

A welcome decision to ease RMG unrest

Cooperative efforts, sound leadership vital going ahead

We welcome the decision of garment factory owners to accept all 18 demands of agitating workers, a much-needed development that will hopefully resolve the unrest that plagued the sector for weeks. According to a report by this daily, factory owners on Tuesday agreed to workers' demands including enforcing the minimum wage in all factories, clearing outstanding payments, provisions for tiffin and night allowances, etc. The government will also help workers in dense industrial areas buy subsidised essentials through its Open Market Sales (OMS) programme, regulate the scrapped clothes business (a key source of the unrest), and review police cases against workers to prevent harassment.

As expected, the decision has had an immediate impact as most factories in Savar and Ashulia reopened on Wednesday, with workers returning to their duties in a peaceful manner. Security has also been beefed up to prevent any untoward situation. However, some factories still remained closed, mainly owing to disruptions caused by financial constraints. This again highlights the urgency of addressing the losses suffered by factories not just during protests but also in the unprecedented mayhem that ravaged various industrial units since the regime change on August 5. The truth is, while we recognise the importance of Tuesday's decision to restore order, we cannot ignore the tremendous challenges that lie ahead for the industry.

The cumulative effect of frequent factory closures and suspensions of production and the vandalism witnessed over the past month and a half is that a number of international buyers have diverted their orders to competing nations. We have earlier commented on how this situation is affecting business, especially after many requests for value-added garments were cancelled or postponed because buyers had to cancel their trips. For a country heavily reliant on its garment exports, such shifts in buyer confidence and preferences do not bode well for both the sector and the country.

The diminished work flow will likely continue to haunt the industry, affecting not just workers and owners but also the scope of investment in modernisation, sustainability, and compliance with global standards. As highlighted by an industry expert, a consolidation phase appears imminent with smaller and financially weaker factories potentially closing. There are lessons for all stakeholders in this: the government, factory owners, and union leaders. Going ahead, they all must ensure collaborative efforts and sound leadership to prevent any further turmoil. The government, in particular, must undertake a comprehensive review of the health of the industry and provide necessary support to help it rise again.

State must ensure women's safety

Recent trend of violence questions efficacy of existing safeguards

At a time when the nation is dreaming of building a new Bangladesh based on equality and empathy, it is most unfortunate that issues concerning women's safety are still being neglected. The National Girl Child Advocacy Forum, a coalition of 206 government and non-government organisations, has recently highlighted a sharp decline in the coverage of gender-based violence, discrimination, and girl children's rights during the first eight months of 2024. According to their report, between January and August, a total of 224 girls were raped, 28 subjected to sexual harassment and abuse, and 19 abducted or trafficked, while 133 died by suicide and 81 were murdered. As disturbing as the numbers are, they still do not reflect the full picture as many incidents go unreported.

Some recent incidents of violence have again brought to the fore the lack of safety for women and girls in public spaces. The gang rape of a 70-year-old woman at Chhobir Haat in the capital's Suhrawardy Udyana and a 19-year-old woman in a moving bus in Chattogram are just two examples of how the state and society at large have failed to provide security to half of our population. Recently, we also witnessed another disturbing trend of moral policing by young men who attacked several women in the capital's Shyamoli area and Cox's Bazar, accusing them of antisocial activities. The attack on a female mountaineer in Dhanmondi is another case in point.

All these incidents point to a decay of moral values in society, which is sadly increasing, but also to the lack of initiatives from the state to make public places safe for women and girls. In this regard, rights activists particularly highlight the lack of enforcement of relevant laws as well as the dismal conviction rate in legal cases as major impediments to curbing violence against women. Such a state is totally unacceptable, especially as it emboldens perpetrators to repeatedly commit crimes. This needs to change.

We urge the authorities to take effective steps to prevent any harassment and abuse of girls and women and ensure that victims get justice without exception. Equally important is the role of the media and NGOs to report and raise awareness on violence, which can play a strong role in ensuring accountability and sensitising our still largely patriarchal society towards women's rights and dignity. Only coordinated efforts from all can bring this much-needed change.

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EDITORIAL

BNP faces the weight of history and expectations



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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There is currently a huge Awami League-shaped hole in Bangladesh's electoral politics, so BNP trying to dive headlong into it is no surprise. Since Sheikh Hasina's fall on August 5, BNP has had to navigate a delicate tightrope-balancing its ambition to return to power with the pressure to support popular demands for state reforms. The party doesn't want to risk the ire of the very students that ousted its arch rival, potentially putting it in pole position to win the next election. But reforms take time, something it doesn't have plenty of after nearly two decades of wait. And the grassroots are getting impatient.

"Impatient" is perhaps a mild term to describe what has transpired over the past month and a half. A more accurate description would be a chaotic transformation of a party getting used to having things its way. As BNP-affiliated leaders, activists, and professional groups scramble to fill the void left by AL, they give us an early preview of the making of another regime, and it's nothing short of disturbing.

For example, since August 5, at least 14 BNP members have lost their lives, eight of them in factional clashes. The most recent incident occurred on Friday in Chattogram's Changaon area, where a Jatiyatabadi Juba Dal activist was stabbed to death during a clash between rival factions. On the same day, heavy clashes between two BNP-linked groups in Chandpur left at least 30 people injured. Such violent power struggles, often centring around the control of extortion rackets, have become quite regular. In many ways, the BNP grassroots are just reenacting the scenes from AL's period which, too, was plagued by factional infighting, with over 150 of its leaders and activists killed in turf wars since the 2018 election. Over the past weeks, we have also had reports on how BNP leaders and activists captured slums, footpaths, transport hubs, and extortion rackets across various markets and sectors. In the civil service, there have been allegations against BNP-affiliated groups trying to influence promotion, placement and even public contract decisions.

Officially, the party is against such practices. Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman, recently warned that the party will not tolerate any reckless actions by "misguided" individuals that could harm "the trust and love" BNP has earned through "years of struggle,



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

sacrifice, and perseverance." He urged party members to "identify and resist" those tarnishing BNP's image, insisting that it is not only committed to expelling such individuals but also taking "legal action" against them.

These warnings, coupled with occasional disciplinary measures, however, have proved insufficient to deter errant party supporters, which means two things: either those were not stern enough, or the party is not trying hard enough. Both scenarios are likely in an environment of patronage politics that has been the mainstay of our political culture for so long. This system of patronage begins at grassroots with the capture of extortion rackets and other undue benefits by political thugs, and culminates with systemic regulatory capture by vested interest groups, all of which serves as an incentive for them to keep working for the party in power. Barring some ideology-based parties, the prospect or promise of mutual gain largely governs the interaction between most parties and their supporters.

BNP, for all its pre-reform posturing in the aid of the interim government, has signalled no willingness yet to lead political reforms, including within itself, to dismantle this corrupt system. While, to be fair, it has shown some signs of remaking itself as a party with a more open political ethos, the revolutionary time that we are going through demands much more.

it as the better of available alternatives, and generations past to ignore history and just go with it. The problem is, the new generation has shown a political maturity beyond their years. So, it must offer something new to win them over.

So far, it has been giving mixed signals. On the one hand, it admitted that repeating the mistakes of AL may bring the same fate for BNP, and how crucial it is to understand the shift in people's mindset. On the other hand, it repeatedly called for an election as soon as possible. Its rhetoric surrounding the student-led mass movement, trying to co-opt it as its own, and its suggestion that long-term reforms should be left for an elected government also reveal glaring contrasts. Perhaps the army chief's recent statement—in which he vowed to back the interim government "come what may" so that elections could be held within the next 18 months—will give it a new perspective. While expecting a roadmap for the election is not unreasonable, it must lift its sights beyond its ambition by focusing, in part, on internal party reforms.

At 46 now, BNP needs a changeover, and the sooner it understands it, the better. As the largest party in the country now, it has a duty not just to its leaders and activists but also the overall political fraternity in the country. To truly signal that it remains synced with the spirit of the mass uprising, BNP needs to set examples by undertaking the following initiatives.

Representation of the People Order (RPO) clause that prohibits political parties from having "affiliated" student or teacher organisations. Over the years, we have seen how political parties, including BNP, bypassed this law on technicalities, passing their student wings off as "brotherly" or "associate" organisations, thus enabling crimes and hegemonic practices that led to a deep distrust of student politics.

Fourth, it must ensure a democratic, transparent, and gender-inclusive party structure. Fifth, it must bring clarity on its finances by making the names of its donors public, and also conduct internal audits of assets held by party leaders. Sixth, it must prevent the breakdown of party discipline under the weight of grassroots expectations through strict measures. These are just some of the initiatives it can take, which will eventually benefit the party as well.

Just before the January 7, 2024 election, I wrote an article titled "Can BNP survive the pre-election meltdown?" amid heavy crackdowns by AL. In the changed reality, the question for BNP is: Can it survive the post-uprising expectations? The fact is, if political parties do not break free from their long-entrenched monopolistic and authoritarian attitudes, changing the constitution and undertaking other state reforms cannot prevent future regimes from becoming authoritarian again. BNP has a historic responsibility in this regard.

The urgent need to counter mob justice

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Nearly two dozen people have reportedly been lynched by mobs in the last month and a half, according to media sources. A report published by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) in July this year highlights the issue of mob justice, stating that 32 individuals fell victim to mob lynching in the first six months of 2024. The numbers were 51 in 2023, 36 in 2022, and 28 in 2021.

These figures clearly indicate a tendency among the general populace in Bangladesh to assume personal responsibility for punishing accused offenders. Who could forget the footage that went viral on social media in 2019, showing the murder of Taslima Begum Renu, a mentally ill single mother, outside Uttar Badda Government Primary School, after she was falsely accused of kidnapping a child? Recently, a youth called Utsab Mandal was injured in a mob attack in Khulna's Sonadanga residential area for allegedly making derogatory comments about religion. In the first week of September, former Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) leader Abdullah Al Masud was killed by a mob while he was buying medicine for his newborn daughter near Rajshahi University.

In a similar vein, two tragic incidents occurring on the same night at the campuses of two universities highlight

the psychological impact that lynching can have on the mass population of a country. Tofazzal Hossain was allegedly beaten to death by a group of students of Dhaka University's Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall on suspicion of theft. When Tofazzal was having his "last supper" before becoming a victim of the hall students, another former Jahangirnagar University student and a former BCL leader named Shamim Molla, was being pummeled by a mob. Students accused him of spearheading an attack on anti-discrimination demonstrators in front of the vice-chancellor's house on July 15. Shamim passed away at Savar Gonoshasthaya Hospital hours after the beating.

To understand the psychology of the mob, several studies have been conducted. Gustave Le Bon, a French polymath, stated that a crowd exhibits comparable emotions and coined the term "group mind" due to this behavioral consistency, regardless of differences in IQ, education, and career. He said, "In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to collective interest." Deindividuation occurs as people in a crowd may become less conscious of themselves and their responsibilities,

which can lead to impulsive and uncontrollable behaviour. People may assume less accountability for their actions and be more ready to engage in behaviours they would normally avoid when they feel anonymous and

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unidentifiable amidst a crowd.

Moreover, following the demise of the autocratic administration, the police faced widespread public condemnation for their abhorrent actions during the July uprising. Police stations were abandoned for fear of a crowd attack.

A parallel to this trend of mob lynching can be found in the barbaric treatment of criminals during the Dark Ages in Europe. In light of that, Cesare Beccaria, later regarded as the father of criminology, declared that the punishment for a crime should be proportional to the crime itself. The modern justice system is based on that notion, but also ensures the rights of the accused as it considers one innocent until proven guilty. Mob lynching

contradicts the principles of justice and the rule of law, particularly the rights to life and a fair trial, which are enshrined in international instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR 1966, Articles 6, and 14) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948, Articles 3, 10, and 11).

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The present government and its institutions must act without delay to uphold law and order in the country. While immediate change may not be possible, prompt actions are needed from the state. To restore normalcy, the government has conferred the power of magistracy to commissioned army officers for two months, as the police are yet to become fully functional.

However, this is not sufficient. Laws concerning mob justice should be enacted as they are currently absent in the Penal Code, 1860. Additionally, social media platforms should be continuously monitored to combat rumours. Interpersonal communication through organising seminars, workshops and educational campaigns on the consequences of mob justice could foster a sense of accountability, and different programmes can also be broadcast. Social organisations can also come forward to organise peaceful rallies and arrange dialogues among citizens.

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