

Are we leaving street children to their fate?

Govt should enforce a comprehensive plan for their well-being

Amid the myriad economic, political, social, and other challenges that Bangladesh has been dealing with in recent times, there is one particular issue that is not getting enough attention: the plight of street children who continue to live in a state of deprivation, humiliation, and abuse. According to a 2022 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), about 80 percent of street children face some form of harassment or torture on the streets. This data alone paints a horrific picture about their vulnerability which needs to be rectified.

While there is no specific data on the number of children living in street situations, a UNICEF study estimates that there could be at least 34 lakh such children living without parental care. The BBS survey also found that 82 percent of these children are male, the majority of whom end up on the streets due to poverty. About 36 percent have never experienced any formal or informal education. They also don't have access to basic amenities, let alone a safe environment to live in, and are forced to survive on begging or menial jobs like waste-collecting, working in tea stalls, factories or workshops, which put them at risk of injuries, not to mention exploitation. Most of those working have to toil 30-40 hours per week for less than Tk 1,000, as per the BBS survey.

It's distressing to think of the cycle of poverty, insecurity, and social stigma that these children remain stuck in. They are vulnerable to violence—physical, mental, and sexual—and most of them don't know whom to reach out for help. Many end up getting addicted and involved in petty crimes. This state of affairs must be addressed. In the new Bangladesh where we expect the rights of every citizen to be upheld without exception, a special focus must be given to the well-being of these vulnerable street children, who have every right to grow up like other children.

Therefore, we urge the government to adopt a comprehensive plan to bring all street children under the state's care. To this end, a robust, well-funded child protection system must be developed with extensive rehabilitation facilities. In addition, awareness must be raised so that society, including well-off families, come forward to help them. It is also worth remembering that not helping the street children means that the nation will continue to lose out in terms of human resources that can significantly contribute to our economic and intellectual growth.

Leave no room for conflicts of interest

Case of former DSCC mayor shows danger of unchecked power

The story of how former DSCC Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh allegedly exploited his office and clout to advance his business interests should serve as a cautionary tale not just for mayors and other public office holders, present or future, but also for the interim government so that no such unethical practices ever occur again. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, Taposh, after becoming mayor in 2020, directed DSCC's substantial fixed deposits and financial dealings to Modhumoti Bank, which he helped establish and continues to serve as a director. By September 2023, Modhumoti Bank held 46 percent of DSCC's total fixed deposits. Additionally, five out of seven ongoing projects of DSCC had their funds deposited in the same bank. In total, "Taposh's bank", as it is generally called, held a total of Tk 966 crore from DSCC's fixed deposits and project funds alone.

Moreover, the mayor, who is now absconding after the fall of the Awami League government, also redirected his office's financial transactions from other banks to Modhumoti, and even established six of its booths within DSCC offices, while depriving other banks. It should be mentioned that Taposh's actions were enabled by Awami League that allowed 50 percent of government agency funds to be kept in the nine private banks it had approved in 2013, including Modhumoti, based on political considerations. The whole episode is another reminder of how the regime blatantly abused power and allowed conflicts of interest to corrupt governance.

The Taposh case is just one of many that occurred during its tenure. Over the years, we have seen how numerous Awami League leaders, including MPs, owned or had stakes in businesses that often benefited from government contracts, policies, or regulations that they were in charge of overseeing. In many cases, they used their positions to secure favourable conditions for their enterprises, bypassing competitive bidding processes. This merging of business interests with power led to widespread corruption and misallocation of public funds. The result was a system where the line between public service and private gain became increasingly blurred.

As we turn a new chapter in our nation's history, we must ensure that future administrations do not fall into the same pattern. For that, the interim government must take concrete steps. For example, there is a need for strict regulations to ensure that elected public representatives cannot hold directorships in private companies while in office. Their finances should also be subjected to regular scrutiny. Moreover, an independent oversight body should be formed under a new law to prevent any potential conflicts of interest in public offices.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Wuchang Uprising begins

On this day in 1911, the armed rebellion known as the Wuchang Uprising occurred against the Qing dynasty. It led to the Xinhai Revolution which ended China's last imperial dynasty.



Why constitutional reform is essential



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The dream of building a nation rooted in equality, human dignity, and social justice has been a cornerstone of Bangladesh's formation. However, over the past 15 years, this very nation has witnessed a stark departure from those ideals, succumbing to the grip of fascism. Democratic institutions have been systematically dismantled, paving the way for authoritarian rule. Fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms have been trampled, and the aspirations that once drove the people to fight for independence have been replaced by dynastic and repressive systems.

The constitution is, in essence, the "manual" for governing a state. Yet, the present Bangladesh Constitution contains elements that neither reflect the spirit of the country's Liberation War nor safeguard against the rise of fascism. It has, instead, facilitated the authoritarianism of the previous regime in power. While there may be differences of opinion on whether to amend or entirely rewrite the constitution, there is little disagreement that the existing one poses significant obstacles to any future democratic process.

At first glance, one might believe that Bangladesh Constitution upholds the spirit of its independence. However, the principles of equality, human dignity, and social justice enshrined in the declaration of independence have been compromised. This constitution has enabled unchecked power to concentrate in the hands of the prime minister. Through successive amendments, the constitution has primarily centralised authority, serving the interests of those in power.

The constitution's core principles are meant to guide the governance of the state. But what should those principles be? They must be value-based, not ideologically driven. Ideological frameworks inevitably lead to conflict, as society is made up of diverse beliefs. One person might support an Islamic system of governance, while another advocate for secularism. One individual may be a proponent of Bengali nationalism, while another subscribes to Bangladeshi nationalism. If the constitution aligns with any single ideology, it inherently dismisses and alienates those with differing views, posing a serious barrier to building an inclusive society.

What, then, should the foundation of the constitution be? It should rest solely on democracy and the values of equality, human dignity, and social justice, as proclaimed in the declaration of independence. Beyond this, no other ideology—whether socialism, nationalism (Bengali or Bangladeshi),

The implications of Article 70 are far-reaching, particularly when the head of the party, the parliamentary leader, and the prime minister are all the same person. This concentration of authority leads to a situation where both the executive and legislative branches of government are controlled by a single individual.

secularism, or religious beliefs—should serve as the guiding principle of the constitution. These ideologies do not align with the needs of a modern state.

The past 50 years of governance under various regimes have shown that ideological frameworks have brought Bangladesh no lasting benefit, instead deepening divisions. The constitution must not embrace any ideology that sparks opposition from any part of society. Its focus should remain on the rules and regulations that govern the state's operations. The state itself should be devoid of any ideological affiliation. Its sole aim is to serve the people and ensure their security through a system of accountable governance. When any ideology—especially one linked to the two dominant political forces of the past 50 years, Awami League and BNP—becomes the basis for governance,

the nation is pushed towards conflict. Embracing such an ideological basis means returning to the divisive politics that have already fractured the country.

The four ideological principles enshrined in the current Bangladesh Constitution are essentially the core tenets of a political party, often referred to as "Mujibism." This ideological basis was included without a broader national consensus, reflecting the dominance of one political group's agenda over the people's collective will. The post-independence constitution was drafted by members of the constituent assembly, who had been elected for Pakistan's legislative body, not to create an independent nation. Following a nine-month independence war, the hopes and aspirations of the people had evolved. Given this transformation, it would have been appropriate to form a new constituent assembly through elections, with the mandate to draft the constitution and submit its guiding principles for a public referendum. However, instead of taking such inclusive measures, one party's ideology was imposed as the national ideology through the constitution.

The second critical issue lies in the relationship between the state and religion. A state should not endorse any particular religion; it must belong to all its citizens, regardless of faith. The state's primary role is to ensure equal rights and dignity for all religious groups and people. The constitution

Moreover, the current constitution has effectively transferred the same authority and power that a president would hold in a presidential system to the prime minister without the necessary mechanisms for accountability. Since the ruling party typically holds a majority in parliament, it becomes nearly impossible for parliament to hold the

election by members of parliament, ensuring a more democratic and less autocratic process.

2. Separation of key leadership roles: The constitution must ensure that the positions of party leader, head of the executive (prime minister), leader of the parliamentary party, and leader of parliament are never held by the same individual. This separation is crucial

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prime minister accountable. Instead of serving as a body that scrutinises the executive's actions, the parliament has become a rubber stamp that merely approves executive decisions and the government's agenda.

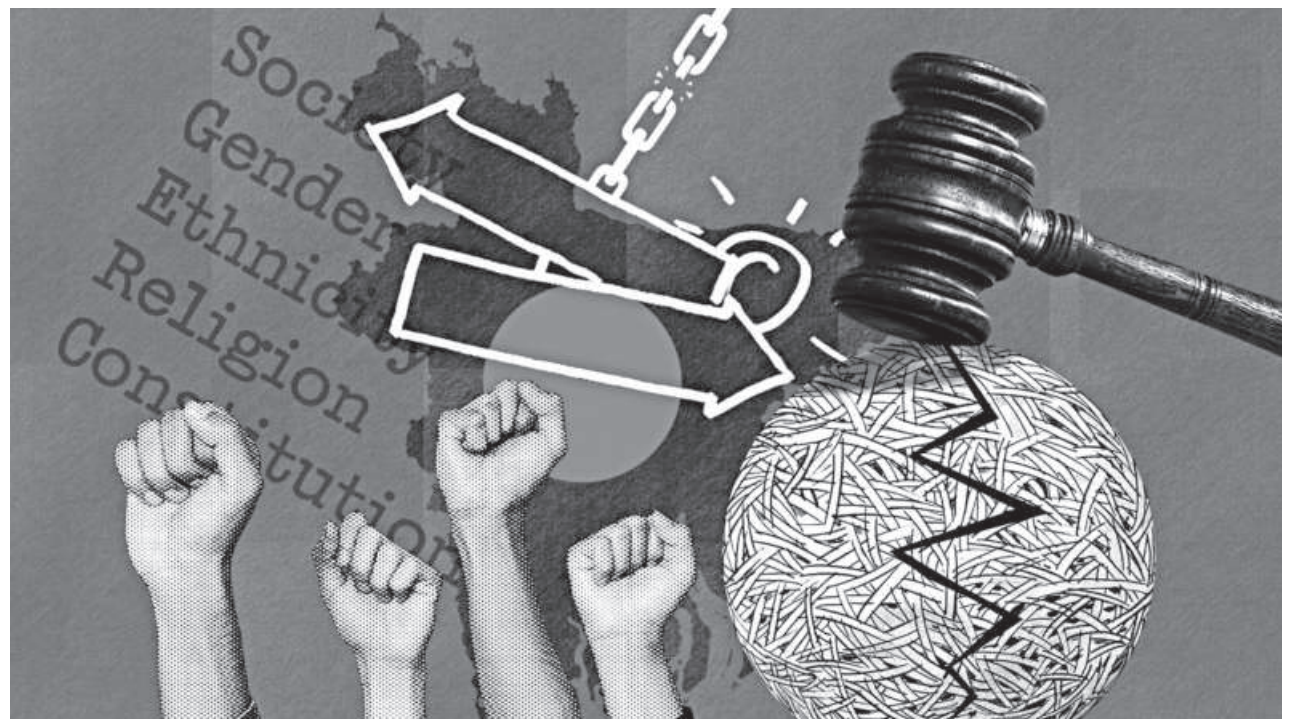
One of the most contentious elements of our constitution is Article 70, which severely restricts the ability of members of parliament (MP) to vote against their party. No MP is permitted to vote against their party's decisions, including decisions made by the government if their party is in power. If an MP dares to defy this rule, they risk losing their parliamentary seat. Rather than representing the interests of their constituents, this provision forces MPs to toe the party line and reduce them to voicing the will of the party leadership, eliminating any possibility of dissent or debate within the legislative body.

The implications of Article 70 are far-reaching, particularly when the head of the party, the parliamentary leader, and the prime minister are all

to avoid the dangerous concentration of power in a single person, which undermines both democracy and accountability.

3. Abolition of Article 70: Article 70 infringes on the independence of MPs and contradicts the spirit of parliamentary democracy, as it eliminates the possibility of meaningful debate and dissent within parliament and prevents MPs from voting against their party. Its removal is essential for ensuring government accountability through a truly functional legislature.

4. Balancing powers between the prime minister and president: There must be a redistribution of power between the prime minister and the president to prevent an excessive concentration of authority in the hands of a single person. Furthermore, the constitution must include mechanisms to ensure "checks and balances" among the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—so that no single branch



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

can dominate the others unchecked.

5. Framework for transfer of power: A clear and robust framework for peaceful power transfer, including provisions for an interim government (caretaker government), is essential to safeguard free and fair elections. The reintroduction of a caretaker government system, with necessary amendments, should be considered.

6. Bicameral legislature: To reduce the concentration of power within a single political party, a bicameral (two-chamber) legislative system should be established. This would allow for broader representation and promote a more inclusive democratic process, ensuring that different voices are heard and represented in the legislative process.

7. Value-based constitution, not ideology-based: The constitution should be rooted in universal values such as democracy, equality, human dignity, and justice rather than any particular political ideology. Divisive issues should be excluded from the constitution to help prevent further division and conflict in society.

Without substantial reform of the constitution, it is impossible to create a balanced system of governance where power is properly distributed among different branches of the government and the democratic process is safeguarded. A revised constitution must prioritise the establishment of checks and balances, ensure the independence of parliament, and place meaningful limitations on executive power, including term limits for the prime minister. Only then can Bangladesh hope to restore true democratic governance and prevent the rise of authoritarianism.

1. Term limits for the prime minister: A constitutional provision should be introduced to prevent any individual from serving more than two terms as prime minister. In addition, the selection process for the prime minister could be modified to resemble that of the president, with an indirect

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