

Govt must act wisely on the HSC debacle

Demands for re-evaluation of results risk setting a bad precedent

There is perhaps no easy way out of the HSC-shaped hole the government has dug for itself. The ongoing protest by a section of HSC examinees—who failed or did poorly in the exams—is a disaster in the marking since August 15, when the government hastily announced new dates for the six previously postponed exams in a country still very much in turmoil, and then again hastily cancelled them altogether when students staged a protest at the Secretariat on August 20. This led to the adoption of a unique evaluation method that combined students' scores from the completed HSC exams with their SSC scores for the cancelled subjects, through a process called "subject mapping."

However, since the results were published on October 15, underperforming students have been demanding "equitable" results through a re-evaluation of all subjects using SSC scores, which would effectively amount to automatic passes for all. This is a classic example of how one poorly handled crisis can lead to another. The government may say this is not entirely their fault. This year's HSC and equivalent exams began on June 30, but after seven exams, nationwide protests demanding reforms to the government job quota system led to multiple postponements. Six subject exams and practical tests were still pending when the Awami League government was toppled on August 5. But while the interim administration may have inherited this crisis, its handling of subsequent developments has left a lot to be desired.

Had it refused to concede to the demands for an "auto pass" on August 20, and instead rescheduled the postponed exams to a more appropriate time, there would have been no question about the evaluation method and the current crisis might have been avoided. Reportedly, after Wednesday's disruptive incidents at the Secretariat, a case has been filed in which 26 protesters have been shown "arrested", while 26 others have been released into the custody of their guardians. The question is, what to do now? Recent developments have again raised the risk of the government acting under pressure, and acting poorly, but we urge it to hold its ground this time and take decisions that serve our best interests.

As experts have pointed out to this daily, the demands for re-evaluation of HSC results are "illogical" and "unacceptable," with far-reaching consequences for the nation. Granting passes without proper evaluations is not only unfair to the students who worked hard to succeed; it also risks setting a dangerous precedent for future students who may seek similar concessions. This may leave future generations ill-equipped to contribute meaningfully to the country. The government must keep in mind that short-term fixes—as we have also seen during the Covid pandemic when automatic promotions were granted—have long-term effects. So, it must rectify its mistakes in this issue and focus on much-needed reforms in the education sector through proper consultations with the stakeholders.

Ensure diversity in reform commissions

Lack of female, minority representation in commissions raises concerns

It is disconcerting that the 10 reform commissions established by the interim government so far lack adequate representation of women and minority groups. Among the 10 commissions—concerning the judiciary, election system, civil administration, police, Anti-Corruption Commission, constitution, health affairs, mass media, labour rights, and women's affairs—only the one on women's affairs is headed by a woman.

So far, a total of 50 members have been selected to work for the six commissions constituted on October 3 (while the remaining four are yet to be fully formed). Of them, only five are female professionals, according to a report by *Prothom Alo*. Moreover, there is no representation from religious and ethnic minority groups in the constitutional reform commission, despite one of the major criticisms of the 1972 constitution being its failure to recognise ethnic minorities. Similarly, the police and judiciary reform commissions have no members from religious and minority communities. Retired government officers make up the largest group—30 percent—among all commission members. In addition, the academics selected as members of various commissions are mostly from Dhaka University (particularly its law department), while other universities, especially those outside Dhaka, have been overlooked.

This underrepresentation of diverse groups, and simultaneously overrepresentation of certain professionals, go against the spirit of the July-August uprising that called for an end to all forms of discrimination. However, diversity carries more than just symbolic value. For example, a recent opinion piece published in this daily highlighted the need for diversity in the health system reform committee. This committee mainly consists of clinicians and physicians, excluding professionals from essential fields such as pharmacology, which is a critical aspect of healthcare.

We still do not know the extent to which the reform commissions will influence the final reform framework, as their mandates or terms of reference have not been published yet. However, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus's September 11 speech indicated that changes proposed by the commissions will not be implemented without consultation with representatives from student bodies, civil society, and major political parties. This offers hope that the final reform framework will incorporate the voices of less-privileged and marginalised communities. Additionally, there is always room to improve the composition of the commissions as the head of each commission has the authority to select the number and qualifications of members.

Thus, we hope that all commissions will prioritise proper representation of diverse groups and perspectives while finalising their members. We also hope that the interim government's future actions will uphold the importance of representational value in all matters of state reform.

EDITORIAL

Between a rock and a hard place

Crony capitalism and the quest for reform in Bangladesh's governance

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It is impossible to ignore the grim reality that the current interim government in Bangladesh, tasked with fixing the country's deeply entrenched dysfunctional governance—shaped by corrupt and extractive institutions that exclusively benefited the ousted regime through crony capitalism for 15 years—finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place. Central to this predicament is the insight provided in the seminal work, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, by the 2024 Nobel laureates in Economics, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. Unsurprisingly, the authors argue that the successes and failures of nations across the world fundamentally depend on the kind of institutions they rely on, leading to either a virtuous cycle of prosperity or a vicious cycle of stagnation and decline.

According to Acemoglu and Robinson, extractive institutions prevent countries from embarking on a trajectory of sustainable economic growth. Nations such as Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone in Africa; Colombia and Argentina in South America; North Korea and Uzbekistan in Asia; and Egypt in the Middle East all suffer under such institutions, despite their diverse geographic locations, histories, languages, and cultures.

By definition, "extractive institutions" are political and economic structures designed to funnel resources and wealth from the majority of a population to a small elite. These institutions limit broad participation in economic activities, concentrate power in the hands of a few, and restrict innovation and economic progress. They are marked by high levels of corruption, patronage, and inequality, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment for the broader society. Conversely, "inclusive institutions" promote broad economic participation, protect individual rights, enforce the rule of law, and encourage competition and innovation. Such institutions ensure that the majority of the population has access to opportunities for economic and political engagement, fostering long-term economic growth and social progress by incentivising productivity and rewarding merit.

The challenge facing the interim government in Bangladesh is that the extractive institutions that sustained the previous repressive regime remain largely intact, even after the ousting of the dictatorial prime minister and

her inner circle, posing a significant obstacle to meaningful reform. However, the saving grace is that this critical juncture offers a rare policy window through which the country can transition from extractive institutions to inclusive ones, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to initiate transformational change.

The phrase "between a rock and a hard place" is germane to policymaking in these desperate straits for the interim government for two specific reasons. One, there is immense pressure to swiftly address the entrenched corruption and dysfunctional governance, left behind by the ousted regime, which requires dismantling the crony capitalist structures that have allowed politically connected elites to exploit public resources with impunity. And two, the government faces constraints in terms of time, resources, and political capital. Any aggressive reform efforts risk alienating powerful vested interests, whose resistance could destabilise

rent-seeking behavior—a form of economic inefficiency described by David Ricardo. Under the previous regime, politically connected elites and businesses leveraged their relationships with the state to extract unearned financial benefits without contributing to genuine economic productivity.

In the banking sector, rent seeking behavior became endemic. Banks, especially state-owned institutions like Sonali Bank and BASIC Bank, became key vehicles for funneling public resources into private hands. Politically connected businesses were granted preferential access to loans with a lack of due diligence, securing financial advantages not because of their productivity or innovation, but due to their proximity to power. Once these loans were defaulted on, rather than penalising the rent-seekers, the government allowed the burden to fall on taxpayers, deepening inequality while preserving the privileges of the elite.

where rent-seekers were charged with corruption or fraud, legal loopholes, and politically motivated judicial decisions often protected them from meaningful consequences. This contributed to an environment where the rule of law was perverted to maintain the economic privileges of the elite, further entrenching the rent-seeking system.

The electoral process was designed to further institutionalise rent-seeking behavior. Political elites manipulated elections, ensuring that those who gained office were individuals or parties willing to maintain the status quo of crony capitalism. Access to government contracts, natural resources, and monopoly privileges were all subject to this rent-seeking dynamic, where political loyalty was exchanged for exclusive rights and protection from competition.

The perpetuation of rent-seeking behavior resulted in severe economic stagnation for the majority of the population. While the politically connected elite enjoyed monopolistic privileges, the broader economy suffered from reduced competition, inefficiencies, and a lack of innovation.

Without decisive action, the vicious cycle of kleptocracy and rent-seeking threatens to continue, stifling Bangladesh's progress toward a fairer and more transparent system of governance. The interim government cannot afford to overstay its welcome without seriously tarnishing the great opportunity for a paradigmatic change afforded by the July 2024 uprising. In this historic movement, the students and the (extra) ordinary people of the country have demonstrated that no challenge is too great for them to confront. Their sacrifices and commitment have set a powerful precedent for the potential of transformative governance in Bangladesh.

However, one of the most significant obstacles to meaningful reform continues to be the entrenched "iron triangle" comprising corrupt politicians, business elites, and elements of the bureaucracy, which have historically controlled the flow of power and regulated resources in the country. This unholy alliance, which thrives on cronyism and patronage, has long resisted any attempts at structural change, reinforcing a cycle of stagnation and inequality. For the interim government, navigating this deeply embedded network of vested interests will be crucial. Without breaking the stranglehold of this iron triangle, the path to inclusive institutions and genuine democratic governance will remain blocked, no matter how strong the public's demand for change.



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the fragile interim period in the run-up to a free and fair election when the political government takes over. Furthermore, the "rock" represents the immediate need to gain public trust by initiating reforms that undo years of systemic corruption, while the "hard place" symbolises the difficult task of navigating institutional resistance and the deeply embedded networks of cronyism that could undermine these efforts. Policymaking in such a context requires a delicate balance—ensuring meaningful progress while avoiding unintended consequences that could deepen the crisis.

It should be borne in mind that the vicious cycle of kleptocracy, overseen by what was historically the most

autocratic and repressive government in Bangladesh, was not only fueled by unchecked crony capitalism and entrenched institutionalised corruption but also by systematic

massive capital flight compounded these issues. Politically connected elites moved vast sums of money overseas, draining domestic resources that could have been used for development. To compensate, the government resorted to printing money, leading to inflation. Under the guise of "development," this practice created short-term liquidity but fueled inflation, further eroding the purchasing power of ordinary citizens while the elite, with wealth safely offshore, remained unaffected. This imbalance worsened economic inequality and weakened democratic governance, as development was pursued at the expense of transparency and accountability.

The judiciary's compromised state also facilitated rent-seeking. Judges who were appointed based on their political loyalty allowed those who benefited from rent-seeking practices to escape justice. In cases

The dangers of commodifying higher education



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At a recent seminar, Professor Samina Luthfa made an insightful point about building research-oriented universities in Bangladesh, remarking that "research is not just about technical skills; it requires insight and questions." This statement reflects a deep understanding of the essence of academic research, and I wholeheartedly agree with her. Insight is not something that can be gained merely through technical proficiency or the mastery of research methods. It emerges from critical engagement with existing knowledge, intensive reading, thorough literature reviews, careful observation, and rigorous analysis. To foster such insight, the ability to think critically and creatively is indispensable.

A significant aspect of this shift is the gradual corporatisation of universities, particularly private universities. While Bangladeshi universities are not fully market-driven, they are increasingly treated as profit-generating entities where VCs act like CEOs, teachers as managers, and students as customers. This commodification reduces education to a transactional process, where degrees are products for sale. But should higher education cater only to corporate needs, or should it develop critical thinkers and socially responsible citizens? The answer lies in re-evaluating our educational purpose.

Public universities, while not fully neoliberal, are adopting these practices, though not as quickly as private institutions, which more visibly display corporate symptoms. The corporatisation of private universities

and local communities. We must remember that higher education is not simply an instrument for economic development but also a space for critical citizenship, intellectual growth, and social transformation. Without critical evaluation, neoliberal reforms could have serious implications for the long-term intellectual and social health of Bangladesh.

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makes them increasingly market-oriented, while public universities are slowly following suit. The emphasis on bureaucratic initiatives like the Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) pushes universities to focus more on quantifiable outputs rather than cultivating the creativity and critical thinking necessary for intellectual and societal progress. We must question whether these measures truly capture the essence of education.

Furthermore, we need to support disciplines that may not align directly with market demands but are essential for broader intellectual and moral development. Are we offering adequate resources for fundamental subjects like philosophy, physics, mathematics, anthropology, and history? What about fundamental research in these fields? These fields are vital for ethical reasoning and scientific innovation, yet they are often sidelined in favour of commercially viable programmes like computer science and business administration. Can a nation truly progress if it focuses only on technical skills, while neglecting the ethical, cultural, and intellectual development that comes from other disciplines?

Instead of simply expanding the number of universities, we should concentrate on creating high-quality institutions as the indiscriminate growth of universities might dilute educational standards. A sustainable approach involves investing in a select number of universities that excel in different fields and promote research, teaching, and public engagement. Quality, not solely quantity, should be the goal.

Additionally, the decolonisation of education must be handled with

nuance. Decolonisation does not mean rejecting knowledge, technologies, or innovations from the West but rather engaging critically with global knowledge systems and integrating them into our local contexts. In a country as diverse as Bangladesh, the relevance of university education depends on its ability to address local needs while remaining open to global influences. Universities should be sites where global knowledge is adapted to fit local realities rather than simply replicating foreign educational models.

Walter Feinberg's concept of "Educational Democracy" offers a valuable framework for rethinking higher education in Bangladesh. Feinberg argues that education should not solely serve corporate or economic interests but should foster democratic values, critical thinking, and public engagement. Higher education, under this model, becomes a space where students and educators collaborate to address pressing social, political, and intellectual issues. Educational Democracy emphasises that universities should cultivate responsible, engaged citizens, not just skilled workers for the corporate world.

Public universities, though slower to adopt neoliberal practices, are not immune to these pressures. Feinberg's model provides a roadmap for transformation. In Bangladesh, this shift means reimagining universities as spaces for public engagement, critical inquiry, and intellectual freedom. Without such a shift, we risk perpetuating a system that serves only a privileged few while marginalising the majority.