

Choking on apathy and neglect

Urgent actions needed to tackle our air pollution crisis

It is disappointing that Bangladesh and the landlocked nation Chad have been ranked as the world's most polluted countries in 2024, with their average smog levels exceeding WHO guidelines by more than 15 times, according to Swiss air quality monitoring firm IQAir. It is little wonder, then, that air pollution causes 102,456 deaths in Bangladesh every year, as the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) recently estimated. Other studies over the years have painted a similarly grim picture. These findings should spur frantic efforts to reverse this trend. The question is, why don't they?

The CREA study highlighted that young children are particularly vulnerable, with 5,258 annual deaths from PM2.5-related lower respiratory infections. It estimated that controlling air pollution could prevent 5,254 child deaths each year and avert 29,920 deaths from heart disease, 23,075 from strokes, 20,976 from COPD, 9,720 from pneumonia, and 3,063 from lung cancer. Additionally, pollution-related illnesses lead to 669,000 emergency hospital visits annually and 263 million lost workdays, significantly harming the economy. Similarly, a World Bank report estimated air pollution caused between 78,145 and 88,229 deaths in Bangladesh in 2019. Another study found it shortens the average Bangladeshi's life expectancy by 6.8 years. Despite these staggering consequences, successive governments have taken minimal action. Vehicle pollution remains high, industrial and power plant emissions go largely unregulated, and construction activities and waste burning continue unchecked.

The persistently high pollution levels highlight not only a lack of ambition in policymaking but also a failure to enforce existing regulations. The absence of regular monitoring mechanisms to uphold air quality standards is another major shortcoming. In spite of these failures, the responsible authorities are never held accountable. This must change. Despite concerns caused by the recent US decision to end a programme that many countries relied on for air quality data, the government must take responsibility for developing its own robust air quality monitoring and improvement systems. Investing in its own air quality monitoring infrastructure would be a crucial first step.

Bangladesh also needs to adopt a multi-pronged approach to tackle the deteriorating air quality. Stricter enforcement of emission regulations for industries and vehicles is essential. Brick kilns and factories—both major polluters—must be required to use modern filtration systems, while large-scale afforestation and urban greening initiatives should be undertaken to help absorb pollutants. Construction activities should also be regulated with dust-control measures, and waste burning should be strictly prohibited. Ultimately, the government and other stakeholders must realise that without urgent, science-backed intervention, the country risks an even graver public health and economic crisis in the coming days.

Ensure justice in rape cases

The trial process must be both swift and flawless

Amid nationwide protests against the surge in incidents of rape and harassment of women and girls, the interim government has pledged to amend relevant laws to expedite the trial process for rape cases. The law adviser has stated that law enforcement agencies will have to complete the investigation of such cases within 15 days and the trial within 90 days. He mentioned another potential amendment, saying that even if the trial is not concluded within 90 days, the accused cannot be granted bail on this basis. While it is good to see that the interim government is finally addressing legal concerns surrounding gender-based violence and has proposed some positive reforms, words alone will not suffice. Concrete actions are needed to implement these changes and ensure justice for victims of rape.

Expediting justice by reforming relevant laws and procedures is key, but any amendment must be finalised after consulting with legal experts and all other stakeholders. While investigations and trials in rape cases must be speedy, the process must also be flawless. In Bangladesh, faulty investigations are a major obstacle to delivering justice. Since, according to the country's law, the maximum punishment for rape is the death penalty, rushed and flawed investigations should not be encouraged. Also, for a proper investigation of rape cases, forensic reports are essential. If forensic reports are omitted to reduce investigation time, will it ensure justice?

Therefore, instead of merely shortening the investigation time for rape cases, it is crucial to ensure that forensic examination results are provided to investigating officers as quickly as possible. This is unlikely with only two forensic labs available in the country. The government, therefore, needs to set up more such labs as well as streamline the operations of existing ones. Furthermore, the investigation process for rape cases requires an overhaul, as weak investigative procedures often lead to delays in case proceedings. This is why, despite numerous rape cases being filed, only a handful result in convictions.

We urge the government to do everything in its capacity to ensure both swift and flawless justice in rape cases. It is encouraging to learn that the government has instructed law enforcement agencies to compile a list of all incidents of violence against women that occurred during the tenure of the interim government and submit it to the court. We hope they will follow through on this directive and ensure justice in each case. The pervasive culture of impunity that fuels sexual harassment and violence must be eradicated.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Worldwide health alert issued for SARS

On this day in 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a worldwide health alert, one of the first in a decade, regarding an illness it later called severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) that struck hundreds of people in China, Hong Kong, and Vietnam.

Giving people power beyond the ballot box



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MIRZA HASSAN

"For the youth, democracy is not merely about elections. It's about dismantling systemic barriers, amplifying marginalised voices and ensuring fairness."

General students interviewed by The Daily Star.

"To institutionalise democracy, elections are the only path."

Mirza Fakhrul, General Secretary of BNP.

The quotes above show the stark differences in the ways young educated citizens and mainstream political elites of Bangladesh perceive democracy. Students' capacious view of democracy has indeed been endorsed and adopted by theorists of democracy and democratic activists globally, given the glaring deficiencies of representative democracy to robustly uphold the collective interests of *the people*. The central argument is that democracy is not just about elections. Democracy is also a method whereby citizens can exercise their power alongside and beyond the ballot box through direct and collective engagement with the state to provide inputs to decision-making. More critically, citizens can directly participate in the checks and balances process, which are not possible through representative democracy. This idea of citizen-led collective form of democracy also needs to be differentiated from the notion of direct democracy (referendums and recall, for example) since this method still leaves the elected representatives only in charge.

On a conceptual level, this collective and direct/participatory form of democracy privileges equality of outcomes over the equality of opportunities. Equality of outcomes ensures that disadvantaged citizens are making disproportionately positive gains, which was reflected in the student's demand as quoted above. Conversely, equality of inputs aims to provide same opportunities to everyone to make those gains. When we think in the line of equality of opportunity, we assume democracy as an instrument to make collective decisions on equal basis, which compels us to articulate it only in liberal *procedural* terms, such as equal opportunities for opposition MPs, possibilities of floor crossing, neutrality of the speakers, bi-cameral system and so on. Such assumptions tend to ignore the prevailing balance



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

of social and economic power in the larger polity and society that ultimately shapes whatever procedures we use in the deliberation processes. Consequently, democracy must also be about resisting and neutralising state capture by the political, social and bureaucratic elites, in the domains of political, economic, social, and ideological processes to ensure disproportional positive gains of the marginalised.

We are currently witnessing massive initiatives, led by the interim government, to reform the state and political institutions to develop robust and resilient checks and balances mechanisms to prevent any reversal towards autocracy by keeping political elites rule-bound and making them operate within a narrow corridor. Different commissions have been tasked with the aggregation of citizens' preferences to reform and come up with agendas for the relevant stakeholders to deliberate.

The major thrusts of the commission's recommendations were largely based on the assumptions of representative democracy being the only game in town. The checks and balances mechanisms they aimed to develop predominantly involved elected political actors with the implicit assumptions that they would have *necessary and sufficient incentives to balance each other*. It is a largely false assumption, as our political history amply demonstrates. Commissions did recommend citizens' direct participation, both individually and collectively, but in a very weak and marginal manner. For the commissions, the state has

remained the predominant site for institutionalising the checks and balances mechanisms.

Such intra-political elite-centred check and balances proposition is predominantly a self-defeating one. It tends to end up in elite collusions to share privileges instead of generating mutual constraints and self-restraints. Elected political elites, also, being a

small group, have better coordination and collective action capacity, which enable them to form political oligarchy. Think of the specific case of duty-free import of cars by the parliament members. MPs across the political divide had no incentive to end this legal but systemic corruption. Furthermore, perpetuation of the policy of whitening of black money indicates that political oligarchy could easily and successfully collude with the economic oligarchy. As our political history shows, there were many such perverse consensus among the political elites (ruling and opposition) that they were happy to live with. Proposals of the commissions have largely failed to address these political realities and associated incentives of the politicians.

Commissions' recommendations to place individual non-partisan citizens, to be nominated by the elected politicians (and president) in the upper chamber (in the proposed bicameral system) with diverse socio-economic and gender backgrounds, will, perhaps, add little value in terms of citizen-initiated checks and balances. The reasons are: i) individuals with de facto partisan background will enter the upper house. They will be least interested in being disloyal to the political party as patron, and voting against the party policies/decisions; ii) even if they are truly non-partisan they can be intimidated and co-opted (with material offer); iii) in general, individualised representation is no match for collective representation of the citizens in terms of collective self-rule and the prevention of the state capture.

The Electoral Reform Commission's recommendations in terms of direct democracy, including recall, referendum and no vote will surely add value to checks and balances. But it is still political elite-centric, sporadic, and it deploys individualised mode of citizen representation (secret ballot). Unlike deliberative democracy, such secret voting does not allow for collective reasoning and reflection. Moreover, large-scale voting can only offer very coarse-grained checks and balances. It is heavily susceptible to ideological and other forms of meta-level factors contributing to behind the scene manipulation by the political and economic elites.

The central focus of the reform commissions seems to be deterring monopolisation of power in the political domain rather than dispersion of power across state and society. We are not proposing that this political-centric mode of checks and balances is abandoned. Rather, this should be complemented by the constitutionalised and collectively organised societal constraints to deter systemic corruption (legal or illegal). To achieve the latter, we need to introduce checks and balances both within and outside the state in the following ways:

i) Within the interfaces of state and society, constitutionally mandated permanent national commissions (like the existing Human Rights and Public Service Commissions) with more independence must be created. Such commissions should also be set up for women, ethnic groups, labour and other marginalised groups to empower them. The more commissions, the merrier.

ii) Checks and balances institutions located entirely outside the state must be created by establishing constitutionally mandated citizen assemblies. Existing citizen-centric political infrastructures at the level of union parishad such as Ward *Shabha* and Open Budget Meetings and their counterparts in the urban areas, can be easily converted to robust forms of citizen assemblies being endowed with sufficient legal mandates. Such forums can also be created at the upazila parishad level.

iii) Within the state, collectively organised citizens' associations, based on professional, gender, ethnic categories etc, should be allowed to nominate their representatives in the upper chamber of the parliament with the power to recall.

Our critical concern is to guard the guardians—to prevent political party elites from capturing accountability institutions. Fundamental institutions and policies should be protected from such capture by creating societal countervailing powers so that ordinary citizens can benefit from robust checks and balance mechanisms.

PROFESSOR REHMAN SOBHAN'S 90TH BIRTHDAY

A life dedicated to pursuit of social justice



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MAMUN RASHID

I met Professor Rehman Sobhan for the first time in 1980 after taking admission to Jahangirnagar University to study economics. I came across him more frequently after starting to visit the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies for supporting papers and further studies. Gradually, I got to witness him speaking at the seminars and symposiums hosted by the Bangladesh Economic Association, loudly advocating for the interests of people in the lower strata of society. He was incredibly articulate and delved deeply into the topic of discussion.

As time went by, I found out that Professor Sobhan is much more than just an economist. He is a public policy champion, an institution, and a guiding force whose intellect, courage, and unwavering commitment to justice have shaped the very fabric of Bangladesh's economic and political landscape. As he reaches 90, we celebrate an extraordinary

life that has been nothing short of legendary. His brilliance, foresight, and relentless pursuit of equity continue to inspire, proving that true visionaries never grow old; they only grow more profound in their impact. It is the truest in the case of Professor Sobhan, whom I see drinking life to the lees, dancing on the floor, and smiling with his sharp eyes even today.

Beyond his towering intellect, Professor Sobhan has mentored generations of economists, policymakers, and thinkers. His presence in a room commands respect not for the sake of authority but for the sheer depth of his wisdom. I recall a conversation in which he said that the moral obligation of economists requires them not just to analyse but to act.

Born in 1935, Professor Sobhan's intellectual journey took root at Cambridge, but it was in Bangladesh where his ideas ignited change. As a young academic at

Dhaka University, he dared to challenge the entrenched economic injustices of the time. His fearless articulation of the economic disparities between the then East and West Pakistan was more than an academic critique; it was a call for action! As one of the architects of the Six-Point

He carried the cause of an unborn nation to the world stage, securing global recognition for Bangladesh's right to freedom. Few scholars have had the privilege of shaping not only their time's intellectual discourse but also their nation's very destiny. His post-independence



Rehman Sobhan.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Programme, he provided the economic rationale for Bangladesh's struggle for self-determination. This made him one of the builders of the "two-nation theory," which finally led to the independence of our nation.

During the Liberation War of 1971, Professor Sobhan transcended the role of a thinker and became a warrior for justice, serving as a roving ambassador for the Provisional Government of Bangladesh.

contributions reflect his lifelong devotion to nation-building. As a member of the first Bangladesh Planning Commission, he played a pivotal role in steering the country's economic policies during its formative years. Yet his greatest legacy is perhaps the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), which he founded in 1993. Under his leadership, CPD has become a beacon of informed policymaking, bridging the gap between

research and governance, and ensuring that economic growth is pursued through the lens of justice and inclusivity.

A prolific writer and a towering public intellectual, Professor Sobhan's work, which spans 27 books and over 140 articles, continues to shape economic thoughts and governance. His seminal writings do not merely analyse poverty and inequality; they challenge the very structures that sustain them. His book *Untroubled Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment* is not just a memoir but a chronicle of a life dedicated to the relentless pursuit of justice and truth.

However, if anything is more awe-inspiring about Professor Sobhan than his past achievements, is his present vitality. At 90, he remains as engaged, passionate, and committed to his ideals as ever. His mind remains as sharp as his convictions, his energy as boundless as his vision. He is not just a scholar or a policymaker; he is a force of nature, a living testament to the idea that one man's intellect and integrity can shape the destiny of millions.

Happy 90th, Professor Sobhan! Your legacy is immortal, your impact immeasurable, and your inspiration eternal. Bangladesh and the world stand in gratitude.