



MANIS UD DOWLA
CHAIRMAN OF ACI

**LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD**

'Business people shouldn't get into politics'

JAGARAN CHAKMA

In an era when the lines between business and politics often blur, M Anis Ud Dowla, one of the most respected names in Bangladesh's corporate history, offers a sharp counterpoint. The chairman of Advanced Chemical Industries (ACI) Ltd believes the two should remain firmly apart, and his own career stands as an argument for why.

"Businessmen should not get into politics. Politics is not our cup of tea. We are here to produce wealth for the nation. Let the politicians handle politics," he said in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, after being honoured recently with the Lifetime Achievement Award

divested its operations in Bangladesh. The company approached him with an unusual proposition: to take over its assets on a "pay-as-you-earn" basis. He accepted, and ACI was born.

"It was a first-class arrangement. From that point onwards, I became an entrepreneur," Dowla said.

Today, ACI employs more than 29,000 people and operates through 29 subsidiaries across pharmaceuticals, consumer brands, agribusiness, and logistics. Crucially, its growth was not tethered to political favour.

Asked about his initial resources, Dowla replied with characteristic humility: "My capital was my mind and

into a few key insights: "There is no shortcut to success. Hard work, passion, and ethical integrity are non-negotiable."

He stressed that success must be built on ethical leadership, customer-centric approaches, and a culture of continuous learning.

"Customers are our kings. Without them, we are orphans. We must focus on solving their problems, not just selling our products."

**DRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN
BUSINESS AND POLITICS**

It is on the question of politics that Dowla is most uncompromising.

"Policies must be pro-people, pro-growth, pro-employment. The broader interest of the nation must come before any personal or political agenda," he said.

But his message to businessmen is sharper still. "Stay away from politics. It is not your domain. Your role is to create jobs, generate wealth, and support the nation's economy."

He warned against the dangerous blend of politics and business, where influence replaces merit and governance becomes compromised.

"Politics is not a livelihood. It is a

Leadership, in his view, is about unlocking the potential of the employees.

"We say this often: anyone who joins ACI is part of a family. We are in this together," stated the ACI chairman.

To aspiring entrepreneurs, his advice is simple: "Love your work. Try and try again. If you love what you do, your leisure becomes your work, and you become highly productive."

He sees failure not as an end but as a lesson.

"Failure often results from distraction or complacency. Re-examine your efforts, learn from your mistakes, and make a new start. Success will come with perseverance," Dowla said.

Looking ahead, Dowla was optimistic about the trajectory of Bangladesh's business landscape but warned that stagnation is not an option.

"Stagnant business is a dead business. To grow, we must keep working hard, innovating, and striving for excellence," he said.

For him, the future depends on partnership, not rivalry, between government and business. "The success



at the 23rd Daily Star-DHL Business Awards.

Dowla began his professional life far from entrepreneurship, serving as a professional business executive in multinational companies in Pakistan, Kenya, and Bangladesh. His expertise in administration and management equipped him for the corporate transformation that would later define his legacy.

"I was always experimenting, improving productivity, reducing costs, and finding new ways to innovate – sometimes with the headquarters' approval, sometimes on my own," he recalled.

The turning point came in 1992, when Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI)

my efforts."

Though ACI raised capital through rights issues and borrowing, what set them apart was not just access to funds but the strategic utilisation of resources and an unwavering focus on values.

"We set our mission to improve the quality of life. Our values were quality, customer focus, innovation, fairness, transparency, and continuous improvement. These aren't just words – we lived them."

Under his leadership, ACI became the first Bangladeshi company to secure ISO 9001 certification, a marker of its commitment to quality management and international standards.

Reflecting on a career spanning over 65 years, Dowla distilled his learnings

service. If you have achieved excellence in your field of specialisation and want to give something back to society, then you may enter politics – not for tenders, not for contracts, but to serve," said Dowla.

He added that government must, in turn, recognise the contribution of the private sector:

"Employment generation, wealth creation – these mostly come from private sector initiatives. The state must recognise and support these efforts."

Dowla states that ACI's greatest strength is its people. "Our employees are our most valuable asset. We treat them as part of the ACI family. We motivate them, respect them, and celebrate their contributions."

of our nation depends on collaboration. Government policies must empower private enterprise, not undermine it."

Despite his age, Dowla continues to lead an active life. Even in his late eighties, he continues to draw energy from work rather than rest.

"I love my work. That's where I find energy. My rest is in thinking about the company and new ideas."

He doesn't spend much time on traditional forms of relaxation, preferring to invest his hours in thinking, planning, and execution.

"Life is limited. We must make the best use of it. If we live productively, we honour the life given to us by Allah," he said. "We are here to serve mankind. That is our duty and purpose."



Agility, ideas vital for growth

Says Md Miarul Haque, MD of DHL Express Bangladesh

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's private sector must respond to change with agility, innovation, and collaboration to remain competitive in a rapidly shifting global economy, said Md Miarul Haque, managing director of DHL Express Bangladesh.

Speaking at the 23rd Bangladesh Business Awards, jointly organised by DHL and The Daily Star on September 23, Haque said businesses must act not only as contributors but also as co-creators of the country's future.

"Tonight, we gather not just to celebrate achievements, but to recognise the journeys that are shaping Bangladesh's future – journeys built on enterprise, foresight, and the courage to adapt," he said.

Haque noted that Bangladesh has achieved steady economic progress through deliberate effort, strategic choices, and the resilience of its private sector. However, he cautioned that global shifts in standards, markets, and technology demand faster adaptation.

"Bangladesh stands at a historic crossroads. Having successfully met all three UN criteria for graduation, the country is scheduled to exit the least developed category in November 2026," he said.

The milestone will boost the nation's global image and investor confidence while also bringing new challenges, he said.

This year's awards adopted the theme "Powering the Private Sector" and were preceded by a series of roundtables jointly hosted by The Daily Star and DHL in recent months.

The discussions, involving business leaders, policymakers, and experts, focused on the implications of the LDC graduation and strategies to enhance

competitiveness.

Quoting from the final roundtable, Haque highlighted one remark of Anisuzzaman Chowdhury, special assistant to the chief adviser: "Whether graduation comes in 2026 or later, the task is the same: to shift from preference-driven growth to productivity-driven competitiveness."

Haque also cited Mahbubur Rahman, CEO of HSBC Bangladesh, who observed: "Have we progressed? The answer is yes. Do we have room for improvement? The answer is also yes, especially if we compare ourselves against international standards."

Rahman said that he "fully" agrees with the assertion that logistics will continue to remain crucial for making businesses competitive regardless of LDC graduation.

"We have progressed, but we still have room to improve. The future will not be shaped by ambition alone, but by our ability to build systems that scale, partnerships that endure, and solutions that adapt," he said.

Haque concluded by congratulating this year's award winners, acknowledging the strength and diversity of the country's entrepreneurs, and reaffirming DHL's commitment to Bangladesh's next phase of growth.

"Your presence here tonight reflects the determination of our business community. You are the ones driving change, creating value, and building the future," he said.

