

The timeframe question

The army chief's suggestion

For some time now, we have observed our head of government, politicians, and high-ranking officials often favouring foreign media outlets for interviews instead of engaging with national media. As a result, Bangladeshi citizens are often forced to rely on international sources for information that should be readily available domestically. This practice, we believe, should change as we work toward building a new and different kind of Bangladesh.

Continuing this trend, Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff General Waker-uz-Zaman recently gave an interview to Reuters, where he stated that he fully supports the interim government, led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, in its mission to implement key reforms following the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This is encouraging news, as the country is clearly in desperate need of reforms that can hopefully prevent the brutal authoritarianism of the former government from being repeated. However, the army chief also mentioned that he believes these reforms should lead to elections within the next 18 months. Previously, politicians, advisers to the interim government, and others have spoken about the need for reforms before elections are held, but no specific timeframe had been proposed by anyone in the government until now. This, of course, raises the question whether the government will face any limitations regarding how much time they will be given to implement these reforms.

Given the questions that could arise as a result of the army chief's statement, we must ask, wouldn't it have been more appropriate for the chief adviser himself to address the issue of the interim government's timeframe? Since the government has not officially announced a specific timeline, the army chief's remarks could create confusion. In light of this, we believe that such a statement should have been avoided until the chief adviser directly addressed the matter.

The army chief also proposed placing the defence ministry under the office of the president. We assume he suggested this since politicians have previously tried to use the army for political reasons, a practice that, as he himself admitted, risks politicising the defence force. Such politicisation can only harm the professionalism of the army as well as our national interests. Therefore, we fully agree with him that the army must remain a professional force, free of political influence. We believe the same must be done with the DGFI, which has also been subject to political misuse. Another encouraging statement by the army chief was his commitment to ensuring that any army personnel found guilty of human rights violations would be held accountable. This would help ensure that our army remains a force the people can trust and respect.

Finally, we commend the army for supporting the interim government and for preventing further bloodshed during the final days of the brutal Hasina-led government. This really proved its pro-people stance, for which it deserves our appreciation. We hope that the army will always stand by the people of Bangladesh and safeguard our national interests, and never be used as a political weapon under any circumstances.

Pharmacies must be better regulated

Lack of registration and oversight raises concerns

It is alarming to learn of the danger facing patients because of the pharmacies operating without licenses and qualified individuals. According to a report by daily *Samakal*, there are some 216,791 listed pharmacies or drug stores in the country. Out of them, the registration of 173,693, or nearly 80 percent, has expired, but they still run illegally. Many have even never registered, while most are said to have no pharmacists although the regulations for registration make them compulsory. This state of affairs shows how chaotic the growth of this sector has been, compromising the quality and safety of medications dispensed to patients, especially those from poor backgrounds who rely more on local pharmacies for primary care.

The importance of having pharmacists cannot be overstated. Their responsibility extends beyond merely selling medicine; they review prescriptions, ensure that patients understand how to take their medicine safely, and can advise on the proper storage of life-saving drugs. Without their presence, patients can be exposed to potentially serious errors in medication use. Another concern here is the negligence in drug storage and handling in these stores. Reportedly, many pharmacies do not follow the necessary protocols for maintaining drug quality. Many are even alleged to sell expired, substandard or even counterfeit drugs thanks to poor monitoring by the authorities.

In a country where public healthcare in general is in a shambles, this state of pharmacies is perhaps not surprising, nor does it get much policy attention. As per existing rules, pharmacy registrations must be renewed every two years. However, last year, only 42,896 pharmacies renewed their registration. We understand that their unchecked proliferation over the years—Bangladesh supposedly has five times more pharmacies than needed—can overwhelm the capacity of the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA). The DGDA, for example, is supposed to inspect pharmacies at least once a year, but only 63,971 were inspected last year. This again shows how crucial it is to ensure proper regulation. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved even after the passage of a new drug law in 2023.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to address this situation. They must take steps to ensure compliance of all relevant regulations so that only licensed, properly staffed pharmacies can operate. Routine inspections, strict penalties for any violations, and closure of illegal pharmacies should be enforced without delay. Moreover, there needs to be an overhaul of the pharmacy sector to reduce its unmanageable growth. Any compromise with the safety and quality of medications cannot be tolerated.

The roadmap for energy sector must be changed



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The problems in the energy and power sector have not accumulated over just 15 years. It began in the early 1980s. At the root of the problem lies the neo-liberal ideological approach that since then turned the power sector into a profit-making enterprise for a handful of local and foreign businesses. The alternative approach is fundamentally different—where access to energy and power should be a public right, and resources kept in public ownership and not privatised or turned into private businesses. Under the alternative approach, essential services such as affordable electricity, gas, and water become available for all without discrimination.

In the early 1980s, the World Bank, in the name of development, recommended the neo-liberal reform of the energy sector, suggesting that foreign investment should be brought in. Their logic was that foreign investment would lower electricity and gas prices, reduce financial loss and waste, and increase efficiency through technology transfer. Reform started in the 80s along with structural adjustment programmes in the economy, and the signing of production-sharing contracts with multinationals began according to this roadmap—the first round in 1993, and the second round in 1997. Although the governments during those periods were different, the nature of the policy remained the same and the trend continued even during the regimes that came to power after 2000.

However, after a while, the World Bank's argument about the benefits of privatisation and foreign investment in the energy sector proved to be wrong. We saw gas prices rising, loss/subsidies/wastage increasing, power tariffs increasing, and the prices of other essentials escalating on a regular basis. Furthermore, we did not see technology transfer and capacity development. Rather, the opposite happened. Foreign companies' negligence—the US company in Magurchhara and the Canadian company in Tengratila—caused big explosions in our gas fields. They destroyed natural gas that could have generated power for almost 18 months, and we still haven't received appropriate compensation for that.

During the last regime, foreign investment and privatisation in the energy sector increased further. In 2010, a new law was passed that essentially made the contracts and the contract processes free from any accountability, meaning these

contracts and the companies involved could not be questioned or taken to court. This legal indemnity made them untouchable. It became clear that the intentions behind these policies were not in the public interest. When we were told that the reason for this indemnity law was to tackle huge load shedding by establishing “quick rentals,” we proposed alternative solutions that would not require “quick rentals.” But the government did not show



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any interest in accepting the cheaper, sustainable solution that would use public-sector plants. They opted for the costly, unsustainable option only to give business to well-connected groups.

The past government took an irrational and aggressive path with regard to the “Power System Master Plan” (PSMP) prepared by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which prescribed coal, nuclear energy, and imported LNG—all heavily import-oriented, requiring loan and reliance on foreign companies, including Japanese ones, which benefited from this plan. Since 2011, the construction of coal-fired power plants by companies from India, China, and Japan began all along our coast from the Sundarbans to Cox's Bazar. The coastal area is extremely vital for the country's defence against natural disasters; it is also one of the most vulnerable regions to natural disasters, environmental damage, and climate change. However, the government

Plus, they initiated surveillance against dissenting opinions. It is easy to see that these plants were not built to generate electricity. There were much better alternatives. Nevertheless, these projects were pursued by the authoritarian government to bag huge commissions for policymakers and profits for a select few. Moreover, the past government sought to stay in power without people's mandate, so they relied on, among other things, international support from some foreign countries. To sustain that support, the government allowed these countries to launch those costly and environmentally harmful megaprojects. As a result, the energy and power sector has now become a huge financial burden for the whole economy and a significant source of environmental damage.

In contrast to the government's approach, we, as part of the people's movement, had developed a real solution for the sector taking the help of independent experts at home and abroad. We prepared an alternative

scrapping projects like Rampal, Rooppur, and Banshkhali. Some may argue about the financial loss if these projects are scrapped. However, my estimates show that the costs of discarding these projects are lower than the costs of keeping these projects active. These projects will endanger Bangladesh's existence. Thus, continuing them will not only be a financial burden but also jeopardise the safety and security of the country.

Finally, this sector as well as the economy require a fundamental shift in policy framework to ensure public ownership, increase the capability of public institutions, and create the space for active public roles to build a better future in the public interest. The government must move away from import loan foreign company-dependent projects and adopt a cheaper, environment-friendly, and sustainable roadmap with public interest—not corporate profit—as the decisive force.

Empowering women beyond protests



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Looking back at the anti-discrimination movement, it's impossible not to acknowledge our young women's immense courage and tenacity. Their voices rang clear amidst the chaos, demanding not just reforms but justice and equity. These women—our daughters, sisters, and friends—stood at the forefront of a battle that sought to reshape the future of Bangladesh. In doing so, they reminded us of the power of youth and the vital role women play in driving change.

The heroines that emerged during this movement, like Nusrat Tabassum, Prapti Taposhi, and Dipty Chowdhury are individuals of integrity and conviction. Their commitment to challenging an unjust system, even in the face of arrest and intimidation, deserves our recognition. But beyond that, it calls for a deeper reflection on how we can continue to empower women in Bangladesh—not just in times of crisis but in all walks of life.

Nusrat Tabassum, one of the key coordinators of the protests, led the charge from Dhaka University. Her determination to stay on the

streets, even in the face of detention and hunger strikes, turned her into a symbol of resistance and justice. Nusrat's bravery inspired her fellow protesters and highlighted the lengths our young women are willing to go to demand what is right.

Prapti Taposhi, a young activist, took to the international stage, discussing the student-led protests on Deutsche Welle (DW) News. Her eloquence and insight highlighted the broader implications of the political upheaval in Bangladesh, emphasising the necessity of government accountability. Prapti's voice became a beacon for those who sought to understand the movement's more profound significance beyond the immediate demands.

Dipty Chowdhury, a prominent media figure, maintained her composure and professionalism during a tense live talk show. Her ability to handle an outburst from a retired Justice with grace is a testament to her strength and poise—qualities that resonate deeply with the spirit of the movement.

The role played by the female teachers from Dhaka University and

Jahangirnagar University should be highlighted as well, given the courage and articulation they displayed during the movement.

Even outside of Bangladesh, women demonstrated solidarity with the movement, showing that the fight for justice has no borders. These women, among many others, have shown us what authentic leadership looks like. But their journey doesn't end with the protest. As a society, we are responsible for ensuring that all women in Bangladesh are empowered to continue leading, innovating, and shaping the future.

To ensure that contributions from individuals like Nusrat, Prapti, and Dipty are not isolated, we must take concrete steps to empower the next generation of women. This begins with education, the cornerstone of any meaningful change. Access to quality education should be a right, not a privilege, for every girl in Bangladesh. But beyond mere access, we need to create an educational environment that encourages critical thinking, leadership, and a deep understanding of social justice.

Moreover, it is crucial to create platforms where women can express themselves freely and safely. The 2024 movement highlighted the risks that women face when they step into the public sphere. Legal protections must be strengthened to ensure that women who speak out are not silenced by fear of retribution. Support networks, both formal and informal, should be established to provide women with the resources they need to navigate the

challenges of activism and leadership.

We must also address the systemic barriers preventing women from rising to leadership positions. This means not just creating opportunities but actively working to remove the obstacles that traditionally held women back.

In both the public and private sectors, women should be encouraged to lead based on their merits and abilities, rather than being forced into adhering to outdated societal expectations.

Mentorship programmes can play a pivotal role in this effort. By connecting young women with experienced leaders, we can create a culture of support and guidance that empowers women to take on leadership roles confidently. These mentors can provide invaluable advice, share their experiences, and help young women navigate the complex world of leadership and activism.

Finally, we must continue to tell the stories of these remarkable women. Their achievements and sacrifices should not be forgotten but should inspire future generations. By celebrating their stories in the media, literature, and our educational institutions, we can ensure that their legacy lives on and continues to inspire others.

The journey toward true equality is far from over, but we are on the right path, with women like Prapti, Dipty, and Nusrat leading the way. Now, it is up to all of us to support them—not just in their moments of triumph but in their everyday efforts to make Bangladesh a more just and equitable society.