

Renewable energy sector needs a push

Reduce dependence on fossil fuels, transition to clean energy

As the world accelerates its shift to renewable energy to cut fossil fuel use, it's disheartening to see the still-limited growth of Bangladesh's renewable energy sector. Reportedly, despite our significant solar potential, a lack of political will and inadequate policy support have stalled its development. According to the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA), as of 2024, Bangladesh's total solar energy output stands at only 1,084.55 MW, which is very insignificant. Bangladesh also ranks lowest in renewable energy generation relative to total power capacity among South Asian countries, as per a 2023 study. Insufficient investment and flawed policies of the previous Awami League regime further hindered the sector's progress.

In 2012, the Awami League government introduced a policy requiring new buildings to install solar panels to obtain utility connections. However, this initiative fell short as many people opted for low-quality solar installations just to meet the requirement, leaving numerous rooftop systems in Dhaka unused. Experts point to policy limitations like the 70 percent capacity cap on renewable energy converters and an underdeveloped net metering policy that discouraged effective solar panel use. Moreover, high import duties on solar equipment further deterred rooftop installations. Consequently, Bangladesh missed its previous targets to generate five percent of its electricity from renewables by 2015 and 10 percent by 2020.

There were also serious inconsistencies in the previous government's energy policies. For example, while the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCP) set an ambitious goal of 40 percent renewable energy in our total energy production by 2041, the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) 2023 reduced this goal to just 8.8 percent—revealing a lack of alignment in energy planning.

Clearly, Bangladesh lags significantly in solar energy development and has much to learn from other comparable countries. Vietnam, for example, provides an inspiring example, as it produces 9,300 MW of rooftop solar energy out of a total 16,500 MW solar capacity. The country's solar production rivals Bangladesh's entire power generation capacity. Therefore, going ahead, Bangladesh can take cues from the experiences of countries like Vietnam and prioritise the growth of the renewable energy sector.

Our power sector is already in a very challenging state. Consistent gas shortages have left many power plants idle, and the dollar crisis has made importing expensive LNG harder for the government. With few viable alternatives, we must look to renewable sources to meet our future energy needs. We hope the interim government gives urgent attention to this sector, and moves away from the flawed and ineffective energy policies of the past.

How could criminals access NBR server?

Strengthening the security of state institutions is urgent

It is worrying to know, from an investigative report by this paper, that cybercriminal gangs have been breaking into the National Board of Revenue (NBR) server, using the ID and password credentials of officers to log in and complete customs procedures for the illegal release of shipments. Investigators have uncovered evidence of foreign cigarettes and liquor smuggled in through this process. What's most alarming is that the criminals managed to bypass two additional authentication layers, including the mandatory One-Time Password (OTP) sent to the credential holder's mobile phone, raising questions about the entire security protocols in place.

Customs and NBR officials have warned that such breaches pose a threat to national security. According to our report, this system vulnerability has allowed criminals to compromise the NBR server to release at least 48 imported consignments and launder money through fictitious imports totalling at least 3,000 consignments from January 2019 to September 2024. Often, the exact contents of these consignments remain unknown, which means dangerous items can enter the country undetected.

One particular breach occurred in May when cybercriminals accessed the NBR server using the credentials of a deputy commissioner from the Chattogram Custom House while he was in India for medical treatment. Investigators have identified a prime suspect in this case, who has reportedly been arrested several times for alleged public data theft from other government servers, including the NID server and land ministry web portal. Yet, he was released on bail every time, allowing him to continue targeting vulnerable government databases.

Clearly, there are significant flaws in the system. Earlier investigations found that cybercriminals secured access to the IDs and passwords of at least 27 customs officials, including retired, transferred, or even deceased personnel. This raises questions about why such credentials were not updated or deactivated. Moreover, security protocols on the NBR server reportedly get relaxed at certain hours, creating a window for cybercriminals to strike. To address these issues, it is essential to determine how unauthorised devices can access the server and why it would stop sending OTP alerts at certain hours.

These breaches suggest the possibility of insiders aiding these criminal gangs. In the current reality in which the government is trying to reform state institutions, it must prioritise cyber security, particularly in major entities like the NBR, NID, land ministry, etc. An in-depth investigation to identify and address all system vulnerabilities and hold accountable those involved in these cyber frauds and identity thefts is critical. Public institutions must be fortified against these increasingly sophisticated cyber threats.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Suez Canal opens

On this day in 1869, the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, was opened, thus creating a key trade route between Europe and Asia.

We must build a foundation for genuine democracy



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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One is not surprised to see the eagerness of some political parties for early elections in Bangladesh. In fact, the BNP has been pushing for an election roadmap for some time, with reported plans to take to the streets if one is not provided within two to three months. The benefits of holding elections have become a routine talking point for some leaders. Unfortunately, despite Bangladesh having held elections quite regularly over the decades, genuine democracy has remained elusive. With every new regime, the democratic deficit widened further until Awami League monopolised power so fully that all democratic institutions were effectively hollowed out.

The country is still reeling from the devastating consequences of that autocratic rule, which resorted to a political hardball where the laws and rules of the game were only "honoured" in their breach. Thus, it is fair to ask if we can afford to submit to a system that is still susceptible to abuse and distortion merely for the sake of an election that might not ensure full democratic benefits to the people under the current arrangements. Admittedly, no system can be made foolproof or fully immune to interference. But every conceivable safety measure must be built into the system with strong guardrails to prevent any derailment by politicians with ill intentions.

The problem does not lie with the existing laws and regulations so much as it does with how the system has been manipulated by those who were entrusted to run it. So the challenge is how to shield the system from partisan tinkering or exploitation so that it cannot be undermined from within.

At the risk of sounding repetitious and even facetious, I think we need to keep reminding ourselves of the past. It is for the benefit of Generation Z—who have often been a victim of biased and truncated accounts of history—to know that it is in the hands of a major political party that the first nail in the coffin of democracy was put, in 1973, and it was buried, with the final nail being put by the same party, after 40 years.



The BNP has been pushing for an election roadmap for some time.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

All hopes of a democratic dispensation under a multiparty system, upholding the *raison d'être* of the War of Liberation, was put paid to by the introduction of a one-party system. This, done by the so-called votaries of democracy, defied all reasons. And as in 1973, this breach of democratic ideals was again evident in 2014 when the same party's re-assumption of power was marred by electoral interference, casting a long shadow on their political legitimacy. Army interference in between these times, made inevitable by the ineptness of political parties, failed to restore democratic principles.

So, Bangladesh cannot afford to have a system that might once again end up reintroducing another stifling, illiberal regime or creating autocrats through ballot boxes. And that makes proper constitutional reforms essential.

and repression that even invited international sanctions on some of the state agencies.

There can be no equivocation as to the fact that the interim government is a unique product of a successful mass uprising. Although one may take issue with its handling of certain matters, let there be no doubt that a body hoisted to that position by the people is automatically invested with the mandate to effect changes by rectifying the systemic decay wrought by 15 years of unchecked power.

True, a constitution is not a bible—it is not set in stone. Changes are necessary to keep up with evolving realities, and there are so many weaknesses in our constitution that should be addressed earnestly. But given the history of constitutional amendments in Bangladesh—most of which served political agendas—

worst being the fourth which virtually was the first nail in the coffin of democracy in Bangladesh.

Democracy cannot operate as a simple majority steamroller, as we also saw in the early days of our independence. Our constitution, among other things, should ensure that a new or amended constitution could be put through a national referendum to ensure the public's endorsement, or lack thereof, of these changes.

The public's demand is clear: fix the system, especially the democratic institutions and public administration. The chief advisor's comment that the tenure of the interim government should be as short as possible is reassuring, as is his declared intent to address systemic flaws. And in this endeavour, patience, especially by the political parties, would be a very helpful virtue.

What RMG sector can learn from labour practices in other countries



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The RMG sector has been a significant driver of economic growth since the early nineties in Bangladesh. The sector accounts for more than 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings and employs around four million workers relying on low-cost labour as a competitive advantage in the global market. However, the sector faces some structural issues which endanger its competitiveness in the long run. An in-depth examination of these issues is required in the context of competitor countries and the recent socio-political advancements for undertaking key takeaways.

According to various studies, the RMG sector's development has been facilitated by a "political settlement" between the government and business elites, aligning economic benefits for owners with political stability through employment generation. This settlement has supported keeping wages low to maintain Bangladesh's competitive advantage, but cemented a cycle of labour unrest, as workers' demands are persistently sidelined, and minimum wage adjustments rarely match inflation or living costs. International attention on Bangladesh's RMG sector peaks only during tragic incidents, such as the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, but systemic issues persist in daily

operations. Workers have protested against low wages, unsafe working conditions, and the suppression of their rights, leading to factory closures and disruptions in production. This unrest is exacerbated by a backdrop of political instability and the interim government is now tasked with the challenge of maintaining order and addressing the root causes of discontent among workers.

Even after four decades, long working hours, low wages, lack of regular contracts, and systemically hazardous conditions persist in the sector. The absence of contracts allows owners to avoid providing proper compensation while laying off workers, or when work-related injuries or deaths occur. Furthermore, arbitrary cases in times of protests hamper the way forward to peaceful collaborative solutions. Trade unions face considerable repression, with union organisers often experiencing intimidation or violence. This suppression hinders workers from securing better wages or improved working conditions, leading to a fragile industrial relations climate. The inability of unions to advocate effectively leaves workers vulnerable and strengthens the employer's position, as reflected in the minimal improvements in wage structures

over the years. Furthermore, taking advantage of the lack of strong unions, vested interest groups driven by political motives manipulate the conflicts.

Another major issue facing the industry is the low productivity of workers which the sector mitigates through longer working hours. This low productivity refers to the lower skill levels due to lower education levels among workers and lower levels of automation in the production process. Currently, less than 15 percent of operations in Bangladesh's RMG sector are mechanised, which is significantly lower than that of competitors like Vietnam. Bangladesh's investment in research and development (R&D) within the RMG sector is also low, with factories allocating only about two percent of their expenditures to research and development activities. Moreover, many mid-to-senior management personnel in this sector lack the necessary skills to uplift efficiency in critical production areas, such as sewing. Such skill gaps prevent the workforce from achieving optimal productivity levels. On the contrary, Vietnam's workforce is often considered more skilled due to better training and educational systems, which contributes to its ability to produce higher-value garments compared to Bangladesh's focus on basic apparel.

Another competitor, the garment sector of Cambodia, faces challenges similar to Bangladesh in terms of wages but has made strides with its structured, tripartite minimum wage adjustment system. Regular wage reviews involving the government, employers, and unions help in creating a more balanced environment. Although there are still challenges, the

presence of structured negotiations has allowed for more stable industrial relations compared to Bangladesh. Vietnam offers relatively higher wages and has better productivity, in part due to a strong focus on efficiency over long working hours. This shift attracts a more stable workforce and minimises excessive unrest, positioning Vietnam as a key competitor.

Moving forward, first, the sector ought to establish stronger, more autonomous trade unions, which would be essential for creating balance in wage negotiations and peaceful collaborative solutions. This shift might include establishing wage-setting boards with true worker representation to foster more regular wage adjustments in line with living costs. Second, emulating Indonesia's model, where wage adjustments align with GDP and inflation, could make wage changes more transparent and prevent abrupt demands for wage hikes due to inflationary pressures. Third, developing a robust regulatory framework and investing in compliance mechanisms can protect workers and minimise the reputational risks tied to poor labour conditions. This could include strengthening Bangladesh's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) to enforce safety standards more effectively.

Addressing the underlying causes of unrest and mitigating the structural issues are essential for restoring confidence among international buyers and ensuring the sector's long-term viability. Without significant reforms and a commitment to stability, Bangladesh risks losing its competitive edge in the global apparel market.