

Gopalganj violence demands answers

Govt must ensure quick and fair investigations

We condemn the attacks on the National Citizen Party's (NCP) rally in Gopalganj by alleged activists and supporters of the fallen Awami League regime. We also regret the loss of at least four lives following daylong clashes between security forces and AL supporters. While the violence was triggered by AL activists, we must ask: did it justify such a forceful response from the security forces, including the quick use of lethal weapons? Following the ouster of the AL regime, and in line with the aspirations of the people, we had hoped that the use of deadly force by security personnel would be limited only to the most extreme circumstances. Even Nahid Islam, the NCP convener, has condemned the use of such lethal force—a principled position that deserves to be acknowledged.

Reports suggest that tensions had been high in Gopalganj since Wednesday morning, as AL supporters, armed with local weapons, took up positions on the Gopalganj Tekerhat road in the Ulpar area of Sadar upazila, blocking several roads by felling trees. They also set fire to a government vehicle and damaged another. Later, they vandalised the venue of the NCP rally and attempted to physically harm NCP leaders and activists. Given that all political activities of the AL have been banned by the government, and with overwhelming evidence emerging of the party's involvement in crimes during the July uprising, it is deeply disturbing that its supporters have once again resorted to such violence. But it is how such violence is handled that best reflects the aspirations and capability of a country, and we have set a poor example of that in Gopalganj.

That said, the culture of attacking rival political rallies has long been one of the biggest obstacles to establishing democracy in this country. This is something we must urgently address. We hope all political parties take heed of this grave crime committed by AL supporters and refrain from repeating such actions in the future. Not only do these acts damage the country's image, but they also instill fear among the public as we are currently witnessing in Gopalganj, where the government imposed a curfew.

In response to these developments, the government has so far arrested at least 25 individuals and deployed additional law enforcement personnel to prevent further untoward incidents. Reportedly, a committee has also been formed to investigate the events of July 16. We hope the committee will carry out its duties with the utmost transparency and ensure accountability for the deaths and injuries. Those responsible for the attacks on NCP must be brought to justice. Equally, those responsible for the loss of lives must also be held accountable.

Finally, the home affairs adviser admitted that law enforcement agencies had prior intelligence regarding potential unrest in Gopalganj, although they did not anticipate the scale of the violence that eventually unfolded. In that case, why were security measures not strengthened accordingly? This, too, must be thoroughly investigated by the government.

We must empower domestic workers

Recognise them under labour law, ensure their rights

We cannot stress enough the importance of improving the condition of domestic workers. Despite being indispensable to the functioning of countless households, these workers, mostly female or child, still remain outside the legal framework and vulnerable to exploitation. Currently, 47 sectors are covered under the Bangladesh Minimum Wages Board, and a review by the Labour Reform Commission shows that 22 of them pay workers below the poverty line. Domestic workers are in a worse position, however, as they are not even recognised officially, making them the most vulnerable of all workers. This exclusion was the central focus of a recent roundtable meeting where experts highlighted the need to address their plight.

It should be noted that both the Labour Reform Commission and the Women's Affairs Reform Commission have recommended the inclusion of domestic workers under labour law. While the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015 does deal with domestic workers, it has yet to be made legally binding. Without legal protections, any claim to rights outlined in the policy is unenforceable. Speakers at the roundtable, therefore, repeated the call for their inclusion under labour law with clear provisions for fair wages, benefits, and so on. They also stressed that verbal agreements with workers—currently the norm—must be replaced by written contracts that outline their duties, working hours, leave, etc. Moreover, experts called for a formal complaint redress system, run through ward committees or apartment societies, to address issues like abuse, non-payment, or overwork.

A lot of the problems facing domestic workers can be addressed simply by formalising this sector, which we hope will be done sooner rather than later. But to ensure that any rights granted under law are properly enforced, it is important that they are registered. Through this mechanism, the relationship between employers and workers can be formalised, ensuring accountability and the protection of the rights of both parties. An inclusive database should also help with unionisation, which is also essential for addressing grievances. Since about 80 percent of permanent domestic workers are reportedly underaged girls, as per a March 2024 report by the Bangladeshi Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association, it is crucial that this issue is comprehensively addressed under any law. We must eliminate child labour in domestic work, and ensure that any employment is done in line with legal age and other requirements.

The Labour Reform Commission has already echoed many of these demands, recommending legal recognition, a national minimum wage coverage for all workers, etc. Given how vulnerable domestic workers are, these proposals and recommendations deserve to be considered with the highest importance.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mein Kampf published

On this day in 1925, the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, the political manifesto written by Adolf Hitler that became the bible of Nazism in Germany's Third Reich, was published.

National consensus cannot be built without youth voices



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In a country where the youth played a decisive role in toppling an authoritarian regime through a mass uprising in July-August 2024, one might expect a wave of political engagement among the younger generation. But reality defies that hope. A recent survey by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), in collaboration with ActionAid Bangladesh, reveals that 82.7 percent of youth in the country, particularly first-time voters, are not interested in participating in politics; only 1.6 percent are currently involved. While I do not have comparative data from the pre-2024 period, given the severity of that era's political repression, it is safe to assume the numbers were no better. This sharp disconnect between democratic aspiration and political disinterest raises serious questions about who truly represents the youth in today's Bangladesh, especially as major political dialogues seem to move forward without them.

This column is not intended as a critique of the above-mentioned survey itself, though one might acknowledge its methodological limitations, including concerns about sampling and bias. Rather, the survey invites a deeper question about how political representation is being structured in the present moment. In particular, it raises concerns about the legitimacy of the National Consensus Commission (NCC), where political parties are engaged in high-level dialogues aimed at shaping the country's future. Surprisingly, few people are interrogating the representational claims these parties make, or questioning whether they genuinely speak for the majority of citizens, especially the youth.

The NCC was formed in February this year to coordinate national dialogues around reform proposals prepared by the reform commissions. These dialogues have involved established political parties who are presumed to

speak on the people's behalf. During the first round of discussions, 45 sessions were held with 33 parties and coalitions, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, CPB, Nagarik Oikya, Ganosamhati Andolon, Gono Odhikar Parishad, and AB Party. A second round is now underway with a similar lineup. This continuity is troubling in light of what the SANEM



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

report reveals.

Although 82.7 percent of young people reported to have no interest in political affairs, as first-time voters, they have a legitimate stake in shaping the country's future. Their overwhelming disinterest in politics suggests that they do not see themselves represented by the current political class.

When someone shows no interest in participating in a political activity led by groups that nevertheless claim to speak on their behalf, the outcome is both misrepresentation and paternalism. The political parties currently in dialogue with the NCC are widely regarded as people's representatives. Yet, if the youth, who make up more than one-fourth of the country's population, are not only disengaged from politics but also

disinterested in the very parties that dominate the political arena, their so-called representation is a fiction. Representation by those in whom the supposed constituents have no interest constitutes a fundamental misrepresentation.

Misrepresentation is always a serious concern. But it becomes even more dangerous when it involves being represented by actors in whom one has no trust or interest, a condition that undermines the moral legitimacy of representation itself. While disinterest does not always stem from distrust, the likelihood that it does, given Bangladesh's long history of political dysfunction, cannot be dismissed. If young people avoid political participation because they do not trust the system or its

actors, having their voices replaced by those very actors constitutes the worst kind of substitution.

This misrepresentation becomes particularly dangerous for the youth because it grants political legitimacy to actors they neither trust nor engage with. These actors are then allowed to make decisions that will profoundly shape the younger generation's future.

When youth disengagement is rooted in political disillusionment, replacing their silence with the voices of untrusted proxies only compounds the problem. The result may be policies that not only ignore the younger generation's needs and aspirations but also deepen their political alienation. In such a context, the appearance of inclusive dialogue serves only to mask a deeper democratic deficit.

Rather than earning the youth's trust and participation, these parties behave as though that trust already exists. They engage in high stakes dialogues such as the national consensus talks without any actual mandate from this generation. This reduces the young people from autonomous political agents to passive subjects in need of guidance. In doing so, the parties deny them the moral and political agency to decide who should speak for them, what issues matter to them, or whether they want to participate at all. That is the essence of paternalism: assuming authority over another's interests while bypassing their voice.

For instance, youth-led community organisations that played crucial roles during the uprising, such as organising protests and disseminating information, have been notably absent from these national discussions. Their exclusion reinforces the idea that only party-affiliated voices matter in shaping the future, sidelining precisely those who mobilised for change but do not conform to traditional political structures.

If inclusiveness is truly the goal, the process must expand beyond party-based representation. The NCC cannot credibly claim to build a new political settlement while ignoring those who do not see themselves reflected in the existing political architecture. Dialogues, therefore, must include independent youth representatives and others who speak from outside traditional party lines. Only by engaging directly with those currently excluded from political participation can any claim to inclusivity or legitimacy be sustained.

If the youth have withdrawn from politics out of disillusionment, then their absence from state-building conversations is not apathy. It is a message, a call to rethink who gets to represent whom, and how legitimacy is constructed in a post-uprising democracy. Without earning the trust of the youth or reforming the structures that have failed them, political actors risk building a future on foundations that the next generation has already rejected. A new political settlement cannot emerge by speaking on behalf of those who remain unheard; it must begin by listening to those who have gone silent.

How Iran's authoritarian rule became its greatest vulnerability



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What is Iran's most significant vulnerability that the recent 12-day war with Israel has uncovered? The conflict led the Iranian authorities to report more than 600 deaths and nearly 4,800 injuries from Israeli strikes, while Iran's retaliatory bombings led to around 30 casualties in Israel. However, the gravest concern in this conflict is not the casualty figures or how destructive and advanced the weaponry both sides deployed were. It's the stories emerging about how deeply Israeli intelligence infiltrated the innermost circles of Tehran's security systems. The case of Catherine Perez Shaked, a French-born journalist who reportedly spent years infiltrating Iran's top circles, highlights this chilling vulnerability.

Perez Shaked infiltrated elite circles, gaining the trust of top regime loyalists, using her most effective weapon—charm—to befriend the wives of Iran's high-ranking government and military officials.

Whether the allegations about her being a Mossad operative are true or not, her story highlights a key weakness in Iran's security system.

Reports indicate that Mossad infiltrators smuggled precision-guided weapons and set up a drone base near Tehran, targeting air defences and ballistic missile

its ageing military equipment or its isolated economy. It's the very nature of its authoritarian system. When a government rules through fear and oppression, it creates the conditions for its own downfall. Citizens become potential assets for foreign intelligence, not because they are traitors but because they yearn for the freedom their government denies them.

The regime's brutality towards its people has created a reservoir of resentment that foreign powers can exploit. Every protester imprisoned, every woman beaten for removing her hijab (remember Mahsa Amini), every journalist silenced, represents not just a human rights violation but a strategic fault line. In a system where trust is replaced by surveillance and loyalty is coerced rather than earned, the very foundations of national security become compromised.

This does not mean that all Iranians unhappy with their rulers are potential spies; most are patriots with unquestionable loyalty to the country. Iran's cinema, which has consistently produced excellent, award-winning films despite stringent government restrictions, aptly illustrates this point, highlighting the strategic fault line.

Mohammad Rasouli's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024), which received the Cannes Film Festival's Special Jury Prize, employs the

metaphor of the strangler fig to illustrate how authoritarian power ultimately destroys the very society it aims to protect. The strangler fig is a parasitic plant that encircles a host tree, eventually choking it to death. A government judge's family unravels when they decide to defend anti-government protesters instead of supporting the regime. The judge, symbolising the state's authority, becomes isolated even within his own family. Events lead to a tragic ending for the once-loving family—a powerful metaphor for how authoritarianism ultimately destroys itself.

My Favourite Cake (2024) by Maryam Moghaddam and Behtash Sanaehee captures the profound longing of everyday urban Iranians for the freedoms they enjoyed before the revolution. The film's elderly protagonist represents a generation that remembers a different Iran, one where women could dance, where music filled the air, and where life was lived with less fear. Her quiet rebellion against the regime's restrictions speaks to the millions of Iranians who carry similar memories and yearnings.

The government banned both the films and prosecuted the directors, ignoring the deep social discontent they reflected, which can have far-reaching strategic implications.

It's not just the weapons systems, troop movements, and tactical capabilities that underpin national security. The Iran-Israel confrontation reveals something more fundamental: the strategic importance of legitimacy. Iran could be much stronger if not for the alienated population that its merciless authoritarian rule has created with its systemic oppression.

A 2024 Human Rights Watch report states that the government continues to execute political

opponents and dissidents on flimsy charges, severely restricts freedoms of assembly and expression, and conducts widespread prosecutions of women and girls for not wearing the hijab in public. An intensified crackdown on activists and human rights workers, using harsher measures and severe sentences, has become the norm to suppress dissent and silence opposition voices. These actions have created an atmosphere of fear and disdain towards the government among a large portion of the population.

When citizens feel betrayed by their government, they become susceptible to foreign recruitment. When intellectuals and professionals are imprisoned for their beliefs, they may seek allies elsewhere. When young people see no future in their own country, they might view foreign powers as an enemy of their enemy, making them potential allies.

This is the fate of authoritarian systems: they become so reliant on fear and control that they can't adapt to change. They don't trust their own citizens, so they miss out on their talents and loyalty. They can't tolerate dissent, which stops them from learning from mistakes. They won't allow freedom, so they can't generate the motivation needed for the national security ingrained in the society.

Iran's rulers might have missiles, drones, intelligence services, and revolutionary guards. Yet, their vulnerability lies deep within the minds of their people, where even such a complex security system would be utterly ineffective. In their attempt to control everything, the leaders left the country exposed to a major security threat. The sacred fig they planted in their society might slowly suffocate the very nation they claim to protect.