

Palestine doesn't need our violence

Vandalism during Palestine protests reflects deeper fractures

As a nation that has always stood firmly in solidarity with the people of Palestine, we are dismayed by what unfolded in several districts during Monday's nationwide protests against Israel's war on Gaza. The protests—comprising sit-ins, processions, and academic closures—followed a global call for strikes, under the banner "The World Stands for Gaza", demanding an end to the brutal military campaign that has already killed over 50,000 Palestinians. While this cause is close to our hearts, we cannot condone the vandalism and looting carried out in its name. According to a report by this daily, various business outlets with alleged links to Israel, including restaurants and shoe stores, were attacked during the protests in Sylhet, Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Khulna, Gazipur, Bogura, and so on.

Later, images and video footage showing some of the attacks went viral, redirecting the conversation from what was a well-intended act of solidarity with a persecuted population. While the government has condemned these incidents, with subsequent police raids resulting in the arrest of at least 49 suspected miscreants, the question that stares us in the face is: how does ransacking and looting local businesses (or even those with international backing) serve the Palestine cause? What justice is served by trashing, for instance, a Bata showroom—a company with no ties to Israel? This doesn't help the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement either, as it is meant to be nonviolent. The ignorance of the miscreants in this regard is matched only by their disregard for peaceful expressions, making a mockery of a noble cause.

Unfortunately, their vandalism took place just as the government launched the Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025, a four-day event aimed at attracting global investors and reshaping our international image. How unfortunate it is that scenes of looted shops, torched signage, or terrified shopkeepers are being broadcast at the same time. This is not how a country invites confidence or foreign capital. And if the government cannot effectively address this trend of violence by opportunists and criminals hiding in the crowd, Bangladesh's image is unlikely to improve any time soon. As we have highlighted in a recent editorial, it is because of the lack of a proper response by police and the judiciary that mobs are being exploited to serve various purposes. Often, mere suspicions of crimes including mugging, extortion, murder or rape have resulted in deadly violence. Political and personal grudges are also fuelling such violence.

This calls for a critical reassessment of the government's approach to dealing with mob activities. But law enforcement alone is not enough. We need a national reckoning with this culture of impulsive violence through the engagement of political and religious platforms. We must uphold the right to protest, but never at the cost of peace, order, and our collective interests.

Make upazila health complexes effective

Rural, marginalised communities need better access to healthcare

We are concerned about the situation at upazila health complexes where a severe shortage of doctors and essential staff is disrupting healthcare services. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), around 59 percent of doctor positions in these health complexes remain vacant, while absenteeism is another major barrier to providing treatment to rural patients. Many of these facilities also lack specialist doctors, forcing patients to seek treatment at district or medical college hospitals. With such inadequacies, what is the point of having these facilities?

Staff and doctor shortages have been a persistent issue for the upazila health complexes but little action has been taken to address it. Recently, this daily published a report on the Kulaura Upazila Health Complex in Moulvibazar suffering from a similar shortage. The facility, serving a population of five lakh, has only two doctors. Similarly, the 50-bed Phulbari Upazila Health Complex in Dinajpur has only three regular doctors to serve an average of 80-90 patients daily. Patients unable to access services at these health centres are often forced to turn to private clinics, increasing their healthcare expenses.

At the Phulbari Health Complex, there are 182 positions for doctors, nurses, and fourth-class employees, but nearly half have remained unfilled for years. In Khulna division, 896 of the 1,327 doctor positions in upazila health complexes remain vacant. Meanwhile, Bandarban district is grappling with a shortage of over 300 staff, including doctors. Clearly, the crisis prevails across the country. The reasons for this are well-known. Since the recruitment of doctors is conducted through the BCS exams, the lengthy recruitment process often delays appointment. Also, doctors posted at the upazila level often prefer living in Dhaka rather than staying in remote areas, disregarding the rules. Furthermore, many doctors, nurses, and other staff members frequently remain absent or on leave due to a lack of discipline and proper oversight. This must change.

The government must develop a comprehensive plan to address the manpower shortage in local-level health complexes. As these facilities play a crucial role in delivering critical services at the grassroots level, they should be adequately staffed. The Public Administration Reform Commission has proposed the establishment of a dedicated Public Service Commission (Health) to manage recruitment, promotions, and other related activities in the health sector—which should be seriously considered to streamline healthcare operations and improve efficiency. Reform is crucial to ensuring healthcare for all.

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Getting the most out of our economic zones



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In 2011, Bangladesh lost a great opportunity to break into the global value chain for electronics. The Korean giant, Samsung, which had entered Vietnam just a few years prior, had set its eyes on Bangladesh. It wanted to invest \$1.25 billion in an electronics plant in Chattogram that would employ 50,000 people. It wanted 250 acres of land to build its plant. Bangladesh could not provide that land. Samsung decided to take that investment to Vietnam and expand its operations there.

By the early years of the new century, the country was ready for an industrial take-off. But there was an emerging constraint that stood in the way. Businesspeople had started complaining about it. Newspapers were reporting it anecdotally. Then, in 2007, solid evidence came in the form of a World Bank report. An investment climate assessment for Bangladesh, the second in a series that had started in 2002, showed that scarcity of serviced industrial land was becoming a serious constraint.

Both the 2002 and 2007 investment climate assessments by the World Bank listed the top five constraints faced by businesses. Four of these were present in both reports. What was new this time was the access to land constraint. In 2007, almost 50 percent of the respondents identified this as a major or severe constraint—this was up from about 30 percent in 2002. Land scarcity was a perennial problem. Weaknesses in land recording and titling compounded it. Businesses found it difficult to obtain unencumbered and serviced industrial land, with good access to infrastructure and utilities. The environment was also harmed by rapid industrialisation. Entrepreneurs had set up factories indiscriminately, and scarce land was being used inefficiently.

At that time, the country had a small number of export processing zones (EPZs) and about 60 industrial parks. The latter were in bad shape, lacking good infrastructure and utilities, and some were in locations that made little economic sense. The EPZs were reasonably well-run, but these were, by definition, all export-oriented. The total area of available

plots in these zones was also limited. Demand was rising for increasing the supply of serviced industrial land through the establishment of more zones, including those accessible by domestic businesses. Moreover, the inability to provide serviced land was a major factor discouraging FDI.

It was in this context that the government started thinking about an ambitious economic zones programme in 2007. This was meant to be a transformative agenda that would not only address the problem of serviced industrial land but would also help ensure that future industrialisation of

the country would be better organised and environmentally sustainable. The programme also envisaged a move away from the purely public sector model of zone development and management prevalent in Bangladesh. This was a bold idea for a country. The report argued for allowing varying degrees of private sector participation, such as purely private zones where the private sector both develops and manages the zones, and PPP zones which may be publicly developed but managed by the private sector.

Where do we stand with the economic zones now? Currently, 122 investment projects are being implemented in the economic zones, with a total land allocation of 1,950 acres. This land amount compares well with the total land occupied by investors (2,300 acres) in the eight EPZs of the country, which represent an earlier generation of economic zones. In other words, the amount of serviced land made available to

the country would be better organised and environmentally sustainable. The programme also envisaged a move away from the purely public sector model of zone development and management prevalent in Bangladesh. This was a bold idea for a country. The report argued for allowing varying degrees of private sector participation, such as purely private zones where the private sector both develops and manages the zones, and PPP zones which may be publicly developed but managed by the private sector.

When it comes to FDI attraction, the picture is not encouraging. Of the roughly \$5 billion already invested in the ongoing projects, only \$200 million, i.e., a meagre 4 percent, is FDI. In other words, even after addressing one of the main bottlenecks to FDI attraction, i.e., serviced land, we have

investors through zones has almost doubled with the advent of the new economic zones.

But what is the country getting, in terms of investment, exports, and employment, from this very substantial land allocation?

Data available from the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) allow us to answer these important questions.

Of the 122 projects, 50 (41 percent of the total) have already commenced operations. The rest are in various stages of construction. Total investment to date is \$5.06 billion, which is 57 percent of the total cost projected. It is projected that these investments will generate about 100,000 jobs. This amounts to 53 jobs per acre of allocated land compared to 217 jobs generated per acre in the EPZs. So far, 43,286 jobs have been generated, i.e., a little less than half the projected number. BEZA provides gender disaggregated data, which tells us that four out of five jobs have

not been able to use the economic zones to attract significant foreign investment.

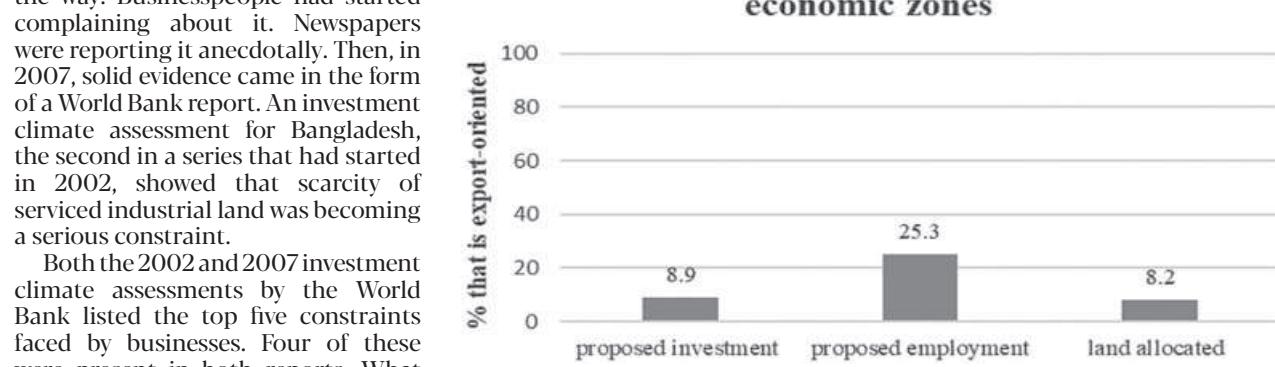
One reason is that while the land and basic infrastructure are ready in the operational zones, many still suffer from an inadequate supply of energy. But why is it that the share of FDI in total investment is so low? If a sizeable amount of domestic investment is coming to the zones despite the energy-related issues, why are foreign investors not coming? This points to the weaknesses that remain in our investment promotion and attraction efforts and the deficiencies in our overall investment climate.

What about the export orientation of the investments in the economic zones? This is an important question since increasing exports is an important development objective of Bangladesh, and the economic zones are supposed to make a major contribution here. The table provided summarises the situation.

Before we discuss the findings, let me clarify how I obtained these numbers. The BEZA database distinguishes between three categories of investment: a) 100 percent domestic-oriented; b) "mostly" domestic-oriented; and c) 100 percent export-oriented. For the "mostly" domestic-oriented category, I designated 20 percent of proposed investment, 20 percent of proposed employment, and 20 percent of land allocated as being export-oriented. For the 100 percent export-oriented investments, the corresponding figures are, of course, 100 percent. I then added up the export-oriented proposed investment, proposed employment, and land allocated for all the operational economic zones. Note that this does not include the EPZs, which belong to an earlier generation of economic zones; this article is about the contribution of the new generation of zones.

The results summarised are somewhat disappointing. We see a low export-orientation, with only about 8 percent of proposed investment and allocated land, and 25 percent of proposed employment being associated with export-oriented investments.

While good progress has been made in developing the economic zones, with more than 100 investors provided with land so far, the economic zones are far from fulfilling their promise—i.e., serving as a major vehicle for attracting FDI that will help diversify our exports and give us a foothold in global value chains. Thus far, economic zones are largely about local investors targeting the local market. This must change.



Can democracy and populism coexist?



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When defining democracy, the words of Abraham Lincoln—"government of the people, by the people, for the people"—resonate universally. Similarly, Winston Churchill's pragmatic observation reminds us that while democracy may be flawed, it surpasses all other forms of governance attempted throughout history. Democracy's appeal lies in its grounding in the will of the people, yet its implementation varies widely. Like the societies it governs, democracy reflects diverse cultures, histories, and local dynamics.

Democracy, though globally dominant since the fall of communism, is far from a one-size-fits-all system. Diverse societies require governance tailored to their unique needs, but certain universal principles must anchor any democratic system. Democracy is not simply the will of the majority; it must safeguard freedom of speech and association, uphold the rule of law, and protect the rights of all, including minorities. While free, fair, inclusive, and regular elections are essential, they alone do not guarantee democratic governance. Without robust checks and balances, elected governments can misuse power or drift into authoritarianism. To ensure accountability, democracy requires the separation of powers among legislative, executive, and judicial branches, supported by independent media and civil society acting as

vigilant watchdogs.

Over the past decade, as concerns about democracy's global decline intensified, the recently former US President Joe Biden sought to reaffirm America's self-proclaimed historical role as a champion of democratic values. He initiated the Summit for Democracy, inviting hundreds of nations from across the globe (excluding Bangladesh multiple times). Many analysts viewed the summit as a strategic effort to counter China's rising influence and highlight its undemocratic governance. In response, China published a white paper titled, *China: Democracy That Works*, asserting that its governance model aligns with democratic principles. However, the ordinary people of China do not have the opportunity to directly elect their leaders. Interestingly, they do not seem to be much concerned about this. Nevertheless, it is for Chinese citizens to decide what kind of democracy best suits their nation. As Mahatma Gandhi aptly noted, "The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within."

The term "democracy" has become so universally admired that even authoritarian regimes hesitate to reject it outright. North Korea, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), exemplifies this paradox. Despite being one of the world's most repressive and isolated

regimes, ruled by a single family for over 70 years, it conducts regular elections where citizens cast votes by secret ballot. However, these elections are purely symbolic, offering only one candidate on the ballot. The scarcity of reliable information about North Korea further obscures the true nature of its political system.

The assumption that democracy would flourish universally after the Cold War has been tempered by reality. Instead of converging towards liberal democracy, many nations have adopted diverse democratic systems, some of which deviate significantly from democratic fundamentals. One of the greatest challenges to democracy today is the rise of populism.

Historically, populism began as a movement advocating for the masses against elite rulers. In its modern form, however, it often leverages division rather than unity. Populist leaders exploit religion, nationalism, and cultural identity to manipulate emotions and garner support. This rhetoric often lacks substantive vision, instead deepening societal divisions and marginalising dissent.

In South Asia, populism frequently intertwines with religion and nationalism, shaping political discourse through identity politics that deepen societal divisions. Politicians often exploit religious sentiments and nationalist rhetoric to consolidate support, as evident in India's Hindu-nationalist politics and Pakistan's Islamist-driven narratives. Bangladesh presents a distinct case, where cyclical anti-India and anti-Pakistan sentiments reflect a hybrid populist strategy. While these tactics effectively mobilise public support, they often divert attention from pressing governance issues, exacerbate polarisation, and marginalise minorities. Once in power, populist leaders tend to bypass

checks and balances, concentrating authority under the guise of acting for "the people." This approach weakens democratic institutions, targeting independent judiciaries, free media, and civil society while relying on propaganda and hate speech to suppress dissent. If left unchecked, populism risks undermining the very democratic structures it claims to uphold, as evidenced by recent regimes across the region.

A key distinction between democracy and populism lies in their approach to pluralism. Democracy balances majority rule with protections for minority rights and dissenting opinions, embracing diversity as a cornerstone of governance. Populism, by contrast, often prioritises the will of the majority, viewing minority protections or institutional checks as obstacles to fulfilling "the mandate of the majority."

However, populism is not inherently harmful. When strategically managed, it can drive reforms within democracy, bringing attention to neglected issues and challenging entrenched elites. Then again, unchecked populism risks concentrating power, undermining institutional integrity, and sidelining dissent.

Populism, as an integral part of democracy, holds a dual nature: it can strengthen democratic participation but also threaten its core principles when left unregulated. Democracy must transcend populist impulses, maintaining its commitment to inclusivity, accountability, and institutional safeguards. American author James Bovard's cautionary words, "Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner," emphasise the need to protect minority rights and uphold systemic checks and balances.

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