

Unity is vital as tensions spill over

Rising unrest is preventing us from achieving desired progress

We welcome the call for national unity amid rising tensions over seemingly unconnected reasons in different parts of the country. Both Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus and top BNP leaders have underscored the importance of peace and unity as the nation grapples with post-uprising challenges. At a recent meeting, Prof Yunus has emphasised the need to deescalate tensions across societal divides, while BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir called for dialogue with political parties to bridge divisions and build unity. However, unity is easier sought than achieved—it requires decisive action, collective resolve, and an unwavering commitment to addressing the underlying causes of unrest.

While remnants of the ousted regime may be partly to blame for the recent turbulence, the alarming frequency of disruptions suggests deeper fissures within our society. In recent weeks, we have seen attacks and hostile mobilisations targeting media houses as well as violent clashes among college students. On Tuesday, unrest surrounding the arrest of a former ISKCON leader led to the brutal killing of a lawyer. Frequent public demonstrations by various groups have also become routine. Though these incidents may appear isolated, they form part of a broader pattern of instability following August 5. While the uprising reignited hopes for democracy, it also exposed the fragility of our sociopolitical fabric, with dissent and disillusionments festering in various quarters. The question is, if the accomplices of the fallen regime are indeed weaponising their divisions, why haven't they been conclusively identified yet? Or are there other forces also at play?

Adding fuel to this fire is the unchecked proliferation of incendiary narratives on social media. The newfound freedom of expression under the government—while commendable—has also become a double-edged sword thanks to minimal oversight, creating a fertile ground for propaganda, hate speech, and baseless rumours. Some are openly advocating destructive action, while others are sowing division under the guise of activism. These digital battlegrounds are making conflicts more likely and resolutions more elusive. Compounding this issue is a perception among many that they can disrupt public life without consequence, taking advantage of the government's relatively lenient approach to protests.

So, how can we navigate these complex challenges to achieve peace and unity? Dialogue, as BNP leaders have suggested, is indeed essential, not just between the government and political parties but also among sociopolitical groups with competing interests. But for the sake of national interest, all must be sincere so that their interests are aligned with the common goal of peace. That said, dialogue alone is not enough. The authorities must prioritise enhancing law enforcement, ensuring that laws are enforced strictly and impartially to deter and punish those inciting violence. Misuse of freedom of expression, especially online, must also be addressed carefully but firmly to curb the spread of hate and misinformation. At the same time, the call for a Truth and Peace Commission deserves serious consideration. Such a commission could play a pivotal role in rebuilding trust, fostering reconciliation, and promoting restorative justice.

The challenges we face today require us all to act responsibly and judiciously. A failure to do so risks undermining the gains of the uprising achieved through so much sacrifice and struggle.

Act now to check air pollution

It is taking a heavy toll on our lives

We are once again at that time of the year when the air we breathe becomes dangerously polluted, not just in the capital but across the country. This year is no exception. Over the past few days, Dhaka's air quality has consistently been classified as unhealthy or hazardous, and there is a concern that pollution levels will worsen as winter intensifies. For instance, on November 27, the concentration of PM2.5 in the city exceeded the WHO standard by 43 percent—an ominous sign for public health.

According to a report by IQAir, a Switzerland-based organisation, Dhaka has ranked among the top two or three most polluted cities globally throughout November. On November 24, Dhaka's air was rated the second worst in the world, with an IQAir pollution score of 291. Just two days later, the score rose to 324, indicating hazardous conditions. The situation is clearly dire, and without immediate action, we risk a public health crisis in the near future.

It's unthinkable that we have come to a point where air pollution has become so dangerous, thanks to the failure of successive governments. Between 2000 and 2019, \$6.5 crore was reportedly spent on two major projects to combat air pollution, in addition to other initiatives funded by hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid. Yet, despite these efforts, Dhaka remains one of the most polluted cities globally. High Court directives aimed at curbing air pollution—over 20 rulings, summons, and orders—have also been ignored, reflecting a failure of accountability and enforcement.

Today, illegal brick kilns continue to operate on the city's outskirts, spewing toxic smoke into the air. Outdated vehicles emitting black smoke ply the roads, while poorly planned construction projects scatter dust and debris throughout the capital. These persistent issues reveal the mismanagement and inefficiencies of successive governments.

Therefore, it is imperative for the interim government to take decisive action to combat this invisible yet deadly threat. We welcome the recent formulation of a national action plan to tackle air pollution. However, its immediate and effective implementation is critical. Additionally, the government must provide clear guidelines to citizens on how to protect themselves from the health hazards posed by polluted air. The time to act is now. Failure to address this crisis will only deepen its impact on public health and the economy.

Takeaways from COP29

The climate clock is ticking faster than ever for countries like Bangladesh



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COP29 convened in Baku amidst worsening climate disasters and was touted as a turning point in global climate action. However, its outcomes highlight some very systemic shortcomings of the international climate regime. Though COP29 finally managed to agree upon a historic deal intended to accelerate climate finance and decarbonisation, the agreement falls frustratingly short of the urgency needed to combat the escalating climate crisis.

A deal too little, too late

On paper, the COP29 agreement promises more climate financing and ambitious decarbonisation goals for wealthier countries. However, the \$300 billion in annual climate finance it pledges by 2035 has been criticised as a “paltry sum” because it falls short of what is needed to tackle the scale of the crisis. For a country like Bangladesh—struggling to keep its head above rising sea levels amidst wild weather—the deal offers little hope for respite. Poorer countries continue to bear disproportionate burdens of a climate crisis they did not cause, underscoring ongoing inequities in global climate action.

The agreement also contains no binding commitments and no real mechanisms for implementation. For this reason, it has been called “a band-aid on a gaping wound,” as it treats symptoms rather than causes. Despite these commitments, record-high carbon emissions persist, and the agreement does little to alter this trend. Scientific consensus indicates that the world is teetering dangerously close to the 1.5 degrees Celsius warming threshold, beyond which lies a cascade of tipping points with devastating consequences. This requires urgent, immediate action—not in some undefined future. Yet, the results of COP29 fail to rise to this challenge when concrete measures are urgently needed. Time is running out, and every delay worsens the global predicament.

Once again, the voices of developing countries were drowned out by priorities set by richer nations. Issues like funding for loss and damage, support for adaptation to climate change, and technology transfer remain inadequately addressed.

The need for COP reform

How election can be a tool of accountability



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The purpose of a “free” and “fair” election is to ensure accountability of those participating in it. In the past, parties in Bangladesh won elections with around one-third of the votes cast, while a third of the constituencies were won with around 30 percent of the votes cast. The problem lies in putting the emphasis on the election, not its purpose. Hence, the electoral system must be reformed carefully.

Among the three commonly used methods of determining the outcomes of legislative elections—plurality, majority, and proportional representation—the third one seems to be most effective. A study of elections in Muslim-majority countries reveal that the re-democratisation in Indonesia has been peaceful and uninterrupted since 1997 because of the proportional representation system in its parliament; the parties must cooperate to get any bill passed, becoming a “check” on one another.

In a proportional representation voting system, votes are cast for the parties, either in an open or a closed list system. The voters can give preference to a particular candidate in the former system, but not in the latter. An individual or a party must get a minimum threshold of votes to enter the legislature (e.g. one percent for individuals, two to seven percent



People in Feni seek shelter on August 21, 2024, as continuous heavy rainfall caused severe floods in multiple districts of Bangladesh.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

There certainly is a growing sense that COP climate talks are no longer “fit for purpose” and urgently need reform. The deep structural and functional flaws evident in COP29 highlight these shortcomings. These so-called inclusive summits frequently marginalise smaller countries, often at the behest of global powers and corporate interests. Procedural inefficiencies, a lack of enforceable commitments, and rampant lobbying by fossil fuel companies undermine the process's integrity.

To regain credibility, COP must transition from a platform of rhetorical commitments to one of binding agreements and fair representation. Crucially, such talks should not be hosted in countries that cannot—or will not—support the phase-out of fossil energy.

Who can lead the climate fight?

disrupted US role poses a very real risk of eroding fragile trust among countries and imperilling future climate talks.

This raises the question, with the US role in doubt, who will drive global climate action? The European Union has long taken the lead on climate change, but fragmentation in its politics significantly limits its capacity for transformative change. China, while a major emitter, has assumed leadership in renewable investment but faces credibility challenges. The most plausible leadership could emerge from coalitions of vulnerable nations and emerging economies, leveraging their collective voice to push for more ambitious commitments.

What should countries like Bangladesh do?

Bangladesh and other developing

nations to demand just financing and technology transfer. They must also pursue greener growth on a low-carbon development trajectory to attract climate-friendly investment and gradually reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

Additionally, regional cooperation with neighbouring countries will help combat common challenges and build shared climate resilience for a more sustainable future. As the global climate regime faces existential challenges, the need for reform and equitable participation has never been greater. Bangladesh and other vulnerable countries must amplify their voices, hold powerful polluters accountable, and pursue self-reliant strategies to safeguard their futures.

The climate clock is ticking—and for countries like Bangladesh, it's ticking faster than ever.

of women in the party list (even at the top at a defined percentage). Women's winning chances are doubly protected in a closed list system.

It may also prevent “one person” parties from claiming to be “people's” parties or issuing threats against every government policy. In 2001, 77 percent of the total candidates got their deposit money forfeited for not getting the minimum 12.5 percent of votes. In fact, 27 political parties received fewer than 1,000 votes each. The minimum threshold requirement to enter the parliament in the proportional system would force the parties to join hands to prepare the list prioritising the candidates most likely to secure the maximum number of votes. It may also prevent over-representation and the loss of the voice of the unheard. It would

Proportional representation has many benefits. With seats in the chamber and in the committees proportional to the votes, as evident in other countries, each party must cooperate for the future. Most importantly, because of the list system, especially when closed, only the best from all parties are likely to be elected. Furthermore, the best female candidates listed by all parties will have an equal chance to win (because the campaigns would be collective, not personal).

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This system may also create women's equal access to the parliament. The laws in other countries require listing

also infuse voter enthusiasm because every vote would count, reducing the risk of polarisation or marginalisation and increasing cooperation, respect and a sense of national responsibility. It is also likely to curb the vote-rigging tendency because a few polling stations will not influence the outcome of one candidate.

A simple calculation shows that with the total numbers of votes polled, in a proportional system, the Awami

League and BNP would have won 143 and 146 parliamentary seats (including the reserve seats) in 2001, and 182 and 123 seats (including the reserve seats) in 2008, respectively.

However, a reformed electoral system may bring the desired political effects only with an accountable, independent, and honest Election Commission that is adequately funded and staffed to regulate the political parties and election candidacy. A survey of dozens of constitutions shows that many countries, because of having political will and experience, have provisions that the constitution of a political party must have a time limit for executive positions (including the party presidency), and restrictions on directly inheriting party presidency (or senior executive positions). Moreover, a political party or group should not be able to participate in an election if it has been disrespectful to the country and its constitution, or has to leave the government under political compulsion (before completing its tenure in office).

Eligibility of election candidacy includes, among others, loyalty to and residency in the country, high moral standing, financial credibility, distance from criminal activity, and so on. Disqualification for election candidacy includes, among others, involvement in financial crime or in acts and ideas against the interest of the country, among others.

The reformed electoral system should focus on making the election beneficial to the voters, not the party, and the election candidacy laws should promote inclusion of the best persons in every party candidate list. Rule of law begins with laws, not arbitrary rules, and would save the government from making arbitrary decisions regarding the elections.