

Bangladesh must remain alert

The situation in Myanmar is becoming more complex

The ongoing conflict in Myanmar between the military junta, the Arakan Army, and other rebel groups has thrown up yet another curveball for Bangladesh. The Arakan Army recently claimed to have captured the last Myanmar army outpost in the strategic western town of Maungdaw, thereby gaining full control of the 271-kilometre-long border with Bangladesh. In light of this development, Bangladesh has urged Myanmar to address the ongoing crisis in Rakhine State and along its borders, emphasising that it cannot negotiate with non-state actors like the Arakan Army.

Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain conveyed this message to Myanmar during an informal consultation held in Thailand on December 19. He also stressed that peace and stability in the region would remain unattainable without resolving the Rohingya crisis, which necessitates their safe and secure repatriation to Myanmar. According to the foreign adviser, at least 1.2 million Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh over the past seven years due to Myanmar's civil war and the persecution of Rohingyas. Moreover, Bangladesh recently had to accept over 60,000 additional Rohingyas through various unofficial channels, despite its decision to prohibit new arrivals. This has been attributed to corruption at the border, which has left the Bangladesh government with limited options.

Clearly, the situation is becoming increasingly complex and concerning for Bangladesh. Corruption along the border, facilitating the influx of Rohingyas and potentially fuelling drug, weapon, and human trafficking, poses a growing security threat. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to address these issues urgently before they escalate further. Moreover, given the current border situation, progress in the Rohingya repatriation process has completely stalled. But how long can Bangladesh continue to provide shelter to them, especially with foreign aid to support Rohingyas steadily dwindling in recent years? The economic, environmental, and social burdens Bangladesh is shouldering to accommodate the Rohingyas are becoming more unsustainable by the day. The potential for further destabilisation, both for Bangladesh and the broader region, continues to grow because of the conflict.

The recent escalation of violence in Rakhine has again raised fears of a revival of organised violence against members of the Muslim Rohingya minority community, similar to that which drove huge numbers of them to flee to Bangladesh in 2017. Under these circumstances, Bangladesh must be extra vigilant about securing its border with Myanmar. At the same time, with the aid of the international community, the government should persuade the Myanmar junta and the various rebel factions to reach a peaceful resolution through dialogue for the sake of restoring regional stability.

Proper reforms will strengthen the media

Proposed changes by media commission to address journalist vulnerabilities

We welcome the long-overdue official conversation on legislating protection for journalists in Bangladesh. The chief of the Media Reform Commission recently announced plans to recommend a new law to safeguard journalists, as well as amending 32 existing laws that hinder press freedom. Such initiatives are critical if we want a media industry that can truly serve as the fourth pillar of democracy, holding those in power accountable.

At a recent dialogue in Dhaka, the commission chief also underscored the importance of financial security for journalists, advocating for a minimum floor wage applicable nationwide. This statement coincides with the unveiling of findings from a Broadcast Journalist Center (BJC) survey that revealed that over half of the country's TV channels are failing to pay their employees on time, while at least 20 percent owe workers several months' salaries. The survey also found that less than 25 percent of channels provide provident funds, and only 10 percent offer gratuities. Similar challenges plague many print outlets as well. Alarming, especially outside Dhaka, journalists often have to juggle multiple roles—as reporters, ad procurers, and salespeople—leaving them vulnerable to corruption and exploitation.

Physical security remains another major concern. Reports of journalists facing attacks—sometimes fatal—while pursuing their work are far too frequent. We cannot forget the tragic death of Golam Rabbani Nadeem, district correspondent of *Banglanews24.com* and *Ekattor TV*, who was beaten to death after reporting on a local upazila parishad chairman's activities in Jamalpur. Equally haunting is the unresolved case of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, who were murdered in their home 12 years ago, with justice still eluding their families.

In addition to these risks, journalists also face job insecurity. According to the BJC survey, at least 150 TV journalists lost their jobs this year alone. Expecting journalists to uphold high standards under such conditions is not only unrealistic, but also inhumane. This is why we applaud the Media Reform Commission's initiative to address these systemic issues. Reforms must ensure that the press is free from government interference and undue influence from powerful entities. Introducing a uniform code of conduct, aligned with international best practices, could help promote ethical and high-quality journalism.

Such measures are crucial to fostering a media landscape capable of holding power to account. We eagerly await substantive reforms that will enable journalists to thrive professionally and contribute to a more transparent, accountable society. Independent, fact-based journalism benefits everyone—and its sustainability depends on the authorities' commitment to ensuring journalists' well-being.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Vincent van Gogh chops off his ear

On this day in 1888, Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, suffering from severe depression, cut off the lower part of his left ear with a razor while staying in Arles, France. He later documented the event in a painting titled "Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear."

Politics, patience and people's mandate



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The *chhatra janata* uprising in July-August unexpectedly ended an entrenched authoritarian regime. A despondent nation had resigned itself to oligarchy, kleptocracy, and crony capitalism continuing for the foreseeable future. But brutal repression of the student protesters and the tyrant's hubris provoked the masses, already nursing long-accumulated grievances, to join the students' call to "march for justice." The students' demand for fairness in government job quotas turned into the people's agenda for nothing less than regime change and repair of the broken state. The interim government headed by Dr Muhammad Yunus was installed on August 8 with this popular mandate.

Politicians, talk-show pundits, and sundry analysts tend to forget this origin of the interim government. To define its job as that of arranging a parliamentary election and handing over the power to the winning party is tantamount to betraying people's trust and expectations and dishonouring the supreme sacrifices of the thousands who lost their lives and limbs during the uprising.

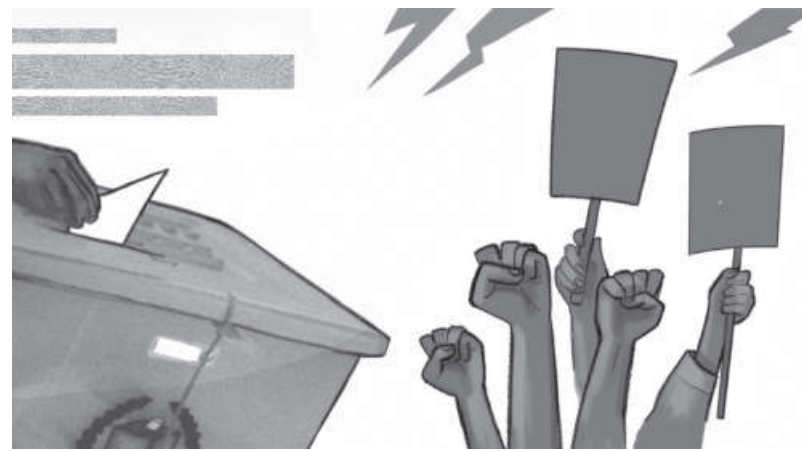
The political parties—particularly the BNP, the presumptive heir to the previous regime—are becoming increasingly impatient about a timetable for elections. When Nahid Islam, a student member of the advisory council, said politicians eager for a quick election may be impeding essential reforms initiated by the government, BNP Secretary-General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir slated him for taking an anti-politics position.

According to some media reports, BNP's followers or those using the party's name are replacing the extortionists, influence-peddlers, and *mastans* of the old regime. At the same time, BNP leaders are equivocal about the interim government's reform mandate, demanding that it limit its activities to keep the government functioning and prepare for and organise the parliamentary election. Other political parties, though not as intensely impatient, have joined this chorus.

As the parties clamour now to reclaim power through a quick

election, have they asked themselves if they promoted and practised democracy in their parties? What did they do when they were in power to ensure accountable governance to serve the public interest, stem corruption, and ensure fair elections and people's right to vote freely?

Historically, relatively fair polling occurred under caretaker governments. Political parties grudgingly accepted those; sometimes they tried hard to bypass or undermine the ground rules of the caretaker government. The major political parties had agreed



VISUAL: REHNUMA PRASHOON

to strengthen democracy after the downfall of the military-backed regime in 1990, but they quickly abandoned the pact and betrayed the nation once elected to power.

What assurance is there that the mindset and values of those who misbehaved in the past have really changed, especially when many of the old players remain in the game and few have expressed any contrition or willingness to engage in collective self-reflection?

The media and public discussion about the interim government's performance is dominated by alleged weaknesses, missteps, inefficiencies, and poor public communication about its objectives and strategies. Many may find these complaints justified, but how serious they appear depends on whether one considers the glass half-full or half-empty.

That Bangladesh stood at the brink of becoming a failed state, that

the current administration came just in time to halt the calamity, and that a reversal has begun do not often figure in public discourse. Is this something to do with the fact that major print and electronic media outlets are dependent on the financial sponsorship of business houses, often with links to political parties? Can the interim government's commission on media consider steps towards creating a more independent public alternative in line with the BBC in the UK or National Public Radio in the US?

A fair question is whether the interim government is hesitant to act decisively on the people's mandate, take on the task of making a new beginning towards "state repair," and create the conditions for fighting discrimination and injustice. Building a democratic polity with voting rights exercised freely by citizens is no doubt a key part of these conditions. Is the government letting the political parties and the less-than-independent

tired and old political parties that did not serve the nation well. Also, why can't the interim government renew and strengthen its mandate? It can take two pragmatic and purposeful steps.

First, the government can ask the newly established Election Commission (EC) to hold the local government elections at union, upazila, and district levels soon. Without political parties' undue powerplay, as seen in the past, the EC can properly conduct an independent election in which genuine people's representatives are likely to be elected. Resources can be provided at the local level to bring various essential services to people. This would be a dry run for democracy under the new dispensation and a way for the interim government to engage meaningfully with citizens.

Second, when the constitution reform commission report is ready, the government, following dialogue with political parties and civil society, can ask the EC to hold polls to form a constituent assembly to adopt a revision of the constitution. The parliamentary election can then be held under the revised constitution. The constituent assembly can consider the commission's recommendations on constitutional reforms as well as recommendations of other commissions. Some of the recommendations are likely to have legal implications that can be incorporated into the constitution.

Meanwhile, the government, media, and civil society would challenge the political parties to be more introspective about their own democratic culture and conduct. The government would also present its goals and plans and encourage citizens to express their views and exercise their democratic rights at the local government level and in constitution-making, and then in electing a new parliament once the revised constitution is adopted.

Students and youth can form their political party or a coalition of parties to stake out their place in the constituent assembly and eventually in parliament. The interim government can try to demonstrate a model for how a responsive and accountable government should be run and lay the groundwork for various reforms initiated. The government must spell out this agenda and the time frame for accomplishing these tasks with confidence derived from the people's mandate. It owes it to the martyrs and heroes of the "march for justice" to not let political parties' impatience for reclaiming power dictate the national narrative.

Ignoring biodiversity conservation will cost us



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Climate change is severely affecting natural resources, including forests, wetlands, floodplains, hill ecosystems, and biodiversity. Concerns about the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems have been expressed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports and in the recent United Nations Conferences of the Parties (COPs). Uncontrolled human activities, trade and business, and climate change are affecting various ecosystems, their species composition, compactness, productivity, and ecosystem health, which in turn are undermining the livelihoods and well-being of millions of marginalised people and indigenous communities living in and around these ecosystems.

Climate change is causing sea-level rise, increased climate variability, temperature rise and heat stress, changes in seasons, and more frequent or intense droughts, wildfires, cyclones, heavy rain-induced floods, and landslides. These impacts are leading to increasingly severe social, economic, and ecological consequences. A recent report from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research on "10 Insights in Climate Science" has cautioned that climate change and extreme events are affecting all ecosystems, which is also happening in Bangladesh. The

National Adaptation Plan, published in October 2022, has identified 12 climate hotspots in the country with several climate stresses affecting both people and ecosystems.

A 2022 UN report states that forests cover approximately 31 percent of the Earth's surface. They are home to 80 percent of the terrestrial species of plants, animals, and insects. However, many wildlife species are extinct, and 22 percent of animal species are at high risk of extinction. Around 12 million hectares of forest land are lost every year due to heat stress, drought, and deforestation. The current high rate of deforestation, caused by human activities and climate change, poses serious threats to forests, biodiversity, and ecosystem health, on which the livelihoods of millions depend directly and indirectly. Additionally, human dependency on forests and ecosystems means that forests, along with natural vegetation, are a major sink of carbon, absorbing over 30 percent of anthropogenic CO₂. Forests and wetlands are also a major source of carbon emissions. Deforestation and the degradation of wetlands are causing rapid changes in both local and global climates.

Climate change is causing frequent and severe forest fires that further degrade forest resources and threaten wildlife and biodiversity. The key

challenges are fighting deforestation and stopping the degradation of ecosystems through regeneration, conservation, and the protection of ecosystems, wildlife, and biodiversity. One of the approaches to ecosystem regeneration is Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) with socio-ecological responses, which essentially meets the twin goals of ecological regeneration

integrated landscape-level forest and wetland management; restoration and conservation of forest, hill, and wetland ecosystems; better management of forest protected areas with communities (SUFAL in Bangladesh); agroforestry and conservation agriculture; climate-smart agriculture; and nature-positive, climate-resilient livelihoods. The EbA projects are generating significant social and ecological co-benefits, such as food and water security, resilient water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and health risk management, livelihood protection, disaster risk reduction (DRR), social protection, and gender equity. It is strongly felt that the planning and implementation of EbA and NbS through a locally-led approach may address many local and community needs, priorities, and sustainable development goals by reducing current and future risks of climate change, as well as enhancing resilience in both society and ecosystems.

The recent COPs under the UNFCCC have placed much importance on planning and implementing EbA with communities and actors, including ecosystem managers, local governments, and community organisations. EbA interventions should be planned and implemented with the active participation of vulnerable communities and actors, following the Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) principles. Thus, the implementation of EbA in the degraded ecosystems of Bangladesh will certainly contribute to achieving the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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and enhancing social resilience to climate change.

The EbA approach is nested within Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for climate risk reduction, social protection, and resilient livelihoods by harnessing and enhancing ecosystem services from healthy ecosystems through conservation, protection, and regeneration of natural resources and ecosystems. Healthy ecosystems provide important ecosystem services that contribute to climate change adaptation. EbA focuses on the benefits that humans derive from biodiversity and ecosystem services to manage the risks related to climate change impacts.

The early examples of EbA include