

## A fresh start for public procurement

Success will depend on proper implementation and oversight

About two decades ago, Bangladesh established a legal framework for public procurement, aiming to ensure transparency and efficiency. Yet, the system has remained less a mechanism for effective state spending and more a game of rent-seeking and collusion. It is against this backdrop that the interim government has unveiled its draft Public Procurement Rules, 2025, a set of reforms that promise greater transparency and accountability.

The single most consequential change is the removal of a controversial provision that disqualified any tender bid more than 10 percent above or below the government's estimated cost for a project. This seemingly innocuous clause was, in reality, a gaping loophole that invited corruption. As officials from the Bangladesh Public Procurement Authority have candidly admitted, the rule made it difficult to prevent political interference. It was a tool exploited by both unscrupulous officials and politically connected entities for personal gain. Its elimination signals a commitment to curbing procurement-related corruption.

Crucially, the new rules also aim to build a more resilient system. At the heart of this ambition is a push for digitalisation. The plan to introduce a fully digital procurement system, complete with an electronic content management platform and an e-payment system, is a positive move. The existing e-GP system has already delivered remarkable results, with annual cost savings of an estimated \$150 million—enough to build 1,500 kilometres of rural roads or 3,000 primary schools. Competition has doubled, with the average number of bids per invitation increasing from four to eight. Now, by allowing contractors to submit bids, bills, and performance securities online, the reforms will further reduce physical interaction. This digital shield is perhaps the most effective tool to sever the unofficial, and often corrupt, ties.

Additionally, tighter subcontracting rules, which will limit such work to a maximum of 30 percent of the total contract value, directly address another major vector for corruption. The requirement for foreign bidders to partner with local IT firms is a commendable move and will foster domestic innovation. The inclusion of micro and small enterprises and NGOs, particularly in consultancy services for health and social sectors, signals a welcome shift towards a more inclusive economy.

The architects of these reforms are right to align them with international best practices. With a proposed 153 rules, the draft represents a comprehensive overhaul. However, the true test of these rules will be in their implementation. The introduction of beneficial ownership disclosure is a vital step for accountability, but it must be backed by a strong, independent oversight mechanism. In a country where effective project implementation has often been hampered by a lack of good governance and institutional capacity, the new rules offer a moment of hope. The task ahead is to ensure that the government's promise is fully realised, and the new rules are used as a fair tool for the benefit of all.

## HC order brings hope for Dhaka's greenery

Development projects must not encroach on natural spaces

It is encouraging to see the High Court's injunction restraining the government from carrying out construction work in Panthakunja Park and the Hatirjheel waterbody in Dhaka. The order, issued on Wednesday, also directed the relevant authorities to open the park for public use and restore Hatirjheel's original waterbody from Moghbazar to the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC) premise. This comes in response to a writ petition filed by environmental activists who argued that construction of the FDC-to-Palashi extension of the Dhaka elevated expressway would be environmentally damaging.

According to the petitioners, the original design of the expressway, as per the Strategic Transport Plan (2005), did not include this extension ramp. The design was changed several times, and despite warnings of increased traffic congestion, the former prime minister greenlit the Palashi ramp construction. Between 2023 and 2024, more than 10 acres of Hatirjheel Lake from Moghbazar to FDC were filled to construct the ramp. As predicted, this worsened waterlogging in the neighbourhood and damaged the biodiversity of the lake.

Meanwhile, hundreds of trees in Panthakunja were felled. Even the political changeover in August 2024 could not stop the Dhaka Elevated Expressway Authority from felling the park's trees, transforming the once lush green oasis in Dhaka's heart into a barren stretch. Members of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement led a 168-day sit-in protest at the park to save the trees. Although their movement eventually led to a hopeful ruling for one of Dhaka's limited green spaces, whether the relevant authorities will take necessary action swiftly remains uncertain.

There are reasons for such apprehension. In the past, there have been instances when judicial directives and executive decisions were ignored. Government bodies have at times even violated express laws, such as filling up a portion of Hatirjheel Lake in breach of the Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act of 2010. These natural spaces are often given the least priority. In the name of development and beautification, large sums of money are spent, and infrastructure built with little regard for the environment. What is more unfortunate is that our policymakers do not appear to consider the long-term impact of environmental degradation.

As a result, Dhaka, with its ever-expanding brick and cement structures, is becoming increasingly unliveable. While finding a suitable alternative for relocating the FDC-to-Palashi extension may not be easy, the government must leave no stone unturned in this regard. We also urge that future development projects be designed with a focus on preserving the little natural space still left in the city.

# Ducsu election: Identity, strategy, and the politics



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The positive aspect of the just-concluded Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducsu) election is that it was held peacefully. No political violence occurred even after the results were announced, which was quite shocking for many. For this, the university authorities, the interim government, students, and political parties all deserve appreciation. However, concerns remain as to whether such peace can be maintained in the national election or the union elections at other universities.

The voter turnout was high overall. However, female student participation was about 15 percent lower than that of male students. If no special initiative is taken, it would probably not be wrong to assume that the women's turnout will also be low in the national election.

The flaws observed in election management also deserve attention. Various videos and candidates' complaints show that if the ballot marks were not dark enough, the scanners could not detect them, causing problems in counting. The attempt to introduce a technology-based counting system is good, but why couldn't the authorities of the country's top university solve this problem beforehand? It ended up resembling the Election Commission's past experiment with electronic voting machines (EVMs). In Britain, even when voting is done with a pencil, no such counting problems have been reported. There were also complaints about ballot distribution during the Ducsu polls. Allegations of distributing pre-marked ballots are absolutely unacceptable. It is unfortunate that those who worked at the polling centres lacked proper training. If a returning officer accuses a candidate of violating the code of conduct without even reading it, that must be considered inexcusable irresponsibility.

Those who won the election have set a new precedent. There is much to learn from their success. Hopefully, the outcome will encourage a culture of free thought, tolerance of differing views, and respect for dissent in the university, thereby playing a necessary role in establishing and safeguarding democracy. Ducsu's experience will also help in maintaining restraint in the face of criticism or condemnation, and in avoiding provocations. Even the refusal to respond to late-night rumours about government efforts to alter results through compromise is a good sign.

In analysing the results, some have said that students have rejected the binary politics of pro- and anti-

independence. That may be true, or it may not. Although the media reported that the winners were from Islami Chhatrashibir, why did they not contest under that identity, as Jatiotabadi Chatradal (BNP's student wing) did? Instead, they contested under the banner of Oikyaboddho Shikkharthi Jote, which even included candidates



Although known as members of Islami Chhatrashibir, the new Ducsu leaders contested the polls under the banner of Oikyaboddho Shikkharthi Jote.

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who were not previously associated with Shibir. What is the explanation for not contesting under their real identity in an election held in a free environment after the fall of dictatorship? Can it be denied that they avoided their original identity because of Shibir and its parent organisation Jamaat-e-Islami's negative image of rejecting the Liberation War?

The question remains whether Shibir gained any special advantage by not contesting under their real identity. While Chatradal has a frightening image of hall takeovers and extortion, Shibir's record of hiding within Chhatra League and enjoying impunity for all kinds of wrongdoing has not been widely discussed. They have faced little accountability. A newspaper editor explained this well, "A Shibir member remains Shibir even if he joins Chhatra League, but a Chhatradal member becomes Chhatra League if he joins them." That's why Shibir has now been able to re-emerge openly. Another

brutal killings of Abrar Fahad at Buet and Abu Bakar at Dhaka University, both on suspicion of being Shibir members.

After the fall of dictatorship, Shibir quickly brought its underground activities and strength into the open. In the past, not only Chhatra League but also other organisations blocked Shibir's entry into Dhaka University. But due to their active participation in the anti-government protests and broader unity, they faced no obstacles after August 5, 2024. They were the first to jump into the student union election. In contrast, the organisationally weakened Chatradal probably struggled just to regroup.

After Sheikh Hasina's flight, another serious allegation arose against Chatradal and its parent party BNP: land grabbing and extortion. Others are not free from such accusations, but BNP's record during its time in power cannot be erased. Moreover,

October last year. They considered the Dhaka city corporation elections, but due to endless protests and blockades by various interest groups, inability to control law and order, and low morale among law enforcement agencies, they abandoned that idea. Instead, they considered the Ducsu and a couple of other student union elections to be suitable for the rehearsal, and one must admit their objective has been largely successful.

This rehearsal has probably also been a major benefit for BNP. Initially, they were reluctant about the Ducsu election. But their participation was perhaps aimed at testing their own capacity. If they had won, their confidence would have risen, but it might also have made them complacent and less strategic in preparing for future elections. Their defeat in Ducsu polls has provided them with an opportunity for self-reflection and learning. Whether they will make use of this opportunity is up to them.

## Trees can be the cheapest anti-heat, anti-anger infrastructure



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I have lived through enough summers in Dhaka to know that the city's heat is no longer merely a discomfort but an aggression. It presses against the body with a weight that drains patience and shortens the distance between thought and outburst. I feel it in the way tempers flare over small inconveniences, in the way conversations are cut short, and in the way people move with an urgency born not of efficiency but of escape. In psychoanalytic terms, the heat pushes us into a state of heightened arousal, where the ego's capacity to mediate between instinct and reason thins to a fragile thread.

It is in this climate that I have come to see trees not as decorative indulgences but as essential instruments of public policy. A tree is a cooling device for the body, but it is also a cooling device for the mind. The shade beneath its canopy is a holding environment, a psychic buffer that interrupts the unrelenting exposure of both skin and nerves. I think of the banyans and rain trees where I have stood not to admire a view but to reclaim a part of myself from the

oppressive immediacy of heat.

In my research I have often described holding environments in architecture—spaces that can contain emotional intensity without amplifying it—and I realise now that trees do this in the open city. They slow the pace of movement, soften the glare, and create microclimates where people can linger without irritation. Without them the public realm becomes an arena of collisions: pavements without shelter, intersections that feel like furnace mouths, plazas that blind and exhaust. These conditions are not neutral; they prime us for confrontation.

The argument for trees is not only psychological but economic. They are the cheapest infrastructure we could invest in to cool a city. They require no imported technology, no energy source, and no specialised maintenance once established. A single planting, if protected, can serve for decades, lowering surface temperatures, filtering polluted air, absorbing noise, and offering a spatial gentleness that no concrete structure can match.

Yet in Dhaka, trees are treated

as expendable. They are cut down for road-widening with no plan for replacement. Beautification projects too often strip the streets bare in the name of openness. I sometimes think our planning institutions carry an unconscious hostility towards softness, as if vulnerability itself must be erased from the city's fabric. The result is an urban landscape stripped of mediating forms, where there is no gradual transition from the harshness of sun and noise to the more bearable conditions of shade and quiet. It is simply the raw confrontation of body with environment.

I often imagine how different the city's atmosphere could be if trees were restored as anchors of daily life. A shaded lane would slow the tempo of movement without stalling it, soften the soundscape, and allow a more measured rhythm of interaction. It would offer a place to pause that is neither inside a shop nor under a paid roof but open, free, and shared. This is a form of spatial psychoanalysis: creating conditions where the urban subject is not forced into polarities of withdrawal or attack but can inhabit the subtle in-betweens.

If trees are incorporated in public policy, they could be legislated into permanence: minimum canopy-cover requirements for every kilometre of road; compulsory planting as part of any building permit; penalties for felling without replacement; and an annual audit of shade deficits

alongside air quality reports. Most of all, there can be a planning culture in which trees are not the leftovers of design but one of its first lines—an essential threshold between the exposed violence of the city and the softer tissue of its people.

The psychoanalytic lens helps me understand why this matters beyond climate adaptation. A shaded street is a street where the superego—our internalised sense of civility—stands a better chance against the irritability of the id when overheated. The tree canopy becomes a quiet moral structure, regulating mood before it spills into violence. In this way, environmental planning, urban design and civic ethics meet in the most ordinary of forms.

We cannot air condition our way out of the heat crisis, and we cannot police our way out of public aggression. Both are symptoms of a deeper estrangement between body and environment. Planting trees is environmental work, but it is also civic repair. It is the restoration of the holding environments that makes public life liveable for both body and mind. If heat has become our national season, then shade must be our national policy. And if we can accept that a tree is not a luxury but the simplest and most democratic form of public peacekeeping we have, then perhaps we can begin to replant not only our streets but also our capacity to live together without the constant abrasion of climate and temper.