

# Malaysia should relax criteria for recruiters

Concerns about some conditions for agency selection are justified

The concerns raised by migration experts, industry insiders, and government officials over Malaysia's new criteria for selecting Bangladeshi recruiting agencies are quite justified. According to a report, of the 10 conditions Malaysia has set for a fresh round of labour intake, seven seem reasonable and can be fulfilled by many of our more than 2,000 licensed agencies. These include having a valid licence for five years, experience of sending workers to at least three countries, a certificate of good conduct, having no record of forced labour, trafficking, extortion, money laundering, or labour-law breaches, and written employer testimonials. It is the remaining three conditions that have raised red flags, however.

Requiring an agency to have recruited at least 3,000 workers in the last five years, to operate training and assessment centres under its sole control, and to maintain a permanent office of at least 10,000 square feet for the last three years are requirements that few can meet. Not only are they impractical, but they are also unnecessary. For example, the training centre requirement is redundant as Malaysia itself doesn't mandate specific training, as per a former joint secretary of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). This could instead inflate recruitment costs that already soared to Tk 450,000-600,000 despite a government cap of Tk 79,000 prior to the 2024 market closure.

Likewise, the large office space requirement seems unnecessary as it has no proven link to recruitment quality or workers' protection. The 3,000-worker threshold is equally unrealistic for most local recruiters considering the disruptions caused by Russia-Ukraine war, global economic downturn, long running syndication in the Malaysian labour market, and the closure of labour channels by some key destination countries in recent years. Against this backdrop, it is perfectly reasonable that the harsh conditions have raised fresh fears of syndication, concentrating power in the hands of a few large recruiting agencies while depriving the wider sector of fair competition and workers of meaningful protection.

We simply cannot afford a repeat of the 2016-18 and 2022-24 syndicate eras when a handful of agencies, reportedly backed by influential actors in both countries, monopolised the market, drove migration costs to unbearable levels, and ultimately contributed to Malaysia halting recruitment altogether, citing widespread labour exploitations. Enforcing those new conditions would be putting "old wine in a new bottle," as a migration researcher called it while speaking with this daily. Reportedly, Malaysia had initially sought a list of compliant agencies by November 15 but extended the deadline later. So far, about 1,000 agencies applied for selection, and the expatriates' welfare ministry shortlisted roughly 500. While the ministry has requested Malaysia to review the three contentious conditions, concerns about the new criteria very much remain.

We, therefore, urge the Malaysia government to revisit and redesign the selection process in a way that ensures fairness without complicating the process unnecessarily or making it susceptible to syndication risks. Bangladesh, for its part, must also rigorously vet its own recruiters, enforce cost ceilings, and prioritise worker welfare in its negotiations. Only a fair, competitive, and accountable recruitment system can help prevent the kind of exploitations that often haunted our workers in Malaysia and some other markets.

# We must stop child labour and marriage

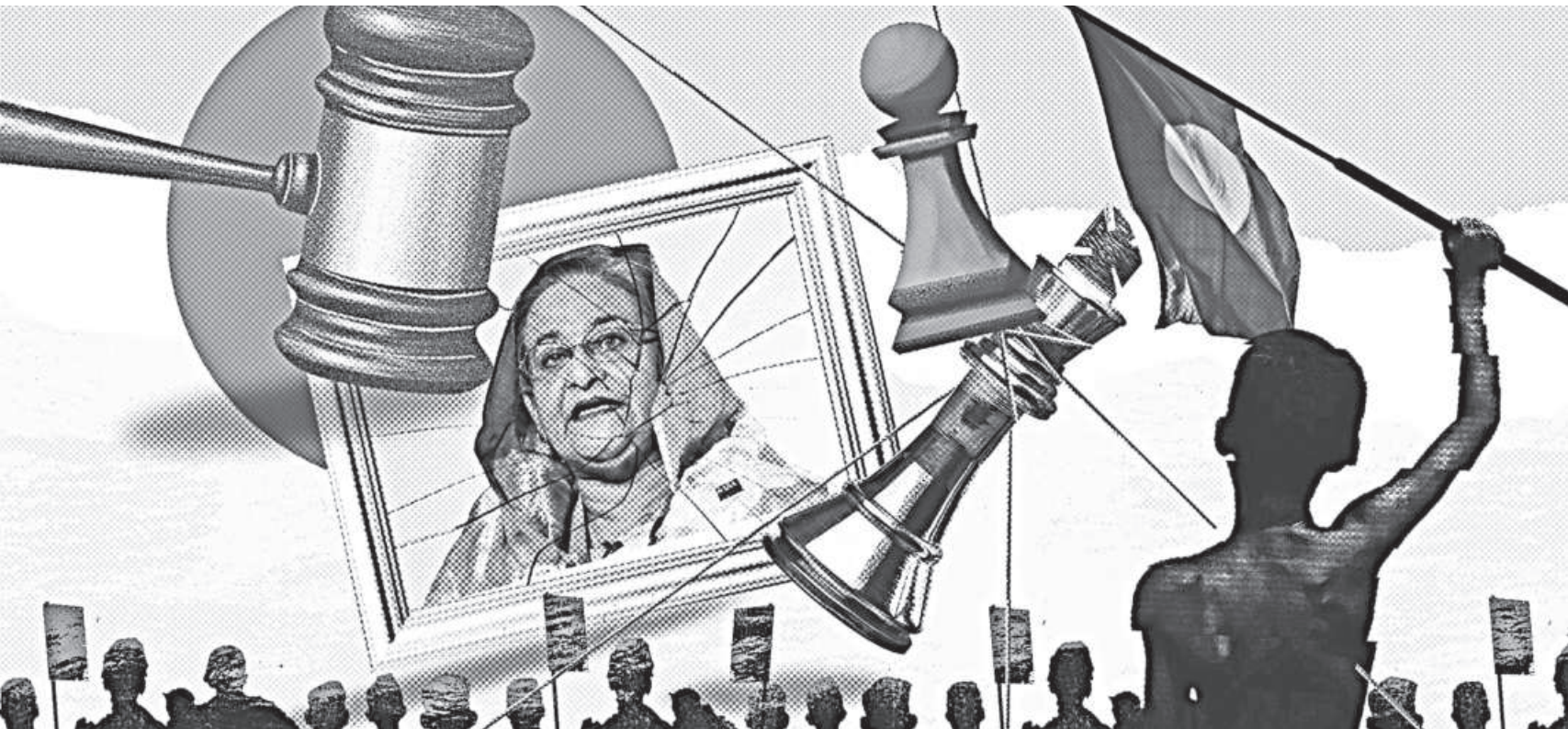
Political parties, relevant authorities must commit to end both

A recent survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, with support from Unicef, has unravelled some bleak statistics on children from low-income households. Although 84 percent of children in Bangladesh complete primary school, less than half finish secondary education. Those who drop out are either married off, especially if they are girls, or pushed into hazardous labour. The survey found that the number of recently married girls aged 15 to 19 sharply increased from 32.9 percent to 38.9 percent. Nine percent of child workers (up from 6.8 percent in 2019) are in hazardous jobs and exposed to dangerous conditions such as extreme heat, toxic chemicals and dust, heavy loads, or unsafe tools and machinery.

Children not attending school are around 2.6 times more likely to be in labour. According to the survey, northern divisions of Rajshahi and Rangpur have a higher number of child workers compared to Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet, where there is better access to education and economic opportunities. With the cost of living sharply rising and incomes not keeping pace, low-income families often depend on their children's income to run the household. In addition, education quality and teachers' inability to motivate students are also leading to drop outs. While boys are put into economic work, girls are burdened with unpaid domestic work and then married off while they are teenagers. Furthermore, gaps in contraception availability and family planning are pushing more girls into early pregnancies, often leading to health complications.

Both child labour and child marriage rob children of their childhood, their right to education and good health. The increase in numbers shows that these are crises that need to be addressed immediately. While there are laws against child labour and child marriage, they are not enforced because society has normalised both these maladies.

Experts have pointed out that unless the reality of extreme poverty of these households is addressed, it will be very difficult to combat these evils. Social safety nets must ensure that poor households can meet basic needs. The government should also raise awareness among parents regarding the need for education and the harmful consequences of child marriages. This requires all stakeholders, including political and religious leaders, to be on board to create social awareness. The education system must be redesigned so that schools are accessible and equipped with better-trained and better-paid teachers as well as innovative curricula that spark the interest of students. As political parties get ready for the next elections, they must pledge their commitment to children. They must promise to enforce the existing laws to end hazardous child labour and child marriage and ensure that every child has access to education.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

# Before Hasina lost in the court of law, she had lost in the court of the people



THE THIRD VIEW

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Let legal experts discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the ICT trial and verdict. Our focus will be on the fact that Sheikh Hasina's political demise had already occurred, and the "guilty verdict" was pronounced by the people, especially the younger generation, much earlier, during the tumultuous days of July-August 2024.

The future is always unpredictable, but as of now, her reputation lies in ruins and her political career buried under a mountain of debris of self-righteous arrogance, misgovernance, and impunity. Whatever may be Awami League's narrative about the national or international conspiracy behind Sheikh Hasina's fall, the fact is that the "death sentence" by the ICT was brought on by her own cruel suppression of political dissent, abuse of the law, corruption, partisan administration, bank looting, money laundering, suppression of independent media houses and corruption of the compliant ones, and finally, the killing of 1,400 citizens including children to stay in power during the last few weeks of her rule. Over the years, enforced disappearance and extra-judicial killings became the hallmark of her regime. Yes, there were some vital infrastructural developments, increase in per capita income, and growth in many social indicators, but the credit for them was swept aside by her destruction of democracy and overwhelming dictatorial rule.

Eventually, Hasina's public acceptance totally collapsed, and hatred for her skyrocketed and the "death sentence" in the people's court was passed due to the killings on the streets, as mentioned above. What distinguishes her rule from that of many dictators and autocrats is that very few of them killed so many unarmed protesters in so short a time.

It is to Sheikh Hasina's credit that she was able to revive, reorganise, rejuvenate, and re-inspire Awami League (AL) to win elections in 1996 after 21 years out of power. Her first stint in office, especially the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord (which she herself did not implement) and the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, marked a new beginning for AL. But over the years, she effectively demolished her own party as she destroyed the police, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, etc—transforming it from a political powerhouse into an apparatus of extortion, corruption, and violence, and replacing ideology with sycophancy, principles with praise for the leader, and service to the people with service to themselves. Every nomination was for sale, most promotions within the party ranks came for a bribe, and every development project was treated as their plaything. BUET student Abrar Fahad's torture and murder by Chhatra League was testimony to how the AL's student body was turned into a murderous gang.

She did not take well either of her electoral defeats in 1991 and 2001. Her view that AL could never be defeated in a free and fair election, but only through rigged ones, partly made her reject these results, inventing the term "subtle-rigging." This marked the

beginning of the arrogance and myopia that led her towards ignoring the truth and making massive blunders. A miraculous escape from a near-fatal attempt on her life in August 2004, in which 24 AL workers and leaders were killed, with no credible attempt by the then BNP government to investigate the grenade attack and punish the perpetrators, probably convinced Hasina that she would always be vulnerable as an opposition politician, and thus she may have decided never to give up power if and when she regained it. This, in our view, killed the prospect of democracy in Bangladesh.

Hasina regained power in a free and fair election in 2008, abolished the caretaker system in 2011, and then manipulated all the following elections held in 2014, 2018 and 2024. As her manipulations succeeded, she grew over-confident and felt that all her political allies were her pawns, all opponents manipulatable, and all dissenting voices easily suppressed. She became entrapped in the mindset of never admitting any mistakes, which resulted in her becoming supremely arrogant. During a meeting

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with editors in 2013, I heard her say: "In spite of so many attempts on my life, Allah has kept me alive for the purpose of carrying out His will. So, you all may write anything you like. I don't care." She felt she was divinely guided and, as such, had nothing to worry about. Thus, she plunged deeper into isolation on the one hand and became further intolerant on the other, both of which distanced her from the people and her party.

Changing the constitution to do away with the caretaker government system to oversee elections gave the first clear signal of Hasina's intention to take over the process of holding national elections. It was crystal clear that the 2014 election was openly and shamelessly manipulated. We have written before—but it deserves to be repeated—that out of 300 seats in parliament, 153 had only one contestant as others withdrew "voluntarily." The Election Commission, therefore, declared "elected" the only contestant there was, who happened to belong to the AL. Thus, in the 2014 election, before a single vote was cast, AL gained the majority in parliament to form a government. It was the most blatant, undemocratic, and immoral tinkering with elections ever. Could that have happened without the sitting prime minister (PM) and the party chief's direct involvement?

The fact that Sheikh Hasina's government was able to get away with such electoral frauds—marking a failure on the part of the BNP to make

an effective protest—gave her and her sycophants a dangerous but ultimately illusory confidence that led them to repeat this manipulation in the 2018 and 2024 elections, thereby digging its own grave, into which it fell in July-August 2024.

The Covid pandemic during 2020-2022 isolated her from her party and the people. The day-to-day functioning of the administration became an unthinking ritual. This was followed by the ostentatious observance of Bangabandhu's birth centenary, which greatly offended the conscientious section of civil society and the public in general. It became clear that people's urgent needs had no place in the PM's mind; instead, creating an infallible personality cult was where her government placed all its attention and resources.

Hasina totally misread the national psyche, which is fundamentally averse to individual cultism. Dubious authors wrote thousands of books that the government bought at exorbitant prices, which, in fact, became a way of siphoning off public money to corrupt bureaucrats, teachers and so-called professionals, all of whom were in an undeclared competition to curry favour with the AL leadership and, of course, make some money in the process. The birth centenary celebration did not produce a single well-researched or intellectually honest account of the leader of our independence movement, but instead flooded schools, colleges, universities and all institutions linked with education

everything converged on one man. Freedom fighters still alive, and the family members of those killed during the war, felt insulted.

Just to cite another example of arrogance and lack of foresight, Hasina forced every government office, every semi-government institution, universities both public and private, NGOs, banks, airports, etc, to open what was called a "Mujib corner" to display photos and books—mostly substandard ones—on him. If instead she had set up "Muktijoddha corners"—which would have been most appropriate at that moment—and filled them with books on the Liberation War, our people in general, and the younger generation in particular, would have been far better informed about that glorious moment in our history. The truth is that Hasina's government was in power for 15 consecutive years and did virtually nothing to raise public awareness about our freedom struggle; she turned it into Mujib worship that only served to create a sense of disgust and alienation.

By 2022, Hasina had reached the height of arrogance. "I know everything," "Every critic is an enemy," "Whatever I do is best for Bangladesh," and similar statements dominated the political discourse. The sycophancy reached such absurd levels that her party leaders and workers started to believe that there were no problems their leader could not solve and no challenges she could not tackle. This allowed conniving party henchmen to try to outdo one another with ever cruder assertions of the leader's infallibility, creating a bubble of absurdities in which Hasina and her courtiers lived.

Hasina and her government's handling of the students' stance against the government quota system for jobs clearly showed the dysfunctionality to which her party and her government had descended. At one stage, she suddenly declared all quotas abolished, which went against constitutional guarantees for quotas for the physically and mentally challenged and ethnic minorities. So, the higher court threw it out. Thus, the demand lingered. At this stage, she could have held a dialogue with the demonstrators and resolved it. In July 2024, things turned violent, and since July 16, killings on the streets in large numbers began. *The Daily Star's* reporters counted bodies in government and private hospitals. By August 1, 2024, they tallied 201 dead bodies and spoke to hundreds of families who lost their loved ones. We headlined death counts every day that we could verify.

Hasina denies that she gave orders to fire lethal weapons on demonstrators—despite a plethora of proof—but then why did she not stop it once it began occurring? Each day's newspapers showed how many were killed the day before. If she is speaking the truth about not giving orders to kill, then why didn't she issue an instant order to stop the carnage? There is no way one can believe that firing on the streets would occur day after day for several weeks, and the PM would not know. She knew, and she had given the order. So, her direct involvement—and the doctrine of "command responsibility"—brings these cruel crimes to the doorstep of the PM, who ran her government with an iron hand.

Legalities aside, those who lived through those crucial days, witnessed the tragic incidents, reported on them, wrote on them, or warned and alerted the government about them, feel convinced that as the head of government, Sheikh Hasina is guilty of crimes against her own people.