

Rule of law must preside

BNP must send a strong message to its activists to refrain from crimes

We are shocked to note that supporters of a Chhatra Dal leader not only obstructed the police from performing their duty but attacked them on Friday morning, injuring five officers. The incident took place in front of the capital's New Market Police Station, where at least 30 people gathered to forcibly take away Mohammad Hossain, alias Mithun, joint general secretary of Chhatra Dal's central committee, from police custody.

According to a report in this daily, law enforcers arrested Mithun in connection with the stabbing of two computer traders in Elephant Road on January 10. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, Mithun allegedly works for top criminal Sanjidul Haque Emon, the main accused in the stabbing case, and had ordered another arrestee of the January 10 case to be at the scene of the stabbing incident. Referring to some video footage, the report also mentions that Mithun's supporters, at one point in their squabble with police on Friday night, questioned the police's authority, asked if they knew about "Mithun's contribution to the uprising," and boasted about their own participation in the movement.

Since August 5, the alleged involvement of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) activists in crimes including extortion and rape have come up a number of times. Although party leaders, including the acting chairman, warned party activists to refrain from unlawful activities, and Chhatra Dal suspended Mithun and another leader Riyazul Hasan Rasel after Friday's incident, such actions do not seem to have had much impact. Some of the party's activists appear to be following the same path as the Awami League's fallen goons, who exploited political power to get their way and even commit heinous crimes. Instead of building an image that aligns with the expectations of the July uprising for a corruption-free Bangladesh, where the rule of law is respected, activists of BNP and its student wing seem to be doing the opposite. But they must remember that a person's affiliation with any party or apparent participation in the movement does not entitle them to special favours or immunity from legal consequences.

As one of the major political parties, the BNP must go the extra mile if it seeks to gain the public's trust. Merely issuing statements or suspending one or two bad apples is not enough. The party must strongly distance itself from individuals with criminal records and take punitive action against anyone committing crimes under its banner. Meanwhile, law enforcers must intensify their efforts to arrest top criminals, many of whom were released on bail after August 5 and have resumed their criminal activities. They must regain their confidence to carry out their duties without political interference. Ensuring citizens' safety should remain their highest priority.

Who will answer for our migrant workers' deaths?

Authorities must do more to ensure their well-being

We are deeply concerned by the unnaturally high number of deaths of our migrant workers abroad, with the host country authorities failing to provide accurate explanations for them. According to the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), 4,813 dead bodies of Bangladeshi migrants arrived in the country from the destination countries in 2024, mostly from the Gulf region. The number of deaths has steadily increased since 2021—with 3,818 in 2021, 3,904 in 2022, and 4,552 in 2023. Reportedly, WEWB received 56,769 dead bodies of migrants from 1993 to 2024, which is shocking. The question is, what is causing the deaths of so many of our workers? Have Bangladeshi authorities sought answers from the destination countries where these individuals met such dire fates?

Every year, many of our workers leave for foreign lands, hoping to improve their financial conditions. Unfortunately, many face severe hardships and return home in coffins, particularly from the Gulf region, the primary destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Often, the exact causes of their deaths remain unexplained, with "heart attack" commonly mentioned on their death certificates by the receiving countries. These countries rarely investigate the true reasons for these deaths, and Bangladeshi authorities also fail to find answers. Additionally, our female migrant workers often face physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of their employers—and many have reportedly died by suicide.

Over the years, our returnee migrant workers have shared the miserable conditions they faced in the Gulf states. Long hours, poor occupational health and safety practices, and exposure to cumulative health risks such as heat, air pollution, abusive conditions, psychosocial stress, hypertension, and chronic kidney disease have been common. The question is, have the Bangladeshi authorities made any effort to improve the living and working conditions of our workers? Additionally, our workers are under constant pressure to send money home to recoup the migration cost, leaving them with no opportunity for adequate rest. Have the authorities taken any steps to lower migration costs?

Why are we overlooking the struggles of our migrant workers, whose labour and remittances form the very backbone of our economy? We urge the authorities to prioritise the lives and welfare of our migrant workers above all else. While Bangladeshi missions abroad must advocate for the rights and welfare of migrant workers, the expatriates' welfare ministry and the foreign ministry should jointly establish a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure workplace safety, improved accommodation, and regular health check-ups for migrant workers. Additionally, they should collaborate with host countries to enforce proper labour laws and hold employers accountable for mistreatment, unsafe conditions, and deaths. The authorities must also demand transparency regarding the exact causes of our workers' deaths.

EDITORIAL

How Singapore's transport policies can inspire Dhaka's growth



Mir A Faruque
is principal strategic planner
for the Australian local
government. He can be reached
at mir.a.faruque@gmail.com.

MIR A FARUQUE

Singapore, one of Southeast Asia's busiest cities, is known for its efficiency. During a recent visit, I was amazed by how seamlessly this small city with a high population density operates without much human involvement in managing traffic, thanks to its revolutionary transport system. The success of Singapore provides a powerful blueprint for cities like Dhaka.

After its independence in 1965, the Singaporean government identified and developed an integrated transport strategy to accommodate a growing population projected to reach 3.4 million by 1992. A traffic study conducted by the Singapore State and City Planning Department in 1967 identified that an improved traffic system with a focus on public transport was essential for the country's growth. This study led the government to invest in the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system, with construction starting in 1983 and operations beginning in 1987. This network has since provided millions of residents with a fast and reliable means of transportation.

Later in 1995, Singapore established the Land Transport Authority (LTA), which introduced various strategies to manage the private vehicle population, including the Vehicle Quota System (VQS), a life changing system that caps the number of new vehicles registered in the city, thereby mitigating traffic congestion.

Today, Singapore's transport system is recognised globally for its efficiency and effectiveness. It has a well-connected network of roads, buses, MRT system, and Light Rail Transit (LRT) lines linking various neighbourhoods. While travelling, I spoke to a migrant named Shri, who has been living in Singapore for the last six years. He mentioned that he can travel to any part of the city using public transport and has relied on it exclusively during his time there. He also noted that even though he can afford a car in Singapore, he has never felt the need to buy one.

In the late 2020s, Bangladesh started its journey towards implementing a citywide MRT system. So far, one route from Uttara to Motijheel has been established through the MRT project. Considering the cost and time of travel, I would rate the MRT as the best option for getting around Dhaka.

Apart from saving travel time, the MRT system offers other benefits, such

as environmental, social, and economic advantages that are worth discussing.

MRT reduces greenhouse gas emissions by efficiently transporting large numbers of passengers, significantly reducing reliance on individual car travel.



MRT reduces greenhouse gas emissions by efficiently transporting large numbers of passengers, significantly reducing reliance on individual car travel.

FILE PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

natural habitats.

Some of the social benefits of MRT include providing social equity, accessibility for all, and security, especially for women and the elderly.

There are many researched economic benefits of MRT. For instance, workers are more productive as they avoid travel-related fatigue, it creates jobs for the community, and MRT stations often become commercial hubs due to increased traffic within and around these areas.

Dhaka can also benefit from implementing a VQS similar to Singapore's model. The revenue generated from VQS can be reinvested into public transport infrastructure such as MRTs or LRTs. While it may

discourage private vehicle ownership, this shift is essential to encourage reliance on public transport, reducing the pressure on roads from private transportation.

Transport planners and policymakers in Dhaka should always encourage the use of public transport and ride-sharing services like Uber and Pathao, which can reduce road congestion and pollution. Encouraging public transport and ride-sharing services will also create job opportunities in the commercial passenger vehicle sector. It's important to remember that Dhaka's transport network was never designed to accommodate private vehicles for every household—it was originally designed for rickshaws, other vehicles and pedestrians. However, as

unnecessary vehicle use while ensuring that those who need to park have access to limited spaces. This approach not only reduces the number of cars on the road but also encourages commuters to seek alternative transport methods, further easing traffic flow in busy commercial areas.

Ticket pricing and local buses

Setting a minimal ticket price for travelling three stations (approximately 3 to 4 kilometres) on the MRT is vital for maintaining the viability of the local bus system. Affordable fares ensure that public transport remains accessible to all residents. I have noticed that due to the MRT, local buses travelling from Mirpur to Motijheel have fewer commuters than before and are experiencing losses. I spoke to some conductors and bus

the city continues to grow and evolve, adopting best practices from around the world and seeking better solutions is crucial.

Paid parking in commercial areas

In the 1990s, Dhaka introduced a paid parking system near the New Market area. However, this system was very informal, with no accountability for the funds collected. Most people believed the fee was paid for car security, even though the driver was usually with the vehicle. Formalising paid parking or banning street parking in core commercial areas such as Motijheel, Gulshan, Uttara, Dhanmondi, and Karwan Bazaar can effectively manage traffic congestion.

In major cities around the world, high hourly parking rates discourage

drivers who mentioned that they only get passengers after 8 pm when the MRT shuts down or is not operational. This is concerning for local buses, and the authorities need to ensure their viability so they can support the public transport system when the MRT is not operational.

The potential benefits of MRT systems extend beyond mere transportation—they can transform cities into thriving, accessible, and environmentally friendly spaces. As Bangladesh moves forward with its MRT project, it has the opportunity to not only improve urban mobility but also foster a healthier, more sustainable, and equitable urban environment for its citizens.

Why our policies must be backed by evidence

Barrister Abir Chowdhury
is a non-practicing lawyer. He can be reached at abirchowdhury@gmail.com.

ABIR CHOWDHURY

In the rapidly evolving political landscape, Bangladesh is presented with an unprecedented opportunity to reconfigure and functionalise its institutions and processes. This opportunity, often referred to as the "reform agenda," arises from a growing demand for a "new political settlement," based on the people's desire for stronger participation in governance and policymaking. This, in effect, is a call for a cultural shift that requires policymaking to be inclusive and evidence-based.

In the world of work, the value of evidence-based decisions cannot be overstated. Governments and organisations globally have adopted data-driven decision-making as a primary strategy to navigate through biases and accelerate progress by reducing wasteful expenditure. As Bangladesh finds itself at the critical juncture of a political and cultural behavioural shift, it is crucial to understand the importance of evidence-based policymaking in its quest to maintain its growth trajectory.

Bangladesh has an established culture of policy-based evidence-making, with evidence being selectively used to justify or support a pre-existing political agenda. The lack of evidence in formulating decisions means that any decision taken is largely supported by political dynamics, economic interests, and administrative pressure, thereby

losing the objectivity necessary for improved policy formulation. This has also led to the selective creation and use of superficial data to support the political narrative, creating a culture of misinformation and ignorance.

To this end, an Evidence Unit established at the Chief Adviser's Office could serve as a transformative institution. An Evidence Unit, as the name suggests, is a dedicated entity within the government that would focus on the analysis and dissemination of high-quality evidence to inform policy decisions. The unit can serve as an integral part of the policymaking process by ensuring decisions are based on available data in an objective manner.

An institutional framework for evidence from the highest level of government will also pave the way for improved understanding and respect for evidence within different agencies and ministries. It will allow for better coordination on issues requiring cross-agency collaboration.

For instance, as Dhaka battles its worst-ever air quality, the remedy requires a synchronised approach among responsible government agencies working on the environment, power and energy, roads and transport, etc. For far too long, this coordination has been left at the mercy of a proactive initiator or awaited strong public resentment and media coverage to force concerned agencies into action.

However, an Evidence Unit can work as the coordinator and tracker for these policy concerns, providing data-driven recommendations to address these challenges. This harmonisation of policy across government ministries and departments will support the

development of a unified reform agenda, reducing redundancy and wasteful expenditure.

The expectations of a "new political settlement" also focus on increased participation of the people, particularly the youth, in state governance. To this end, a noticeable phenomenon recently has been the alteration of policies based on social media outcry, often creating mistrust and public dissatisfaction with government initiatives.

Evidence-based policymaking is of paramount importance to make decisions that are more decisive, inclusive, discernible, debatable, and fact-based. The political actors in this process should also recognise that giving precedence to evidence in everyday decision-making demands steadfast political commitment.

The proposition for establishing an Evidence Unit stems from the need for a unified knowledge hub within the government mechanism that bridges the gap between academia, development organisations, and researchers. This would allow authoritative information and expert views to be utilised in the country's policymaking process.

Several countries have long benefited from taking this approach to policymaking. The What Works Network in the United Kingdom has been instrumental in supporting the government by improving how government and other public sector organisations "create, share, and use" high-quality evidence in decision-making. Likewise, the Government Policy Analysis Unit in Finland and the Productivity Commission in Australia are all effective institutions that have institutionalised evidence-driven governance.

The What Works Network, established in the United Kingdom in 2013, has been an integral part of the British legislative system. The network not only focuses on the pertinent question of "what are the available options" but also addresses the important question of "how?" It identifies several well-tested and effective interventions, ensuring optimum planning and resource allocation, providing cost-benefit analyses, and identifying whether policies are likely to deliver their intended benefits. For example, the Education Endowment Foundation, one of the institutions under the Network, provides educational institutions with resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning by summarising evidence on the most effective educational practices.

This is particularly important for a country like Bangladesh, where several streams of the education system have somewhat reinforced societal divides, institutionalised skill disparity, and facilitated prestige gaps in some cases. The social fabric of Bangladesh is at risk of being blemished by the mistrust created by years of ineffective and disengaged policy decisions. The Evidence Unit can serve as a facilitator to maximise the returns of impactful research and data and instil objectivity and confidence in the government machinery. It will also serve as a repository for the plethora of research and information being generated globally on policy matters. Therefore, as we move forward with the reform agenda, it is indispensable for policymakers to acknowledge the role of evidence in policy formulation and embrace this behavioural shift.