

Political extortion, thuggery must stop

Parties must show zero tolerance to crime within their ranks

In recent months, we have watched with increasing alarm as reports of extortion by political activists have continued to emerge from across the country. What makes this more unsettling is the boldness with which such crimes are being carried out under a supposedly neutral interim government. If politically affiliated criminals feel this audacious now, one shudders to think what they might do if their party assumes full or even partial control of the state post-elections.

Part of the reason for this situation is a still lingering sense of a "security vacuum"—a perception that security forces remain either overstretched or hesitant to act decisively—despite efforts by the government. This has led to a freefall where not only politically connected individuals but also unaffiliated, opportunist, or all-weather criminal groups feel like they can get away with it. According to Dhaka Metropolitan Police, at least 70 extortion cases were filed every month in the capital during the first half of 2025. In the same period, police also recorded many cases involving robbery, mugging, theft, rape, murder, etc. While official figures are often unreliable, it is safe to say the law-and-order situation has been similarly volatile in many other parts of the country as well.

However, the threat of political extortion and thuggery has been of particular concern after reports frequently implicated grassroots members of major parties. Take, for example, the gruesome murder of scrap metal trader Lal Chand alias Sohag in Dhaka's Mitford area by men linked with BNP. Or the case of the group led by Abdur Razzaq Riyad, a leader of the Students Against Discrimination (SAD), who extorted an ex-MP's family and pressured another ex-MP into signing cheques worth crores. Or take the leaked list of 123 alleged extortionists that has caused a stir in Rajshahi recently. These alleged criminals—among whom 44 were tied to BNP, 25 to Awami League, and six to Jamaat—were accused of everything from land grabbing and criminal intimidation to extorting money from coaching centres, development projects, and even vendors, showing just how deeply entrenched the culture of political extortion has become.

Political parties, especially BNP, which hopes to form the next government following the upcoming elections, must ask themselves why their disciplinary measures, including expelling those involved in crimes or issuing public denunciations, are proving ineffective in controlling their errant members. They must also address concerns over how many criminals, previously linked with the ousted regime, have managed to rebrand themselves under the patronage of certain parties. Clearly, signalling tough posturing or symbolic distancing is no longer enough. What we need are meaningful steps, both from the parties and the government, to ensure that political crimes are not tolerated under any circumstance.

Time running out for Palestinians

International community must act to end Israel's genocidal campaign

We are appalled by Israel's relentless bombardment of the besieged Gaza Strip, which resulted in the killing of at least another 34 Palestinians on July 31. A day earlier, according to Al Jazeera, Israeli attacks killed at least 71 Palestinians who were attempting to access humanitarian assistance amid a deepening hunger crisis in Gaza. Among them, at least 51 people were killed (and more than 648 others wounded) in a single strike while they were heading towards the Zikim crossing point to receive aid from trucks entering northern Gaza. Similarly, in southern Gaza, another 20 aid seekers were killed near the Morag Corridor, close to Khan Younis.

On the one hand, Israel is severely restricting the entry of aid into Gaza to the bare minimum, deliberately starving the Palestinian population. On the other hand, it has consistently targeted those seeking aid and turned distribution sites into dystopian killing fields. Starving and desperate Palestinians have described this brutality as Israel's version of "The Hunger Games" against them. As a result, Gaza is now experiencing "the worst-case scenario of famine," according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), with children being the worst affected. The IPC reports that more than 20,000 children have been admitted to Gaza's hospitals with acute malnutrition since April.

The silence and support Israel has received from its Western allies—even in the face of such war crimes—has been sickening. However, the fact that the majority of the world, including millions of ordinary Western citizens, has raised their voices against Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza may still hold the key to halting this massacre. The governments of France, the UK, and Canada—all of which have blindly supported Israel for decades—have, for example, recently been forced to put some pressure on Israel. France has issued a collective appeal with 14 other countries, expressing their desire to recognise the State of Palestine. British and Canadian prime ministers have made similar announcements, stating that their countries will formally recognise it in September unless Israel takes various "substantive steps", including agreeing to a ceasefire in Gaza.

Although extremely late in coming, these are indeed some positive signs. The international community must build on this momentum now to force Israel to end its genocidal campaign, before it is too late. Conscientious citizens and governments around the world must also use this opportunity to push all relevant parties—particularly the US—to acknowledge that the only way to resolve this crisis is through a two-state solution, which requires the recognition of the State of Palestine.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Oxygen discovered

On this day in 1774, English chemist Joseph Priestley discovered oxygen by isolating it in its gaseous state.



Kudos for consensus in some vital areas

Victors in the next election must implement them



THE THIRD VIEW

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There is enough good news coming out of the National Consensus Commission's (NCC) deliberations to feel cheerful after months of frustrations. As of 7:30pm on Thursday, consensus has been achieved in 16 areas, some of which are extremely significant. Some parties gave the note of dissent, but did not oppose. After 44 meetings with 32 political parties and alliances from March 20 to May 19 and 23 meetings with 30 political parties from June 2 to July 31, the NCC has been able to produce some significant results which, if the political parties don't shift from their commitment, could change the course of our political history and culture.

One of the most significant consensus deals is the approval of the formation of the upper house in parliament through proportional votes received by parties during the election of the lower house. This is likely to bring about a qualitative change in the functioning of our parliament and in our political debates, hopefully moving towards sobriety and in-depth analysis, replacing unabashed sycophancy and cheap rhetoric.

The 10-year time limit for an individual serving as the prime minister is a sign of true negotiation and genuine "give and take" among the political parties. Reaching a consensus on this point is something totally contrary to our political culture, especially as it affects the future of the de-facto party chief. Though the BNP accepted it with a note of dissent, it was a mature concession and hence deserves our praise.

The consensus reached on the election of the president is another milestone achieved by the NCC. Over the years, the election of the president, which in reality was selection by the prime minister, became more and more arbitrary and sometimes whimsical, epitomised by the election of President Mohammed Shahabuddin who said on TV that he did not know as he was never even asked. We also recall how President Baddruddoza Chowdhury was forced to resign from his office because the prime minister had wished so. So we desperately need to institutionalise the election to the position of the head of the state. As we have agreed to curtail the prime

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minister's power and share some of it with the president, his or her election must be a transparent and morally acceptable process.

The other issues on which a consensus has been reached include: a change in Article 70 of the constitution to allow MPs to vote freely except on no-confidence motion and finance bills; providing for the opposition to get the position of the chair of four important standing committees; demarcation of constituencies; guidelines for the president's pardoning power; decentralising the High Court; process of appointment of the chief justice; process of selecting the Election Commission to be incorporated in the constitution; setting up an independent police

commission to create a people-friendly and accountable police force; separating the prime minister's and party chief's positions, which cannot be held by the same person; and agreeing to appoint the deputy speaker from the opposition. The parties that disagreed gave a note of dissent.

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Bringing the police under an independent commission will help prevent its abuse by the political powerholders of the day. Will our political parties respect this decision after winning the next election? We have deep-seated reasons to feel uncertain. Resistance against constituting an independent police

of the country's voters had practically no representation in formulating our reforms. The Women's Affairs Reform Commission was perhaps the most vilified of the reform commissions, and its recommendations have all but been ignored. If the coming election marks the beginning of our new democratic journey, then it will begin with very few voices of women having

A topic that did not receive sufficient attention during the reform dialogues is the autocratic nature of the inner workings of our political parties, the concentration of power in the hands of the party head, and the arbitrariness and lack of accountability in using that power, which make our political parties totally undemocratic.

been heard.

There are two ironies here. First, during the last three decades of our politics, we had an unbroken rule by two powerful women leaders: Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Yet, women's rights remain unrealised and their contribution fundamentally unrecognised in the country.

The second irony is that Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, whose pioneering microcredit system won global fame and recognition and

diabolical proportions during the Sheikh Hasina regime.

To restore the power balance in our constitution, we need to trim the prime minister's power. That is why the demand that the same person cannot be allowed to hold both the posts of the head of government and head of the ruling party is so important. This power must be split. Otherwise, dominance of the executive branch over the legislative will never cease and the division of power and the practice of checks and balances will never come into play in Bangladesh.

The executive branch's hold over the judiciary, exercised through the law ministry over the years, has crippled the latter. And instead of independent judges, we have ended up with gutless appeasers. The biggest example of this is the way former Chief Justice SK Sinha was literally driven out—first from the court, then from the country.

Thus, we see the prospective ruling party, namely the BNP, trying its best to maintain as many of the old ways as possible so that the executive branch does not have to face accountability from the judiciary as the present constitution envisages.

The other serious issue is that of political culture. Whatever constitutional, structural, procedural and legal reforms we institute, if they are not accompanied with a change in our political culture and of our mindset, then the prospect of positive change—towards democracy, good governance, accountability, transparency, etc.—will be very dim indeed.

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The National Consensus Commission has been able to produce some significant results by bringing all the political parties to the table to discuss reform proposals.

SOURCE: PROTHOM ALO

commission may come from the home ministry's secretariat as bureaucrats are always averse to losing power. But an independent commission, which will be forward-looking, transparent and accountable to the public and parliament, will have a huge positive impact on our police force as well as the general public.

The disappointing part, however, is the consensus reached on women's seats. The provision of 50 reserved seats remains as before, with a new agreement that five percent of the candidates of a party's total candidates nominated to contest an election will have to be women.

In real terms, it means nothing. Without the provision that there will be specific women-only constituencies, women candidates will have to fight with male contestants, which traditionally results in the victory of the latter. In the overall seat calculation, knowing the likely results, all political parties, especially the big ones, will choose female candidates where they are the weakest.

This is the biggest injustice that is being done against women in spite of their unquestioned sacrifice and massive and effective participation in the July mass uprising. In this new Bangladesh—"Notun Bondobosto"—there is nothing new for women's representation in parliament. It must also be noted that all political party representatives in the NCC's dialogue sessions were men, and the NCC itself had no women members. There were one or two women who participated, but only for a while. So about 50 percent

the Nobel Peace Prize for him and his institution, and who was almost completely focused on women's real empowerment, now heads a reform process that has so little participation of women and even fewer prospective results for them.

In our view, there are two fundamental reasons why consensus could not be reached on some vital points: a) desire to maintain unbridled power for the executive branch over the legislative and judiciary; and b) the nature and history of our political culture.

From the very start, in 1972, of the three branches of the government, the executive branch always enjoyed more power. It started with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose overwhelming stature dwarfed every other body regardless of how powerful they constitutionally were.

From the president, speaker of the House, chief justice and chief whip, to every other person of position, however powerful, naturally revered Sheikh Mujib and never asserted themselves even when they had the legal and moral grounds to do so. The executive branch stood above the other two. Then with the military intervention, the concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch continued throughout the tenure of Gen Ziaur Rahman and Gen HM Ershad. When democracy was restored, the emergence of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina as bigger-than-life figures carried on the tradition of powerful leaders, leading the executive branch and minimising the role and importance of the two others.

Needless to say, that trend took the inner workings of our political parties, the concentration of power in the hands of the party head, and the arbitrariness and lack of accountability in using that power, which make our political parties totally undemocratic. Whatever may be said in the party constitution, in reality, total power is always exercised by the party chief. The constitution of the Awami League had many decision-making tiers, but lower-tier leaders would meet and "decide" to "request" the party chief to make all decisions, especially selecting people for virtually all posts which were supposed to be elected.

The BNP's constitution gives all powers to the chief without any restraint, including the power to dismiss all committees at all levels, even if elected as per party rules.

The question arises: how can undemocratic institutions implement democracy when in power? Therefore, the political party culture has to change, and their internal operations must become more democratic and accountable. Lower-tier party leaders must have a voice and power.

If our political culture is to change, the functioning of our political parties must change dramatically. We celebrate the success of the National Consensus Commission and congratulate them for their tireless efforts, perseverance and capacity to manage the whole dialogue process. We also congratulate the political parties for reaching consensus on vital issues but strong doubts remain as to how they will behave once elected to power. We have witnessed, over and over again, a political party's transformation once in power.

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