

‘Domestic gas exploration is the most economical option’

Dr Badrul Imam, honorary professor at the Department of Geology in the University of Dhaka, talks about the reasons behind the ongoing gas crisis and the possible way out in an exclusive interview with Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star.

Our industrial sector has been suffering due to gas shortage for the past few years, but lately the crisis has become acute. It is also severe in residential areas. What factors contributed to this situation?

The main reason behind the ongoing gas shortage is that we only depend on the available reserves. We have not discovered any new gas reserves for a long time, while our existing gas reserves are depleting quickly due to increased demand. Generally, in countries with significant gas reserves, exploration is done continuously so that if one source is depleted, another source can replace it. In Bangladesh, however, exploration is minimal. So, once the production drops, it's difficult to increase it again. This, in my view, is the main reason for the current crisis.

You have always emphasised the importance of becoming

self-reliant in gas resources, for which exploration is urgent. What is stalling exploration in Bangladesh?

There is a serious lack of initiative and urgency among the authorities responsible for gas exploration in Bangladesh. There needs to be a visionary leader in this sector, someone who understands our vast potential for gas reserves. We also need experts who truly understand the technicalities of the energy sector to lead exploration drives. Many countries with similar geological formations like ours—Nigeria, parts of the US, and Indonesia—have successfully tapped into their gas resources. There's no reason to believe that Bangladesh has less potential. However, achieving self-sufficiency in gas resources requires a robust exploration policy, which we are lacking. Our past governments were content with small-scale explorations



Badrul Imam

that yielded enough to meet the immediate demand only. They did not implement any comprehensive long-term plan. To make a significant impact, we need a massive exploration drive. If our local companies can conduct the exploration, the cost will be minimal. Even if we engage foreign companies, it will still be cheaper than importing liquefied natural gas (LNG). So, domestic gas exploration is the most economical option to meet

our energy needs.

Are there any specific gas fields where exploration could yield quick results?

In the Sylhet region, for instance, surrounding the Surma basin, which includes large gas fields like Habiganj and Bibiyana, there are still enough scopes for exploration. Bibiyana, in particular, is a giant gas field in the global context. Exploration in these

areas is still in the primary stage. If we could explore these fields, I believe we could get even larger reserves than we currently have.

Do we have the required technology and resources for gas exploration?

Well, our resources are limited. Our state-run company, Petrobangla, does not have the capacity to conduct such extensive exploration alone. To overcome this limitation, we need to bring in foreign companies with the expertise and equipment for large-scale exploration. Engaging reputable international companies could lead to significant discoveries. But even if we start exploration today, it could take at least five years to see significant results.

What could be the short-term solution to the current crisis?

As I have said, in the short term, we can reactivate the old gas wells that have not been fully utilised. These wells have already been drilled so we can start producing gas from them with minimal work. Ideally, we should not go for LNG import because it is much more expensive. Relying on imports is also not sustainable in the long run, especially given our high dependency on gas. However, to immediately manage the crisis, LNG import may be unavoidable.

How many wells can be reactivated

right now?

Quite a few. Each of our gas fields has at least four to five wells that can be reactivated. That means there are about 20-25 wells in five fields that can be put to use. A substantial amount of gas can be extracted from these wells.

What is the status of our offshore exploration?

Unfortunately, exploration of offshore gas reserves has not progressed much. There were talks of exploration years ago, but it did not happen. So, this area remains largely unexplored. Dividing the Bay of Bengal into exploration blocks and launching competitive bidding for them could yield great results. What we need is a strong push to initiate international bidding and invite foreign companies to explore these offshore blocks.

If we go for both onshore and offshore exploration on an urgent basis, how long do you think it may take for us to achieve self-sufficiency in gas resources?

It's hard to give an exact time frame. Even if we had started exploration three years ago, we would have seen some results by now. Gas exploration takes time. For the areas that have already been explored, production can start within one to two years, but for new exploration, it will take more time.

BNP's unfolding strategic stance

Straddling the aftermath of a revolutionary 'event' and realpolitik

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The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh marked a pivotal moment as students and citizens rallied for transformative change, challenging established political hierarchies. Unlike previous movements, this protest operated independently of any political party leadership, underscoring a grassroots demand for reform that had eluded mainstream opposition efforts for over a decade. For the first time, a mass uprising forced the removal of a seemingly entrenched regime through sheer public resolve, demonstrating the often-overlooked power of collective action—an “event” as described by eminent French philosopher Alain Badiou: a disruptive break from the status quo of conventional political order.

On August 8, the formation of an interim government emerged as a critical turning point in Bangladesh's political landscape, briefly uniting opposition forces, including the BNP, around a shared agenda for paradigmatic change. Initially supportive of the student movement, some argue that the BNP later tempered its endorsement, seemingly distancing itself strategically from some of the demands for structural reform of extractive institutions widely seen as enabling the rise of illiberal, authoritarian governance, epitomised by the recently ousted regime. Notably, the BNP is now subtly yet unmistakably shifting away from calls for the immediate resignation of the sitting president—a figure closely tied to the discredited past—and towards advocating for a more cautious, electoral roadmap. This strategic repositioning has allowed the BNP to present itself as a stabilising force focused on continuity and gradual reform through electoral processes, a choice that critics argue reflects a conservative impulse to preserve familiar structures.

According to cultural theorist Frederic Jameson, understanding such political decisions requires analysis through multiple lenses or “horizons.” On the “political horizon,” Jameson's first level of analysis, the BNP's reluctance to support student-led calls for immediate presidential removal can be viewed as a tactical move to balance reform aspirations with stability. By prioritising an electoral roadmap over sudden upheaval, the BNP is perhaps portraying itself as a seasoned opposition force. This approach positions the party as a measured alternative amid calls for radical change—a strategic choice to avoid being swept up in what it might see as “instant gratification” in favour



People celebrate the fall of the Awami League government in Dhaka on August 5, 2024. FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

of long-term goals. However, critics argue that this approach risks the party appearing overly conservative and misaligned with the youth-driven energy fuelling the July uprising.

The “social horizon,” meanwhile, explores deeper class and institutional interests that shape political choices, often unconsciously. Here, the BNP's distance from grassroots reform demands can be seen as aligning with the entrenched two-party system, which has long structured politics in Bangladesh. By prioritising incremental reforms and institutional stability over radical transformation, BNP implicitly supports structures that have historically benefited both itself and the Awami League. This reluctance to disrupt institutional power structures could be understood through Jameson's concept of the “political unconscious,” where underlying class interests influence behaviour that may appear pragmatic but, in effect, serves to protect established hierarchies. The BNP's stance could be reflective of this tendency, preserving a status quo that risks sidelining the radical reforms that some segments of the public are increasingly demanding.

In the “historical horizon,” Jameson's final layer of interpretation, BNP's response to the uprising can be seen as part of Bangladesh's cyclical political struggles. Rather than embracing a transformative shift, BNP's positioning could suggest a reluctance to break from long-standing political rivalries, framing itself as the ideological heir to the

episode in the Awami League-BNP rivalry. In Jameson's view, such cyclical politics underscore a missed opportunity for genuine change, as BNP's actions could hint at continuity within Bangladesh's familiar political pattern to some, rather than a break from it.

French philosopher Alain Badiou's concept of the “moment” underscores the unique potential of the July 2024 uprising to introduce new political realities. For Badiou, such a moment represents a radical rupture from established norms, challenging entrenched power structures and creating the possibility of unforeseen political reforms. The uprising's mass mobilisation of public sentiment without major party backing exemplifies that this kind of “event” informed disruptive rupture, a grassroots force demanding structural change that bypasses established political channels.

However, Badiou also warns that these transformative moments can be co-opted or neutralised if not sustained by active revolutionary commitment, or what he calls “fidelity” to the event. The BNP's stance, which shifted from initially aligning with the students to later portraying the president as a stabilising figure, could risk dissipating the transformative potential of this “moment.” By reverting to conventional political processes, BNP's approach could undermine the movement's radical energy, restoring the status quo ante, rather than actualising the profound systemic reforms demanded by some people.

stance may preserve order and avoid immediate risks, it also places the BNP at odds with some segments of society that have become increasingly disillusioned by traditional politics. This hesitance could alienate reform-minded citizens, especially younger voters who may view BNP's position as self-serving or evasive. Rather than merely adopting the movement's ideological legacy, BNP's strategic ambivalence risks positioning it as another entity within the political duopoly that the uprising implicitly critiques.

BNP's strategic choices in the wake of the July uprising reveal a tension between preserving continuity and embracing transformative potential. While Jameson's “Three Horizons” show how the party's stance aligns with established power structures, Badiou's concept of the “moment” underscores the revolutionary potential that the BNP risks missing. By aligning itself too closely with stability, and gradualism, BNP could marginalise itself in the eyes of a public yearning for meaningful change. To truly capture the movement's spirit, the party may need to move beyond mere strategic positioning and fully engage with the grassroots demands that fuelled the July uprising—demands that traditional, incremental politics can no longer afford to overlook. By the same token, this challenge also calls for a delicate balancing act of realpolitik, as the party weighs transformative ambitions against the pressures of political continuity and stability in an unpredictable landscape.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Book makeup
6 Hacienda houses
11 Island ring
12 Houston player
13 Baking need
15 Stop
16 Touch lightly
17 Cheering cry
18 Tyrants
20 Furious feeling
21 They hold power
22 Photo problem
23 Canary homes
26 Prolonged attack
27 Lofty poems
28 Knight's address
29 Rooster's mate
30 First aid kit item
34 Bullring cry
35 Convoy member
36 Fellows
37 Accountant's layout
40 “— all, folks!”
41 Keyed up
42 Miser Marner
43 Pick from the menu
- DOWN**
1 Betrayed nervousness
2 Make amends
3 Merchandise
4 Caribou's cousin
5 Easy shoes
6 Play groups
7 Cabinet wood
8 Like surgical tools
9 Floor cover
10 “Serves you right!”
14 Puts away
19 Diner desserts
22 Robin or wren
23 Kelly and Ryan, e.g.
24 New York university
25 Army bigwig
26 Serenades
28 Uttered
30 Army bigwigs
31 Add a change to
32 Gaggles group
33 Door sign
38 Greek vowel
39 That woman

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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