

The Daily Star

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Attacks on businesses must be prevented

These incidents have a serious impact on the economy

We are deeply concerned about the severe and still-unrelenting disruptions faced by business establishments after the fall of the Awami League government. Business leaders have also expressed deep concerns about the impact of these disruptions caused mostly by incidents of arson, looting, and vandalism but also rising extortion, logistical bottlenecks, etc. It is only reasonable to think that if these challenges persist and business leaders are not given the support they need to weather this crisis, it may significantly hurt their operational capabilities and also the prospects of our export-driven economy. Even mass layoffs and factory closures cannot be ruled out.

Our top priority, then, should be restoring law and order and protecting all industrial establishments from harm, regardless of the identity of their owners. A recent report by this daily highlighted the extensive damage caused by politically motivated attacks on businesses from August 4 to 27, saying that nearly three dozen industrial units were targeted during this period. Most of them were owned or controlled by individuals with ties to Awami League. These attacks, invariably followed by looting and vandalism, have led to significant financial losses. Among the hardest hit was the Gazi Group, owned by former textile and jute minister Golam Dastagir Gazi. Two of its factories in Narayanganj—Gazi Pipe and Gazi Auto Tyres—have been left in ruins following repeated attacks, with the latter estimating a loss of Tk 1,000 crore alone. About 2,650 officers and employees of this unit have also become unemployed.

The Bengal Group of Industries also suffered heavy losses, with several of its factories in Gazipur being damaged by arson, vandalism, and looting. Its estimated losses amounted to around Tk 462 crore. Among other well-known factories affected were those of the Beximco Group, owned by Salman F Rahman, and the Ha-Meem Group. Such examples reportedly abound, taking place across various industries and even in warehouses, although we are yet to know the full extent of such attacks or the damages caused. One thing is clear, however. The unprecedented scale of industrial attacks will have a debilitating impact not just on the workers and officers employed by factories but also their respective markets, resulting in a crisis that may shoot up domestic prices of relevant products.

Against this backdrop, increasing security is paramount. That may be a challenging task considering the recent turmoil witnessed in some security forces, but for the country to move ahead and businesses to flourish again, there is no alternative to taking strict actions. And we hope the law enforcement authorities will do just that. Going ahead, business leaders also need help to recoup their losses which they have already detailed, including favourable import terms, continuation of the export development fund, removal of existing barriers in consignment release and transportation, etc. The BGMEA, which represents garments manufacturers, also requested a soft loan of Tk 1,800-1,900 crore to pay one month's wages for the workers, which too deserves consideration. These financial, logistical and policy supports are essential to boost business confidence again.

Coordination vital in aid distribution

The authorities must streamline all flood relief efforts

It was very heartening to see the spontaneous response from people to help those affected by the recent floods in eastern districts—one of the worst in living memory. But one lingering problem that somewhat marred this response is the insufficient logistics in relief distribution in many of the affected areas. According to a report in this daily, local administrations are struggling to reach remote areas because of logistical issues. The lack of coordination among the groups involved is causing a problem as well. We believe an urgent plan is necessary to expand and streamline all such efforts to ensure smooth delivery of relief goods.

According to the report, even though the flood situation has started to improve, there are areas where people are still trapped by water, with no modes of transport and communication available. Local administrations and volunteers are facing difficulties in reaching these areas as they don't have enough boats, particularly in Feni, Cumilla, Lakshmipur and Noakhali districts. In Feni, teams of armed forces have been trying their best to reach as many people as possible; they have air-dropped food packets in some remote areas. But some places remain inaccessible. Volunteer groups are working on their own; locals and some volunteers told *Prothom Alo* that their aid efforts in Feni Sadar are mostly limited to places close to the Dhaka-Chattoogram highway. In Cumilla, more than 1.1 million people in 14 upazilas are still marooned, and they haven't received any aid yet, *Samakal* reported.

There is another aspect that needs attention. As the floodwater recedes, the extent of damage is coming to view. Homesteads have been severely damaged; livestock, poultry and fish farms have been washed away, affecting people's livelihoods. In many areas, people are falling sick and there is no access to first aid and basic medications. The risks of various water-borne diseases breaking out also remain a considerable cause for concern.

Given the situation, the government needs to adopt a two-pronged approach. The first is to coordinate distribution of food and medicine especially for remote areas. The disaster management and relief ministry has already directed the DCs of flood-affected districts to coordinate with volunteers, armed forces, fire service, medical teams and others. The ministry should take the lead in this regard and guide these groups, providing necessary logistical support with the help of local government offices. The second is to plan for the post-flood scenario. People are going to need help to rebuild their lives; they will need support to make a living and survive any potential health crisis. The government must be prepared for that as well, and mobilise resources to provide the required support in the coming days.

DU must lead by example in abolishing partisan politics

A note to the new vice-chancellor



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SAAD HAMMADI

As the tide of reform sweeps across institutions with changes taking place in the leadership positions, the interim government and university authorities must ensure that teachers and students are no longer dragged into party-based politics in academic institutions. The present political affiliation of teachers and students is counterproductive for academic excellence.

The brand of student politics that has been prevalent in Bangladesh's universities since the 1990s is nothing short of running criminal rackets in academic institutions. From controlling access to student accommodations, to assaulting and even killing students critical of the party in power and interference in every other institutional decision, student politics in the academic institutions earned the reputation of notoriety, serving the dictatorial aspirations of mainstream political parties.

This environment has undermined institutional autonomy, discipline, and integrity. I hope that Dhaka University, under the leadership of the new Vice-Chancellor Professor Niaz Ahmed Khan, who was also my teacher, will lead by example the abolition of party-based politics in all academic institutions.

Thuggery in the name of student politics

We must not forget the brutality that so-called student leaders of the mainstream political parties have waged against regular students. In October 2019, 21-year-old Abrar Fahad, a student at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), was killed inside the university's student dormitory by a group of students belonging to Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the Bangladesh Awami League. He was tortured inside the student dormitory for several hours before he died from internal injuries. Abrar's life was cut short because of his criticism on Facebook against the previous government's deals with India.

The brutality against Abrar is not the first of the hallmarks of terrorism and violence that the present brand of student politics has unleashed in academic institutions. This has been the culture inside public universities since the 1990s.

The private universities have for the longest time strictly prevented activities of mainstream political parties in their institutions. However, in the last couple of years, student committees representing the BCL have been formed in some of these universities as well. Teachers have resorted to self-



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censorship in academic discussions about political periods and actions due to fear of reprisals. Most recently, general students have been attacked by BCL members at some of these universities for participating in protests against discrimination. A teacher at a private university shared with me her frustration about how the BCL leaders enjoyed preferential treatment inside the campus, which undermined institutional integrity.

Another teacher at a public

university recently shared with me her fears about the repression being carried out against teachers, who are being forced to resign by students due to their political affiliation with the previous ruling Awami League party.

Universities are also grappled by a wave of ultra conservative demands of some student bodies that have time and again risen to breach the privacy and freedom of others. This includes denying religious freedom and dictating how female teachers and students should carry themselves. Bangladesh is only free from oppression and discrimination when the minority in the country can truly enjoy the same freedom as the majority.

Institutions must promote civil and political rights

Student politics have played significant role globally at shaping discourses and ushering in social and political changes, whether it was the civil rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 60s that

rights that have paved the way for people to come together and organise for genuine causes in public interest. Students and the youth have led by example many of these movements for political change.

The right to freedom of expression, assembly, and association is fluid and entitled to everyone under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Constitution of Bangladesh. They do not draw any distinction between race, age, gender, religion, ethnicity, economic, social, or political values.

This must not be confused with the thuggery that student wings of the mainstream political parties have brandished across academic institutions. To advance the political agenda of the parties in power, they have suppressed intellectual debates, academic and fundamental freedoms in institutions. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Institutional integrity critical for reform

A young teacher at Dhaka University, whom I spoke to recently, shared that she joined the university at a time when everyone endorsed the blue panel to be in the good books of the administration. The blue panel is the platform of teachers belonging to the Awami League camp. There is also a pink panel composed of left-leaning teachers and a white panel comprising supporters of the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. The panel that belongs to the party in government traditionally decides the recruitment and promotions in the university. Political orientation of candidates predominates merit and performance.

Prof Niaz Ahmed Khan is an expert in monitoring and evaluation. It is important that the existing political nexus of students, teachers and political parties do not determine the fate of teachers and functions of academic institutions. Instead, transparent and accountable systems should be in place to determine the recruitment and promotions of academics.

The university, as a matter of priority, should abandon all party-based politics through a policy and define the scope of student politics that strictly upholds the right to practice academic, intellectual, civil, political, social, cultural and religious freedom, and diversity.

The necessity for substantive police reform



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MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

For police reform to be substantive, the first order of business should be the enactment of a new Police Act to replace the present archaic legislation enacted in 1861. The act is weak in almost all the parameters needed to govern democratic police legislation.

The act makes it easier for others to abuse and misuse the police organisation because it gives the government the authority to exercise superintendence over the police, without defining the word superintendence or prescribing some guidelines to ensure that the use of power will be legitimate. It also does not establish any institutional and other arrangements to insulate the police from undesirable and illegitimate outside control, pressures and influences.

Besides, this law does not necessitate outlining objectives and performance standards, nor does it set up independent mechanisms to monitor and inspect police performance. The law is antiquated in its charter of duties, which is narrow and limited, and does not mandate the police to function as a professional and service-oriented organisation.

Another criticism is its dissonance with the requirements of democratic policing, which requires a police force to be publicly accountable and subject to the rule of law, rather than the whims

of the party in power. In democratic policing, the force can intervene in the lives of citizens only under limited and controlled circumstances.

The principal characteristics of police organisation produced by the Police Act 1861 are: (i) preservation of status quo; and (ii) maintenance of order and avoidance of breach of peace. The law overemphasises the constabulary functions of the police as against the professional aspect of crime control. Except in the preamble, the act does not mention crime control. In fact, the duties of a police officer laid down in the law include obeying and executing all orders and warrants lawfully issued to him by any competent authority; collecting and communicating intelligence affecting the public peace; preventing the commission of offences and public nuisances; and detecting and bringing offenders to justice.

The duties also require police to apprehend all persons to whom he is legally authorised to apprehend; take charge of unclaimed property and furnish an inventory thereof to the district magistrate; keep order on the public roads and in the public streets, thoroughfares, and ghats and landing places and on all other places of public resort; and prevent obstructions on occasions of assemblies and processions on the public streets.

The principal objective was to administer a static, immobile and backward rural society living in villages and small towns. It envisages the exercise of authority without local accountability. It presupposes a society without any constitution, basic and fundamental rights, organised public opinion, mass media that projects and agitates public interest.

Police accountability is a crucial issue today. The advanced coercive, scientific, and technical tools available to police necessitate stricter accountability measures. The current system is not only ineffective but also lacks public trust. Therefore, it is essential to replace it with statutory bodies like the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) in England and Wales or the National Public Safety Commission in Japan. The IOPC is composed of civil society members, who investigate serious complaints against the police. Meanwhile, the commission in Japan ensures that police operations remain free from political influence. These apolitical commissions oversee police administration to protect it from daily political pressures both at national and prefectural levels.

Corruption arises from a combination of interconnected issues, such as inadequate salaries for police officers, extensive discretionary powers, outdated performance evaluation systems, substandard working conditions, ineffective internal oversight by superiors, and extremely weak external accountability mechanisms, including those through the judiciary, media, and parliament. If police officers feared job loss, they would have fewer reasons to engage in corruption. However, accepting bribes becomes a rational decision if the risk

of losing their job is minimal compared to the financial gains from corruption.

Ensuring gender-sensitive policing is a critical element of ongoing police reform efforts in South Asia. Programmes and strategies aimed at changing police attitudes towards women involve the proactive induction of substantially large proportions of women into police forces of the region. A gender-sensitive training strategy for police personnel on how to handle the growing number of cases of domestic violence, harassment at workplaces and sexual assaults is also integral to the police reform agenda.

The three areas that need urgent attention if police were to be credibly transformed into a public-friendly, service-delivery organisation are corruption, inefficiency, and misbehaviour with the public. Policies and strategies seeking to reduce corruption in the police is needed although enhancing police efficiency through true professionalism and transforming public-frightening police into a public-friendly outfit have not been very successful in South Asia.

Any police reform strategy will have to consider several other key variables such as the structure of the government, the role of the judiciary, and political parties in administrative affairs of the country. The question is one of mandate of the police force and how serious the attempt to shift the basis of legitimacy of the police from an adversarial to a consensus or a community model is.

For too long the basic functioning of police has remained unchanged. Improving the quality of law enforcement needs to be a permanent and integral part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.