

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Boost TCB supply and distribution

Ease people's suffering, safeguard their dignity

It is deeply disturbing to see how the rising prices of essentials, coupled with stagnant incomes, is pushing more families towards financial hardship, forcing them to increasingly rely on subsidised food programmes for basic sustenance. This is reflected in the growing queues of people at TCB truck sale points across Dhaka, where men and women are seen jostling for their spots every day. An average package of basic iftar items of soybean oil, lentils, sugar, chickpeas, and dates that costs around Tk 950 in the open market is available for just Tk 550 at the TCB trucks. For many families, this Tk 400 difference is significant.

The scenes at the sale points are heartbreaking. Reportedly, 40-year-old Nasir Khan, waiting at Kazipara metro station with his leg in plaster following a serious accident, struggled to secure a package for his family. Seventy-year-old Mulkuch Bibi had to prepare the night before to ensure she could get cooking oil and sugar. Young mother Minuara Begum stood in line for hours with her baby because she had no one at home to help. Stories like these unfold across the city every day, highlighting the urgent need for more effective, humane support for vulnerable families.

According to BBS, food inflation rose to 8.29 percent in January, reversing the earlier signs of easing. Meanwhile, projections by the World Bank last year suggested that the national poverty rate could climb to 22.9 percent, with extreme poverty nearly doubling compared to three years ago. Findings from the PPRC indicate an even sharper rise, with nearly 28 percent of the population now living below the poverty line, and about 1 in 10 surviving in extreme poverty. The numbers are indeed alarming and deserve urgent action.

At present, 450 mobile trucks of the TCB are operating nationwide, aiming to distribute 23,000 tonnes of essentials to 35 lakh consumers during Ramadan. Clearly, this is not enough. The government must increase the volume of TCB's open market sales in line with demand. It must modernise the distribution process and consider area-based distribution in labour-dense neighbourhoods, factory zones, and informal worker hubs to reduce crowding at central points. Special arrangements should be made for the elderly, persons with disabilities, and working class people who cannot afford to lose hours of income. Moreover, as the government prepares to inaugurate its family card programme on March 10, which will provide four crore families with Tk 2,500 or essential commodities of equivalent value, poor households must be included urgently and without any political affiliation.

While providing subsidised food is essential, safeguarding the dignity of citizens is equally important. The sight of thousands waiting in queues for hours should not become a normal feature of our urban landscape. Instead, it should serve as a call to ensure that assistance is delivered efficiently and respectfully. In times of economic distress, compassion must be matched with competence.

Footbridges must not be 'deathtraps'

Authorities must ensure safe pedestrian crossings urgently

No matter how many roads and flyovers are built to accommodate vehicles in the country, pedestrian safety has always been something least prioritised by our authorities. Even in the capital city of Dhaka, in a busy area like Paribagh, a major pedestrian bridge remains "cordoned off" for months. A recent report by *Prothom Alo* highlights the deadly state of the foot overbridge: missing steps, existing ones being eaten away by rust and age, and littered landings. A cable restricts entry at the foot of the bridge in a flimsy effort to prevent pedestrians from using it. But without a safer alternative, most pedestrians either use the road to cross or use the broken bridge anyway.

Unfortunately, the Paribagh footbridge is not an exception in the city. One would struggle to find a foot overbridge in Dhaka that is in perfectly usable condition. When the steps are not completely broken or missing altogether, they are uneven and visibly dirty. At night, with lighting being inadequate or absent, these bridges become hubs for criminals of various degrees. It is not uncommon for pedestrians to be mugged or physically harmed at night when using such dark footbridges.

All of these factors make it so that pedestrians have to resort to simply crossing the busy roads. Here, too, they are forced to accept great risk as few vehicles abide by basic traffic rules such as driving per the speed limit and not occupying zebra crossings. Needless to say, this level of inaccessibility follows pedestrians onto the footpaths as well. Not only are these usually uneven, but they are often scattered with open manholes that pose further danger to pedestrians. In many areas, footpaths are also occupied by the wares of formal and informal businesses, making them all the more difficult for pedestrians to navigate.

Bangladesh's urban centres have a reputation for being extremely unwalkable. It is unacceptable that necessary structures such as foot overbridges, which are constructed using taxpayers' money, should remain in such dilapidated states for months. In a country where walking is a big part of commuting, the government must prioritise the construction and upkeep of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. Without adequate foot overbridges, people are exposed to various crimes, physical injury, and even the risk of death.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Chemical structure of DNA discovered

On this day in 1953, Cambridge University scientists James Watson and Francis Crick announced that they determined the double-helix structure of DNA, the molecule containing human genes. The molecular biologists were aided significantly by the work of another DNA researcher, Rosalind Franklin, although she was not included in the announcement, nor did she share the subsequent Nobel Prize award for it.

Depoliticise institutions, not ideas



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is vice chancellor at the University of
Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Nor often do you hear a politician saying that "politicising education, research, and the practice of arts and literature is never a mark of a civilised society." There is a lot to unpack in Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's speech made at the Ekushey Padak 2026 award distribution ceremony on Thursday.

Ekushey, by design, is a political space. It is an archive of ideologically driven sacrifice leading to the formation of a nation-state. The award ceremony named after Ekushey celebrates dignity and intellectual freedom that is not devoid of politics. But when the prime minister labels "politicising" as an "anti-civilisational" marker, we need to ask: what does it mean to "depoliticise" education and the arts? The answer is far from simple.

It is impossible to sweep politics out of universities or academies of arts and culture. The transformative agenda of education is political in its noblest sense. When we design our curriculum to decide how we want to shape our citizens, to give them the knowledge and consciousness to question power and distinguish right from wrong, we embrace politics as a civilising agenda. The same goes for art. It is more than aesthetics that entertains. Arts teaches us to critique injustice and to push the boundary of our imagination by challenging established order. Politics does not threaten civilisation; it shows that it is alive and functional.

The real problem is not politics. It is the partisan attitude with which parties capture power. The Ekushey Padak to a certain individual was given and then stalled this year. The merit of the prize conflicted with the award-giving politics. Since the announcement of the resignation of Dhaka University's vice-chancellor, speculations have been running high. A short list of candidates is available, but ironically

all these senior teachers are being identified by their party loyalty and affiliations. Having worked with some of them in close quarters, I know of their high academic acumen and strong scholarly aptitudes. Yet, media tends to focus on their contribution to the political party alone.

As we have transitioned from an unelected interim government to a political one, we expect lessons to be learnt from the previous malpractices that corroded the system from within and gave politics a bad name. As a



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

nation, we have inherited a proud legacy of politics synonymous with civic courage; moments of rupture, such as 1952, 1969, 1971, 1990 and 2024, erupted into the political scene, ushering in significant changes in our national life. One atrocity in such frequent brushes with politics is a culture of partisan affiliation. It started with student organisations, which acted as extensions of national parties. Then other professional bodies joined the bandwagon. We are living in a culture that demands political

loyalty.

It is in this context that Tarique Rahman's comment makes sense. It is the duty of the state to give weightage to these words. Gaps between what is said and what is practised will render this statement mere rhetoric. We need a system that promotes education and culture as spaces to nurture excellence in thought. We need a system that does not necessarily equate success with proximity to power. That system has to start with our educational institutions and academies. Our graduates must not internalise political patronage as normal before they enter the bureaucracy, the media, the judiciary—the job sector. Politicians must stop thinking of campuses as recruitment grounds. Over the years, we have created a culture that mobilises youthful energy for state control and electoral machinery. Curriculum has also been symbolically controlled to advance a convenient cultural narrative that supports party politics.

biased answers—it produces fewer questions. Frustrated by conservatism, brain drains can accelerate. For a developing country aspiring to move up in the global indexes, we need aggressive pursuits of innovation and technology. To uphold the value of our civilisation, we must protect the arts from symbolic appropriation. Already, we have seen how the issues of Bauls, Qawali, Mazars, Pahela Baishakh, and Probat Feri have been scrutinised for ideological leanings. When cultural institutions or festivals feel pressured to align with partisan narratives, we realise the importance of the depoliticisation that the premier talked about. Since art depends on patronage from both state and non-state agencies, the depolitical paradigm must take the tension between power and imagination responsible for its creation into consideration.

There is a popular saying: everything is political. While it is true to a great extent, not everything needs to be partisan. We need to create an academic culture that knows the difference between political consciousness and party allegiance. The call for depoliticisation at the institutional level requires the establishment of civic rules and the safeguarding of democratic norms. A weak system devoid of rules allows partisan agents to thrive. The answer is transparency and accountability. We need to select academic and administrative leaders using clearly published criteria and independent search committees.

If the political leadership desires, they can decouple their student wings on campuses. Elected, non-partisan student unions may serve democracy better than formally or informally party-affiliated bodies. For a non-political system to thrive, there has to be an inbuilt grievance redress mechanism. If I understand the spirit of Tarique Rahman's statement correctly, "politicising" as an anathema to civilisation means freedom of consciousness. Can a teacher or a student question authority without calculating risk? Can researchers publish uncomfortable data without consequence? Can artists stage dissent without fearing cancellation? The answer is not devoid of politics. But it is where politics respects boundaries.

Who truly pays for the Ramadan price spike?



Farah Kabir
is country director at ActionAid Bangladesh.

FARAH KABIR

In much of the Muslim world, Ramadan brings discounts on staples, state-subsidised markets, and public messaging about restraint. In Bangladesh, it brings something else: a predictable surge in prices. The holy month, meant to cultivate self-discipline and solidarity with the poor, has become a season of extraction. And nowhere is the cruelty felt more sharply than in our women's kitchens.

The annual hike in the cost of essentials is now treated as routine. The price of rice, lentils, edible oil, sugar, meat, and fruit rises steeply in the weeks before the month of fasting begins. Iftar items such as dates and chickpeas become conspicuously dear. But the inflationary fever does not stop at food. Clothing, footwear, and transport fares swell ahead of Eid. Demand is predictable while profiteering is rehearsed.

This pattern is not inevitable. In countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia, governments routinely expand subsidised sales. Even in low-income countries across North Africa, Ramadan markets are often associated with discounts rather than mark-ups. Seasonal demand spikes are anticipated, not exploited. Bangladesh's opposite trajectory is, therefore, not a cultural destiny but a policy failure and an ethical collapse.

Traders cite port congestion, supply chain bottlenecks, currency pressures, and rising global prices. While these factors exist, they do not explain the regularity or brazenness of the Ramadan price spike. Nor do

they justify the open secret that some wholesalers hoard goods to engineer scarcity.

Blaming shadowy syndicates alone is too easy: a small group of traders and importers controls the market, holding power to set higher prices. It absolves the rest of the value chain. Retailers adjust price tags without question. Transport operators invoke holiday demand to rationalise higher fares. Opportunism trickles down because it is tolerated upwards.

The economic consequences are severe. With inflation already high, low- and fixed-income families enter Ramadan stretched thin. For day labourers, garment workers and the urban poor, the month becomes a calculus of anxiety: how to honour a sacred tradition without falling into debt. Yet, this hardship is not gender-neutral. It is profoundly feminised.

Ramadan in Bangladeshi households rests on women's labour. They wake before dawn to prepare sehri. They cook iftar while fasting. They clean, host, serve, and manage the domestic rituals. Religious discourse often reinforces this arrangement by promising spiritual reward for feeding family members and elevating domestic service into devotion. Household, long romanticised as an expression of love and sacrifice, intensifies during Ramadan.

When prices rise, it is women who absorb the shock. They stretch budgets that no longer stretch. They negotiate with shopkeepers who will not budge. They dilute lentils, substitute beef with

cheaper protein, slice fruits thinner, cook with less oil, and serve smaller portions. They try to manage children's expectations about Eid clothes when they suddenly cost more. Many go without new clothes. Women carry the emotional burden of scarcity so that the family's sense of celebration remains intact. This is invisible labour layered upon economic precarity.

When prices rise, it is women who absorb the shock. They stretch budgets that no longer stretch. They negotiate with shopkeepers who will not budge. They dilute lentils, substitute beef with cheaper protein, slice fruits thinner, cook with less oil, and serve smaller portions. They try to manage children's expectations about Eid clothes when they suddenly cost more.

Men dominate the market—wholesalers, transport operators, shop owners, and association leaders. Women, largely excluded from these spaces of price-setting power, confront the consequences without meaningful agency. The gendered irony is stark: women are charged with sustaining the moral atmosphere of Ramadan at home, while men in commercial networks extract profit from the rituals women sustain.

The normalisation of this cycle is perhaps its most corrosive feature. Each year, headlines lament rising prices, authorities conduct publicised raids, and the pattern repeats. Breaking this cycle requires more than seasonal

crackdowns. It demands structural reform and a moral reckoning.

Price monitoring must be continuous, not theatrical. Permanent market surveillance, real-time publication of wholesale and retail benchmarks, and accessible complaint mechanisms would reduce the space for arbitrary mark-ups. Enforcement must be consistent; token fines that can be absorbed as a business expense only embolden repeat offenders.

Predictable demand should be met with planned supply. Advance import scheduling for high-demand goods, temporary duty adjustments where necessary, and expanded subsidised outlets in low-income neighbourhoods can blunt artificial scarcity. Demand spikes during Ramadan and Eid are not surprises; they are annual certainties.

Accountability must extend beyond "syndicates." Trade associations and chambers of commerce should adopt public pledges of price stability in Ramadan, with reputational incentives for compliance. Corporate social responsibility cannot mean distributing iftar packs while quietly raising prices. Ethical commerce should be a badge of honour.

Crucially, women must be recognised as economic actors, not merely household shock absorbers. Supporting women-led cooperatives and small-scale enterprises can shift the bargaining power. Including women's organisations in market oversight would bring perspectives currently largely absent from price-setting conversations. When women gain agency in markets, not merely responsibility in kitchens, the balance begins to tilt.

Ramadan is meant to discipline appetite and cultivate empathy. To convert it into a season of calculated escalation is to betray both the spirit of the month and the households that keep its rituals alive. Breaking the cycle is not merely an economic imperative, but a feminist one and a moral one.