

In search of a vice-chancellor



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The government has formed a five-member search committee to identify candidates for the three top positions of public universities. The education adviser, two members of the University Grants Commission (UGC), and two senior professors will be responsible for shortlisting names for final appointment by the chancellor of universities, also the president of the country.

Similar ideas were floated in 2003 by the Moniruzzaman Miah Education Commission, which proposed appointing the chief justice or an elected judge as the head of the selection panel. The idea was not well received, especially by the faculty of the four public universities governed by the 1973 Act, who are particularly sensitive about their autonomy. The 2006 UGC report and the National Education Policy 2010 reiterated the idea of selection panels; these were also largely ignored. Central to the formation of the panel is the objective of minimising political interference in the selection of top university managers.

One may wonder though: why now, and why did such initiatives fail before? Critics have already pointed out that the top positions at 47 public universities have already been filled by the interim government. What positive outcomes will this proposed search committee produce?

The formation of a search committee is a welcome move in that it creates an opportunity to examine the deep-seated issues plaguing the hiring process of top management in the country's higher education system. The first challenge will be to streamline the two different pathways for appointing vice-chancellors: one under the University Act 1973, and the other under the Private University Act 2010. For universities

under the 1973 Act, a senate session must be held to select a panel of candidates, while others bypass this process and appoint vice-chancellors directly through recommendations from the UGC and the education ministry—or from the board of trustees, in the case of private universities. The final decision rests with the chancellor, making the process susceptible to political manipulation.

The challenge for the search committee is to reconcile these inconsistencies and establish a system that involves broader consultation, stakeholder support, or direct interviews. Vice-chancellors, ideally, must be more than competent teachers or researchers. They should be visionary administrators, balancing academic excellence with institutional governance. As heads of institutions, they must earn their colleagues' respect by demonstrating a deep understanding of the academic environment and the evolving landscape of higher education. A clear, forward-looking vision for the university should accompany their academic integrity. They must create an ecosystem where students and faculty can realise their potential. Furthermore, ideal candidates should possess the personal network and diplomatic acumen to communicate institutional needs while safeguarding the academic environment from external and political interference.

Vice-chancellors must recognise that their role entails enhancing the campus experience for students and staff alike. A safe and congenial academic atmosphere that fosters holistic development opportunities is essential. To achieve this, a vice-chancellor must exhibit strong administrative skills—managing finances, human resources, and

infrastructure efficiently—while upholding the highest ethical standards. In all respects, they should ensure clear communication, transparency, and a commitment to reducing systemic inequalities.

Unfortunately, we have seen many of our vice-chancellors fail to live up to these ideals. Several have faced forcible removal, siege, or even assault. One of the key issues the search committee must consider is whether to appoint homegrown faculty to lead their respective universities or to select from a national pool of qualified academic administrators. Many vice-chancellors brought in from other institutions often lack a deep connection to the universities they are appointed to lead. This disconnect renders them vulnerable to opposition from local stakeholders who feel excluded from decision-making. When vice-chancellors are not rooted in their institutions and lack local support, their authority is inevitably

weakened, leading to instability.

The situation at Barishal University is relevant to this discussion. The assault on the National University vice-chancellor, following demands for an automatic pass scheme, highlights another disturbing trend. After the July uprising, many students feel empowered and entitled. They are increasingly asserting their authority over university leadership. These acts of defiance point to a larger underlying issue: students no longer trust their leaders or are overambitious about their careers. The murder of a student leader in a park near the Dhaka University campus has raised another pressing concern: student safety. DU vice-chancellor is now facing protests for a crime committed outside the campus, with calls for his resignation. While speaking to students at one of the protests last week, he lost his temper, adding another layer to the crisis.

Given the evolving realities, the search committee could implement a transparent and functional system to nominate top officials, free from the complexities of local and short-term politics. It should also seek to reform the institutions for which they are selecting top management. Many academic leaders are unable to achieve excellence due to inherent institutional flaws. Regrettably, political motives have driven the establishment of many of our universities. A significant number of them still operate more like degree colleges. These institutions serve as political tools rather than centres of higher learning. This approach has prevented universities from maturing into autonomous, globally competitive institutions. Instead, they have become arenas for partisan conflict, frequently prioritising political considerations over academic ones.

The formation of the search committee is a step in the right direction towards comprehensive reform of university governance. I trust the committee will define the terms of reference for would-be VCs, in which political allegiances should be the least of concerns. First and foremost, we want accountability and transparency from our university administrators. Second, we want quality over quantity. If necessary, two or three universities can be merged to ensure sustainable resource management and growth of our higher education sector. Third, there should be no compromise on the rule of law. We must immediately put an end to the mob mentality of students demanding auto-passes or other undue privileges. Finally, a moratorium must be placed on party politics within universities. Career clubs can offer alternative platforms for students to exercise their freedom of thought and rights—but they should not have direct links to mainstream political parties.

The crisis in Bangladesh's higher education leadership is not merely about individual vice-chancellors or political factions. It also involves a systemic failure. The search for new leadership, if done right, can be a step towards resolving these issues.



Students of Barishal University stage a hunger strike demanding the vice-chancellor's resignation. The photo was taken on May 13, 2025. The government removed the VC, pro-VC, and treasurer of the university on the same day.

FILE PHOTO: TITU DAS

Our farmers are leading the fight against climate change



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In the heart of Bangladesh's rural belt, a silent revolution is underway. While global leaders debate climate action, 1.65 crore Bangladeshis farm households are already battling its impact in the forms of flash floods, prolonged droughts, salinisation, and invasive pests. Between 2000 and 2023, climate-related disasters caused over Tk 1,200 crore in agricultural losses. Yet, amid this turmoil, farmers are pioneering grassroots solutions: floating gardens in flood-prone haors; drought-resistant crops in Rajshahi; and saline-tolerant rice in coastal Satkhira. These innovations—low-cost, climate-smart, and scalable—are quietly transforming survival into resilience. Farmlands in this country are becoming global classrooms for adaptation in a warming world.

Climate volatility has transformed Bangladesh from a fertile delta to a battleground for survival. According to the World Bank's Groundswell Report (2021), nearly 1.33 crore Bangladeshis may be displaced by climate-induced stress by 2050, most of them in rural areas. Agriculture, which employs over 40 percent of the workforce and contributes 11.2 percent to GDP (BBS, 2023), bears the brunt.

Cyclones Sidr (2007), Aila (2009), and Amphan (2020) alone caused combined agricultural losses exceeding Tk 150 crore.

Salinity intrusion, now affecting over 10 lakh hectares in the coastal belt (Soil Resource Development Institute, 2022), is pushing farmers out of traditional rice production. In the northwestern Barind Tract, rainfall variability has reduced monsoon intensity, undermining rainfed farming.

What Bangladesh's farmers are pioneering are not isolated tactics; they are scalable, cost-effective models for climate adaptation. Floating farms, saline-resistant crops, and community-based irrigation are being studied by global platforms like the CGIAR Initiative on Climate Resilience and FAO's Scaling-Up Agroecology Initiative.

Even more troubling is the collapse of seasonal predictability. Crop calendars that once guided sowing and harvesting have become irrelevant now, making traditional farming knowledge less reliable with each passing year.

Yet, this is not a tale of despair; it is one of ingenuity. Across Bangladesh, farmers are transforming adversity into opportunity through grassroots innovations. In Satkhira, Rahima Begum, once unable to grow rice due to salinity, now cultivates BRRI Dhan67, a salt-tolerant rice variety developed by the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI). This variety tolerates up to

eight dS/m salinity and yields 4.5 tonnes per hectare, a lifeline for over 250,000 coastal farmers (BRRI Annual Report, 2022).

In haor (wetland) areas of Kishoreganj and Sunamganj, floating agriculture is making a comeback. Revived with modern composting techniques, these bamboo-based dhap platforms, first documented in the 17th century, are enabling year-round vegetable cultivation on floodwaters. A pilot project by FAO in 2021 found that floating gardens increased household nutrition scores by 35 percent and provided women-led income streams.

In the dry zones of Rajshahi, alternate wetting and drying (AWD) methods, promoted by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), are helping

(Department of Agricultural Extension, 2022).

Women play a critical but under-recognised role in climate adaptation. According to a 2024 study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), farms managed or co-managed by women in Bangladesh show 28 percent more crop diversity and 20 percent higher adoption of adaptive techniques.

In Khulna, Fatema Khatun and her group of 35 women farmers transitioned to saline-tolerant vegetables and crab-fattening units. In the north, women-led nurseries and vermicomposting units are diversifying household incomes and ensuring seed availability at local levels. These initiatives often outperform top-down interventions due to their contextual knowledge and community trust.

However, access barriers persist. Only 3.5 percent of women own agricultural land (BBS Gender Statistics, 2023), and fewer than 10 percent receive formal agricultural training. Addressing these gaps is essential to unlocking their full potential in climate resilience.

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The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report 2022 cites Bangladesh's adaptive agricultural strategies as case studies in successful local adaptation. These strategies align with principles of agroecology, ecosystem-based adaptation, and low-emission development, all vital for meeting the Paris Agreement targets.

Bangladesh's updated National Adaptation Plan (NAP 2023-2050) recognises these innovations, calling for Tk 850 crore in investments in climate-resilient agriculture, research, and early warning systems. The roadmap exists. What's needed now is execution.

Three priority areas demand immediate action. First, climate finance must reach the grassroots, yet as of 2023, only eight percent of international climate funds in Bangladesh reached local communities, according to Climate Finance Transparency Initiative. Second, gender-responsive investments are critical: women farmers must gain access to land rights, finance, and training to scale their contributions. Finally, research and extension services need urgent revitalisation. Institutions like BRRI, Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture (BINA), and Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) require consistent investment to develop and deliver climate-smart technologies that can safeguard livelihoods and secure future harvests.

As the world waits for COP30 in November, Bangladesh offers not just dire warnings but grounded wisdom. Its farmers, living on the frontlines of climate disruption, are pioneering solutions that are shaping a new blueprint for survival. These innovations are not theories from labs, but tested tools from the soil: resilient, scalable, and deeply rooted in lived reality.

This is not a story of despair but of determination. Adaptation is already happening in fields, not forums. But to grow this momentum, global leaders must act where it matters most. Because the future of climate resilience won't be built in air-conditioned halls; it will be grown, seed by seed, in fields.

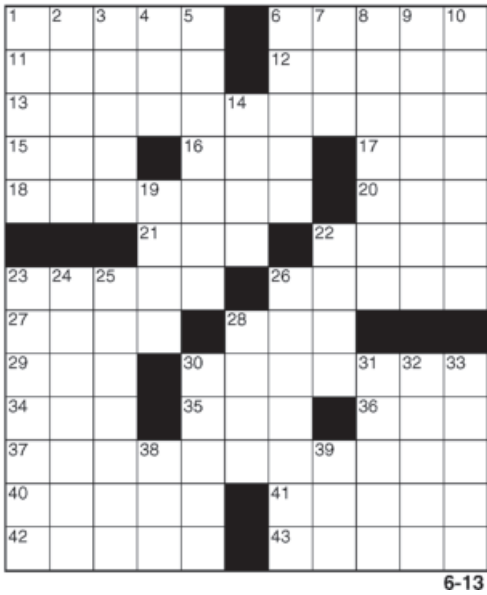
CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
1 Tibetan monks
6 Sports data
11 Dote on
12 Subject
13 Fighter of remote fires
15 "My country — of thee"
16 Supply voices for
17 Wisdom bringer
18 Poet Wallace
20 Uncooked
21 Hot blood
22 Office note
23 Is overly fond
26 Wife of Menelaus
27 Nights before
28 So far
29 Cariou of "Blue Bloods"

- 30 Left the group
34 Stretch of years
35 Purr producer
36 Yale student
37 Sociable diner
40 TV's DeGeneres
41 Avignon's river
42 Wintry weather
43 Indian lute
- DOWN
1 Survives
2 Concede
3 Caribou's cousin
4 Place of refuge
5 Farmers, at times
6 Ticket remnants
7 Huck's pal

- 8 Duds
9 Reason for overtime
10 Attach, as a jar lid
14 Flag Day month
19 Competes
22 Parcel (out)
23 Takes out
24 Comprehensive
25 Easily defended
26 Browbeats
28 Casual assent
30 Fragrance
31 Bus terminal
32 Kagan of the Supreme Court
33 More dreadful
38 Director Spike
39 Fraternity letter



6-13

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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