

Mob violence continues apace

We must send an undiluted message against mob activities

Cumilla's Muradnagar upazila has been lately in the news for the heinous treatment of a woman who was tortured, raped, and then filmed while disrobed—turning the incident, as a commentator of this daily claimed, into “a permanent sentence of shame and exposure” for the victim. Muradnagar is again in the news, this time for a gruesome act of mob violence that left three members of a family dead and another critically injured on Thursday. The Muradnagar connection here is but coincidental. What's notable is the persistence of these two most disturbing criminal trends of our time despite widespread protests and firm pledges of action. Mob violence, in particular, seems to have become unstoppable.

Over the last week, six people were reportedly killed in mob violence. According to an estimate by the Human Rights Support Society, a whopping 143 people died over the 10 months since the August 5 political changeover. Much has been made of the underlying causes behind the rise in mob violence during this time, especially how it is being fuelled by misinformation, social tensions, or political motives, as again exemplified by a mob that attacked a police station in Lalmonirhat on Wednesday and snatched away two convicts. The failure of the justice system and law enforcement is also largely to blame. Mob violence is a classic example of how crimes, if left unchecked, only engender more crimes. Despite this clarity, we are no closer to a solution than we were before. This is partly because of our inability to send a clear, undiluted message against this type of criminality.

Late last month, Tarique Rahman, BNP's acting chairman, condemned mob violence, calling it “an enemy of humanity.” But there have been allegations of involvement of grassroots BNP leaders and activists in many mob activities. In the Lalmonirhat case, the OC of the attacked police station blamed the local unit of BNP and its affiliated organisations. The National Citizen Party (NCP), meanwhile, has come under scrutiny for its alleged involvement in multiple incidents. Most recently, its leaders and activists were linked to a violent confrontation at Patiya police station, which led to the OC's withdrawal. While NCP leaders have attempted to distance the party from mob activities—claiming that these are expressions of public outrage after years of repression—the fact remains that political parties have failed to send an unequivocal message supported by consistent action and internal accountability. In some cases, their silence, denial, or selective condemnation has only emboldened such acts, including by party members.

Even the interim government, while repeatedly assuring us that no mob activities would be tolerated, has frequently fallen short of backing those assurances with swift and firm action, raising concerns about implicit tolerance and even quiet complicity in some cases. This trend must be reversed. We all must come together and rise against this violent tide that can derail our journey back to democracy.

Gas crisis deserves priority attention

Our industrial and economic future depends on it

The news of the government's failure to provide gas connections to over 1,000 industries—despite more than 400 applicants having completed all formalities, including payment of the required fees—is indeed concerning. Among them is a factory established by Lantabur Group at the cost of Tk 700 crore. The company received its demand note for the connection as early as November 2022. Once operational, the facility was expected to employ around 1,500 people. Yet, despite construction being completed six months ago, it remains non-operational due to the lack of gas supply. In the meantime, the company has already begun repaying bank loans despite not having generated any revenue from it.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. The 400 applicants currently awaiting connections include both new and expanded factories, as well as those seeking an increase in gas supply. A further 600 factories have applied for connections but have yet to receive any assurance of approval. This clearly demonstrates the extent to which industrial and economic growth is being held back by the ongoing gas connection crisis.

Industrialists have been sounding the alarm on this issue for years. However, the Awami League government, during its tenure, was heavily reluctant to invest in domestic gas exploration even though expert assessments indicated considerable potential. Instead, it placed excessive reliance on imports. With global gas prices having fluctuated drastically in recent years, this dependency has, unsurprisingly, proven costly. Consequently, industries have suffered and continue to do so.

The Awami League government also burdened the energy sector with massive debt through corruption and poor governance—debt that the interim government is now having to repay. But this has significantly reduced its financial flexibility. Although it has rightly prioritised domestic gas extraction, the benefits of such efforts will take time to materialise. That said, while it may be risky for the government to take on added financial pressure to rapidly boost gas supply, it should seriously consider it simply to stimulate industrial activity and accelerate economic recovery in the short term.

At present, the country supplies around 2,800-2,900 million cubic feet (mmcf) of gas per day, against a demand of 3,800 mmcf. And just over 1,200 mmcf is allocated to the industrial sector. To provide all promised connections, an additional 100 mmcf will be required. We urge the authorities to explore all viable options for acquiring this additional supply. Furthermore, the entrenched corruption in the energy sector—including credible allegations that some suppliers demand bribes in exchange for gas connections—must be thoroughly investigated and eradicated.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Israel's Law of Return passed

On this day in 1950, passed by the Knesset, the Law of Return granted Jews the freedom to immigrate to Israel and receive immediate citizenship.



Dr Selim Raihan is professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka and executive director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd.

SELIM RAIHAN

Bangladesh is at the crossroads where economic reform is no longer an option, but a requirement. There have been several structural flaws in key sectors, i.e. taxation, the financial sector, management of public spending, trade policy, and investment rules. These flaws have held the country back from maintaining high economic growth and building a resilient economy. Reform shortfalls in these sectors still undermine Bangladesh's ability to cope with domestic economic challenges as well as with external shocks. A reform-oriented and vision-driven development strategy is, therefore, needed to rectify inefficiencies in institutions, obsolete rules and regulations, policy discrepancies, and weak enforcement prevailing in these sectors.

The call for reform has been more aggressively voiced in the face of erosion of domestic macroeconomic fundamentals, i.e. insufficient reserves, widening fiscal gaps, inflation pressures, and exchange rate volatility. These have been compounded by a volatile global economy in the face of increased geopolitical tensions, tightening global financial conditions, and unstable global demand. Against this context, Bangladesh's aspiration to graduate smoothly from the LDC status and to achieve upper middle income status calls for not only additional public investment and social spending, but even more significant structural and institutional changes that will trigger productivity, improve competitiveness, and drive quality investment.

Significantly, the most strident calls for reform have usually originated outside the state machinery. Think tanks, segments of the business community—especially those looking beyond short-term rent-seeking—and international development partners have consistently raised the imperative for reform. Through policy advocacy, policy analysis, and technical assistance, these actors have been able to show that reform is not only needed but achievable. Even under the past regime, through the 6th, 7th, and 9th Five-Year Plans, the

then-ruling political elite officially recognised reform imperatives and made ambitious commitments. But those commitments were largely on paper, as tangible progress in their implementation was a mirage.

The principal obstacles to reform in Bangladesh have been manifested



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

through anti-reform coalitions among political and business elites and elements within the bureaucracy. Rent-seeking opportunities are institutionally embedded in public institutions, and many in the nexus of political and business elites and bureaucrats see reform as a threat to their privileges. As a result, reforms that would interrupt these vicious cycles of rent-seeking—i.e. tax policy reform, streamlining public expenditure, banking sector overhauls or regulatory reform—face either quiet dilution or outright policy paralysis.

It is also important to note that leading political elites in Bangladesh avoid deep reforms because they threaten the rent-seeking networks and power structures that sustain

their dominance. Some of the political parties themselves lack internal democratic practices, making them resistant to transparency and institutional checks. As a result, they opt for incremental, uncoordinated changes that preserve control while projecting an image of change, without challenging the underlying status quo. Regrettably, though it was expected that there would be major reform initiatives under the current interim government, guided by the reports of the white paper committee and the task force, unfortunately, attempts so far have remained either incremental or ineffective due to poor design or internal resistance.

What, then, needs to be done? First, reforms need to be initially

array of actors, i.e. new segments of the business community, civil society, the media, and local institutions, who can exert demand-side pressure and lend legitimacy to reform efforts.

Fourth, strong reform-minded leadership from the state is needed. Reform-minded officials who can coordinate across bureaucratic silos, mobilise internal supporters, and sustain policy attention over time are key to building and sustaining momentum.

Fifth, development partners must act as facilitators by fostering policy innovation and capacity and by providing incentives for reform through financial and technical support.

Finally, deeper economic reforms in Bangladesh are unlikely to succeed

politically smart, sequenced in a manner that builds momentum and credibility but not necessarily giving rise to overwhelming opposition. It may mean beginning in areas where there is some elite consensus or where it can register some early successes seen by the public.

Second, design for reform should be context-dependent and achievable, not overambitious or too technocratic, but consonant with the country's political reality and administrative capacity. It is important to identify areas where a “big bang” approach is necessary due to the long-standing reform deadlocks, and where a gradual approach would be more appropriate.

Third, reform coalitions need to be expanded by mobilising a greater

without reforming political institutions and improving the nature of politics itself. A more accountable, transparent, and participatory political system is essential to overcome resistance, align incentives, and build the broad-based consensus needed for sustained structural change.

Reform in Bangladesh has often faltered not for lack of ideas but due to the misalignment of political incentives. Overcoming this will require more than technical fixes; we need a reconfiguration of the political and institutional conditions under which reforms are designed and implemented. Only then can the country transition from ad hoc policy adjustments to a robust and resilient economic transformation.

Time to end the harmful practice of child domestic work



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

While the Asia-Pacific region has seen a sharp overall decline in child labour, Bangladesh's progress tells a more complex story, based on a report published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF on June 11. There has been a significant reduction in hazardous child labour in Bangladesh—from 3.2 percent in 2013 to 2.7 percent in 2022, affecting approximately 10.7 lakh children. However, the overall proportion of working children aged 5-17 years has slightly increased, from 8.7 percent to 8.9 percent during the same period. The rate of child labour involving harmful forms of work remained relatively stable, rising marginally from 4.3 percent in 2013 to 4.4 percent in 2022. These figures suggest that despite notable achievements over the past two decades—particularly in expanding school enrolment—Bangladesh is not on track to eliminate child labour by 2025.

Child labour harms children's education, violates their rights, and limits their opportunities for a better future. It also puts them at risk of physical and mental harm. Poverty and poor access to quality education are major reasons behind child labour.

According to the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (amended in

2018), the minimum legal age for employment is 14. Children between 12 and 14 may only engage in “light work” that does not hinder their education or development. However, the law fails to clearly define what constitutes “light work.” Most working children remain in informal employment. They often work long hours in poor conditions. The situation of child domestic workers is the worst.

The government has declared 43 types of work as hazardous for children—jobs that threaten their physical and mental development. Currently, 10.7 lakh children are engaged in hazardous work. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed concern over Bangladeshi children working in welding, transportation, manufacturing, tobacco and battery factories. Child domestic labour is not on this hazardous work list, despite the obvious risks.

According to a March 2024 report by Bangladeshi Oivabashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), about 80 percent of the permanent domestic helpers are minor girl children. These children are denied access to education, healthcare, recreation, and protection. They perform almost every household chore—cleaning floors,

washing dishes and clothes, cooking, and caring for younger children—often in exchange for basic food and shelter. Many are locked inside the house when employers leave for work, living in practical confinement.

Living far from their families in unfamiliar environments, child domestic workers are frequently subjected to physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse. A 2024 survey by Action for Social Development on child domestic workers in Dhaka revealed that nearly 50 percent experience some form of abuse, and 31.45 percent suffer from excessive workloads. Among those abused, 18.47 percent reported physical injury, 8.23 percent were beaten, 20.74 percent were verbally abused, and 1.7 percent experienced sexual abuse. If these conditions do not qualify domestic labour as “hazardous,” then what does? All forms of child labour carry inherent risks, but the hidden and isolated nature of domestic work makes children even more vulnerable.

The Labour Act must clearly define “light work” and stipulate penalties for violations. Most importantly, employing children as domestic workers must be categorised as hazardous work.

The issue of removing children from hazardous jobs can be addressed through several strategies: improving household income, enrolling children in school and vocational training, and raising awareness among parents and employers about the harms of child labour. If children must work in limited, non-hazardous settings, then they should be supported through training that builds skills for a better future. Meaningful progress in eliminating child labour will require coordinated

efforts from communities, employers, trade unions, civil society, NGOs, and the media.

Bangladesh has launched numerous national plans to eliminate child labour, but weak implementation and lack of political will have hindered meaningful progress. This must change.

We often accept child labour due to poverty while simultaneously celebrating our country's economic progress—this contradiction is telling. There are examples from other countries where child labour has been eliminated even in the face of extreme poverty, simply because society deemed it unacceptable.

In Bangladesh, most people consider child domestic labour normal. Many believe they are “helping” a poor child by offering food and shelter in exchange for work. But if someone genuinely wants to help, they should support the child's family financially so the child can stay in school. Exploiting a child's labour under the guise of charity is nothing more than opportunism.

We are shocked when we think of practices like slavery or the burning of women with their dead husbands (*satidaha*), which once had social acceptance. Shouldn't we be disturbed by the practices that exist today—where one child plays or attends school while another, the same age, labours in their household? Is this not a modern form of slavery?

As we speak of reform and progress in society, we must confront the deeply rooted and dehumanising acceptance of child domestic labour. It's time we recognised this practice for what it is: an inhumane tradition that has no place in a just society.