

An unfortunate turn of events

Questions over Awami League's future must not lead to fresh chaos

Ever since the July uprising, the nation has been rocked by wave after wave of protests, both online and offline, over various issues and developments. While this is but a natural consequence of the heightened exposure to, and awareness of, long-festering injustices and divisions, the recent flare-up over the question of Awami League's rehabilitation following alleged exchanges between some leaders of the National Citizen Party (NCP) and the army chief has the potential to plunge the country into fresh chaos, if not properly addressed. The explosiveness of the situation owes as much to the alleged content of said exchanges, and the manner in which they were revealed, as to the sway involved parties hold over the post-uprising society.

On the assumption that these developments are known to all, we are not delving into details. To sum up, in a Facebook post on Friday, NCP leader Hasnat Abdullah claimed that he had been presented with an "Indian plan" at the cantonment to rehabilitate Awami League. It involves a "refined" version of the party, led by leaders without questionable reputations, which would publicly renounce Sheikh Hasina's legacy and pledge to restore the ideals of "Bangabandhu's Awami League." In exchange, Hasnat wrote, politicians who endorse this new faction would receive parliamentary seats and other concessions. The justification for the move, he added, was that "it is better to have several opposition parties, including a weak Awami League, than just one party in opposition."

After the post went viral, it caused heated debate and also demonstrations. Later, the veracity of Hasnat's version of the event was contested by his NCP colleague Sarjis Alam, who accompanied him during the meeting with army chief General Waqar-uz-Zaman, while another, Nasiruddin Patwary, called the post "inappropriate". Meanwhile, the army called it "laughable" and "immature" in comments shared with the Netra News. However, what's clear from these statements is that said meeting did take place, whether pre-planned or not, and Awami League's rehabilitation was indeed discussed, even if its intent and other relevant details remain disputed. This development brings to the fore the critical importance of transparency in any process involving the future of Awami League to prevent confusion, foul play, or politicisation. It also shows, once again, the significance of Sheikh Hasina and other leaders facing accountability for the atrocities they committed before a new chapter can be opened.

The potential for chaos is real if this issue is mishandled. The people are still grappling with the consequences of the ousted regime that left deep scars in society. The last thing we need now is further instability. We agree with the NCP that political decisions should be left to the political entities. But the need for broader consensus in such matters cannot be ruled out either. At the same time, we must be careful that the army is not pulled into any controversies that do not concern it. The chief adviser has already said that the interim government had no plan to ban the AL—that doesn't mean AL's future is decided. As the trial process for its crimes continues, politicians may, and should, continue to engage in discussions about it but this must not lead to further turmoil. All stakeholders of the July uprising must act with greater caution and restraint.

Eid journeys should be safe and easy

Take steps to increase highway safety, minimise gridlocks

With the Eid holidays around the corner, more than one crore people are reportedly preparing to travel back home to spend time with their families. Like every other year, this journey is not expected to be smooth this time either, given our inadequate transport system, dilapidated road conditions, and rising instances of highway robberies of late.

According to a 2022 survey, 1.18 crore people leave Dhaka during the last four days before Eid using road, river, and rail transport. Due to the inadequacy of trains and launches, most people travel by road in buses, private cars, trucks, motorcycles, and even autorickshaws. This year, despite the government holiday extending over nine days, the strain of road journeys is unlikely to lessen much, according to a *Prothom Alo* report. One reason behind this forewarning is the condition of highways, particularly the ongoing expansion work on two major routes—Dhaka-Sylhet and Tangail-Rangpur—used for travel to at least 30 districts.

The four-lane expansion work currently taking place between Narayanganj and Narsingdi on the Dhaka-Sylhet route has already become a nuisance for commuters due to dust, large potholes on roads, and a total disregard for traffic rules. Travel time on this route is already twice the normal, and one can only imagine what the gridlock would look like in the days before Eid. Illegal autorickshaw stands and hawkers occupying both sides of major intersections on highways are another set of problems that should be addressed for uninterrupted traffic flow.

Another major concern is the increase in highway robberies. Compared to last year's figures, highway robberies during the January-February period have more than doubled. In response, the government has promised to install CCTV cameras in all bus, rail, and launch terminals and increase police presence on highways. We sincerely hope such moves will curb the threat of robberies as well as help control road rage and traffic violations. However, strict monitoring of vehicle overcapacity and road rules must be enforced, with increased supervision by patrol teams. This should include checking the number of trips by transport drivers and restricting the entry of slow-moving vehicles like *Nasim* on highways. Such pre-emptive actions can also prevent the loss of lives. Also, temporarily halting road work several days before and after Eid may help ease gridlocks.

EDITORIAL

The more BNP talks about reforms, the less interested it seems in them



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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Going solely by its public statements, an interesting aspect of BNP's activities since the July uprising has been its search for—and interaction with—new adversaries, in the absence of the one it fought against for so long. As new forces emerge on the scene, BNP, driven partly by post-uprising realities and partly by an abiding sense of victimhood, has increasingly found itself at odds with former allies, new parties, student leaders, the chief adviser and his cabinet colleagues, and even media voices critical of its unruly activists. And it has sought to use these moments to come out stronger. What's interesting about it is how unchanged BNP's manner of engagement has remained despite the political changeover in August, often adopting an adversarial tone that feels too eager at times.

In his seminal work on the politics of enemies, Canadian historian Michael Ignatieff explains that when politicians target their adversaries using inflammatory rhetoric, it is not necessarily true that they are merely representing their constituents' feelings or responding to injustices and societal divisions. "The truth may be darker: it may be a language game not to represent grievance, but to create it, and to polarise for the sake of political advantage." However, as the largest party at present—and one many expect to win the next national election—BNP's adversarial politics hurts more because it was expected to lead a new culture of politics, with a new political language that seeks mediation rather than confrontation.

Be that as it may, where it gets particularly disturbing is when BNP brings its combative approach to the state reform drive, which the nation hopes will be the catalyst for transformational change in the country. BNP's stance on reforms has long been one of confusion and mixed messages. On March 16, however, it seemed to take it a step too far. Speaking at an iftar programme at Dhaka Medical College, senior BNP leader Mirza Abbas said, rather ominously, "We will not easily accept any reforms dictated by their [interim government's] hands or pens. If they carry out reforms, we will make corrections. BNP, in collaboration with



other political parties, will determine those corrections and present them to the nation. We will not accept the so-called reforms led by the so-called intellectuals who are not even citizens of this country."

This statement is striking for two reasons. First, it outright dismisses the proposals from various reform commissions which, by the way, are with the political parties for review. Second, it openly questions the legitimacy of those who prepared the proposals and are in talks with stakeholders, including the BNP, to achieve consensus on the nature and extent of reforms. But if this is how BNP wants to navigate this crucial phase—by pre-emptively rejecting expert proposals, disparaging those involved, or accusing the "unelected" government of trying to favour certain parties—what was the point of all the efforts over the last seven months? The non-citizen jibe, likely aimed at the National Consensus Commission Vice Chairman Ali Riaz, who also heads the Constitution Reform Commission, was particularly insensitive. Despite BNP being very much on the inside and having the ability to impact outcome through

documented. The party has itself complained that its commitment to reforms is being unfairly questioned, but stopped short of considering whether it is somehow contributing to this perception. Instead, it appears more interested in its own 31-point charter, which largely consists of broad visions. All this suggests BNP's growing alienation from the aspirations for structural change through the ongoing reform drive. While acting chairman Tarique Rahman's statement on Wednesday—warning that extremists and fascists could again "bury democracy" and expressing BNP's commitment to maintaining the country's secular character—is laudable, it's the grunt work of reform-making where its commitment, and support, are most needed. Right now, its critical stance isn't helping. Ali Riaz appeared to hint as much on Thursday when he stated that both internal and external forces are trying to "obstruct the reform process."

BNP must recognise that, besides electoral changes, there are other reforms that deserve equal priority. Our painful history of political violence and corruption demands

that some key changes be made—at least in the judiciary and police force—to ensure Bangladesh doesn't return to the pre-July status quo after elections. The idea that this may not happen is both naïve and dangerous. To expect a political government to honour its commitment to reforms is like expecting it to honour its election manifesto, and we all know how

faithful past ruling parties were to their manifestos. There must be at least some binding mechanisms or safeguards in place to ensure that the reform drive does not derail after elections. One way, as suggested by a columnist in this daily, would be for political parties to "thrash out a common minimum reform programme (CMRP)—a set of core reforms based on the maximum principle, where the maximum number of parties agree on a minimum set of urgent measures." This is precisely what the National Consensus Commission can help achieve, if given proper support.

If the BNP really wants to be seen as a pro-reform force, it should engage in these discussions with greater sincerity, sending an undiluted message of solidarity with whatever outcome this process yields. At the same time, it should balance its political aspirations with the broader national interest. That goes for all other parties as well. Any attempt to politicise the reform drive—whether by questioning and obstructing the process or by selectively endorsing reforms that suit their interests—will serve neither the parties nor the country in the long run.

Let women thrive both online and offline



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The world celebrated this year's International Women's Day (IWD) with the theme "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment." While the global message envisions a future where women and girls lead as changemakers, our nation's reality remains far from this vision.

Similarly, a video was falsely linked to Nusrat Tabassum, a Dhaka University student and a central executive committee member of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement. The daughter of Shafiqul Alam, chief adviser's press secretary, also became a victim of deepfake images.

Hate speech targeting women and marginalised communities in Bangladesh is now a pervasive issue. Social media spaces often serve as breeding grounds for misogynistic content. For instance, there are Facebook groups which actively spread misogynistic messages aimed at undermining feminist movements and silencing women's voices.

Women professionals also face relentless character assassinations. Many incidents illustrate how irresponsible reporting fuels misogyny and shifts focus away from professional allegations to personal slander, amplifying gender stereotypes.

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Environment, Forest and Climate Change Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan and well-known actress Mehazabien Chowdhury were targeted with AI-generated images.

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Poromoni, a popular Bangladeshi actress, often faces online harassment rooted in deep-seated sexism. The abusive comments reflect a broader cultural problem where women in the public eye are judged harshly for their

personal lives and professional choices. This pattern of online abuse highlights the widespread misogyny female public figures encounter, exposing the challenges they face in maintaining their presence and voice in a hostile digital environment.

Such behaviour underscores the urgent need for enhanced media literacy, accountability, and measures to curb online harassment, especially

Digital space has become a breeding ground for gendered violence which is not contained within the digital sphere. It is affecting women and adolescent girls in offline spaces. It seeps into their daily lives, affecting their psychological and physical well-being and resulting in paranoia, shame, isolation, and even death.

in Bangladesh's social media landscape. Addressing this crisis requires immediate and comprehensive action. The government must enforce clear and robust regulations to combat cyber harassment and digital violence. Legal provisions should address online sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, and misinformation, ensuring swift judicial processes and strict penalties for offenders. Protecting victims must be a priority, with legal assistance, counselling, and financial support readily available.

Law enforcement agencies also need targeted training on digital rights, cybercrime, and gender sensitivity. Specialised cybercrime units focused on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFCBV) should be established to handle these cases with the urgency and expertise they require. Teachers should be trained to educate students about digital ethics and responsible online behaviour, equipping them to navigate the digital world safely and respectfully.

Moreover, fostering a culture of respect and empathy must begin in childhood. Schools should incorporate lessons on digital manners and ethics alongside traditional moral education. Children must learn that online behaviour carries real-world consequences and that respect for others extends beyond face-to-face interactions. Parents and educators should work together to instil values of kindness, accountability, and digital responsibility.

Addressing TFCBV is not just about protecting women—it's about upholding human rights and fostering just, inclusive societies. This fight aligns directly with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16.10 (Ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms). By creating safe digital spaces where women and marginalised communities can express themselves freely and participate fully in society, we move closer to a more equitable and peaceful world.

Let us remember that the journey towards equality requires collective effort. We must challenge patriarchal norms, demand responsible media practices, and push for stronger legal protections. Only then can we ensure a future where every woman and girl can thrive, both online and offline.