

Spare female athletes from regressive dictates

Joypurhat-Dinajpur incidents raise fresh alarm about intolerance

We are deeply alarmed by the recent disruptions of women's football matches in Joypurhat and Dinajpur by fundamentalist groups. These incidents are stark reminders that hard-earned progress in women's empowerment remains fragile, as such groups continue to impose their will on society even after the historic July uprising that promised greater inclusivity for all. Calling these acts unlawful would be an understatement. They violate the very spirit of our constitution that—through Articles 19, 27 and 28—guarantees equality of opportunity, equality before the law, and protection against discrimination on the basis of religion, sex, etc. But why do such incidents keep occurring with impunity?

The Joypurhat incident centred around a football field that was due to host a friendly match between two female teams from the district and nearby Rangpur. Things escalated when a mob of madrasa students and local extremists reportedly stormed the ground and tore down its fences on the grounds that women playing football is "anti-Islamic." The attack was also live streamed on social media. The previous day, another incident in Dinajpur saw a women's football match descend into clashes, leaving at least 20 people injured. These incidents send a chilling message: that women must conform to regressive dictates and expectations, or suffer consequences.

They also represent a broader pattern of gender-based restriction, discrimination, violence, harassment, and stigmatisation that frequently affect women and young girls in their journey as individuals and as citizens of this country. From opposition to women's leadership in politics to attacks on cultural events featuring female performers, we have often seen reactionary forces—emboldened by the authorities' capitulation to their demands and the lack of legal consequences—unduly target them. The Joypurhat-Dinajpur incidents were particularly painful to see as women's role in sports, especially football, has been a source of national pride in recent years. The challenges for women, however, are not limited to the physical space. They face misogynistic abuse on online platforms, too. According to the Police Cyber Support Center for Women, 9,117 cases of cyber harassment were reported in 2024 alone.

Following the recent incidents, the interim government has sent out a firm message, vowing to hold the perpetrators accountable. But words are not enough unless backed by decisive action. As the rights organisations have demanded, it is crucial that local administrations and law enforcement agencies ensure the safety of female athletes and take steps to prosecute those responsible for committing or inciting the violence. They must be tough against the radical forces curtailing our progress as a nation. It is equally important that social and religious leaders speak out in favour of women's rights, countering the narratives of those who seek to repress them. Furthermore, sporting and other relevant bodies must work together to ensure that female athletes receive full institutional backing.

Public offices demand absolute integrity

ACC must penalise govt employees with dual citizenship

It is concerning that a number of high-ranking government officials reportedly hold dual citizenship in violation of the Government Service Act, 2018. A recent probe by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) found that several government employees even laundered money abroad by taking advantage of their foreign nationality. So, the ACC issued letters on January 12 to senior secretaries and secretaries of all ministries, seeking details of such government employees. The search covers employees at all levels of public offices, including semi-government, autonomous, and semi-autonomous bodies, judges, court employees, commissioned officers of the armed forces, and even elected representatives.

The issue of dual citizenship came to the limelight after the fall of the Awami League government when several former ministers and parliamentarians were found to hold citizenship from countries such as the US, UK, and even Papua New Guinea. Article 66 of the constitution clearly states that individuals who acquire foreign citizenship or pledge allegiance to another country cannot serve as MPs or ministers. Yet this precondition was flouted. Even crucial ministries such as finance were led by individuals with foreign citizenship. The judiciary was not exempt either, with a Supreme Court judge, AHM Shamsuddin Choudhury Manik, known to have had dual citizenship. The ACC, in its letter, also pointed out that some public officials with dual citizenship are currently residing in foreign countries to conceal their misdeeds and evade prosecution.

While not every government employee holding foreign nationality is engaged in corruption, the very act of acquiring another country's citizenship while in public service is unlawful. It raises serious ethical and legal questions about their commitment to Bangladesh and their respect for laws. A government job, particularly one that involves policymaking or law enforcement, demands absolute allegiance to the state.

Therefore, the ACC's move to identify and penalise such officials is a step in the right direction. However, as the chairman of the National Board of Revenue has pointed out, it could have conducted the investigation more discreetly to prevent rule-breakers from being alerted in advance. Many officials may not voluntarily disclose their foreign citizenship fearing dismissal under Section 40(l) of the service act. Nonetheless, ACC's action may encourage some to come forward and renounce their foreign citizenship as a corrective measure. Those who fail to do so must be held accountable through collaboration with relevant agencies. Likewise, the Election Commission must ensure that individuals holding foreign citizenship are barred from contesting elections.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Luna 9 launched

On this day in 1966, the Soviets launched Luna 9, the first spacecraft to make a soft landing on the Moon.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Reforms vs election: A distracting debate

We need and can have both by the year-end



THE THIRD VIEW

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Recently, a debate in our political arena has been clouding our thinking. "No election before reforms" vs "No reforms if it delays the election" has our political players' attention engaged, distracting them from urgent actions. Exchanges between the respective proponents are now getting shriller and acrimonious. The truth is, we need both and can have both within the time frame of December 2025 or January 2026. People are firm and clear about not missing this unique opportunity to institute vital reforms, but they are also conscious about the complexity of the current situation and would prefer a more stable political and legal scenario.

Those who place the election above reforms undervalue the vital need for the latter. They tend to forget that the introduction of BAKSAL, two military interventions, the binary nature of our politics since the restoration of democracy in 1991, and the authoritarian rule for more than 15 years not only prevented reforms in areas like the judiciary, administration, police, etc, but reversed the process of making governance a public service and not a weapon in the ruler's hand. All our vital institutions need fundamental reforms—and urgently so. Let there be no doubt about it.

Contrarily, those who place reforms above the election do not truly understand the significance of a free and fair election and the absolute necessity of holding it as soon as possible as voters have been cheated of their right in the last three. It is also vital to put the country back on the track of having an elected government and parliament. The national election will restore people's right to choose who should and who should not rule them. It is a citizen's inalienable right to select which party and/or individual will be given the power to lead the country, govern it, spend our tax money, and introduce new policies and plans. Only a free and fair election can ensure it.

well in time. Four of them have already delivered their recommendations, while two others are expected soon. Some important committees have also shared their findings. What awaits us is the dialogue with political parties that the chief adviser has already planned. Recommendations on vital issues like the constitution, Election Commission, police and Anti-Corruption Commission are already in the public domain. All of them now await widespread discussion, which we think should start immediately.

However, when a national dialogue should be starting in earnest, the "reforms vs election" controversy has reemerged, and this time, unfortunately, in a tone that we should and need to avoid. The BNP's latest decision to launch a movement may lead to counter-movements, which may bring many factions to the streets. When things seem to be falling into place, such actions seem unnecessary. The recent remark by BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakrul Islam Alamgir about the interim government—that

if it loses its neutrality, we must have a new one to conduct the election—took us all by surprise. The reasons he cited need to be examined, but we think the conclusion he made was a bit premature.

Mirza Fakrul's comments took a dramatic turn when Adviser Nahid Islam speculated as to whether or not BNP was making an indirect call for bringing back an army-backed government to hold the election, modelled after 1/11.

This comment, we think, took the discussion towards a confrontational direction. Instead of a greater understanding, attributing motives to the BNP, which was neither fair nor justified, has now led to a distance between the students and the BNP, which is, as Adviser Dr Asif Nazrul observed, "undesirable." If anybody, it was the BNP that suffered the most during 1/11. Given its experience, BNP would be the last political party to want the return of an army-backed caretaker government.

Vital and urgently necessary reform proposals are now in place. We urge all to begin serious discussions on them. Let's start with the one that has a built-in consensus: police reform. We want the police to be permanently changed from being an extension of the ruling

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party's oppressive mechanism to an institution that upholds law and order for the benefit of the people. As a public institution, the police must represent justice, not oppression. Many of the reform suggestions are timely, useful, and urgently needed. The reform process can easily start with the police and can be seen as an example for the other reforms to follow.

As for the judiciary (what we have been able to learn from media reports; the formal presentation of its report is yet to come) the idea of decentralising the High Court benches is a most timely one. The dictum "Justice delayed is justice denied" is a painful reality for most citizens who live outside Dhaka. Travel, stay, food and the high cost of lawyers put the higher judiciary literally out of reach for most people. Even when they make the effort, the procedural maze and the avoidable but casually imposed delays make our ordinary citizens puppets in the hands of the law, which is well exemplified by the 5.77 lakh cases pending at the court. Reported suggestions about

appointments, work accountability, financial transparency of the judges and separate administration, supervision, etc will make the proposals most relevant. If there is a place where anti-discrimination needs implementation, it is here.

Public administration reforms are also an urgent need for us. Our administration never served the

We are aware that some sections will gain with an early election and others will not. It cannot be counted out that arguments of both the sides could also be based on these perceived benefits. But we have to put public interest above everything else. We cannot lose this opportunity and the momentum to reshape our future on the basis of democracy, equality, tolerance, and general prosperity.

people but the ruling party of the day, and of course themselves. There are honest officials, but they are a small minority. Most are corrupt, inefficient and totally without accountability and monitoring. Reforms here would be most resisted, and hence must be pursued with determination.

Election reforms are of immediate concern and must be implemented fastest, compared to others.

The above examples—only a small part of the whole process—show how important the reform proposals are and how seriously and diligently we must pursue them.

As we pointed out earlier, we have almost a year in hand. If we use this time with efficiency, dedication, and seriousness, and refrain from getting embroiled in unnecessary issues, we can have both reforms and the election within the desired time frame, about which there is a widespread agreement.

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We strongly urge all concerned not to further dig into this debate and concentrate fully on achieving both the reforms and the election, which will serve our national interest most effectively. We should set aside our differences and assist the interim government to move forward with speed and clarity to implement this dual agenda.