

## We must learn from history

Justice demands proper trials, not just bans

On late Saturday night, the interim government announced a ban on the activities of Awami League, including its online presence, under the Anti-Terrorism Act. The ban, we are told, will remain in place until the International Crimes Tribunal concludes the trial of the party and its leaders. This is a unique step. Following 15 years of repression and particularly its role during the July uprising, there is a widespread sense of public disgust towards the AL, which is clearly visible to all. Public outrage intensified when former President Abdul Hamid was recently permitted to leave the country for Thailand. This served as a trigger, prompting the government to impose the ban in a matter of days, despite having shown reluctance to do so in the previous 10 months. The key question now is: how will this decision impact our politics and future elections?

Looking at historical examples globally, the banning of political parties is relatively rare. Even rarer is a ban that successfully achieves its intended objectives—the banning of the Nazi Party, which played a central role in starting the Second World War, being a unique exception. In our own history, we have witnessed the banning of religion-based political parties after our independence. However, that ban was lifted under President Ziaur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina's AL government also banned Jamaat-e-Islami shortly before its fall from power. Even before that, in 2013, Jamaat was barred from contesting elections by a High Court ruling. That decision was repeatedly used by Hasina's AL government as a pretext to crack down on Jamaat's leaders and activists—as well as on other dissidents falsely associated with Jamaat. But did that prevent Jamaat's survival and later emergence as a powerful political force?

It is a matter of fact that Sheikh Hasina and numerous leaders and activists of the AL have committed grave human rights violations. What is unfortunate is that, despite the passing of 10 months, we have not seen the government make significant headway in appropriately prosecuting the alleged criminals within the AL, starting from the very top. And looking at historical examples, both globally and locally, whether a blanket ban serves the purpose of properly dispensing justice remains questionable.

It is more than likely that the ban will drive many AL members to other activities, as we have seen previously with associates of other banned political parties. So, instead of taking the easy way out by simply banning the party, the government should focus on meeting the primary demand post-uprising: justice for the many atrocities perpetrated by AL members, through transparent and proper trials. We must learn from global, Asian, South Asian, and our own history about the results of banning a political party.

## Let this budget mark a break from the past

Strengthen budget transparency to build public confidence

As the nation prepares for its first budget following the uprising, likely to be unveiled within a month, the latest findings from the International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey should serve as a wake up call for the interim government. Bangladesh continues to languish near the bottom of global lists on budget transparency—ranking 37th among 125 countries in 2023, and trailing behind most of our South Asian peers, according to the survey. It thus confirms what we have long known: the persistent lack of openness and accountability in fiscal governance under the Awami League and previous governments, particularly in the formulation and implementation of budgets.

In fact, the whole process of budgeting, starting from the very onset, has long been plagued by a top-down approach, with very limited public participation and almost ceremonial legislative engagement. For instance, while many countries publish pre-budget statements—outlining the broad parameters of fiscal policies, economic forecast, and anticipated revenue, expenditures, and debt levels—to encourage discussion, Bangladesh does not do so. Moreover, recommendations from experts are seldom reflected in the proposed or approved budgets, rendering public consultation and any parliamentary discussion futile. Equally alarmingly, important materials that can help guide public debate—such as simplified budget summaries, monthly implementation reports, and audit reviews—are either missing or delayed. This trend is deeply problematic. In the absence of meaningful public participation in the decisions affecting their lives—such as which taxes to levy, which services to provide, or how much debt to take on—the whole process becomes authoritarian.

The lack of transparency and accountability inevitably fuels inefficiency, waste, and corruption. The question is, how can we expect people to pay taxes faithfully when they do not properly know where their money is going—having had little engagement or impact in the budgeting process—or worse, when they suspect that it is being misused? We must not let this trend continue. The interim government has a chance to demonstrate a clear break from the past, setting the ground for greater budget transparency from future political governments. It must begin by publishing a pre-budget statement to initiate public discussion, and ensure public opinion is properly reflected in eventual decisions. The authorities should also strive to adhere to global best practices at every stage of this crucial public matter.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### First flight over the North Pole

On this day in 1926, aboard the semirigid airship Norge, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, American scientist Lincoln Ellsworth, and Italian engineer Umberto Nobile made the first undisputed flight over the North Pole.

# Ban on AL and future actions



### THE STREET VIEW

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In moments of national transition, the desire to undo the past through dramatic gestures is tempting. After years of repression, injustice, and fear, many understandably crave a break from the old order—a symbolic act that declares, “never again.” For some, banning the Awami League (AL) appears to be that break.

This decision, driven by years of repression and authoritarian rule, may seem like poetic justice to some. But it carries a heavy price: the risk of turning democratic renewal into another round of political vengeance.

There is no denying the extent of damage the AL has done over the last 15 years, particularly from January 5, 2014. Many citizens hoped that, at the very least, AL leaders would publicly acknowledge their wrongdoing, express regret, and ask for forgiveness. But instead of remorse, what has come is provocation—from exile, through messaging that seeks to inflame rather than reconcile. The public anger, already deep, has only intensified. And yet, even in the face of this resentment, we must ask whether banning the party outright solved the problem of punishing the individuals who committed crimes against humanity.

Make no mistake, the AL has much to answer for and it must be held accountable for its brutal actions and those responsible must be punished.

From the 2014 “midnight election” to the brutal crackdown on student protesters during the July uprising of 2024, the party’s leadership has repeatedly flouted democratic norms and trampled on human rights. There is widespread and legitimate demand for punishment.

Let’s begin with the obvious: the Awami League is not merely a political party—it is a multigenerational institution. Millions of people across the country supported it in the past, many of them born into families that have been part of the party for decades. What will happen to these people in



Hundreds gathered in the capital's Shahbagh on May 10, blocking the busy intersection, and demanding a ban on the Awami League.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

the new reality? How will they react is the important question.

What’s more, a ban gives the AL exactly what it needs to recast its image—from oppressor to oppressed. The same party that wielded state power to silence dissent now gets to claim victimhood.

Then there is the legal dimension. Bangladesh is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which clearly states that restrictions on political rights must meet the tests of legality, necessity, and proportionality.

A blanket party ban—the most extreme form of political restriction—can

Justice demands that we punish the guilty—not everyone who are not directly involved with them. Collective punishment, even when driven by righteous cause, undermines the very legitimacy of transitional justice.

History shows that dissolving parties rarely heals nations. It more often deepens fractures, stokes grievances, and makes martyrs of those who once stood accused.

Supporters of the ban may point to the student movements, particularly the July uprising, as moral justification. And indeed, the courage of Bangladesh’s young protesters deserves admiration. They braved

Perhaps worryingly, this move sets a precedent. Today, it’s the AL. Tomorrow, it could be any party deemed “unacceptable.” Once the door to blanket political bans is opened, it becomes easier to silence dissent and concentrate power under the guise of legality.

Bangladesh deserves more than symbolic ruptures. It deserves the hard, principled work of imparting justice and institution-building. Accountability must replace impunity. We must also ensure political pluralism. If we are to escape our past, we must choose justice and democracy.

# How we can navigate the tariff maelstrom



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The importance of the readymade garment (RMG) sector to the Bangladesh economy cannot be overstated. Contributing 85 percent of the country’s export earnings, 11.5 percent of GDP, and providing employment to over four million workers, the sector has been a pivotal force behind Bangladesh’s GDP growth, rural-to-urban wealth distribution, and economic empowerment of women over the past two decades.

Given its role in the economy, any local or global headwinds affecting the sector have significant macroeconomic implications, raising concerns among economists, policymakers, and industry leaders alike.

The latest tariff impositions by the Trump administration, followed by a 90-day freeze, have triggered unwanted disruptions in the global trade system. Bangladesh must assess the broader consequences of these tariffs, especially on its trade flow and export competitiveness.

As RMG remains Bangladesh’s top export, and with the United States as its largest single-country export destination, the sector is vulnerable to any protectionist measures. To formulate an effective response, it is essential to understand the concerns of the US administration, which seeks increased imports of American goods and higher foreign direct investment (FDI) into the US economy. While Bangladesh’s limited capital stock and

regulatory constraints make large-scale FDI unlikely, there is potential to expand imports of basic agricultural commodities from the US—such as cotton, oilseeds, and vegetable fats. These arrangements could be pursued through both government-to-government (G2G) initiatives and private sector partnerships, offering a diplomatic lever in ongoing trade discussions.

Understandably, industry leaders are alarmed by tariff hikes as steep as 37 percent on Bangladeshi apparel—even as some competing countries face similar increases. This raises critical questions: how competitive will Bangladesh remain in the midst of this trade war? What should be our strategic response to mitigate potential setbacks to this vital sector?

While international trade will inevitably slow, the impact will not be evenly distributed. Emerging economies like Bangladesh may find new opportunities as global supply chains realign. China, the largest apparel exporter to the US with a 21.3 percent market share, faces the highest tariff rates—bringing the total to over 100 percent on certain categories. This opens the door for Bangladesh and Vietnam to absorb some of the redirected orders from China. The challenge, however, lies in Bangladesh’s current limitations in producing higher-value apparel and man-made fibre (MMF)-based

products, where global demand is surging.

In 2024, MMF-based apparel made up only about 29 percent of Bangladesh’s production, compared to the global average of 78 percent, according to the International Textile Manufacturers Federation. To remain competitive, especially in the European Union (EU) market—where

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stringent sustainability regulations are gaining momentum—Bangladesh must invest in MMF capacity, sustainable production systems, and a recycled fabric ecosystem.

The new tariff regime is also expected to trigger inflationary pressures in the US, with forecasts suggesting a rise from two to four percent. Historically, in times of economic uncertainty and stagflation, US consumers gravitate towards affordable, fast-fashion products—a market segment where Bangladesh has a significant foothold.

Notably, during the aftermath of the global financial crisis, Bangladesh’s apparel exports surged by 44 percent in 2010-11 compared to the previous year.

To successfully navigate this volatile environment, Bangladesh’s apparel sector must pursue a “triple diversification strategy”: i) geographic diversification which involves reducing dependence on Europe and the US, and exploring emerging markets; ii) fabric diversification by increasing MMF-based and recycled fabric production; and iii) product diversification by shifting towards higher-value and varied product categories.

Simultaneously, our diplomats and trade negotiators must proactively engage US counterparts, advocating for increased procurement of US cotton, which currently accounts for just nine percent of Bangladesh’s imports. Redirecting sourcing from Brazil, India, and West Africa to the US could bolster diplomatic goodwill. Additionally, marketing Bangladeshi apparel as “Made with US cotton” could strengthen our position during trade negotiations. Ensuring that our tariff rates remain at par with, or lower than, those of key competitors such as Vietnam and India must also be a top priority.

Rather than viewing the Trump-era tariffs solely as a threat, Bangladesh can treat them as a once-in-a-decade opportunity. Proactive policy measures, diplomatic engagement, and industry readiness can help absorb the shifting orders from China while adhering to sustainable practices and diversifying our export portfolio. In doing so, Bangladesh can not only withstand the current trade disruptions but also accelerate towards the sector’s ambitious target of achieving \$100 billion in exports in the coming years.