

## Persuasion can do what pressure cannot

### Push for drastic state decisions must keep long-term impact in mind

We are concerned about the tendency, as evidenced by some recent events, to apply high-pressure tactics to rush important decisions that otherwise need careful deliberation based on diverse and informed perspectives. The latest incident occurred on Tuesday evening, when several hundred protesters tried to break through security barriers in front of Bangabhaban demanding the resignation of President Mohammed Shahabuddin. The ensuing clash left five people with minor injuries, as police resorted to baton charges and tear gas to disperse the crowd. Last week, the same tendency was on display when student leaders led a protest on High Court premises demanding the resignation of “pro-Awami League fascist judges,” forcing a decision that could have been reached following due process.

The controversy surrounding the president began after *Manab Zamin* published an interview on Sunday, in which he claimed he had only heard about Sheikh Hasina's resignation but found no “documentary evidence” of it. This, from a man whose retention after the fall of Awami League was deemed a constitutional necessity, sparked heated reactions as well as demonstrations in Dhaka and other districts. At the Central Shaheed Minar earlier on Tuesday, leaders of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement issued an ultimatum to meet their five-point demand, including the president's removal, by the end of the week. Their other demands include annulment of the 1972 constitution, a permanent ban on Chhatra League, declaration of a “Proclamation of the Republic” to govern post-2024 Bangladesh, and invalidation of the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections.

All these issues, we must say, have profound legal and political implications that cannot be taken lightly. Any forced decision risks not only creating new crises down the line but also weakening or disrupting the ongoing reform drive of the government. It cannot be denied that some of the demands raised by protesters have merit, having arisen from a backdrop of sustained grievances over decades. The power of mass mobilisation to effect change cannot be denied either, especially after the mass uprising. But the current political landscape is different. The interim government, born out of that uprising, has a mandate to reshape the nation's future through proper reforms. And it must be given constructive support—not threats or ultimatums—to do that since rushing through critical decisions could result in half-baked policies that fail to address the deeper issues plaguing the country.

The president's removal, for example, is a decision that needs political consensus which cannot be forced upon. If it must happen, it should happen in a judicious, fully-thought-through manner that serves our long-term interests. The same goes for any decision related to the constitution. We have a nine-member reform commission currently reviewing the constitution. But demanding its instant annulment while such a body of experts is in place undermines the purpose of this process. If protesters push for immediate actions without regard for due process, what is the point of having all such commissions?

We, therefore, urge protesters, especially student leaders, to show the same maturity they did during the uprising. The current period, with so many actors of competing interests around, calls for caution and collaboration with the government to ensure the reform drive remains on course. If real, meaningful change is what we want, there is no alternative to constructive engagement.

## Govt must ease the burden of prices

### Ensure better supply, tighten market oversight

We remain concerned about the state of the market as prices of many essential food items are still beyond the reach of lower-income families, despite recent measures by the government. While the price of eggs has decreased in the past week after having gone through the roof earlier, the cost of four other key items—rice, oil, sugar, and onions—has risen. Despite the government reducing import tariffs on these goods to lower prices, consumers have yet to benefit from it, as these imports have not reached the market. But can tariff reduction alone stabilise the market? Experts argue otherwise. What's needed is a comprehensive plan covering all aspects of the supply chain to lower the costs of these daily necessities.

It goes without saying that the government's failure to control prices is hitting low- and fixed-income households the hardest, making it increasingly difficult for them to access proper meals, especially protein. For instance, a woman named Shahinur, who has four children and whose husband drives a battery-operated rickshaw, recently told *Prothom Alo* that her family mostly survives on rice and lentils. Previously, she could afford to give her younger children milk four days a week, but that is no longer possible. The rising cost of rice has been particularly distressing. Just three months ago, the price of BR 28 rice was Tk 54 per kg; now it stands at Tk 65 (as of October 22). Prices for other rice varieties also remain high, despite sufficient stock in the market, as our reporter observed during visits to various kitchen markets in the city.

The causes of the current market instability are not unknown. Illegal hoarding continues to play a role, as does the disruption of supply due to recent floods. Furthermore, powerful syndicates appear to be manipulating the supply chain of different items. The government, therefore, must address all these issues with equal importance. Its first priority should be ensuring sufficient supply to meet demand. At the same time, market monitoring must be enhanced to prevent businesses from engaging in price manipulation. Breaking the monopoly of large companies that control the import of essential goods is another necessary step. Additionally, the government should further expand the Open Market Sales (OMS) programme to better support the poor.

Given how persistent the price problem has been, the interim government must give utmost importance to controlling the market to provide relief to the people struggling with soaring prices of essentials.

# Reforms require unity among our politicians



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In a recent interview with *Prothom Alo*, Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus urged the nation, “Unite for reforms. We must not hold the election without carrying out reforms. That is my appeal to everyone. Do not lose this opportunity.” His appeal captures a sentiment shared by millions: emphasising that reforms must precede elections if democracy is to thrive in Bangladesh. For too long, elections have been treated as rituals to renew power, not as opportunities for meaningful change. Since independence, no government in Bangladesh has fully lived up to the expectations of its people. Despite repeated promises, successive administrations have failed to deliver on their commitments. This persistent failure has fuelled widespread disillusionment, with many citizens now seeing politics as a self-serving enterprise rather than a means of public service. The growing mistrust reflects a deeper crisis within the political system, raising a crucial question: what do the people of Bangladesh truly expect from their leaders?

The people of Bangladesh expect politicians to be honest, accountable, and dedicated to public service. They want leaders to create a safe and fair environment where they can live and work without fear of bribery or extortion. People also expect politicians to focus on important matters like economic growth, healthcare, and education. Sadly, most politicians seem more interested in criticising opponents, using harsh words and weak arguments. People also hope for fair prices of essential goods and reliable access to basic services such as water, electricity, and gas, so people from all income levels can live with dignity. They want freedom of speech to be protected, allowing them to speak out without fear of retaliation. Citizens are tired of promises made during election campaigns that are never kept—they expect politicians to deliver on their commitments through fair and responsible leadership that upholds

the law and ensures institutions serve everyone equally. Unfortunately, there is a wide gap between these expectations and the political reality in Bangladesh.

For the past three decades, Bangladesh's political landscape has been dominated by two major players: the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Despite their longstanding dominance, these parties have failed to reach a consensus on any matter of national, political, social or economic importance that could genuinely



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benefit the country. Their ideological divisions are stark, but ironically, their main goal remains the same—winning elections and holding on to power—at any cost. Both parties have followed the same playbook when they were in opposition: boycotting parliament, inciting violent protests, and damaging public and private property, all in the name of democratic rights. They claim to uphold democracy, but their actions suggest otherwise. Their internal structures remain highly autocratic, and most decisions are made based on the personal preferences of the party president/chairperson. There is little room for new ideas or input from others, which stifles political progress

and power stays within a small circle of individuals.

Politics in Bangladesh, once considered a noble calling, has now become a fast track to wealth and power. For some, it serves as a family legacy; for others, it is a shortcut to personal enrichment. While corruption has always existed in politics, the current scale and openness of it are alarming. Many politicians control local territories, rig public contracts, and engage in various illegal activities, including land grabbing, sand mining, extortion from street vendors and the transport sector, and running drugs and gambling operations. A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) report reveals that corruption in the Roads and Highways Department alone has cost the nation nearly Tk 50,835 crore over the past 15 years. Another TIB report estimates that Tk 2,000 crore is extorted every year by transport owners' and workers' associations. This money is shared among influential figures, including politicians, police,

manipulate the youth for their political interests. It has become customary for political parties to use young people as picketers during protests. Some of these picketers are street children, while others are students. Under the guise of political movements, they engage in street violence, often fighting fiercely on behalf of their political mentors and, in the process, become victims of violence themselves. These young people are treated as expendable foot soldiers by all political parties.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh's political standards are now at their lowest point, with integrity in governance and honesty in leadership almost non-existent. Bangladesh's politics had a glorious past, marked by a proud history of struggle and supreme sacrifices for national causes, including the Language Movement of 1952, the Mass Uprising of 1969, and the Liberation War of 1971. In those days, the most well educated, honest, and socially conscious individuals with high moral values engaged in politics. Unfortunately, over time, things have deteriorated. While even a clerical job now requires a college degree, there is no minimum educational qualification requirement to become an MP—an important position with responsibility for making laws.

Professor Yunus rightly argued that holding elections without meaningful reforms would be a grave mistake. Rebuilding political institutions and fostering a healthier political culture are monumental tasks—especially for an interim government with limited time. Yet, key reforms are essential not only to ensure free and fair elections but also to curb the misuse of state resources and dismantle the cycles of patronage and political violence that have plagued the nation for decades. People are exhausted by these “self-serving *netas*,” they yearn for leaders capable of rooting out corruption, challenging harmful traditions, and, most importantly, fostering unity for the betterment of Bangladesh. However, these aspirations demand more than empty promises—they require genuine action. Unless politicians address these critical issues, the gap between public expectations and political realities will continue to widen. The question now is whether political leaders will rise to meet the people's expectations—or allow yet another opportunity for meaningful change to slip away.

bureaucrats, contractors, and engineers.

Political leaders have built a patronage system that extends into nearly every sector, including student groups, labour unions, lawyers, teachers, doctors, and business leaders. These groups are often offered financial incentives, business opportunities, or influential positions in exchange for suppressing dissent from the public or opposition parties. This system has enabled successive regimes to cling to power through a mix of violence and rewards, alienating ordinary citizens and causing unnecessary suffering. What is particularly concerning is how politicians exploit the poor and

# We need diverse expertise in the health committee

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The interim government has recently formed a committee to reform the health system, a commendable initiative given the importance of healthcare to society. However, there is significant concern regarding the committee's composition, which, much like the Covid pandemic management committee before it, is predominantly made up of physicians. This narrow focus on clinical expertise is inadequate for addressing the complexities of the health system.

Health is a social system interconnected with other societal structures such as the economy, politics, and governance, making it far more than a singular component of society. Reforming such a complex system requires a transdisciplinary (TD) approach, which goes beyond multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary methods.

TD integrates expertise across various disciplines and includes input from non-academic stakeholders like policymakers, practitioners, and the community. This approach fosters collaboration that co-creates practical solutions grounded in real-world contexts.

The formation of the health reform committee raises concerns due to the overrepresentation of individuals from a specific discipline, namely physicians

and clinicians, many of whom have administrative and leadership experience. However, this approach overlooks the crucial contributions of other core disciplines vital to health services, such as pharmacy, health technology, clinical psychology, public health sciences, data sciences, and medical sociology. Mental health, in particular, is underemphasised, as professionals like clinical psychologists—who play an essential role in mental health care—are not included.

The committee's composition could have been more balanced by involving not only those directly engaged in health services, but also academics from diverse fields who are key to understanding the broader health system. This includes public health experts, data scientists, health system analysts, biotechnicians, economists, sociologists, and psychologists. Importantly, a TD approach should also involve perspectives from outside academia, considering that a health system is a complex social structure—opinions and perspectives from other key stakeholders are also crucial and should be carefully considered.

Furthermore, the committee has overlooked tens of thousands of people who rely on alternative medicine systems like Ayurveda, Unani, and homeopathy. These systems play a significant role in the healthcare-seeking behaviours of marginalised populations in Bangladesh. Excluding their perspectives undermines the potential for creating a sustainable, equitable health system that meets the needs of the entire population.

Pharmacy, pharmaceutical sciences, and public health are integral components of the healthcare sector, yet they have been completely overlooked in the formation of

this committee. From a healthcare perspective, the exclusion of industrial pharmacists and clinical pharmacists makes the formation of a committee solely composed of physicians both irrational and exclusionary. Without the involvement of pharmacists, essential functions like proper and effective drug delivery, rational drug use, and the management of drug-related issues—including adverse drug reactions and contraindications—cannot be effectively carried out.

On October 17, the interim government announced the formation of a health commission, chaired by Professor Dr AK Azad Khan. It was also stated that the remaining members of the commission would be announced within 7-10 days. We hope the government's health adviser recognises that meaningful reform in the health sector requires expertise and input from professionals across various disciplines. Since in the previously formed health reform committee, only doctors and clinicians were included, when determining the members of the health commission, the government should move beyond this narrow approach and adopt the proposed TD approach.

Some have questioned whether it is feasible to recruit hospital pharmacists and clinical pharmacists under the current pharmacy curriculum. To them, we emphasise that the reform process will be structured into short-term, mid-term, and long-term phases. In the short term, necessary adjustments will be made to the curriculum. In the mid-term, job opportunities for hospital pharmacists and clinical pharmacists will be created. In the long term, these professionals will be recruited in hospitals across the entire country.

It is impossible to reform

the healthcare sector without simultaneously addressing the pharmaceutical sector. The development of a new drug policy, aligned with the national health policy, is essential. Urgent steps must be taken to draft a modern drug policy, reform the outdated 1982 drug policy, and investigate the reasons behind multinational companies withdrawing from the pharmaceutical sector.

Additionally, creating a favourable environment to attract investment from multinational companies and restoring opportunities for knowledge, skills, and technology transfer is crucial. Efforts must also focus on curbing corruption in the drug sector, keeping drug prices affordable, preventing the production of counterfeit, adulterated, and substandard drugs, and ensuring drug quality through a comprehensive overhaul of the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA). To achieve these reforms, the reform commission on health affairs should include at least two senior pharmacists and two faculty experts in pharmaceutical sciences.

The improvement and reform of the pharmaceutical industry is a critical element of the overall healthcare system. If affordable and quality medicines are not made available, the healthcare system will inevitably collapse. Furthermore, if hospital pharmacists and clinical pharmacists are not adequately employed across all hospitals, patients will continue to be deprived of essential pharmaceutical services. We, therefore, urgently request the inclusion of pharmacists and pharmacy faculty representatives in the health reform commission to ensure a comprehensive and effective approach to healthcare reform.