

The Daily Star

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Bhola rape continues cycle of impunity

Authorities must take strict steps to reverse this disturbing trend

We are extremely concerned about the rape incidents being reported across the country. The frequency, brutality, and increasingly multifaceted nature of these incidents reflect not only the deepening breakdown in law and order but also a dangerous erosion of moral values. Just the other day, we talked about the horrific treatment of a woman in Cumilla's Muradnagar that showed the pitfalls of widespread exposure, triggering both outrage and unnecessary controversies. And now, we are again forced to process an incident in Bhola that shows the failings of political safeguards against crimes. The fact is, rape incidents are becoming too frequent for us to treat them as isolated occurrences or mere law enforcement failures.

These incidents underscore broader social, political, and institutional dysfunctions that allow such crimes to recur. In the latest case, the victim found herself in a situation that, like the Cumilla incident, may appear complicated on the surface, but none of that should overshadow the fact that a woman was raped—this alone should demand the full weight of justice. According to our report, the incident occurred on Sunday after the victim's husband was "lured" to the house of his third wife, where he was held captive and tortured for two days apparently for separation money. The third wife, now under arrest, allegedly orchestrated the incident with the help of her associates, who belong to the local units of three BNP-affiliated organisations. And on Sunday, the victim arrived at the scene to rescue her husband, only to be locked inside at one point and gang-raped.

Regardless of the surrounding personal or relational dynamics, the crime remains as unacceptable as any other. What is notable in this case is the involvement of criminals attached to BNP-affiliated organisations, namely Sramik Dal, Chatra Dal, and Jubo Dal. It is no secret that the culture of impunity that enables repeated rape incidents in the country has long been fuelled by such political affiliations and protections. While it is a welcome step that Sramik Dal and Chatra Dal have expelled the accused concerned, these actions are reactive and often driven by public pressure rather than a genuine commitment to prevent crimes. We have seen similar reactions during Awami League's tenure as well, but rarely have they given way to effective intra-party disciplinary action to deter crimes by errant activists. Another pressing concern is the menace of misinformation and viral content on social media that often distracts from the real cases, as seen after both the Bhola and Cumilla incidents.

These issues demand as much scrutiny as the crimes themselves. Going forward, we urge the authorities to take strict measures that can effectively prevent rape incidents. If we really want to reverse the current trend, political parties also must take genuine preventive steps, while the justice system must deliver timely punishments. The state, political parties, and society at large must recognise that, without collective action to address these crimes, the cycle of violence against women will only continue.

End the persistent KUET stalemate

Appoint VC, resume classes without further delay

We are deeply concerned by the continuing stalemate at the Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), where academic activities have remained suspended for about four and a half months now. As one may recall, on February 18, two student groups—Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Chatradal (JCD) and Students Against Discrimination (SAD)—clashed over demands to ban student politics on the campus. In the aftermath of the violence, students demanded the resignation of the then VC, pro-VC, and director of students' welfare. The prolonged protests, including a hunger strike by students, eventually led to the removal of the VC and pro-VC. Although a new VC was appointed on May 1, he resigned on May 22, citing pressure and a lack of support from the KUET Teachers' Association. Despite a directive from the Ministry of Education to resume academic activities from May 4, the teachers' association has continued to boycott all academic and administrative responsibilities. Amid such a situation, it is the students who are suffering the most.

Since the 2024 July uprising, campuses across the country have witnessed recurring unrest, where students, teachers, and administrators clashed over various grievances but meaningful solutions were rarely achieved. KUET has become a major example of this. The academic future of its 7,565 students now remains in limbo, and the newly enrolled first-year students—originally scheduled to begin classes on April 24—have yet to start their academic journey. However, the teachers' association has clearly stated that without the appointment of a new VC, the current stalemate cannot be resolved. They reiterated their demand for disciplinary action against certain students and "outsiders" who allegedly harassed faculty members during the earlier unrest.

Meanwhile, with both the VC and pro-VC positions remaining vacant, the university's administrative and financial operations—including salary disbursements, project payments, and academic decisions—have come to a standstill. Reportedly, more than 1,100 teachers, officers, and staff members have not received their salaries since May. In addition, all infrastructure development projects may soon come to a halt unless a new VC is appointed. Furthermore, if the university fails to utilise its allocated revenue budget, there is a risk that the funds will be forfeited. This situation is deeply worrying.

We urge the government to immediately resolve KUET's prolonged crisis by appointing a VC and pro-VC through proper procedures. It should listen to the concerns of both teachers and students and take initiatives to solve the underlying issues through meaningful dialogue. Most importantly, the government must ensure that all academic activities, including classes and examinations, resume without any further delay.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mohamed Morsi removed

On this day in 2013, following massive demonstrations against his rule, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was removed from office by military action.

Bangladesh needs pragmatic gradualism in nation-building



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A state is not a debating society; it is a ship that needs a steady hand at the wheel. But a captain who ignores the compass (the law) and silences the crew (the people) will eventually run aground. In this spirit, institutional reform in nations like Bangladesh is a complex journey.

Formal institutions often give way to deeply entrenched informal practices. Given how resistant these informal ways are to change and the political challenges, pragmatic gradualism is the optimal way for achieving lasting reforms. This requires addressing criticisms that small steps might be undone by larger, interconnected problems, which some believe demand a "big push."

The max-min principle, where the maximum number of parties agree on a minimum set of urgent measures, tackles institutional "stickiness." The approach can realistically lead to a Common Minimum Reform Programme (CMRP). This process reduces overt resistance and makes reforms politically viable.

Yet, putting CMRP or the July Charter, as has been dubbed by the National Consensus Commission, into action requires a strong executive to translate it into reality by navigating political complexities, bureaucratic hurdles, and vested interest clutch. Crucially, for gradual reforms to succeed, a strong executive is essential.

The July uprising highlights the urgent need for new norms that go beyond simple management fixes, paving the way for ensuring power that truly serves the people.

Why gradualism is essential
In Bangladesh, vertically and horizontally linked informal institutions like patronage networks often control how formal institutions actually work. These informal structures are incredibly resilient and tend to revert to their original state. A radical overhaul, despite its appeal, risks severe backlash, instability, or a failure.

South Korea in the 1960s-80s carefully sequenced reforms—first building export industries, then slowly liberalising finance—while maintaining state oversight to prevent shocks. Botswana combined gradual economic diversification with steady institutional strengthening, avoiding "resource curse" of states

such as Nigeria that affected nations with more radical approaches.

Conversely, Russia's 1990s "shock therapy"—rapid privatisation and market opening—led to economic collapse and oligarchic control, showing the dangers of big-bang reforms without strong institutions and capable leadership. Ad hoc incrementalism—piecemeal reforms

Bangladesh. Yet, without robust checks, power inevitably corrupts.

India's "Licence Raj" showed how weak executives allowed bureaucrats to stifle the economy. The "Bureaucratic Trap" shows that without a decisive executive, unelected officials become the real rulers, delaying or sabotaging policies. Pakistan is a case in point.

History offers examples of strong executives fostering development, strengthened by checks. Lee Kuan Yew ruled Singapore firmly, fighting corruption and achieving growth. He also kept courts clean and let technocrats work freely, not as rivals but as state tools. His power was centralised for action, crucial for pragmatic gradualism, yet not arbitrary. It operated

and speeding up decisions—actions vital for gradual reforms. Second, executive strength must be countered by the imperative to "keep courts and parliament alive." Their role is to check corruption, abuse of power, and violation of rights. Finally, the "stealth state" problems—arising from opaque power of unelected bureaucracy, businesses and NGOs—undermine democracy through shifting power to shadowy interests.

Recent discussions about "direct democracy," "deliberative democracy," and "countervailing citizen power," etc are important. These valuable concepts, however, might risk becoming mere administrative fixes rather than empowering the people as the source



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

without a long-term vision—results in policy reversals and stagnation in many developing countries.

Critics rightly point out that interconnected problems might hinder incremental reforms. For example, anti-corruption efforts might fail without judicial independence. This echoes the "big push" theory, which argues for simultaneous, coordinated reforms across many areas to avoid bottlenecks. The classic argument, nevertheless, remains relevant that, as Albert Hirschman stated, if developing countries had the capacity for a "big push," they would not be underdeveloped. Pragmatic gradualism, instead, encourages endogenous reforms.

Why strong executives are crucial for reform

A strong, commanding executive is vital for driving development, especially in countries like

within a framework of meritocracy and integrity that enhanced his effectiveness.

Bangladesh's own history confirms this. The 2006-2008 caretaker crisis showed the dangers of a weak executive. This lack of strong executive leadership prevents structured, pragmatic reform.

While a strong executive is necessary for reform, power, like a tiger, must be strong enough to hunt, but kept in a cage so it doesn't eat the zookeeper. Many "democracies" have superficial checks. Mexico under PRI rule had elections, but bureaucrats ran everything. Egypt today has courts and parliaments, but real power stays with generals. This is the worst of both worlds.

To navigate this, Bangladesh needs decisive executive command with genuine guardrails. First, "let the executive lead" means cutting red tape, empowering elected leaders to remove obstructive bureaucrats,

of power.

Steering the ship towards nation-building

Reform is a marathon, not a sprint. The big-bang overreach risks collapse or reversal, as history shows. Bangladesh's age-old wisdom proves that the tortoise often wins the race. Pragmatic gradualism is thus a necessity in Bangladesh's complex reform landscape. It also requires a strong, decisive executive who can act, but whose power is rigorously guarded by independent judicial, parliamentary and media oversight.

Just as a ship needs a captain with a steady hand to navigate turbulent waters, guiding it with command while respecting the compass of the law and the voice of the crew, Bangladesh requires an executive that can act decisively towards a future where the people are the true navigators of their own destiny.

The law we need to protect our children



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Paedophilia and the grooming of children are yet not covered by any law in Bangladesh, which is a serious issue as children across the nation remain vulnerable to predators both in person and online. The country still lags behind many others that have enacted strict laws to prevent child exploitation and sexual grooming.

Grooming is the process through which an adult establishes a connection with an underage individual to win their trust, with the eventual aim of sexually abusing or exploiting them. While grooming is a risky step towards abuse, it is not abuse in and of itself. Since it is the first step towards potentially harming a child, many countries have declared it illegal.

Paedophilia, recognised as a mental illness, occurs when an adult or older adolescent develops a strong sexual attraction to children, usually those under the age of 13. Paedophilia

targets children who have not yet reached puberty. If left unchecked, this condition may lead to grooming and long-term abuse.

In Dhaka, a shocking incident was revealed in February this year. An 11-year-old girl, allegedly "in love" with a 19-year-old man, went away with him when her family reported her missing. Police later dismissed it as a romantic issue. But this, in fact, was a case of sexual exploitation, not romance. Predators usually don't go straight to abuse; instead, they will gradually build a bond through "grooming." This could be as simple as offering the child chocolate, compliments, conversations, or even gifts. The goal is to gain the child's trust and convince them that inappropriate adult actions are acceptable, even though they are deeply wrong. Weeks, months, or even years may pass during such process. Even in the absence of physical abuse, such practices are considered crimes

in countries like the US, UK, India, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. However, Bangladesh is unable to penalise child grooming in cases where there is no physical abuse involved.

Existing laws in Bangladesh, such as the Penal Code, 1860, punish the crimes of rape under Sections 375 and 376, and certain kinds of exploitation of children under Sections 366A and 373. Meanwhile, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, discusses the sexual abuse of children but does not address grooming. The Children Act, 2013 protects children from violence, but it does not have a distinct section on grooming either. Even the recently passed Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025 does not focus on identifying and criminalising online grooming.

Online grooming is particularly dangerous. Through social media sites, adults pretend to befriend children, sending compliments, gifts, and sometimes even hinting at meeting up in real life. All these steps lead towards a long-term plan to sexually exploit the child. Since these crimes are difficult to spot in the first place, it becomes harder to punish them if appropriate laws are not in place.

Children are getting access to smartphones at a younger age

than before, often with little to no supervision. While these devices offer access to education and entertainment, they also open the door to the threat of paedophilic grooming. Online predators target children through social media, messaging apps, and gaming platforms. Without legislative safeguards to identify and prosecute these early stages of abuse, children continue to be easy targets, and predators continue to operate in the shadows.

Earlier in May, the government issued a gazette of the Cyber Security Ordinance to identify, prevent, suppress, and subsequently try the crimes committed in cyberspace. We must also introduce explicit legal provisions defining and criminalising online grooming. But beyond that, we need comprehensive legislation criminalising grooming in both the cyber world and physical space. The law must cover all forms of preparation for sexual abuse of children.

Law enforcement personnel need training to identify and treat grooming seriously. In the absence of such a law, our children are at risk. Combating paedophilia and grooming requires a strong and effective law. Protecting children from abuse must begin years before abuse can start. A law that acknowledges grooming as a crime is the first step towards that protection.