

Protect students from disruptive influences

Frequent academic interruptions are hurting their future

We are concerned about the disruption of academic activities in a number of crisis-hit educational institutions in Dhaka. Among them are five colleges embroiled in senseless violence last week, leading to the suspension of their classes and affecting the education of at least 40,000 students. The alarming frequency of such incidents since the ouster of the Awami League government deals a blow to the dream of building a robust academic environment in line with the spirit of the uprising. For a sector already plagued by systemic challenges, this is exacerbating its vulnerabilities.

The five institutions now facing disruptions are Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College and Kabi Nazrul Government College (both affiliated with Dhaka University), as well as Dr. Mahbubur Rahman Mollah College (DMRC), Dhaka National Medical College Hospital (DNMCH), and St. Gregory High School and College. According to a report, in addition to regular classes, their exams have also been suspended. Among them, DMRC suffered heavy losses as it was the epicentre of the violence. The involvement of two of its affiliates also prompted Dhaka University to postpone final exams for first- and fourth-year students in all seven of its affiliated colleges, taking the number of institutions affected by one cycle of violence to 10.

All this apparently began over alleged medical negligence at the DNMCH, where a DMRC student died, resulting in clashes that spread to nearby colleges. The mindless mayhem witnessed on November 24 and 25 in particular was quite disturbing. Around the same time, we also saw clashes between students of the Bangladesh University of Textiles (BUTEX) and Dhaka Polytechnic Institute, as well as between Dhaka College and City College. The violent sit-ins and protests by students of Government Titumir College and other DU-affiliated colleges, demanding university status for their institutions, also align with this pattern of disruptive mobilisations that have been taking place since August 5.

While these expressions of discontent are not unthinkable in a post-conflict society, their consequences are dire. The dream of a better Bangladesh, born from the sacrifices of so many people, cannot be realised if the education sector remains in disarray. If the country is to prepare a generation of leaders capable of driving it to greater heights, ensuring a stable and productive academic environment must be a top priority. The question is, what can we do to prevent frequent disruptions?

The issues students face are multifaceted but not something that cannot be resolved through proper engagement and initiatives. However, the authorities must first understand the long-term consequences of such turmoil, and act decisively and judiciously, both in enforcing the law and addressing student grievances. In the short term, immediate steps should be taken to restore normalcy in the five affected colleges so that the future of ordinary students is not jeopardised in any way.

Equip people with a basic income

CPD's suggestion can mitigate effects of inflation on the poor

As the rising prices of essentials continue to strain household budgets, it's time for the government to rethink its approach to social safety net programmes (SSNPs). Introducing a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme for vulnerable populations, as recently recommended by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), could provide much-needed relief and help address structural poverty in the country.

According to a CPD study, providing Tk 4,540 per month to approximately 1.47 crore families could reduce overall poverty by 6.13 percent. Using a poverty scorecard tailored to Bangladesh's context, the study assessed multiple indicators such as type of residence, energy consumption, health conditions, education expenses, etc. It also recommended differentiated poverty thresholds for urban and rural populations, highlighting the disproportionate exclusion of urban poor under the existing SSNPs. Urban migration, driven by climate change and dwindling rural job opportunities, is also exacerbating this issue.

Currently, the government operates around 140 SSNPs, but their effectiveness has been consistently marred by inefficiencies and irregularities. Issues such as exclusion and inclusion errors, corruption, politicisation and a cumbersome delivery process are leaving many deserving individuals without support. Additionally, the meagre sums provided under these programmes every month fail to sustain beneficiaries for even a week. In this context, UBI, offered at the household level, could better address these shortcomings, particularly during times of high inflation and food insecurity.

However, financing a UBI programme—estimated to cost Tk 75,000 crore annually, or 54 percent of the current SSNP budget—will be challenging. A significant portion of the budget is currently allocated to areas unrelated to poverty alleviation, such as pensions for retired government employees, interest payments on national savings certificates, agricultural subsidies, and SME interest subsidies. Rationalising these expenditures could free up funds, but any reallocation must be carefully planned to avoid destabilising those sectors.

Unlike fragmented SSNPs, a well-implemented UBI programme could reduce systemic inefficiencies while empowering vulnerable populations to make better economic and social decisions, ultimately contributing to the country's progress. Therefore, our vision for social protection must extend beyond providing alms. With several reputed economists now leading key ministries under the interim government, this is an opportune moment to take bold steps like UBI. At the same time, the government must address anomalies in social safety net budgeting and resolve issues related to beneficiary selection and fund disbursement. A transparent and centralised approach to social protection can create a pathway towards long-term poverty alleviation.

Challenges abound, but sound policymaking can help



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The interim government of Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, balancing daunting challenges and unforeseen opportunities akin to navigating a labyrinth—requiring the ingenuity and tact of a Daedalus, not the reckless ambition of an Icarus. Tasked with stabilising essential commodity prices to tackle food insecurity, restoring demoralised law enforcement agencies, keeping businesses and financial institutions operational, and rebooting reforms to dismantle entrenched extractive institutions, it must also organise a free and fair election to secure its legitimacy both prospectively and retrospectively. This election is not merely a procedural milestone to be completed perfunctorily, but rather the litmus test for transferring power judiciously to a legitimate political government.

Unlike its predecessor, which clung to power for more than 15 years before being unceremoniously toppled, this administration must traverse a volatile landscape with tight timelines and limited authority. Its success or failure is contingent on how gracefully it avoids oversteering its welcome with the public, leaving behind a legacy that outlasts its tenure.

By definition, the interim government operates in an environment rife with conflicting demands and entrenched interests. It must chart a path through chaos without succumbing to inertia or overaccommodation. The “Garbage Can Model” (1972) by Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen offers a lens to understand the unique policymaking challenges the government faces. The model highlights the interplay of problems, solutions, participants and choices in situations where clarity is elusive and decision-making often borders on the chaotic. This resonates with the current reality in Bangladesh, where political fragmentation and institutional inertia exacerbate governance challenges. John Kingdon’s “Multiple Streams Framework” (1984), a refinement of the Garbage Can Model, sheds further light on this. Kingdon emphasises the convergence of three streams—problems, politics, and policies—as a critical window of opportunity. For instance, stabilising food prices necessitates aligning public demand,

technical expertise, and political will. Without this convergence, even the most well-intentioned policies risk falling flat.

While the Garbage Can Model captures the current disorder, alternative policymaking theories provide additional insights. Charles Lindblom’s “Incremental Model” (1959), often summarised as “muddling through,” emphasises small, pragmatic adjustments over sweeping reforms. While this approach may suit resource-constrained contexts,



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

it risks perpetuating inefficiencies in extractive institutions.

Similarly, Herbert Simon’s concept of “Bounded Rationality” (1957) is highly relevant. Decision-makers often “satisfice”—a portmanteau of “satisfy” and “suffice”—by choosing options that are good enough rather than optimal, constrained by limited information, time, and resources. This is evident in the interim government’s balancing act between controlling inflation and maintaining business confidence. However, while satisficing expedites decisions, it may defer essential structural reforms, leaving deep-seated problems unaddressed and untouched.

Aaron Wildavsky’s (1986) focus on the politics of budgeting adds another layer of complexity. The interim government’s ability to prioritise funding for essential commodities, law enforcement, and election logistics will be a decisive factor in its

could derail the transition process and deepen public cynicism about governance.

Beyond immediate priorities, symbolic reforms play a crucial role in setting the stage for long-term change. Actions such as curbing corruption in procurement or making transparent appointments in key institutions may not transform governance overnight, but they send a message that accountability and reform are priorities. Such steps can serve as confidence-building measures, paving the way for deeper institutional changes under a future political government.

The interim government of Bangladesh is not merely managing a country in transition; it is laying the groundwork for a future anchored in democratic principles, economic stability, and institutional integrity. Stabilising the economy, restoring public trust, and organising a

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Can Bangladesh prosper without gender equality?



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NICOLAS WEEKS

“Discriminatory social norms significantly hinder women’s success in education, careers, and personal development”—this sentiment was just one of the many challenges highlighted during our recent youth-led dialogues on gender equality at the workshop “Breaking Barriers, Designing Equality.” The dialogues aimed to facilitate a platform for youth engagement and to foster innovative thinking while co-designing normative dialogue messages to advance gender equality in Bangladesh.

While issues like gender-based violence, domestic violence, child marriage, lack of economic empowerment, and limited participation of women in decision-making may seem well-known, they were repeatedly identified as major barriers during the workshop. This persistent emphasis suggests that there is still a long way to go in reversing these norms, highlighting the need for a reassessment of ongoing efforts.

A robust legal and policy framework is essential for achieving gender equality, and more work is needed in Bangladesh regarding legal reform. However, meaningful change is

unattainable if society continues to accept specific practices, even when laws exist to counter them. Thus, changing social norms is critical as well.

According to the UN Women’s “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Bangladesh: A Situation Analysis” (2022), societal attitudes often do not treat girls and women equally, placing disproportionate emphasis on their caregiving and reproductive roles. This can partly explain why many women are denied the academic and professional opportunities they deserve. Participants extensively discussed the discriminatory attitudes within families and society, affecting every aspect of women’s lives—from their choice of study subjects to professional success. Social norms also contribute to child marriage and gender-based violence.

Participants emphasised the importance of involving religious leaders in the movement for gender equality. These leaders hold significant influence over the values and decisions of large sections of society, making their engagement crucial in driving change.

In addition to challenges related to social norms and religious influences, young people highlighted emerging issues like increased vulnerabilities due to the climate crisis and limited participation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.

While women in Bangladesh are making progress in education and contributing meaningfully across various sectors, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and harassment remain pervasive. The lack of safety and protection for women and girls is a severe societal issue, exacerbated by limitations in bringing perpetrators to justice. Despite changes in individual agency among women, structural changes are necessary. Societal views on women must evolve to enable their full social, economic and political empowerment.

Gender equality is not only important at an individual level, but also critical for any country’s social and economic development. A series of research point to the fact that gender equality is a powerful catalyst for poverty reduction and an important driver for sustainable development. Research from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) suggests that narrowing the gender gap in labour markets could increase GDP in emerging markets and developing economies by almost eight percent.

During the workshops, young participants identified stakeholders including government departments, civil society, media, community groups, religious leaders, and family members who are important in bringing changes.

credible election are interconnected imperatives that demand a nuanced balance of chaos and compromise. Drawing from the Garbage Can Model, Multiple Streams Framework, and the concept of Bounded Rationality, the interim government must adopt adaptive decision-making to tackle immediate crises while keeping long-term objectives in view. Stabilising the prices of essential commodities, rebooting financial systems, and instituting symbolic reforms may not solve all problems, but they can set the stage for more profound changes under a future political government.

The ultimate litmus test, however, remains the organisation of a free and fair election. By addressing electoral transparency, voter education, and neutrality in law enforcement, the interim government can redefine public expectations of transitional governance. A successful election would not only validate its legacy but also set a precedent for peaceful power transitions, a cornerstone of resilient democracy.

That said, the path forward requires navigating the delicate balance between paralysis in the face of chaos and overaccommodation in the name of expediency. Drawing upon Daniel Kahneman (2011), one may suggest that the advisers of the interim government should engage both System 1 and System 2 thinking in tandem to integrate “thinking fast and slow.” While System 1 provides intuitive, rapid responses to urgent crises, it is through System 2’s more deliberate and reflective reasoning that long-term reforms and stability are planned. The two systems, far from being opposites, must be used contrapuntally, with quick, intuitive decisions informed by deeper reflection and vice versa.

In this vein, as Kurt Lewin (1957) aptly puts it, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” The interim government must embody Lewin’s assertion by continuously integrating theory into practice. It must combine strategic foresight with pragmatic decision-making to address the multifaceted challenges it faces. By posing questions, critically examining answers, and adapting its approach as circumstances evolve, it can craft a responsive, adaptable strategy that addresses both immediate needs and long-term aspirations. If successful, it will not merely serve as a bridge between administrations but as a catalyst for a stronger, more accountable, and more equitable Bangladesh.

The stakes could not be higher, but with thoughtful policymaking and a commitment to leaving a credible legacy, this administration has the potential to transform a period of uncertainty into a moment of renewal. Governance under constraint can still serve as a beacon of hope for a better future.

This demonstrates that each segment of society should perform their responsibilities effectively to achieve gender equality.

Gender equality work is not solely about girls and women. Misconceptions that gender initiatives only benefit women and girls also need to be addressed. There is limited understanding that gender stereotyping negatively impacts all genders, hindering their ability to realise their full potential. Involving men and boys in achieving gender equality is thus crucial. Some organisations are already working on this, but these initiatives should be strengthened.

Sweden employs a three-pronged approach in Bangladesh that includes providing direct support to gender equality initiatives through partnerships with civil society and the UN; integrating gender equality into various sectors, such as climate change and economic development; and fostering dialogue aimed at changing societal norms and behaviours.

Bangladesh is making significant strides towards gender equality, and these results will serve as pillars for achieving social and behavioural change in the long term. I am pleased to hear the voices of the future and see the drive and engagement of youth. Learning about their fresh perspectives and commitment has been immensely inspiring, bringing the focus to those social norms that require attention. The Swedish embassy will continue to partner with the authorities and civil society on the journey to achieve gender equality in Bangladesh.