

The Daily Star

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Family Card launch a positive start

Govt must not allow partisan influence, scammers to undermine its impact

We laud the pilot launch of the BNP government's promised Family Card programme within less than a month of assuming office, even before the first session of parliament. During the first phase of the pilot between March and June this year, 37,567 women-headed households in 14 upazilas across the country, including several urban slums, will receive Tk 2,500 in their bank accounts or mobile wallets. A part of BNP's election manifesto, this initiative aims to gradually bring two crore families under the social safety net programme and turn the card into a universal social identity instrument by 2030, with a plan to allocate three percent of GDP for social security by 2028. So far, the launch of the pilot phase—from household selection to data verification—has been positive, without any major complaints. However, the government must be vigilant about partisan influence and scammers that could undermine this initiative.

This daily has found at least 31 Facebook pages and groups that are phishing for users' personal data by using deepfake videos of the prime minister and his family members in which they appear to offer Family Cards or cash rewards. What is concerning is that some of these videos have been shared many times, and social media users have left their bKash numbers and even addresses in the comment sections of some of these videos. Not all are harvesting personal data, however; some pages are uploading and sharing these deepfake videos only to increase followers rapidly and subsequently sell their pages, as revealed by fact-checking organisation Dismislab. Whatever the case may be, cybercrime units must identify these pages and take necessary action before more people fall prey to these scammers. At the same time, the government must run countrywide awareness campaigns to educate people about the selection and cash disbursement process under Family Cards, and make them aware of social media scams.

As for partisan influence, we have seen in the past how such influences led to huge inclusion and exclusion errors in social safety net programmes. That is why experts suggest incorporating a strong grievance and appeals mechanism as well as routine recertification into the Family Card programme. Also, a single dynamic registry used across ministries can mitigate the problem of "double-dipping." The government should also be cautious about merging all social safety net programmes as the Family Card may not necessarily fulfil the goals of some specific programmes.

While targeting women-headed households at the pilot phase has been a good decision, once the fully fledged programme is launched, the government should allow for more flexibility and also take into account gender diversity in the selection process. Above all, the BNP leadership must remain steadfast about the proper functioning of this initiative and not allow corruption to seep into this programme, like we have seen in the past.

Educational governance must not regress

Don't relax qualifications for chairpersons of governing bodies

We are concerned by recent discussions about relaxing the educational qualifications for chairpersons of the managing committees and governing bodies of private educational institutions. The Ministry of Education is reportedly considering lowering the requirement for chairpersons of these committees to hold at least a bachelor's degree, with some proposals even suggesting the complete removal of formal qualifications. This has raised serious concerns among education experts about the impact this change may have on the quality of education.

We have nearly 35,000 private institutions functioning at the secondary and college levels. They are governed by managing committees and governing bodies, which oversee almost all administrative and operational tasks—from fund collection and teacher appointments to payroll approval, budget management, and the maintenance of school assets. Chairpersons of these bodies are expected to lead effectively, ensuring that schools provide quality education and sound management.

In the past, no formal educational qualification was required to become the chairperson of a private educational institution's managing committee. However, in May 2024, regulations mandated at least a higher secondary certificate for chairpersons. This requirement was later raised to include bachelor's or master's degrees, depending on the level of the institution. These changes were intended to improve leadership and uphold educational standards. Relaxing these requirements now risks reversing progress and undermining governance at a time when the sector is already struggling to maintain quality. This also raises a crucial question of whether the proposed relaxation intends to allow politically affiliated individuals to occupy these positions.

Our education system has long suffered from policy gaps and a lack of consistent reforms. Although various commissions were formed during the interim government's tenure to drive reforms across various sectors, the education sector was overlooked. Furthermore, low investment has left both public and private institutions struggling to meet even basic educational standards. Therefore, the government must avoid decisions that could prove detrimental to the sector in the long run.

It must prioritise genuine reforms in the education sector, protecting it from political influence, and ensure that qualified and capable individuals fill leadership positions. Any decision that lowers standards would be deeply damaging to the sector. Instead, the focus should be on strengthening governance, providing leadership training, and enabling private institutions to deliver quality education. We hope the government will refrain from taking a decision that undermines the standards of our education system.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mahatma Gandhi begins Salt March

On this day in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement, began the Salt March, a non-violent protest against British rule that brought him international attention.

A youth-quake Jatiya Sangsad must break with the past



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The 13th Jatiya Sangsad, which goes into its maiden session today, is in many ways a first for the country. Installed through a historic transition following an uprising that toppled the longest-running autocracy in Bangladesh, it brings about a generational shift in the political guard. Both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, each in their sixties, are first-time parliamentarians. Two-thirds of the newly elected MPs, responsible for shaping the nation's future, are also first-timers. In fact, a majority of MPs from both the ruling party and the opposition are newcomers to parliamentary affairs.

In a sense, this is a credit to the youthquake of 2024, which has infused fresh blood into Bangladesh's parliamentary democracy. The entry of six parliamentarians from the year-old National Citizen Party (NCP) is also significant, as its leadership is entirely a product of the student-led uprising. There has been debate about the party's electoral alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami, which some argue greatly benefited NCP through Jamaat's well-established membership base, strong financial resources, and highly organised political machinery. Conversely, the fledgling party also suffered setbacks as several prominent figures—women leaders in particular—deserted it over the alliance, citing Jamaat's historical opposition to Bangladesh's war of independence. It may still be too early to judge how much popular support NCP has consolidated, but its six MPs will undoubtedly attract considerable public attention.

Fresh blood brings fresh hope. Understandably, people have high expectations of this Jatiya Sangsad. The new MPs may lack familiarity with procedural complexities, parliamentary jargon, and legislative culture. But their vision of fairness in governance and their commitment to accountability, human rights, the rule of law, and the reduction of socio-economic disparities offer hope for a fresh start.

In the absence of veterans—or at least experienced hands in parliamentary business—some may wonder what differences we can realistically expect. One certainty is that enacting the July National Charter will be the most contentious issue in the early days of this parliament. The ruling BNP MPs have yet to take the second oath as



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members of the proposed Constitution Reform Assembly, while opposition MPs have already done so. The July charter requires MPs to assume the role of members of a constituent assembly, alongside their parliamentary duties, to carry out constitutional reforms pledged by the parties that signed the charter. BNP, however, insists that the constitution requires parliament first to approve the idea of assuming this concurrent role. Only after such approval, they argue, would MPs be required to take the second oath.

The nature of the debate on this procedural issue may offer early clues about what lies ahead for the 13th Jatiya Sangsad. Politics may become interesting again—no longer confined to the corridors of power that ultimately enabled autocracy. The Jamaat chief's pledge to play "a responsible and constructive role" as the opposition is precisely what the country needs, instead of repeated threats of street agitation without exhausting parliamentary avenues.

Bangladesh's parliamentary experience is relatively short, and MPs often drift from their legislative role into administrative authority to such an extent that many view their constituencies as "MP-raj," or personal kingdoms. Some first-time MPs may still harbour misconceptions about their responsibilities. On February 26,

for instance, the well-known Islamic speaker-turned-politician Amir Hamza, now an MP, was heard declaring: "There is no higher authority in Kushtia now; I am the authority." There may well be other similar instances and assertions from across the political aisle that have not come to public notice, but such attitudes to power should not become a feature of our new beginning.

Westminster Code of Conduct for MPs. In Britain, the push for such standards gained momentum after the 1994 "cash-for-questions" scandal, which led to the resignation of Conservative MPs Neil Hamilton and Tim Smith. Both had accepted cash in brown envelopes from Mohamed Al Fayed, the then owner of the famous Harrods department store, who was later posthumously disgraced

The 2024 uprising was not only against autocracy; it was also a revolt against cronyism and kleptocracy. It rejected a system rigged for the benefit of those in power and riddled with conflicts of interest. Questioning impropriety was discouraged, and accountability became a forgotten word. Ministers and MPs routinely shaped policies and rules that advanced their own business interests without declaring personal stakes. Such practices must never return.

In this connection, one may recall how Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem Arman, a newly elected lawmaker from Jamaat, had expressed interest in bringing fresh investment into the troubled mobile financial services provider Nagad, currently under an administrator appointed by Bangladesh Bank. Reports suggested his interaction with the then central bank governor days before the February 12 election, where he described himself as a coordinator for certain foreign investors. Now that he is an MP, any such association with prospective investors should cease immediately. His constituents elected him not to lobby for specific business deals or advance personal interests, but to represent them in shaping laws and policies.

The 13th Jatiya Sangsad should codify a clear code of conduct for its members based on ethical principles and aligned with global best practices, such as the

over allegations of sexual abuse.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life, established after that scandal, has revised the code over time, and its latest version further tightens lobbying rules. MPs are now prohibited from initiating or participating in proceedings or approaches to ministers, other MPs, or officials that seek material benefits for clients who have paid or rewarded them within the previous 12 months. The rules also require MPs undertaking outside work to have a written contract explicitly stating that they cannot lobby on behalf of their employer or provide paid parliamentary advice and that the employer cannot request such services.

Among many other restrictions and obligations, one particularly important provision requires ministers to register with the House all benefits received in their ministerial capacity. This ensures that the public can access complete and timely information about a member's financial interests in one place. Failure to comply with these rules may result in suspension from the House for varying durations, or even expulsion.

Those who play with numbers often describe 13 as "lucky for some." But many also regard it as ominous. We must ensure that the 13th Jatiya Sangsad proves lucky for Bangladesh, setting the country firmly on a new path of democratic revival.

Washington's Iran gamble is already backfiring



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There is something deeply revealing about the way Washington has been speaking about this war. The language has been triumphant, the tone self-congratulatory, and the assessments divorced from reality. Oil refineries bombed, missile launchers taken out, the Iranian navy declared finished and yet, nearly two weeks in, the Strait of Hormuz remains closed, oil is trading at nearly \$120 a barrel, and the regime in Tehran has not only survived but appears to be consolidating around the crisis.

This was never going to be the quick, clean victory that was advertised. The core problem is simple: the US went to war against a country it did not fully understand.

The thinking in Washington went something like this: hit Iran hard enough, destroy enough of its infrastructure, and moderates will emerge from the rubble ready to cut a deal. Iran would pivot away from Russia and China, oil would flow freely again, and the region would reshape itself in the US' favour. Some policymakers argued that sustained military pressure was the only remaining

lever to prevent long-term nuclear escalation. But the execution so far has revealed a fundamental misreading of what Iran actually is.

Iran is a civilisational state with institutional depth, a security apparatus that shows no signs of internal fracture, and a population that, whatever its feelings about the clerical regime, does not want to see the country dismembered by foreign powers. Persians are roughly half the population, but the Baluch, the Azeris, the Kurds, and every major ethnic group harbours a fierce attachment to Iranian statehood. When you bomb a nation, you don't fracture it. Often, you fuse it.

The choice of the new supreme leader signals the direction of travel. This is not a regime scrambling for an exit but one that has decided to dig in.

Consider what the US' war has actually accomplished against its three stated objectives. Iran's nuclear programme was largely dismantled in last year's conflict, and that remains the one genuine strategic achievement. But the ballistic missile and drone programme has been damaged, not

destroyed, and according to regional military analysts, Iran still retains significant capacity. The network of proxies, including forces in Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen, will not collapse because of airstrikes on Tehran. These are organisations with their own roots, their own grievances, and their own local logic entirely separate from decisions made in Iranian ministries.

Iran could not win a conventional fight against the US' airpower. Nobody expected it to. What it needed instead was to make the war economically unbearable, and towards that objective it has made more progress than Washington is comfortable admitting. Closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a fifth of globally traded oil passes, was a calculated message: this is what the world economy looks like when Iran decides to create a problem. Stock markets will feel it. Fuel prices will feel it. And voters in the US, historically sensitive to the price of fuel at the pump, will feel it most strongly. That is the strategy Iran chose, and it is one where US military superiority is largely irrelevant.

The Gulf states present another complication that Washington seems to have underestimated. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar worked carefully to signal neutrality before the conflict began. They made it clear that US bases on their territory would not be used to attack Iran. But those have been utilised anyway. Yet none of these states ostensibly want a regime change in Iran. What they want is containment, because they

understand better than most what a collapsed Iranian state actually means: a nation of 92 million people descending into civil war, with refugee flows and spillover instability across an already fragile region. A failed Iranian state would be catastrophic in ways that a hostile Iranian state is not.

The human cost on the Iranian side is severe. Nearly 1,500 civilians have been killed, and the infrastructure damage will require reconstruction measured in many billions of dollars. The Iranian people are paying an enormous price for a regime most of them did not choose. And yet, the war has given that regime exactly what authoritarian governments prize most in moments of crisis: a foreign enemy, a nationalist cause, and a reason for the opposition to stay quiet.

There will be an off-ramp eventually. The triumphalist language from Washington has already begun softening at the edges. What was once framed as regime change may quietly become "Iran has no nuclear weapons," which is a condition that was arguably the case before any of this began. Victories will be declared and the complexity will be smoothed over in the telling.

But the underlying reality will remain. The regime survived. It hardened. And the lesson every adversary is drawing from this is straightforward: make the war economically painful enough, hold your institutional ground, and wait the US out. That is not a story the United States should want to keep telling.