

Ridding the admin of corruption is vital

We must ensure the accountability of corrupt officials

We are encouraged by the recent push for building a corruption-free and public interest-driven civil administration. This will not be a cakewalk given how deeply embedded corruption has been for over 15 years, with remnants of the old regime still resistant to any change that may expose past transgressions or challenge the “business as usual” approach. But a pro-people reform in our administrative culture is long overdue. And it must be pursued regardless of any resistance and to honour the spirit of the mass uprising that claimed over 1,000 lives, as per a recent estimate.

On Wednesday, in his first meeting with the secretaries of all ministries and divisions, the chief adviser encouraged top officials of the state to “think outside the box” while bringing about reforms in government operations. Among other things, he underscored the importance of initiatives targeting corruption and simplifying provision of services to “achieve the highest level of public satisfaction.” There is no denying that corruption committed, enabled, or ignored by civil servants is a major reason behind the woeful state of our institutions. So minimising their chances of corruption—starting from before recruitment to even post-retirement—and building a strong accountability mechanism can help largely prevent it.

The administration has already started the process of establishing accountability by initiating some measures. Among them is the mandatory disclosure of assets by all officials and employees across the public system, regardless of whether they fall under the tax net or not. While such regulations have existed for years, they have largely been ignored or loosely enforced. Reportedly, no one will be exempt from submitting their asset declarations, with particular focus on officials at public administration, police, customs, tax, and registration departments. Those in the judiciary have already submitted their declarations. The government has also sent a strong message that anyone found involved in corruption will be punished, including senior officials who will be held responsible not only for their own conduct but also that of their subordinates.

However, perhaps the most significant aspect of this anti-corruption drive has been in its focus on instilling ethical governance at every level. In his address to the secretaries, the chief adviser also urged officials to work for the public, not out of fear but a sense of duty to them. His call for public servants to uphold national interest and moral responsibility in all their dealings is a reminder that public service is a duty to the people, not an opportunity for personal gain. Over the years, this message was significantly diluted as public servants were showered with not just perks and benefits but also opportunities for corruption.

Going forward, we hope this message will be consistently conveyed with matching actions to build an administration that exclusively serves public interests. As for the drive to collect asset declarations, it is vital that this doesn’t turn into a pointless routine like that of the submission of affidavits by political candidates during elections. The authorities must follow up on the declarations by investigating the veracity of their contents and taking necessary actions if irregularities are found. This process of accountability for assets acquired by public servants and all other aspects of their operations must continue regularly.

Injured protesters need better help

Financial assistance for their treatment must be disbursed soon

The mass uprising in July-August has brought us freedom from an oppressive regime but at a huge cost, as evidenced by the sufferings of those who lost their loved ones and those who are still languishing in hospitals with irreparable injuries for over a month. One government estimate puts the total number of casualties during the protests at over 17,000, of which the number of fatalities could be as high as 1,000. This just shows how great the cost of this freedom was.

According to Health Adviser Nurjahan Begum, more than 400 people alone lost their eyesight because of bullet wounds. Many who were shot in the head have little hope of surviving, as complicated and risky surgeries are often required to remove bullet residues. What’s more heart-rending is the fact that many of the wounded are young people barely in their teens or twenties. The emotional and financial toll for the families of the injured defies description. Sadly, the inefficiencies of our health system are adding to the stress of these families. Although the interim government has waived treatment costs and hospital bills for the injured currently under treatment at public hospitals, the families still have to pay for medicine and tests unavailable in these hospitals. For the wounded patients in private hospitals, the medical cost is even higher.

The government’s announcement on August 17 to bear all medical expenses of the injured came as a positive move. However, that assistance is yet to reach many as the government is still in the process of completing the list of fatalities and injuries from the July-August uprising. Under the circumstances, the government may consider disbursing financial assistance in phases, prioritising those whose information on injuries has been confirmed. That would provide some respite to the families who urgently need help. The government may also consider streamlining all donations for the injured by urging people to donate through the Chief Adviser’s Relief and Welfare Fund. The most crucial measure would be to ensure that unnecessary medical and logistical delays do not exacerbate the sufferings of the wounded.

Finally, the government should plan for the rehabilitation of people maimed for life so that they can return to normalcy. Ensuring that these victims of an autocratic government get all the help they need to recover and rebuild their lives is a moral duty for all of us, especially the interim government that emerged out of the foundation of their sacrifices.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Princess Diana’s funeral held

On this day in 1997, about a week after her death in a car accident, a funeral was held for Princess Diana. An estimated 2.5 billion people watched the televised ceremony, which included a performance by Elton John.

Two hours with the chief adviser

THE THIRD VIEW



Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

For me, it was after 12 years that I could get anywhere close to the highest seat of power, leave alone have an exchange of views. The former prime minister never allowed the largest circulated English daily of the country, its editor or any of its journalists access to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) or to cover any event where she would be present. The reason I mention it is to point out that, by law, any position—except perhaps those devoted to national security—that is run using public money cannot be kept out of the process of accountability, including and especially that of the media. She broke the law by denying us access to the highest seat of governance. When former US President Donald Trump threw out CNN’s White House correspondent because he loathed the new network, a federal court reinstated him in less than two weeks, saying no office run by taxpayers’ money can be denied access to the media. But here she was, the “law” and the courts were at her beck and call. For us to go to the court would—as we thought, and our suspicion was justified by examples—have led to a judgment that would give a legal veneer to an illegal act. We were denied access for 12 years until the chief adviser (CA) of the interim government called us on Tuesday. The same fate was meted out to the highest circulated Bangla daily in the country, *Prothom Alo*. Our only crime was that we wanted to hold power to account.

Hopefully, that story has ended forever in Bangladesh, along with one-person rule, one-person bank loot, one-person-led loan default culture—who changed his looks and garb to pretend piety while looting the stock market, bond market, etc, and at the same time destroying financial discipline. Hopefully, we also have seen the end of abuse of power, cronyism, corruption, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearances—an endless list of degeneration that 15 years of unaccounted for rule led us to.

Yesterday, we commemorated one month after the end of this repressive regime. It was a transformative moment when people from all walks of life spontaneously joined the students in a united struggle for freedom.

The two hours with the chief adviser, Prof Muhammad Yunus, began with a refreshing modesty. Instead of “I know everything, listen to me, wonder, and applause,” he began by unhesitatingly sharing how onerous the tasks he faces are, how little time he has to accomplish it, how limited his own and his team’s expertise is, and how desperately he

needs the support of all people, and especially of the media. What a breath of fresh air it was—especially for those of us who tried our best to speak truth to power in the last 15 years—when Prof Yunus urged the editors to say, as loudly as possible, whenever we saw something wrong being committed by his cabinet. From a culture of “I cannot make any mistake because I love my people and Bangladesh always benefits when my party and I are in power,” to an open and sincere invitation to criticise the government which—the CA understood and the former PM did not—would only help him achieve the goals that the people want him to. The modesty, the humility, the openness and, above all, the sincerity won our hearts and minds.



FILE PHOTO: PID

The most challenging task that the chief adviser sought the media’s help in is to work towards unifying the nation.

The most challenging task the CA sought our help in was to work towards unifying the nation. He felt, and we agreed, that today we stand dangerously divided, which must be ended as soon as possible. It is this division that gravely corroded all our previous attempts to take the country forward. He did not explain the issue in detail, and neither could we, but we all felt, intuitively and deeply, the centrality of that particular challenge.

There were talks about the reform of the constitution, especially devolving the unrestrained power that our constitution gave to the head of the government. There were talks of making the judiciary independent, empowering the Anti-Corruption Commission (which is described by one of its chairmen as a “toothless tiger”), human rights and all other statutory bodies powerful and independent enough to do their

granting functional autonomy to the state-run Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), Bangladesh Television (BTV), and Bangladesh Betar so that public money is no longer wasted on propaganda for the government.

In his introductory remarks, Prof Yunus raised the question of the length of the interim government’s tenure. He added that the political parties he had spoken with so far had given two broad views: “take as long as you need,” and “take a reasonable amount of time” without defining what reasonable meant. Most of the editors responded by saying that the interim government should first set out its agenda and use that to determine the time it needed, and not go the other way of allowing the specificity of time to determine its agenda. The very few who gave any specific time frame, which varied between one and three years, added that the “honeymoon period” may not last for long, adding

community played an ignominious role, casting aside all ethics and norms of good journalism, thereby shaming all journalists.

There are two fundamental streams of work that the interim government needs to do: one is to run the everyday affairs of the government, and the other is to reform it. The first is itself a massive task that would occupy the full energy and resources of a full-fledged elected government in any country, made more so by the injustices, discrepancies, corruption and bad governance left behind by the ousted regime.

The second is the task to create for us a chance to build a better future. A one-minute pause by any of us would bring to our focus the tremendous challenge that the interim government faces.

Let us help them and give them time, patience, understanding and, most importantly, trust.

RESTORING POWER TO THE PEOPLE

A step towards a fair energy pricing system

Helen Mashiyat Preoty
is senior research associate at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

Mashfiq Ahasan Hridoy
is research associate at CPD.

HELEN MASHIYAT PREOTY and MASHFIQ AHASAN HRIDOY

Exactly 10 days after taking office, the interim government of Bangladesh made a significant shift in the power and energy sector by announcing the discontinuation of the Quick Enhancement of Energy and Power Supply Act, 2010 and the cancellation of its executive authority to raise power and gas prices without a public hearing by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC). This much-needed shift towards transparency and accountability repeals the controversial clause, which allowed the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources to unilaterally set energy prices, and will help restore BERC’s authority. This reinstatement of public hearings marks a return to democratic principles in energy governance and reflects a broader commitment to safeguarding consumer interests.

For nearly two years, Bangladeshi consumers have suffered under an executive system that gave the government unchecked power to set energy prices without their input. The 2022 amendment to the BERC Act was intended to stabilise energy supply

and address economic needs quickly. Instead, it led to repeated price hikes, straining household budgets and causing widespread dissatisfaction. In 2024 alone, the former government raised electricity tariffs four times without offering any public justification.

The now-repealed Section 34 (A) of the BERC Act bypassed the regulatory oversight intended to check government power, undermining transparency and public participation. By sidelining BERC, the government weakened the commission’s role as a regulatory authority and eroded public trust. Without public hearings, consumers felt powerless and excluded, leading to a sense of injustice and disenfranchisement.

Repealing the ministry’s price-setting powers and reinstating BERC’s role is more than just restoring procedure—it represents a commitment to public involvement in crucial decisions. This move underscores the government’s dedication to transparency and good governance, particularly in the energy sector. However, while reintroducing public hearings is a positive step, it alone

cannot ensure fair or rational energy pricing. The existing challenges, along with BERC’s diminished authority since the 2020 amendments, raise doubts about the effectiveness of this approach in truly serving the public interest.

In addition to electricity and gas prices, BERC should also take responsibility for setting fuel oil prices, a role currently held by the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC). BPC’s dual role as both the sole importer and regulatory authority raises concerns about the credibility of its price determinations, especially for petrol, diesel, octane, and kerosene. Since BERC already regulates the price of imported LPG, extending this responsibility to other fuels would be a logical and necessary step.

Public hearings enhance transparency by involving stakeholders in the price-setting process, but transparency alone does not guarantee rational tariff outcomes. Anomalies in the financial accounts of public authorities raise questions about financial transparency and credibility. The data provided, especially by the BPC, must be rigorously scrutinised to ensure it reflects the true financial state of the energy sector. Concerns are growing that information from BPC and the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) may not be accurate, with discrepancies in financial reports potentially leading to misguided decisions.

A major issue is the inefficiency within companies like BPC, where operational problems, such as fuel leakages, are passed on to consumers through higher prices. These inefficiencies should not become a public burden. Instead, they must be measured, reported, and resolved at the source to ensure that price adjustments reflect actual costs, not the inefficiencies of the providers.

To achieve true fairness and effectiveness in energy pricing, BERC’s original powers from the 2003 act must be reinstated. Before the 2023 amendments, BERC had the authority to conduct energy audits, enforce standardisation, introduce competitive bidding, and hold both government and private entities accountable. The legislative weakening of BERC has significantly undermined its role as an independent regulator. To ensure an effective energy transition, these crucial powers must be restored.

Additionally, competitive pricing should align with international market standards to ensure that Bangladesh’s energy prices reflect global trends. Pricing mechanisms must also account for the broader impact on the transport and power sectors, which are heavily reliant on energy costs. Any new pricing structure should be implemented with careful consideration of its ripple effects across these critical sectors to avoid unintended economic disruptions.