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Speakers at a discussion on "Post-Uprising Bangladesh: Free Thought and Freedom of Speech," organised by The Daily Star at the capital's The Daily Star Centre yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Freedom of expression key to democratic progress

Speakers tell *Star* discussion

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Democracy can only flourish in a country that guarantees freedom of thought and expression, speakers said at a discussion yesterday.

They also called for a culture of tolerance, fact-based expression, and the repeal of oppressive laws at an event, titled "Post-Uprising Bangladesh: Free Thought and Freedom of Speech," organised by The Daily Star at the capital's The Daily Star Centre.

"Democracy has never thrived in any country without press freedom and freedom of expression," said constitutional expert Arif Khan. While constitutional and legal recognition of these freedoms exists, they must be reinforced to better safeguard them, he added.

Bangla Academy Director General Mohammad Azam said democracy is absent within political parties and society at large. The lack of democratic practices makes it difficult to coexist with differing opinions.

He said the mass student uprising was a rare instance where diverse groups worked together while maintaining their individuality, which shows

a positive future.

He also criticised the weak academic culture in Bangladesh, saying, "The academic sphere, is a space for presenting and discussing diverse views. But it is missing from newspaper columns and social media."

The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam said journalism relies on freedom of expression and thought, which are prerequisites for creativity. However, in the last 15 years of the Awami League government, we have not been able to practice journalism freely in the true sense."

He added, "We will be fully in favour of freedom of expression. But it should be based on facts."

Poet and essayist Shakhawat Tipu called for a free and tolerant society.

"We need a democratic identity and state structure. Only then can we embark on an ideological struggle," he said.

Values like free thought and freedom of speech will naturally follow in a truly democratic society, he added.

Author Mashiul Alam said, "Embedded journalism is often preferred over neutral

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OVERCROWDING, POLLUTION, FOOD STALLS

Suhrawardy Udyan UNDER THREAT



Once celebrated as the "lungs of Dhaka", Suhrawardy Udyan, a haven for nature lovers and history enthusiasts, is now under siege by illegal vendors, turning it into a chaotic, polluted shadow of its former self. Overcrowding, pollution, and illegal food stalls now threaten the park's tranquility and environmental integrity. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

SIRAJUL ISLAM RUBEL

As far as the eye can see, food stalls crowd every nook and corner, offering everything from "bhaja puras" to Chinese dishes. Tea vendors jostle for space alongside hawkers selling women's ornaments at bargain prices.

But this is no carnival, this is not a fairground—it's Suhrawardy Udyan!

Once celebrated as the "lungs of Dhaka", Suhrawardy Udyan, a haven for nature lovers and history enthusiasts, is now under siege by illegal vendors, turning it into a chaotic, polluted shadow of its former self.

Overcrowding, pollution, and illegal food stalls threaten the park's tranquility and environmental integrity.

SURGE IN ILLEGAL VENDORS

Since August 5, the park has seen an influx of over 200 makeshift food stalls, up from around 50 previously. Displaced vendors from the nearby Dhaka University campus have capitalised on weak law enforcement, particularly near the Raju Memorial Sculpture, Shikha Chiranton, and Ramna Kali Mandir.

The stalls, concentrated around main entrances, have turned the park into a noisy, crowded hub, much to visitors' dismay.

LOSS OF SCENERY

Aisha Siddiqua Mim, a long-time visitor, said, "It used to be a place to relax, but now it feels like a noisy fairground."

Aqib Hasan added, "This park was once ideal for quiet walks. This is unthinkable now. There are food stalls everywhere, attracting

hundreds. This is ruining the natural beauty and raising environmental concerns.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOLL

The surge in vendors has significantly worsened littering and pollution.

Food wrappers, plastic cups, and leftovers are strewn across the park, with waste often left uncollected.

"The trash piles up, and the smell of rotting food is unbearable," said Mehedi Hasan Khan Pavel, a student activist.

"Smoke from grills and stoves has also affected air quality, while habitat loss threatens birds and other wildlife."

"Birds and animals are losing their habitat due to pollution and reduced green spaces," he added.

Student groups have written to the Public Works Department, demanding the removal of illegal vendors and the park's restoration.

However, vendors argue they are merely trying to survive.

Shamim Patwary, a stall owner for over 20 years, said, "Many of us were forced to move here after being evicted from Dhaka University. If we're removed again, how will we support our families?"

PWD'S INACTION

The PWD, tasked with managing the park, has yet to take decisive action.

Executive Engineer Abul Kalam Azad did not respond to queries, but an official admitted, "We've warned the vendors, but they've resisted. Stronger measures are under consideration to restore the park's environment."



Traffic reform needs both awareness and enforcement: speakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka's traffic management system is in a state of severe chaos and disarray, a longstanding issue that has yet to see any effective resolution, said speakers at an event yesterday.

To address this disorder, speakers emphasised the need for widespread awareness and the implementation of a disciplined framework.

Law enforcement alone will not be enough, they added.

They shared these views during a programme titled "Meramot Alap-2 (Reform Talks)".

The event was organised by Voice for Reform, a citizens' platform established on September 17 with the goal of contributing to state reform.

During a session of the event titled "Dhaka's Traffic Congestion: What Solutions Are Possible Right Now?", Dhruvo Alam, deputy transport planner at the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA), said Dhaka's transportation problems are deep-rooted and cannot be solved through

immediate measures alone.

He emphasised that a blend of short-term and long-term strategies is crucial for effectively addressing the issue.

He suggested that traffic signals at intersections, which have been inactive for the past 20 years, should be reactivated.

He emphasised the need to reduce the number of private vehicles and increase the availability of public transportation.

Kazi Md Saifun Newaz, assistant professor at the Accident Research Institute (ARI) at BUET, said clearing sidewalks of illegal encroachments is essential to reclaim space for pedestrians.

Unlike other cities around the world, Dhaka's intersections are uniquely congested and encroached upon, he said.

He said crowds and illegal occupations are particularly concentrated around these intersections. To alleviate this, he stressed that unregulated parking must be halted immediately.

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'Hold direct polls to women's seats' Journos tell Electoral Reform Commission

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalists have proposed increasing the number of parliamentary seats and introducing direct elections to reserved women's seats to promote inclusivity and women's empowerment.

They also called for amending the law governing the formation of the Election Commission to ensure an unhindered environment for journalists covering polls.

These recommendations were shared during a views-exchange programme with the Electoral

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IAB slams BNP for prioritising polls over reforms

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) yesterday criticised BNP for giving priority to elections over ongoing reform process.

IAB Ameer Syed Md Rezaul Karim said this at a press conference at the party's central office in Nayapaltan, Dhaka, marking the interim government's 100 days and addressing the current political situation.

The IAB ameer called upon the interim government to remove uncertainty among people through announcing the election roadmap after completing the ongoing reform works swiftly.

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Artists perform "Lal Majlum" (red oppressed) yesterday, recreating the memory of the July uprising. They began the performance at the base of the Raju Memorial Sculpture at Dhaka University. The performance marched through the DU campus staging various segments of the play in different locations.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN