is no exception. The absence of doctors in health centres is a perennial issue. The corruption that surfaced during the Covid pandemic is still fresh in our memory. We know these issues arise due to the lack of accountability and poor management. The private healthcare sector has become a behemoth without any control whatsoever, harbouring severe inequalities. In 1982, an ordinance was passed giving special priority to the private sector, but it has not been updated since. There is no clear regulatory provisions to control them, leading them to get away with unethical and illegal practices. Despite the presence of the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council which was established decades ago to monitor the professional behaviour of doctors, many still engage in unethical practices without facing any consequences.

Another significant drawback in our healthcare system is poor investment. Currently, the government's spendings on

healthcare is one of the lowest globally: only 0.7 percent of the GDP. With such meagre investment, it is impossible to imagine modern healthcare. We have seen to our dismay that two of the important pillars of human development, health and education, were among the lowest priorities for the previous government. Our neighbour Sri Lanka, which is far ahead of us in most indicators, spends nearly four times more on health than we do in Bangladesh. Even the small funding that the health sector gets is not fully utilised, with the utilisation rates remaining below 80 percent. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of adequate capacity in the ministry of health, whose inefficiency in drafting a proper budget, planning, and utilising funds is very well-known. The lack of vision is yet another reason. A "poverty of vision" seems to have gripped the ministry. If we want to emerge as a prosperous nation, our health planners must have a clear vision befitting the

no effective mechanism in place to ensure the quality of these institutions. Similarly, we need to focus on research. Recently, Bangladesh Health Watch published an extensive research-based book documenting Bangladesh's first 50 years, which shows how Bangladesh has surpassed its neighbours in various health indicators. One of the findings revealed that in recent years, Pakistan has been able to overtake Bangladesh in health research.

The previous government had expressed its commitment to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Unfortunately, it never felt the need to explain in detail how this would be done or where the additional funds would come from.

The recent uprising is a massive achievement, with tremendous sacrifices made by students and common citizens. We know that every crisis also presents an opportunity. After World War II, the European countries built their health systems on the ruins of war, ensuring free healthcare for all citizens. In the 1990s, after a horrific genocide, Rwanda launched its UHC programme. As I see it, the student revolution has similarly given us a golden opportunity to overhaul our broken health system. Experts have agreed on what needs to be done. This can be broadly divided into five actions: i) establish a high-powered permanent national health commission to create and monitor

**One of the benchmarks for countries that have made significant progress in health is their investment in primary healthcare. Bangladesh's primary healthcare system extends from upazilas to unions and community clinics. Ignoring the primary level and focusing on urban-based big hospitals is an action equivalent to nurturing social inequality. Increased investment in primary healthcare with an effective referral system would significantly reduce the pressure on urban hospitals.**


health system of a developing country, and our budgets should be framed accordingly.

One of the benchmarks for countries that have made significant progress in health is their investment in primary healthcare. Bangladesh's primary healthcare system extends from upazilas to unions and community clinics. Ignoring the primary level and focusing on urban-based big hospitals is an action equivalent to nurturing social inequality. Increased investment in primary healthcare with an effective referral system would significantly reduce the pressure on urban hospitals.

In addition, another significant issue plaguing Bangladesh's healthcare system is its human resources. Doctors, nurses, and midwives are in severely short supply. To address this crisis, the previous governments licensed new institutions in both the public and private sectors which contributed in alleviating the crisis to some extent. However, there is

a roadmap for implementing UHC nationwide; ii) establish a national health security office to ensure accountability in the health system by separating the ministry of health's roles as a "purchaser" and "provider"; iii) ensure good governance and proper management; iv) increase healthcare investment to two percent of GDP, with increased priority for primary healthcare; and v) enhance the quality, efficiency, and oversight of institutions involved in professional health education and research.

I believe that if we follow this path, we will confidently move towards achieving our national goals. While we have made significant achievements, complacency cannot be allowed and must be kept at bay. To bring about a real and lasting change, there is no alternative to reform. This is something the student leaders have repeatedly emphasised. The interim government must take a bold stance and move towards reforms in the health sector that lead to the public being served.



**Dhaka Power Distribution Co. Ltd.**  
ঢাকা পাওয়ার ডিস্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানি লিমিটেড (ডিপিডিসি)  
(An Enterprise of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh)  
বিন্দু বন (৩য় তলা), ১ আব্দুল গণি রোড, ঢাকা-১০০০।  
Web site : www.dpdc.gov.bd

e-Tender Notice

**e-Tenders are invited through the national e-GP portal for the following procurement of works/goods.**

e-Tender ID	Name of Works	Closing & Opening Date & Time	Procuring Entity/ Contact Persons
1008688	Supply of Printronix printer Ribbon and Others printer Toner office of the Executive Engineer, NOCS Sitalakhya, DPDC.	1/09/2024 14:00 pm	<b>(Engr. Md. Kamal Hossain)</b> Superintending Engineer SE, NOCS, Circle Fatulla Panchoboti, Fatulla, Narayanganj. Phone: 02997746700 Email: sefatulla@dpdc.gov.bd
1010299	Supply of Stationary Items for office of the Executive Engineer NOCS, Sitalakhya, DPDC	17/09/2024 14:30 pm	
1010330	Supply of Printronix printer Ribbon and Others printer Toner office of the executive Engineer, NOCS Fatulla, DPDC	11/09/2024 15.00 pm	

The interested persons/firms/organizations may visit website (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) to get the details.

DGM (HR) Public Relations, DPDC