The Daily Star

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Whom do the bureaucrats serve?

Existing bureaucratic culture is holding the government back

When the Awami League government fell on August 5, 2024, following weeks of mass movement, there was a widespread sense of hope that better days lay ahead. The interim government took office on August 8, promising an efficient, pro people governance system in line with the spirit of the July uprising. Unfortunately, over five and a half months on, it is struggling to even get on the track of that promise, thanks largely to a non-cooperative, past-bound bureaucracy.

According to a recent report by Samakal, several advisers of the interim government have expressed frustration at being unable to carry out their duties properly due to a lack of support from the bureaucrats. Adviser Nahid Islam even spoke about this publicly. As a result, the government has failed to complete 70 percent of the tasks it had set for itself, which is staggering. These unfinished tasks include crucial issues such as the posting of deputy commissioners, withdrawal of politically motivated cases, distribution of free school textbooks, procurement of necessary equipment at various government offices, etc—all matters that needed prompt response.

Apparently, bureaucrats are still being sluggish, resistant, and mostly "strategic" in their work knowing the transient nature of this non-political administration; they are cautious to avoid potential trouble when a political party comes to power through election. Strong resistance is also coming from those who benefited from various perks under the Awami League regime; there are allegations that these officials are intentionally creating bottlenecks for the current administration.

As frustrating as this situation is, it is not entirely unexpected. Bureaucracy in Bangladesh has historically been politicised, used by the ruling party of the day to varying extents. This abuse peaked under the Awami League's rule, which politicised almost every level of government and provided perks and benefits to officials in exchange for loyalty. In return, these officials helped it maintain its authoritarian grip, stifling democratic practices and good governance. This led to a bureaucratic system so entrenched in corruption that any indication of change or reform triggers adverse, almost visceral reactions from bureaucrats fearing they might lose their positions of power and comfort.

Today, some of the old players may have changed, but the old system remains firmly in place. A properly functioning government requires a supportive and efficient bureaucracy. To achieve this, our outdated bureaucratic system must be dismantled to make way for a healthy, accountable system. Bureaucrats must realise that their job is not to pander to the rulers, but the people—the taxpayers. They must check their self-serving attitudes and heed the public demand: to uphold the integrity of their duties.

Persistent mugging in Dhaka quite worrying

Police must step up to prevent such incidents

The persistence of muggings and lootings in Dhaka has left residents in a constant state of fear while outdoors. Reportedly, criminals are no longer waiting for the cover of darkness, with daylight muggings becoming increasingly common. The situation is particularly severe in Mohammadpur, where organised gangs armed with sharp weapons are often attacking people in broad daylight. While such crimes were widely reported in the aftermath of the fall of the Awami League government, police efforts to curb them have remained inadequate even after nearly six months.

According to an intelligence report, there are at least 432 high-risk spots for mugging across the city, with Mohammadpur alone accounting for 108. Residents report frequent incidents in areas such as Bosila, Tin Rastar Mor, Dhaka Udyan, Nobodoy Housing, Chand Udyan, Bosila Garden City, 40 Feet Road, Chandrima Housing, Ekota Housing, and Nabinagar. Many of the crimes are allegedly committed by teen and youth gangs. While Mohammadpur has been a hotspot for quite some time, muggings are also rampant in Dhanmondi, Asad Gate, and other neighbourhoods. Reportedly, the authorities have identified 205 active muggers in Mohammadpur alone. The question is, what are they doing to prevent them?

Recently, a video that went viral on social media showed a teenage boy hacking another with a machete in broad daylight in Dhaka Udyan. On January 25, three young men stopped a college student's rickshaw near Dhaka State College on Nurjahan Road and snatched his phone at knifepoint. The incident was caught on a security camera, while multiple bystanders witnessed it. Unfortunately, despite the availability of CCTV footage in many such incidents—some of which have gone viral—many criminals remain at large. More alarmingly, the victims are often stabbed or hacked. Clearly, the city's law and order situation has worsened in recent months, despite expectations to the contrary.

But why are the police still failing to protect all citizens? Ensuring public safety is their fundamental responsibility. Since the August 5 political changeover, law enforcement agencies have repeatedly assured us that they are increasing patrols and surveillance, yet mugging incidents abound. Recently, the IGP stated that police must adopt a zero-tolerance policy against extortion and mugging. It is time for such pledges to translate into action. Dhaka's residents need safety and security, not empty promises.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mahatma Gandhi assassinated

Mahatma Gandhi, internationally esteemed for his doctrine of nonviolent protest (*satyagraha*) to achieve political and social progress, was assassinated on this day in 1948.

'The BRT project was flawed from the start'

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque, *professor of civil engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), talks to* **Monorom Polok** *of* **The Daily Star** *about the maiden BRT line in Dhaka that opened last month.*

The Gazipur-Airport BRT project has incurred massive expenditure. How would you assess its potential to alleviate traffic congestion?

To address this issue properly, it is essential to first consider the broader ecosystem of public transport. Public transport encompasses various modes, with buses forming the base of the productivity pyramid. A standard bus system can manage up to 4,000 passengers per hour per direction (PHPD) at most. To enhance capacity in densely developed urban areas, systems with greater productivity are necessary. This is where the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems come into play. By providing buses with dedicated lanes, they can operate with increased efficiency and immunity from congestion caused by smaller vehicles.

For instance, BRT systems in Jakarta and Istanbul allow buses to reach speeds of up to 70 kilometres per hour, competing with the efficiency of metro systems. Metros, operating on fully segregated tracks, provide faster and more reliable services, making them particularly attractive to urban commuters. However, when implemented properly in dedicated corridors, BRT systems can achieve comparable levels of efficiency.

The concept of BRT stems from the notion that buses can be rapid and efficient within a dedicated and controlled environment. Globally, cities like Curitiba in Brazil and Bogotá in Colombia are considered the gold standards for BRT implementation. These systems exemplify flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and high productivity. However, a well-executed BRT system requires substantial infrastructure, such as dedicated lanes, controlled access points, and barriers to separate BRT lanes from other traffic. The design of these barriers depends on the level of enforcement needed. Unlike metro systems, BRT systems do not demand extensive land acquisition but rather a reallocation of road space. Prioritising buses and isolating road sections for public transport are central to their success.

When implemented with dedicated stations resembling those of metro systems, BRT services offer faster, more reliable alternatives that encourage commuters to transition from private cars to buses. This modal shift gradually reduces congestion and fosters a sustainable commuting culture. Moreover, older, unorganised bus systems can be phased out and replaced by more structured and efficient BRT services. The success of BRT systems globally—adopted in over 180 cities—demonstrates their viability as cost-effective solutions for urban congestion, particularly during peak hours.

How do these global standards align with the specific context of the Gazipur-Airport BRT corridor, particularly given the prevalence of large trucks, inter-district buses, and pedestrian traffic in the area?

The effectiveness of BRT systems relies on specific prerequisites. Road width is a critical factor; a minimum of 12 lanes is typically necessary to implement a BRT system effectively. This ensures that even after allocating two lanes for the BRT, there remains adequate space for non-BRT traffic. In certain cases, 14 lanes may be required. Unfortunately, many corridors in Bangladesh, including the Gazipur-Airport corridor, do not meet these criteria. While the corridor was intended to be widened near stations, this plan was poorly executed, leaving insufficient space for the system's proper functioning.

Another challenge lies in the modal composition of traffic. BRT systems are most effective in areas with high concentrations of small private vehicles, facilitating a modal shift from cars to buses. However, the Gazipur corridor runs along industrial zones dominated by large trucks and inter-district buses, with very few private cars. Additionally, approximately 90 percent of workers in these industrial zones walk to their destinations due to the short distances involved. This undermines the two main prerequisites for a successful BRT system: adequate right of way, and high volume of smaller vehicles.

Pedestrian traffic poses another challenge. Industrial workers frequently cross roads to reach factories, creating a constant flow of pedestrians. Physical barriers introduced by the BRT system can lead to a social divide, restricting workers' movement. Even if footbridges or escalators are installed, they are impractical given the high pedestrian volume and workers' time constraints. Delays of even a few minutes can result in wage deductions, prompting many to bypass these barriers and cross the BRT lanes directly.

Could you elaborate on the flaws of the project, particularly regarding the suitability of the chosen corridor and its alignment with the original Strategic Transport Plan (STP)?

The Gazipur-Airport BRT project has been plagued by significant planning and design flaws from its inception. The corridor, with its narrow roads and industrial character, was inherently unsuitable for a BRT system. These factors should have been identified during the feasibility study but were overlooked, allowing the project to proceed without addressing these critical issues.

The placement of infrastructure further compounded the problems. Footpaths were narrowed to accommodate footbridges, reducing pedestrian space in an area where walking is the primary mode of transport. The original plan for BRT-3, as outlined in the STP, proposed the route through a densely populated urban area. However, the current alignment lies outside built-up areas, where demand for such a system is minimal.

Additionally, a fundamental aspect of BRT systems is their ability to serve multiple destinations along the corridor, encouraging high passenger turnover and maximising productivity. The Gazipur-Airport BRT, however, functions more like an intercity bus service, with limited stops and long travel times. This design reduces turnover, rendering the system less efficient and productive.

What operational challenges arise from the coexistence of the BRT system with existing inter-district buses in the Gazipur-Airport corridor, and how does this affect its effectiveness?

BRT systems are usually designed to replace existing bus services within their corridors, creating a streamlined and disciplined transport network. However, in the Gazipur-Airport corridor, inter-district buses continue to operate alongside the BRT system, undermining its purpose. These buses provide flexible, personalised services, stopping wherever passengers need, unlike the fixed stations of a BRT system. Consequently, commuters are less likely to switch to the BRT, resulting in minimal modal shift and rendering the system ineffective.

Successful BRT systems thrive in urban settings with high volumes of small vehicles and commuters. The Gazipur-Airport corridor, however, is characterised by industrial traffic, large vehicles, and limited private car use.

Experts say the BRT's permanent infrastructure, including flyovers, may restrict future modifications. Can you elaborate?

Yes, unlike flexible BRT systems in cities like Jakarta and Chinese metropolises—which utilise lightweight and adaptable infrastructure—the Gazipur-Airport BRT has been implemented with permanent structures, including flyovers. This rigidity precludes future modifications, such as upgrading the corridor to accommodate a metro system—a critical limitation in a rapidly urbanising country like Bangladesh.

Furthermore, the corridor's repurposing from a national highway to a BRT system has disrupted its original functionality without meeting the needs of its users. Narrow footpaths and poorly placed infrastructure have further marginalised pedestrians, compounding the system's inefficiency.

What lessons can be learnt from this project for urban transport planning in Bangladesh? What are your recommendations for the future?

The Gazipur-Airport BRT project highlights the consequences of inadequate planning and coordination in urban transport. So, going ahead, Bangladesh must prioritise comprehensive and integrated transport strategies, addressing key issues such as narrow roads, unorganised bus services, and insufficient pedestrian infrastructure. To make urban transport smoother and more reliable, a franchising system for buses must be introduced to ensure better service. Different transport options, like BRT and metro rail, need to work together so that people can travel easily. This integration must be properly planned and executed, and a dedicated team should be formed under the public transport authority to keep things running efficiently. Safe, accessible walkways must also be prioritised instead of inconvenient footbridges. Finally, learning from successful BRT systems worldwide can help us find practical and affordable solutions that work for us.

Dr Md Shamsul Hoque

How the 7-college issue can be solved

Dr Samina Luthfa
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SAMINA LUTHFA

The possibility of the seven colleges each becoming an independent university has been a long-debated topic. This presents significant challenges, however, given the scarcity of resources in terms of land, infrastructure, and supporting workforce. However, establishing one university for all seven colleges is viable.

The current model, in which the seven colleges are administered by Dhaka University (DU), has proven ineffective. The execution of this model has demonstrably strained the university's resources. Besides, DU teachers have received no real support to incorporate this added work pressure, leading to a slow, inefficient cycle where the students suffer the most losing years of their lives. This arrangement has not served the colleges either, because of persistent academic and administrative challenges as well as a lack of communication between the university administration and college authorities and students. With no signs of improvement, the students have been rightfully demanding a change for years.

While this "unhappy marriage" has placed undue stress on all involved, the complexities of creating new universities necessitate careful consideration of various factors.

Two steps can help in solving this problem efficiently. The first is to establish an independent commission that can co-opt the four-member committee headed by the chairman of the University Grants Commission, which was created by the education ministry last month. This commission would be tasked with evaluating and addressing the students' demands. The second step is inclusive decision-making. All stakeholders, including diverse representatives from all seven colleges, must be involved in the decision-making process. This includes teachers, administrative high-ups, and some students from each of the seven colleges as well as some education experts and government officials.

Internal resistance, particularly from within the colleges and even within the ministry, is anticipated. However, resolving the seven-college problem is paramount. The current uncertainty jeopardises the lives and futures of both students and teachers of Dhaka University and the seven colleges. I welcome the decisive move from the DU administration to sever ties with the seven colleges. This is good news for all involved.

Now, we need to prioritise addressing the issues of these colleges. First, we need to recognise that the teachers and students of these colleges are citizens as well as members of the academic community, and we have a responsibility to protect them from harm. Also, students are urged to remain peaceful and avoid provocation. Any escalation of the situation must be prevented. Patience and collaborative effort are essential for a resolution.

Reports from various sources indicate that provocation has been incited through some social media platforms, especially Facebook. It is crucial to identify and bring those involved in such instigation to book. The frequent formation of mobs, including cyber mobs targeting individuals, is deeply concerning. It is hoped that the authorities will hold perpetrators accountable.

For the sake of the colleges' future, my humble proposal is to turn them into a federative collegiate university, where the colleges will be in charge of the education, syllabi and to some extent residence of the students. Unlike the Ox-Bridge model, I propose a University College, London model. However, it will be an interim option where the colleges/new umbrella university will gradually decide the nature of this union. The university can be an administrative body, looking after the admission and examination processes. Meanwhile, the umbrella university should admit only bachelor-level students and stop admitting higher secondary-level students. The colleges, meanwhile, can be transformed into Higher Secondary institutions, keeping the current teachers, admin staff, and higher secondary students. Existing teachers should be encouraged to join these seven government higher secondary colleges. The university authorities should initiate recruiting university faculty members for the institutions under the umbrella university. Existing faculty and staff need to be given enough time and benefits to get rehabilitated so that their transition can be smooth. However, this is just a proposal that can be tried out with the stakeholders in the seven colleges. They should be the ones deciding their future and their career, not anyone else.