

Time to take a critical look at labour sector

Closure of 68 factories since August 5 is alarming

The sheer uncertainty and chaos that has followed the closure of 16 Beximco factories in mid-December is but a reflection of a deeper crisis exposed by the fall of the Awami League government. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, these factories are among the 68 that have shut down in Gazipur, Savar, Ashulia, and Dhamrai over the past five and a half months. Six more are in the process of closing, while the number of job losses recorded so far has surpassed 50,000. These closures and the subsequent protests by workers, often resulting in public disorder, highlight not only the urgency of the crisis, but also the need for long-overdue reforms in the industrial sector.

Further details from the report help illustrate the point. For example, Gazipur has 2,176 registered factories, including 1,154 garment factories, while Savar, Ashulia, and Dhamrai have 1,863 factories, of which 745 are garment factories. It makes sense then that the RMG sector has been disproportionately hit by the post-uprising turmoil, which is alarming given its crucial role in Bangladesh's export earnings. The crisis may spread to other factories where grievances over unpaid dues and annual wage increments threaten to destabilise their environment. The question is, why are factories failing to operate properly?

According to factory owners and labour leaders, several factors are at play here: lack of export orders, inadequate support from banks, and the inability to cope with rising production costs. Many owners, especially those linked to the ousted regime, took on loans far beyond their capacity, often through duplicitous means. Enforcement of stricter measures on these loans now has exacerbated the problem. Some owners have also gone into hiding, leaving their businesses in disarray. The Beximco crisis perfectly captures this situation: the group's total debt, according to the labour adviser, exceeds Tk 40,000 crore, including Tk 29,925 crore borrowed against 32 factories in Beximco Industrial Park. However, 16 of these factories exist only on paper and have been used as collateral for loans. Given the sheer volume of its debt, the government has reportedly opted against reopening the closed factories.

Where does it leave Beximco's laid-off workers? What about the workers of other closed or soon-to-be-closed factories? It is not enough to simply arrange for the payment of their unpaid dues. These people need jobs, which are hard to come by in the current situation, especially for women and those with disabilities. Finding employment for them and helping the struggling factories to stay afloat are equally important. We, therefore, believe the government should urgently introduce a structured financial support mechanism to help these factories while also facilitating targeted loan restructuring programmes in collaboration with banks.

That said, it is equally important to think about the future and undertake proper reforms to prevent the recurrence of such crises. We hope the Labour Reform Commission, which is supposed to submit its recommendations to the government by February 18, will address the systemic issues that have long plagued the industrial sector. Building an environment that supports growth and livelihood free from undue business and political influences is crucial.

Renewables are our future

Refrain from decisions that deter the transition to renewables

It is unfortunate that Bangladesh's power generation from renewable sources pales in comparison to its neighbours, despite our role as a climate change champion on the global stage. According to a recent report, only 0.8 percent of total power in Bangladesh comes from renewables—mainly wind and solar—whereas India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam generate 11.5 percent, 3.7 percent, 10.8 percent, and 13.6 percent, respectively, from those two sustainable sources.

Bangladesh's transition to renewable energy has been slow, complicated, and hindered by contradictory policy decisions. Corruption and inefficiency plagued the country's entire energy sector during the last regime, and renewables were no exception. To partially fulfil her government's commitment to producing 6,000MW-16,000MW from renewable sources by 2030, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina approved 37 renewable plants, without following due process, under the controversial Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act, 2010. The law was repealed after the interim government took power in August, and the Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) floated tenders for 22 solar plants in various areas of the country with a total capacity of 853MW.

Unfortunately, the interim government, unlike previous administrations, has decided not to underwrite bills of power-generating companies if the PDB defaults. Ironically, PDB, which sells power at prices lower than its production or purchase cost, has a record of defaulting on payments. While the interim government's decision could be seen as an attempt to incentivise institutions to operate more efficiently and profitably by not bailing them out, it risks discouraging businesses from investing in renewables.

Given that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has long advocated for actions to mitigate climate change, we would expect his administration's policy decisions to reflect a commitment to transitioning to renewables. Decisions that contradict this aim should therefore be avoided. Also, a mechanism should be put in place to hold future political governments accountable if they fail to accelerate the transition to renewables. Moreover, reform of relevant public institutions is essential to ensure that Bangladesh does not fall behind in renewable power generation. Reducing our dependence on fossil fuel generated power is not just necessary to cut costs and reduce reliance on foreign power supply sources, but because renewables may soon be the only viable options left for us to generate power.

What should we expect from a national constitutional council?



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The Constitutional Reform Commission submitted its report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on January 15, proposing a number of recommendations to bring significant changes to the constitution of Bangladesh. Among the most notable recommendations is the creation of a constitutional body called the National Constitutional Council (NCC). The goal of forming this body is to establish checks and balances among constitutional organs, preventing the concentration of power in any single individual or institution. The recommendation is rooted in Bangladesh's recent experience with 15-plus years of authoritarian rule, during which the constitution was repeatedly misused to suppress dissent. The proposed NCC is expected to curtail the prime minister's extensive powers, restore institutional balance, and oversee the formation of interim governments.

The concept of NCC appears to draw inspiration from constitutional councils in other jurisdictions, which serve as guardians of constitutional principles. Originating in France, the idea of a constitutional council has parallels with, but differs from, the constitutional court model found in countries like South Africa and Colombia. A few nations have adopted the constitutional council framework. For instance, it is viewed as a quasi-political entity in Cameroon, a fully political body in France, and a body composed of senior public officials in Cambodia. Within South Asia, Sri Lanka and Nepal have implemented similar models. In Nepal, the constitutional council primarily focuses on recommending appointments to constitutional positions, promoting gender and inclusive representation, and formulating guidelines for nominations. However, the council in Nepal has faced criticism for partisan decision-making and difficulties in achieving consensus. The requirement for majority approval in a politically fragmented environment often leads to delays in appointments. While recent amendments have aimed to enhance procedural transparency, they have also sparked allegations of



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

increasing executive dominance.

Given that Bangladesh's constitution, under Article 102, already vests extensive judicial review powers in the High Court Division, which includes the authority to interpret the constitution and review executive actions, adopting the NCC model instead of a constitutional court seems prudent. The NCC would not have judicial functions, but would complement the judiciary's robust review powers, making it a sensible and promising approach.

The proposed composition of the NCC is noteworthy, bringing together representatives from various constitutional organs. It includes the president, the prime minister, the leader of the opposition, speakers of both houses of parliament, the chief justice, deputy speakers from both houses nominated by the opposition, and one member elected by a majority vote of all legislators, excluding the prime minister, the opposition leader and their party members. In coalition

aspects of constitutional councils in Nepal (Article 284) and Sri Lanka (Article 41A). The Sri Lankan model highlights the inclusion of civil society members to minimise political influence in the appointment process. In contrast, the composition of the proposed NCC does not incorporate this feature, setting it apart from the Sri Lankan model in this regard.

Additionally, the NCC would remain operational during interim governments and periods when the parliament is dissolved. This continuous operation is designed to address extraordinary constitutional crises, such as the one triggered by the abrupt departure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024 amid widespread protests. The NCC's ongoing presence would enable it to manage unforeseen constitutional challenges effectively.

The NCC would play a pivotal role in appointing individuals to significant constitutional positions. It would advise the president on appointments to key roles, including the chief election

commissioner and other election commissioners, the attorney general and additional attorney generals, the chairpersons and members of the Public Service Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and National Human Rights Commission, as well as the chiefs of the defence forces and other positions prescribed by law. This advisory role would limit the scope of Article 48 (3), which currently requires the president to act on the prime minister's advice in these appointments. By reducing the prime minister's unilateral authority, the NCC would introduce greater transparency and promote democratic practices. This mechanism is similar to the appointment roles of constitutional councils in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the NCC would be responsible for selecting advisers for interim governments formed after the dissolution of parliament.

For Bangladesh, establishing the NCC has the potential to strengthen democratic institutions and address systemic governance challenges. Functioning as a quasi-political entity rather than a judicial body, the NCC could serve as a constitutional guardian, similar to the role of constitutional councils in other nations. Entrusted with upholding and preserving constitutional principles, the NCC has the potential to enhance governance and reinforce democracy in the country.

A vision for a child-friendly book fair



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Children have an innate love for stories. When given the right resources, their imagination soars, sharpening their analytical abilities, deepening their attention spans, and enhancing their communication skills. Reading is not just an activity—it is vital for children's intellectual and emotional development.

As the month-long Amar Ekushey Boi Mela, the largest book fair in Bangladesh, approaches, a question looms large: are we truly creating an environment that fosters love for books among children? Year after year, countless families throng the fairground with children excitedly tagging along, eyes wide with wonder. Yet, for many of these young visitors, the experience falls short of its potential. Are we doing enough to nurture their budding curiosity and imagination?

Take, for example, the designated children's corner at the book fair. While it holds promise, it often lacks the creativity and vibrancy needed to captivate young minds. Imagine a magical gateway at the entrance—a vivid, colourful portal transporting children into a world of imagination and wonder. The decor could mirror the themes of beloved books, with characters and scenes brought to life through art, colours, and innovative use of space. This is not merely about aesthetics; it's about creating an environment where children feel

valued, seen, and inspired.

Infrastructure, too, demands careful thinking. Children's safety and comfort should be non-negotiable. Facilities like child-friendly drinking water stations, washrooms, and breastfeeding corners for mothers with infants must be prioritised. These practical elements ensure that families can fully immerse themselves in the book fair without unnecessary stress.

But the experience should not stop at browsing and buying books. The children's corner could host interactive sessions with authors and illustrators, where children share their thoughts and learn about the creative process. Such exchanges would not only delight young readers but also provide invaluable insights for authors and publishers about what resonates with their audience. Why not include spaces where children can express themselves through storytelling, dressing up as their favourite characters, or even designing their book covers? Such activities spark creativity and make the experience truly immersive.

Then there's the issue of *Shishu Prohor*, a dedicated time slot for children that often feels diluted by the presence of the general crowd. It's disheartening to see this initiative lose its purpose because it isn't strictly enforced. A simple yet bold solution would be to reserve these hours exclusively for children and adults accompanying them, ensuring an

uninterrupted, focused experience.

Publishers bear a significant responsibility. Parents often lament the lack of high-quality Bangla books for children. Many say their children prefer English books simply because they find them more engaging. This isn't surprising in a world where visual storytelling in films, animations, and video games sets an extraordinarily high bar. Books need to compete,

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and they can do so only if publishers continue to improve the quality of books.

Books must evolve to challenge outdated notions. Families, societies, and the world are changing. Books should be written considering these factors. The days of rhymes and stories riddled with racist, misogynistic or otherwise insensitive undertones are long gone. Stories must be inclusive and forward-thinking, providing children with lessons about empathy, diversity, and resilience. Children of different ages have different feelings, thoughts, and reading speeds. Authors should write books that will delight children, inform them about age-

appropriate topics, and inspire them to live meaningful lives.

There is a need to publish books on various subjects including rhymes, poems, stories, novels, geography, science, nature, classic literature, fairy tales, mythology, etc. In many countries, different kinds of experiments are going on regarding storytelling, illustration, and printing. Are we doing that? Are we utilising new technologies and possibilities in publishing children's books, considering paper type, binding, cutting, etc in line with the age of the readers? Isn't it natural that children will not want to read a book if its content and printing quality is not good?

Parents play a crucial role in fostering a culture of reading. The seed of love for books are sown at home. Parents who read to their children from infancy and share the joy of storytelling create a lifelong bond between their children and books. It's essential to include books in the family budget, encourage library visits, and celebrate books as thoughtful gifts for birthdays and festivals. Children learn by observing, and when they see their parents read, they're likely to follow suit.

School libraries play an important role in developing reading habits among children. Teachers can encourage children to read books. Free transport could be organised for students from various schools to visit the Amar Ekushey Book Fair.

The Amar Ekushey Book Fair has the potential to be more than a cultural event; it can be a movement that rekindles love for books in a generation inundated with digital distractions. But for that to happen, all stakeholders must step up. It's time to think boldly, act decisively, and reimagine what a child-friendly book fair can be.