

Biman board appointments must be reversed

They raise questions about the interim government's neutrality

The latest appointments to the board of directors of the state-run Biman Bangladesh Airlines, made at the fag end of the interim government's tenure, are both surprising and deeply controversial. These decisions raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest, abuse of power, and the potential compromise of neutrality ahead of the national election. Of the three newly appointed directors, two currently serve the government with the rank of minister and state minister, while the third is the top civil servant of the Election Commission.

A gazette notification issued on Thursday named National Security Adviser and High Representative for the Rohingya Issue Dr Khalilur Rahman, Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser at the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology (with the rank of state minister) Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, and EC Senior Secretary Akhtar Ahmed as new board members. Earlier, on August 26 last year, Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin, who oversees the civil aviation ministry, was appointed chairman of the board. This marked the first instance of a minister assuming the chairmanship of a company under his own ministry, departing from the long-established norm of keeping operational management separate from the ministry.

Traditionally, ministers have not served as directors of state-owned enterprises because their official positions already allow them considerable influence over policy and strategic direction. Their direct involvement in corporate governance risks creating conflicts of interest, undermining transparency, and opening the door to mismanagement and corruption. Although the gazette notification claims the appointments were made in public interest, they instead invite suspicion about the government's true intentions. At the very least, the move appears to be an attempt to rehabilitate outgoing advisers by placing them in alternative official roles after the end of their ministerial privileges. Moreover, if the government's objective was to restructure or revamp Biman by modernising its fleet or expanding its network, legitimate questions arise about the moral and legal authority of an interim administration to pursue such initiatives when the country is less than four weeks away from electing a new government.

Equally troubling is the appointment of the EC secretary. With the electoral process already underway, safeguarding the commission's neutrality is essential to maintaining the credibility and integrity of both the parliamentary election and the referendum. Assigning a senior election official to another position sets a dangerous precedent and risks being perceived as a reward for service during the election period.

The February 12 election is one of the most consequential events in the nation's recent history. The interim government must avoid decisions that could cast doubt on its impartiality or undermine public confidence in the electoral process. These appointments should be withdrawn immediately to ensure that the integrity of the election is not questioned and that the perception of political favouritism does not tarnish the role of supposedly non-partisan advisers.

Another death due to ambulance syndicate

Authorities must urgently take action to dismantle this syndicate in Shariatpur

We are horrified to learn about yet another death caused by an ambulance syndicate and its extortion practices in Shariatpur. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, 70-year-old Jamshed Ali Dhali died inside an ambulance after a local ambulance syndicate stopped the vehicle at least twice on its way to Dhaka. This tragedy follows a similar incident in August last year when a newborn died as an ambulance was blocked on the road by the same syndicate. Legal action in that case led to charges against several syndicate members, but it appears to still remain fully active.

Family and witness accounts describe a chilling sequence of extortion and violence. Jamshed, who was admitted at Shariatpur Sadar Hospital, was referred by his doctors to the National Institute of Neurosciences and Hospital in Dhaka. On Tuesday, after initially hiring a local ambulance for Tk 6,000, the family was told to pay extra money. They then arranged for another ambulance, which was not a part of the syndicate's fleet, for a lesser price. But that ambulance, carrying Jamshed, was stopped twice by the syndicate members who demanded to know why the family had arranged an "outside" ambulance. This delayed Jamshed's transfer to Dhaka by 90 minutes, and he passed away before reaching the neuroscience institute.

Reports suggest that ambulance services in Shariatpur have been effectively controlled by an organised syndicate for years. According to *Prothom Alo*, hospitals in the district refer 80-100 patients to Dhaka every day for advanced treatment, yet there are only seven government ambulances to meet this demand. This chronic shortfall has created a vacuum that private operators are exploiting, turning emergency transport into a cartelised service where prices are inflated and dispatch is tightly controlled. Disturbingly, this is not treated as a criminal violation despite being widely known. Although the official fare for a Dhaka trip is supposed to be Tk 4,000, syndicate-controlled ambulances routinely charge Tk 6,000-8,000.

Jamshed Ali Dhali's death calls for an immediate systemic response. Emergency care should not be at the mercy of syndicate whims. We urge the government to crack down on syndicate control of ambulance services through clear regulations, strict enforcement, and transparent oversight of both public and private emergency vehicles. Ambulance operations must be standardised with fixed fares and penalties for extortion. District administrations, law enforcement and the health ministry must work together to ensure that no patient faces obstruction when every minute counts.

Is public sympathy for street protests fading?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The agitating students of seven colleges in the capital are demanding the immediate issuance of the ordinance for their proposed university. These students fought earlier to decouple from their degree-giving entity, Dhaka University, and won the initial battle through the declaration of a separate administrative body. The transition faces numerous logistical challenges because the government cannot create a university overnight. Yet, the students feel the urgency to press their demand, probably before the election next month when a political government is going to replace the interim one, which has been rather sympathetic to students for their contribution to the toppling of the previous regime.

The fact that these students are blocking the roads with impunity is an example of such sympathy. The public, perplexed by the government's inaction, is experiencing the bystander effect. The collective inaction demonstrates a situation where everyone is waiting for someone else to act first. Students need to understand that the time for moral action is rapidly approaching, and the ordinary public's patience could quickly escalate into violence.

We have already witnessed a simmering public reaction. The passive bystanders are feeling the pressure of prolonged blockades at various choke points across the city. One sweat-soaked rickshaw puller was seen pulling the hands of a protester to his neck, asking to strangle him, as his vehicle had been stuck in the same spot for more than three hours due to the blockade. The heartfelt plea came from a man whose daily wage was disappearing because of the street demonstrations. Another paediatric orthopaedic surgeon was heard saying that if they blocked him, many children would miss timely dressings or scheduled operations. A female passenger was heard saying, "You stay in subsidised dorms, enjoy money sent to you by parents like us, and then pose difficulties for others. What kind of education is that?"

Students need to read the public

pulse. They are losing the plot not because their grievances lack merit, but because their tactics have trespassed the personal spaces of others. The lifeblood of any protest is persuasion. The July uprising was successful because everyone felt the ills of discrimination. However, as the suffering visibly shifts, the backlash may become unforgiving.

Protests have a limited lifespan. When the students of seven colleges took to the streets to protest the



Students of the seven colleges blocked key points in Dhaka demanding the immediate issuance of the Dhaka Central University Ordinance two days in a row, paralysing the capital's traffic. The photo was taken on January 15, 2026.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

hierarchy claimed and haughtiness exerted by their parent organisation, they gained sympathy through moral coherence. The negative experiences at the DU Registrar's Building form the foundation of a haunting plateau, reinforced by the repetition of similar stories. One would have expected the students to defuse the tension once they secured the assurance for a separate university. But by rushing the process, they are showing their ignorance of the intricate process through which a university operates. And their tactic of arm-twisting the government is exhausting the very public whose attention they need.

campus. Given the current political climate, a firm commitment to the establishment of a new campus seems improbable.

The college administrators have also failed to anchor youth politics in their respective institutions. Teachers who have transitioned to teaching at the university level through civil service examinations fundamentally oppose student demands. The establishment of a university could potentially lead to the removal, withdrawal or posting of numerous Dhaka-based teachers. The issue of intermediate students, who require these teachers' instruction, also arises.

How to address the root causes of disinformation sprees



T.I.M. Nurul Kabir
is a business, technology and
policy analyst. He can be reached at
timnkabir@gmail.com.

T.I.M. NURUL KABIR

The spread of disinformation, rumour and misleading content on social media has become a critical challenge these days, particularly ahead of the national election. The government has taken a tough stance to curb the insidious circulation of fake and misleading information. A new section 73(A) has been added to the Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance (RPO), which says any deliberate act of creating and disseminating misleading information, images, videos, audio or any other content with the intent of influence or malign the electoral process would be treated as a corrupt practice and be punishable. The National Cyber Security Agency (NCSA) has formed a special cell to monitor online and social media to prevent fake information, misleading content and rumours ahead of the election.

However, concerns have been raised regarding overreliance on legal measures without ensuring due transparency and impartiality, which could be detrimental, and that a multi-pronged approach is needed to gain public trust and combat fake news and misinformation effectively.

While legal measures, regulatory mechanisms and technologically well-equipped fact-checking cells are important, the rooted causes of spreading rumours and fake news should also be addressed.

Proliferation of fake news in political campaigns, particularly during elections, has become a global phenomenon. Social media and biased reporting on a number of news portals can drive political polarisation and social fragmentation by creating the echo chamber effect. People in echo chambers hold similar views and ideas and are drawn to information that supports their existing beliefs, creating a biased sense of identity.

Social media algorithms designed to keep users engaged determine which content is displayed to whom based on previous browsing activity and demographic information. The selective display of content aligned with a user's preference further entrenches fragmentation and polarisation. While users view, share and interact more and more with the content of their preference, every click is monetised by some relevant party.

Heightened fragmentation and polarisation during the political

transition are creating critical challenges for social cohesion in Bangladesh. Social cohesion is the bond between societal actors and institutions. Policymakers recognise the importance of social bonds in driving economic growth and sustainable development. The UN SDG pledges to build an equitable society based on inclusive growth, equality, and peace, where no one is left behind.

The heads of states and governments and high representatives at the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2), held in Qatar on November 4-6, 2025, acknowledged the urgent need to address profound social challenges, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, and address their underlying and structural causes and their distressing consequences. The Doha Political Declaration of the WSSD2 recognises that poverty eradication, promotion of productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and therefore, all three objectives need to be pursued simultaneously.

Bangladesh has achieved rapid improvements in several of the social development indicators. Several NGO programmes and projects have facilitated income-generating activities among poor and marginalised women, fostering broad-based social development. Mobile telecommunication services have driven rapid digital and financial inclusion in Bangladesh. However, the pace of employment generation has remained very low. Data from

Chaos has stifled any potential for civic engagement, enabling endless street politics.

The stakeholders also need to take the anxiety economy into consideration. Many of these young protesters will probably fail to see the benefits of the creation of a new university. They will graduate with certificates that say, "affiliated with Dhaka University." Only through civic engagements can these students and their alumni network create mobility pathways for their peers and defuse the psychological pressure of being a "second-class student," which is fuelling the escalation.

However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the government, who must declare that enough is enough. They need to condemn violence unequivocally, listen publicly, and communicate progress honestly. Weeks before the election, the government must ask who benefits from this series of protests.

The more the students move away from their principled position, the more their disruptive acts will open space for coercive responses. If the government does not wake up from its institutional stupor, streets can become unpredictable and volatile, allowing many opportunistic actors to take advantage. And the apathy, which is the most corrosive outcome of such a situation, will hollow out democracy.

Normalcy cannot be restored by repression or indulgence alone, but by a recalibration of legitimacy, limits, and reciprocity. We can view the blockade's performative dominance as a temporary victory. However, the sooner the protesters realise that their purpose has become conflicted and convoluted, the better. Their right to dissent is now infringing upon the right of others to mobility, work, education, and healthcare. In democracy, no right exists in isolation.

Historically, student movements earned respect because they sacrificed for a principled cause without entitlement. The prolongation of protest is reversing that moral equation. Students are coming off not as conscience-bearers of society but as harbingers of disruption—a perception that, once formed, is difficult to undo. It's better if the students redo their homework and recalibrate their actions. The government must also provide them the scope to return to the classroom by declaring a realistic timeline for the proposed university. Meanwhile, institutions must drop ego and coordinate.

The Labour Force Survey 2024 shows that unemployment is particularly high among educated youth. Lack of employment opportunity and rising inequality in wealth distribution are among the key causes of general discontent and lowered trust in institutions.

Escalation of disinformation and misinformation on social media is more of an effect, and not the root cause of this widespread discontent, low trust in institutions or social fragmentation. Among the main causes of the proliferation of fake news, lack of knowledge and low literacy come first. Dishonesty and partisan political views deeply influence people's sentiments, creating an echo chamber effect, driving social fragmentation.

The problem of tackling fake news and misleading content on online platforms is a complex and multifaceted crisis deeply rooted in ethical, social and cultural norms and attitudes, as well as education level, institutional capacity, transparency, and the commonly prevalent political power-seeking tactics.

To combat this challenge, policymakers, researchers and civil society need to take the initiative to identify the nature and extent of Bangladesh's social relationships as well as people's interactions with formal institutions. By doing so, it can be determined how the positive manifestations of trust, cooperation and institutional efficiency could be strengthened to enhance social cohesion and economic development.