

Govt must listen to women's voices

Moitree Jatra calls for a discrimination free country

We congratulate the Women's March for Solidarity (Moitree Jatra), which drew in thousands of women to Manik Mia Avenue in a show of strength, unity and resoluteness to stand up to oppression and discrimination. Several thousand women, along with hundreds of men, marched in Dhaka city with three main demands: that the government take action against threats to women and minority communities, the misinformation campaign against the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, and the weaponisation of religious sentiments to create an environment of fear. They also stated that political parties that want women's support must clearly express their stance on women's complete political, economic and personal freedom.

What was most heartening to see was women from all walks of life and from diverse communities taking part in this grand rally. They included tea garden workers, garment workers, home workers, Indigenous and Dalit women, teachers, students, development workers, cultural activists and human rights defenders. Fifty progressive organisations comprising women workers, cultural activists, students and professionals expressed their solidarity with this unique March.

This March has come at a time when women and girls are facing all kinds of threats, especially in the public sphere. Abusive and threatening language has been used against women both in public rallies as well as online. Women have faced assaults in the streets and while playing sports. Sexual violence against women and girls continues unabated, with perpetrators becoming emboldened by the unhindered hate speech and moral policing of certain groups. Threats of rape and abusive language have increased significantly on social media. Mob violence has also targeted women.

We have also seen how women, even those who were instrumental in the people's uprising, are being sidelined and their voices silenced through misogynistic speeches and exclusion. All this does not bode well for Bangladesh, a nation built on the principles of equality and justice for all and an end to all kinds of discrimination. The July uprising, too, was primarily based on removing discrimination of all kinds.

We agree with their declaration that the government must take action against these threats to women's active participation in all spheres of life. The virtual silence of the interim government after the vicious verbal attacks on its own appointed commission and its members has been disturbing and disheartening. We expect the government to make it clear that it will not tolerate misogyny and will punish violence against women in any form. The interim government, and the government that will be elected in the future, must ensure a safe environment for women and girls, free from violence and discrimination.

Fairly investigate cases against journos

Retaliatory cases risk undermining press freedom

We are concerned about how journalists continue to be targeted through retaliatory cases since the fall of the Awami League (AL) government in August last year. Very recently, 26 journalists were accused in an attempted murder case filed by Rezaul Islam, a lawyer affiliated with the Jatiyabadi Ainjibi Forum's Chattogram unit. The case, filed on May 13, alleges that the journalists, along with others, were involved in an attack on Rezaul on May 1, 2025. However, many of the accused journalists strongly deny the charges, claiming that the allegations are based on distorted facts. They assert that they are victims of retaliatory cases, similar to previous incidents where journalists were indiscriminately targeted. Such arbitrary filing of criminal cases against journalists undermine press freedom.

In the case statement, Rezaul alleges that many of the accused are affiliated with the AL, Jibon League, and their associated groups. He accuses them of extortion, murder, and attacking protesters during the July uprising. He further claims that they repeatedly threatened him to withdraw cases filed on behalf of the families of July victims, and that they attempted to abduct him, robbed him, and even hurled a crude bomb at him. However, the journalists accused in the case have narrated a completely different version of events. According to them, Rezaul threatened to disrupt a picnic event via a Facebook post on April 30. On the day of the picnic, May 1, he and his group allegedly assaulted one of the journalists near Premier University. Furthermore, several journalists who were nowhere near the scene that day were nonetheless implicated. Additionally, law enforcement officials have raised doubts about some of the claims in the case statement. The Officer-in-Charge of Kotwali Police Station stated that no reports of a crude bomb explosion had been received in his jurisdiction. The inconsistencies between Rezaul's allegations and the journalists' accounts must be addressed through a fair and impartial investigation, as demanded by the Chattogram Union of Journalists (CUJ).

We therefore urge the government to conduct a fair investigation into this case and take strong measures to prevent the misuse of the legal system. While the government previously stated that legal action would be taken against those filing false cases, we have yet to see any meaningful steps to this effect. This is deeply concerning. At present, journalists remain imprisoned due to cases filed out of personal or political vendettas. These cases should be resolved through due process.

EDITORIAL

Unpacking the proposed reforms to our revenue system



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The low tax-GDP ratio of Bangladesh has often been attributed both to the weakness of the tax administration and to the lack of innovation and reform in the tax system. Successive administrations have set lofty revenue collection targets without undertaking meaningful reforms and have remained oblivious to capacity concerns. The large annual shortfalls (e.g., typically about 14-15 percent) in realised revenue over target have hardly been a surprise.

The interim government (IG) has just passed an ordinance dissolving the erstwhile National Board of Revenue (NBR) and has created two new bodies, namely the Revenue Policy Division (RPD) and the Revenue Management Division (RMD), under the direct oversight of the Ministry of Finance (MoF). This has been done in the anticipation that separating the revenue policy setting process from that of tax collection would permit the RMD to devote more energy to tax administration. Indeed, this view has been promoted by multilateral agencies, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Promulgation of the ordinance was preceded by the MoF launching an Advisory Committee to investigate the subject, which duly submitted its recommendations some months ago.

Two salient points are in order. First, a separation of policymaking from that of tax administration is standard practice in most modern revenue systems. In Canada, the Canada Revenue Agency is in charge of tax collection. It even reports to a separate minister of national revenue, not finance. Secondly, merely splitting the tasks by itself, IMF notwithstanding, will not breathe new life into the stagnant tax-GDP ratio. That would require both significant tax reforms as well as augmenting tax administration capacity.

The primary logic behind the separation of revenue tasks at issue is to inject an element of operational independence into the proposed bodies. Revenue administration regimes in OECD countries operate as independent entities, albeit working within the broader framework of public accountability. Creating a division within the MoF is not a step in the right direction. Worse, the draft ordinance proposes that the RPD will be entrusted with the task of monitoring the application of tax laws as well as revenue collection undertaken by the RMD (Section 5, Clause 6, "cha"). The latter implies a hierarchical pattern between the two divisions, contrary to

the spirit of their separation. This is a no-go. Several members of the MoF Advisory Committee have spoken out, arguing that the ordinance grossly misrepresents their recommendations; the committee's vision was to create an autonomous entity outside the direct control of any ministry.

Beyond the principle outlined above, the proposed ordinance points to a misconception of how to improve the efficacy of the revenue administration



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

process. With an unchanged tax code, the tax-GDP ratio can be enhanced only if the administrative body can expend greater effort, benefit from additional training, and adopt suitable technology. To that end, it will be necessary to bring about innovation whereby suitable candidates can be recruited, promoted, and retained through timely performance reviews, thereby upgrading the overall tax administration capacity on a sustained basis. That goal would require a compensation structure commensurate with safeguarding high professionalism in the cadres and weeding out endemic corruption. The statutes posed in the proposed ordinance are at odds with these objectives. To boost staff morale, one needs transparency in the staffing modalities in terms of experience and qualifications required, especially at the upper echelons. This aspect has already caused dissension among the ranks, who have reportedly called for

grandiose demands. Alternatively, the policy body may, of its own volition, examine the feasibility of a certain tax-revenue reform. Whatever the task—directed from above or arising from within—the revenue policy entity must have administrative freedom and adequate resources (including suitable staffing) to do its job without hindrance. The design of tax reforms is inherently difficult, often requiring substantial input from advisers from academia, the legal and/or the business community. These processes require independence rather than interference from the higher administration.

Furthermore, it is the revenue administration body that needs to be insulated from political pressure in conducting its routine work, namely, to implement the tax/revenue laws of the nation without fear or favour. On the issue of capacity, the recruitment process of taxation/excise/tariff staff should be separated from that of general

administration, somewhat along the lines of the Bangladesh Bank. The logic is that the background preparation for the former would be more specific.

The new ordinance also entails anomalies in dealing with appeals. On one hand, in Section 4 (Clause 5) it calls for attaching the Appeal Tribunals for income tax, excise and VAT to the Revenue Policy Division. At the same time, in describing the scope of the Revenue Management Division (Section 7, Clause 9), it suggests the opposite. The principled point is that most appeals concern the application of tax laws, and not a contest of the law itself, and hence the responsibility of expeditiously dealing with such appeals ought to be part and parcel of revenue administration.

The separation of policy-setting from that of revenue administration is welcome. Ideally, both entities ought to enjoy full operational independence

in fulfilling their mandates, though the case is stronger for the tax administration entity. Hence, creating two divisions within the MoF is not the way to safeguard this objective. The two entities should be renamed to better fit their mandates—namely i) Bangladesh Revenue Authority; and ii) Bangladesh Revenue Policy Institute. In view of the presumed responsibility, each entity should be headed by a minister of state, especially the former. In terms of the allocation of staff, the existing NBR personnel should be invited to indicate a preference to work in one of the two bodies, with a one-line explanation in support of their choice. The Internal Resources Division (MoF) staff may likewise be asked for their preference to join the new policy entity or be absorbed into the general administration. And the process of staff allocation can be reviewed by an expert body made up of both internal and external members.

Confronting Dhaka's battery-run rickshaw dilemma

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One of the more recent manifestations of informal urban expansion is the proliferation of battery-run rickshaws. One may claim that rickshaws are eco-friendly, cost-effective, and a source of livelihood for many, but these advantages come at a heavy cost. A large number of battery-run rickshaws are currently operating in Dhaka, with many lacking legal registration or fitness clearance. Their prevalence, largely unregulated, has contributed to a range of unintended traffic consequences.

Firstly, battery-run rickshaws introduce extreme variations in vehicular speed on city roads. Unlike motorised vehicles that maintain relatively stable speeds, these rickshaws frequently cause abrupt stops or unexpected slowdowns, thereby increasing the likelihood of accidents and congestion. Secondly, the uncontrolled acceleration capacity of many battery-powered rickshaws exceeds the structural limits of their makeshift bodies, making them prone

to accidents. Thirdly, the continued operation of these unfit and illegal vehicles creates a precedent that encourages further violations of road and transport regulations. If authorities are seen to tolerate such infractions, other transport providers may be emboldened to neglect licensing, maintenance, and safety standards. Fourthly, the presence of these rickshaws severely disrupts lane discipline, especially in already congested corridors, contributing to overall traffic disorder. Finally, law-abiding road users—both motorists and pedestrians—become demoralised, as the perceived inequity in enforcement undermines the legitimacy of the entire regulatory system.

Urban planning in the Global South is often faced with a dilemma of informality—an unregulated sector that arises from necessity, yet poses complex governance challenges. Dhaka serves as a compelling case study where unchecked informal developments such as illegal retail activities and unplanned slum settlements have placed immense pressure on infrastructure, governance, and public space. This illustrates a broader problem: the government finds itself in a precarious position, sheltering a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the longer such informality is left unchecked, the stronger the claims of ownership become; on the other, abrupt removals could devastate livelihoods and

escalate urban poverty. This paradox of informality, if not addressed strategically and promptly, can have far-reaching consequences not just for land use, but for urban mobility and functionality as well. The crisis around battery-run rickshaws poses a similarly critical challenge.

To mitigate the challenge of battery-run rickshaws, immediate and integrated interventions are essential, including the introduction of dedicated bus lanes and well-managed bus services. This would improve the reliability and attractiveness of public transport for daily commuters. A good example within Asia is TransJakarta, Southeast Asia's first bus rapid transit (BRT) system, which has grown into the world's longest, spanning over 250 kilometres. As of 2024, it serves more than 1.3 million passengers daily, offering a reliable and affordable alternative to Jakarta's congested roads. The system features dedicated bus lanes, elevated platforms for rapid boarding, and an integrated fare system, enhancing efficiency and accessibility.

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the number of trips during peak hours, easing pressure on roads. Furthermore, current rickshaw drivers could be integrated into cooperative public transport initiatives, such as low-cost community bus services, allowing livelihood transition while enhancing overall urban mobility.

In contrast to these structured solutions, the current approach of deploying rickshaw traps, which restrict rickshaws from certain roads, is praised as an immediate response, but it remains piecemeal and potentially counterproductive. Not only do these traps obstruct the normal flow of traffic for other vehicles, but they also represent unsustainable interventions unless supported by a comprehensive mechanism to permanently regulate rickshaw operations. Short-term resolutions, such as impounding rickshaws and shaming the drivers in public, can only make short-term impacts.

The issue of battery-run rickshaws in Dhaka must be understood as part of a broader governance challenge in managing urban informality. As the adage goes, "a stitch in time saves nine," but this stitch must be strategic and grounded in sustainable urban transport planning. That stitch should begin with the provision of disciplined, inclusive, and efficient public transport services—capable of meeting the city's mobility needs while gradually phasing out harmful informal practices in a just and equitable manner.