

Post-COP29 environmental challenges for the interim govt



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
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Bangladesh is facing several hazards on the environmental front. Some of these challenges are immediate, and others are looming on the horizon. The new interim administration will at some point need to address a few of them and tackle them as soon as the more pressing issues have been resolved. While law and order and stabilisation of the macroeconomic sector must receive the highest priority, environmental catastrophes are only around the corner.

Bangladesh's air quality is among the world's worst. How did we achieve this distinction? Deaths from dengue fever have peaked. As per the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, Bangladesh ranked as the seventh extreme disaster risk-prone country in the world. Our dependence on carbon-generating fossil fuels has worsened in the last 15 years. Buzzwords such as "energy transition," "green energy," and "carbon neutrality" were given lip service, while the ruling class were consolidating their grip on the creaky levers of power and laundering money abroad.

The interim government led by renowned economist and social entrepreneur Prof Muhammad Yunus has promised to look afresh at all the deviant practices and kleptocratic policies pursued by the previous Awami League administration. His adviser in charge of the Department of Environment, Forests and Climate Change is Syeda Rizwana Hasan, a lawyer and environmental activist. She has publicly declared her intention to tackle pollution, protect wetlands, and curb single-use plastics, but the full agenda is yet to be enunciated.

It would not be too much to assert that Prof Yunus is one of the original environmentalists. When I first met him in March, 1976 at the annual gathering of the Bangladesh Economic Association, held at Dhaka University's TSC, he was discussing his ideas on small-scale rural banking, but he also brought up the possible spillover effects of his proposed initiative, particularly the overall health and environmental benefits of his microcredit movement.

Befitting his lifelong commitment to improving the well-being of the masses, Prof Yunus took the time to make an appearance in Baku, Azerbaijan, to advocate for the Loss and Damage Funds for addressing the ill effects of climate change, and to espouse the cause of adaptation and mitigation in developing countries.

Soon after the new government took charge in early August, the flooding in the eastern districts once again reminded us of our dependence on the mercies of nature. Now, we are battling two other environmental and health issues: air pollution in the major cities and the dengue fever epidemic. In the coming weeks, these seasonal curses will affect urban dwellers, particularly the lower-income and other vulnerable groups.

Amidst all these, the environmental adviser recently expressed her confidence that litigation might be an effective tool for reducing global warming and controlling carbon emissions. In an interview with a foreign news outlet, she also expressed her concern about the current state of climate negotiations and the resources available for adaptation and mitigation. While

the adviser rightly expressed concern that global ambition on climate change is regressing, one has to also wonder what went wrong.

The recent setbacks must be assessed in light of the conditions on the ground. Bangladesh might have taken the slippery path of command and control policy in environmental management. This strategy leads to

regulatory fines did not affect technology adoption. In addition, possessing voluntary certifications increased exports while constructing new effluent treatment plants did not. Green finance on the other hand affects the adoption of treatment plants and voluntary certifications.

Therefore, the interim advisers need to optimise the available institutions,

Bangladesh could team up with other smaller nations heavily impacted by global warming and changes in weather patterns. This group would do well to bring its vulnerabilities to the attention of the international agencies that are entrusted with the task of disbursing the new funds. While our country is one of the most climate-sensitive

resilience to climate change, advance the decarbonisation of the economy, and manage transition risks. International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the ADB are part of the various initiatives including the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) which offers \$1.4 billion. We also need to tap the Green and Climate Resilient Development Credit (GCRD), a World Bank-facilitated climate funding channel.

Finally, a word on Bangladesh's air quality crisis based on a July 2024 report by the staff at the Atlantic Council Global Energy Center. It labelled our situation as "Bangladesh's air quality trilemma" and went on to add, "There are no easy ways to mitigate Bangladesh's air quality crisis. Bangladesh has little renewable energy potential and faces difficulties in expanding nuclear energy or adopting vehicular emissions programmes given the country's limited financial resources. Moreover, Bangladesh suffers from substantial energy poverty, making improved energy access a top priority."

Undoubtedly, it is extremely difficult to balance these concerns, particularly in the short term. But the interim government could lay the foundations for the longer term. Low-emission fuels and clean electricity can help Bangladesh resolve its trilemma of ensuring clean air, economic growth, and sustainable energy access.

Bangladesh is facing a disaster on the environmental front owing to the severe and ongoing threat posed by climate change. Some of these are man-made while others are natural. Bangladesh's low-lying geography makes it highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, frequent flooding from cyclones, and other extreme weather events. In the final analysis, Bangladesh is considered one of the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, facing potential large-scale displacement and economic disruption if immediate action is not taken.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A recent report labelled Bangladesh's air quality as a trilemma noting that the crisis cannot be mitigated easily.

a dead end if we over-litigate. Our courts and the judicial system are already overwhelmed with cases of criminal and civil law violations. For a cleaner environment, there are more effective and less costly interventions. Some of these policies are better enforcement of existing laws and the use of modern and digital monitoring tools.

In a research paper, "Regulatory or market pressures: What promotes environmental grandstanding in Bangladesh?" published in June 2024, quarterly data from official sources show regulatory fines were found to have no significant effect on the adoption of effluent treatment technology. The study also shows

both national and international. At the recently concluded COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, an additional \$300 billion commitment was made for developing countries. Bangladesh is a rightful claimant to this new funding, but "to date, climate financing from external sources to Bangladesh is yet to come in size despite significant global commitment," says an Asian Development Bank (ADB) report. The private sector is still in the early stage of engagement, especially in climate adaptation. Increased domestic resource mobilisation will be essential to increase fiscal space for climate finance, as well as for other development priorities, such as human resources development.

ones, we have to be constantly on the lookout for issues we need to address as well as innovative ways to finance them. The previous government, fostered by some close cronies of the former prime minister, funnelled money into the Information, Communication and Technology sector. The environmental projects were neglected and left to linger.

Recently Bangladesh launched the Bangladesh Climate and Development Platform (BCDP) to attract private-sector investment for adaptation and mitigation. This collaborative effort, in partnership with international financial institutions, bilateral donors, and private sectors will attempt to strengthen Bangladesh's

Bangladesh needs to strengthen its political leadership



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The role of honest and committed political leadership is paramount in a modern democratic polity. In a democratic system of governance, a party in power can fulfil people's desires and aspirations only if it properly follows democratic processes, starting with supporting free and fair elections, ensuring a functional parliament, promoting good governance, and guaranteeing the optimal utilisation of national resources. Without capable and strong leaders, a political party cannot be steered in the right direction to achieve national development goals.

Bangladesh faces a number of challenges today, but despite having the technical knowledge to address them, weak leadership remains a hindrance to their effective resolution. The crisis of political leadership in the country has reached such a level that people now desire reforms in all areas of politics, including electoral reform, constitutional reform, administrative reform, local government reform, and anti-corruption system reform. The interim government has formed separate reform commissions in these areas to offer recommendations for improvement.

One vital question is, why have we not developed a culture of honest political tradition? There is no easy or straightforward answer to this question. In different countries—particularly our next-door neighbour India, where democracy



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Top political leaders in Bangladesh must play a dominant role in changing the political culture for the better.

has thrived for the last 77 years without interruption—political tradition has matured and has been sustained without major shifts in social structure. Bangladeshi politics could have matured in the three and a half decades since 1991, following the departure of the last military ruler, President HM Ershad. By then, Bangladeshi society was believed to have become more open to change, less tradition-bound, and ready to embrace democratic values. In rural areas, the power structure was becoming less rigid, with traditional landowner-peasant relationships breaking down, creating room for the growth of other non-land-based power centres. This was an opportune time for grassroots democratic openings in Bangladesh. However, political

caretaker governments. However, in 2011, the Awami League abolished the caretaker government system, sparking widespread protests by other political parties, particularly the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Communist Party of Bangladesh. These protests have continued for the past 14 years, weakening the political process in the country.

Bangladesh, in its 54 years of history, has experienced a lot of political turmoil and frequent power struggles. These are due to weak political culture, a winner-takes-all tendency among parties, corruption, the use of government machinery for political gains, and harassment of opposition party workers and leaders. An idealistic attitude at all levels of political leadership has been lacking.

Although two female prime

ministers have ruled the country since 1991, women's roles in politics have hardly strengthened during this period. Out of 300 seats in the national parliament, only 20 women were directly elected in the 12th general elections held in January 2024. Including the 50 reserved seats for women in parliament, women make up just 20 percent of

the total MPs. But what qualities should political leaders possess? Robert B Denhardt has identified five characteristics of effective leadership based on studies in the US, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia—commitment to values, service to the public, empowerment and shared leadership, pragmatic incrementalism, and dedication to public service. These leadership qualities are equally applicable to Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi politics has been dominated by national-level politicians over the years. In mature democracies, local leaders can rise to the national level through their performance. In Bangladesh, however, local leaders lack such opportunities due to increasing marginalisation by national leaders, who extend their power

bases to the local level. For instance, members of parliament are often involved in local government activities, dominating local leaders and blocking their chances to demonstrate their capabilities. This tendency creates a leadership vacuum at the mid-level. Therefore, national-level political actors must cease their control over local government institutions.

Political parties should establish institutional frameworks with built-in restraint mechanisms to prevent leaders from becoming authoritarian. As Bertrand Russell noted, some political leaders are intoxicated by power. However, great leaders in various countries have set examples by retiring from politics early. In some countries, such as the US and the UK, term limits for heads of state or government allow other political leaders to rise to top positions, helping to avoid conflicts within party hierarchies. Top political leaders in Bangladesh must play a dominant role in changing the political culture for the better.

Another essential role of senior leadership is grooming young and emerging leaders towards a just and ethical path, rather than encouraging unhealthy political engagements, patronage, and graft. Top party leaders should monitor and screen out party members involved in violence, coercion, and oppression. They must also adopt objective mechanisms to select and nominate candidates who are seen as clean and accountable to the public. Political parties should instil ethical and moral values in their members. Since political power has a natural tendency to corrupt, parties must develop institutional mechanisms to weed out corrupt elements. Such discipline will restore public confidence in political parties.

Like careers in the corporate or public sector, political careers

require capacity-building. National-level leaders need specialised knowledge and skills in areas like economic policymaking, environmental management, health service delivery, and education. Local leaders aspiring to rise within the party must train themselves for higher responsibilities. High-level positions, such as cabinet posts, should be awarded to deserving and knowledgeable individuals who demonstrate credibility and competence.

Although there are training programmes for government officers, bank employees, doctors, and engineers, there is no dedicated institution for training political leaders. Political parties should arrange lifelong training for their members, and politicians should undertake self-learning. This will enable them to become independent decision-makers when in government, without overly relying on bureaucracy. Politics, by definition, is the art of solving societal problems, and politicians must acquire the necessary skills to fulfil this role.

Effective political leadership is essential for achieving democratic governance. Politicians should operate selflessly for the benefit of the masses and dedicate themselves to fulfilling people's rights. Top leaders must implement government policies honestly to achieve national and international goals, such as poverty alleviation, reducing inequality, addressing environmental concerns, and fostering social development. The current reform proposals being developed by the interim government will only succeed if elected political leaders implement them with sincerity, dedication, and honesty. Therefore, political parties must participate in the ongoing reform process and prepare themselves to shoulder this responsibility.