

Austerity measures are a necessary move

We must navigate this difficult time with careful balance

As the US-Israel war against Iran continues to disrupt global energy flows, Bangladesh, like many other countries, faces the economic aftershocks. With the rising oil prices and the resultant pressure on foreign exchange reserves, the government has announced immediate cost-cutting measures to ease the strain on fuel, gas and electricity supplies. Reportedly, all government and private offices will now operate from 9am to 4pm, while banks will close transactions at 3pm and shut fully at 4pm. Shopping malls will close by 6pm, with exceptions for essential services such as pharmacies and food outlets. The austerity measures will also apply to the prime minister, cabinet ministers and state ministers, whose fuel allocations for official vehicles will be reduced by 30 percent. We welcome these measures.

In addition to reduced working hours, the government expenditure on fuel, power and gas are to be cut by 30 percent, while foreign training for civil servants has been suspended until further notice. Purchases of government vehicles, vessels and aircraft have been put on hold. Hospitality budgets for meetings and seminars will be halved, domestic training programmes reduced by 50 percent, and non-essential travel expenditure cut by 30 percent.

The Middle East remains Bangladesh's key source of fuels and fertilisers, but Gulf suppliers have raised prices or curtailed deliveries. The impact is increasingly visible in our daily economic life. Reduced diesel availability is already affecting irrigation in agriculture, while rising fertiliser and transport costs are putting more burden on farmers. Export-oriented industries are scaling back production due to rising input costs and logistical uncertainty. Concerns are also mounting over potential electricity shortages during peak summer demand, given constrained gas supplies. Recently, the price of cooking gas cylinders has been raised, which will inevitably drive the food costs higher.

Across Asia, governments are responding to the energy shock with a mix of austerity and market interventions. The Philippines has declared a national energy emergency and moved to a four-day work week with consumption caps and subsidies, while Thailand and Vietnam are encouraging remote work and stabilisation funds. India is rationing LPG to prioritise essential use, and Pakistan has introduced compressed workweeks and school closures alongside broader consumption controls. Bangladesh's move towards energy austerity is, therefore, not out of the ordinary. It is necessary.

However, such measures also raise difficult questions about economic resilience in the long run. Shortened working hours may reduce productivity in both public and private sectors, while restrictions on consumption and investment could further slow down an already fragile growth momentum. Reduced business hours may conserve electricity, but they also risk dampening commercial activity, disproportionately affecting small businesses and daily wage earners. Without targeted support, the burden of adjustment risks becoming uneven and unjust. Moreover, the possibility of adjusted school schedules and blended learning raises further concerns about disruptions to education, particularly for students with limited access to digital resources.

The government, therefore, must navigate this crisis with careful balance. Its response must go beyond austerity to ensure that the burden does not fall disproportionately on ordinary citizens. At the same time, it should actively engage with the international community to call for an end to the war and coordinated support for economies bearing its indirect costs.

Arrest Faridpur gang rape perpetrators

The state must ensure women's safety in public places

We are deeply disturbed by a recent report on gang rapes in Faridpur and the fact that such incidents continue to occur unabated. According to the report, one woman was allegedly gang-raped in a moving microbus in the district's Pangsha upazila, while another was gang-raped in a field in Bhanga upazila. These incidents once again expose the extreme insecurity faced by women in public spaces in Bangladesh. That such crimes continue to occur with an alarming regularity is a grim reflection of how deeply entrenched sexual violence has become in our society.

Almost every day, there are reports of women and girls being harassed and attacked in public spaces, on the streets, in workplaces, and even within their own homes. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), in the first two months of this year alone, 66 women and girls were raped across the country. However, these figures reflect only the reported incidents, while many more remain unreported. We must ask: why are such crimes continue to take place unabated? And why do perpetrators so often feel emboldened to commit them?

Worryingly, according to a 2024 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), around 50 percent of women in the country don't know where to report incidents of assault. In cases of rape, even when incidents are reported and cases are filed, conviction rates remain low and uncertain. Lengthy legal processes, inadequate investigations, weak forensic capacity, and insufficient witness protection all contribute to a system where accountability is often delayed or denied altogether. This culture of impunity sends a dangerous message to potential offenders: that sexual violence carries limited consequences. At the same time, survivors are often left to bear the burden alone. Beyond the physical trauma, they face severe psychological distress, social stigma, and a lack of adequate state support. Without strong medical, legal and psychological assistance, the pursuit of justice becomes all the more difficult.

As cases have already been filed by the survivors in the Faridpur incidents, we call for the immediate arrest of all those involved and demand that they be brought to trial without delay. Justice must be swift and transparent in such cases. At the same time, the authorities must ensure full medical and psychological support for the survivors, along with adequate protection for them and their families. We urge the government to also make an unequivocal commitment to ensuring women's safety everywhere and to bring an end to all forms of gender-based violence once and for all.

Austerity and the crisis of fuel, confidence and coordination

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Last week, while buying vegetables from an open market, I could not help feeling dissatisfied over the hiked price of every item. "It seems you are still in a moon-sighting mode," I said, to which the seller responded nonchalantly, "What can I do? There is not enough supply after Eid." The market had yet to resume its usual motion. This was the week when we were supposed to recalibrate, when offices returned to their routine, factories picked up their rhythm, and transport networks started wheeling. But the flight to regularity was stalled by both geo- and domestic political concerns, leading to increased uncertainty and anxiety among businesses and consumers alike.

The proverbial flap of butterflies—understatement intended—in the Gulf straits has caused a tsunami in the rest of the world. The queues at the refilling stations extend beyond miles; altercations among punters stretch beyond their patience limits as we muse over the tit-for-tat missions in Tehran and Tel Aviv. Even though we are listed among the few privileged countries whose ships are allowed through the Strait of Hormuz, the fear of fuel shortages remains high. UK-based newspaper *The Independent* has marked Bangladesh as "the country that could be the first to run out of fuel

temporary rationing, and directives on "economical use" highlight our structural vulnerability. We import roughly 95 percent of our primary energy requirement, making us susceptible to global price shocks and foreign exchange pressures. In theory, the call for austerity is pragmatic demand management, but its timing could not have been worse. The decision comes when the economy has

compressed. Just when these sectors need extended hours for economic recovery, they are faced with a logistical freeze. The authorities have shortened banking hours, hampering coordination with customs, transport, and utilities. Real economic loss is likely to result from these austerity measures.

Ironically, many of these administrative decisions stem from the public sector that has a different temporal logic. The system often normalises shorter hours and extended holidays. The performance metrics of bureaucracy frequently fail to align with the urgent needs of private sector recovery. This creates a structural asymmetry that hinders effective governance and intensifies economic challenges, especially during periods of crisis when rapid action is essential to

initial attempt at rationing encouraged informal markets to thrive and led to selective enforcement.

Second, there is the question of perception. Austerity is not only about economic adjustment but also about legitimacy. Households implicitly question whether they share the burden when asked to conserve energy, limit consumption, and absorb the rising costs. Are elites equally constrained? The SUVs with hooters are still roaming the streets while ride-sharing bikers are forced to spend one-third of their shifts collecting fuel. Is discipline being demanded only downward?

This brings us to the third point: the question of governance style. The formation of monitoring cells must entail transparency, grievance mechanisms, and participatory communication. Tools of enforcement can poke deeper tension: austerity can stabilise an economy, but it can also destabilise trust. The post-holiday moment magnifies this tension because it exposes the lived experience of policy. A garment worker returning to Dhaka does not encounter "automatic pricing mechanisms"; they encounter higher transport fares. A factory manager does not see "demand management"; they see delayed shipments and rising input costs. Small traders perceive fuel directives as a limitation rather than as a sign of macroeconomic caution. And yet, alternatives exist—not in abandoning austerity, but in recalibrating it.

We expect the government to make burden-sharing visible. If fuel prices are adjusted, there should be targeted protections for those most affected. Demand management should prioritise transparency over coercion. Temporary limits can work, but they must be accompanied by clear communication of stock levels, timelines, and grievance channels. Otherwise, rationing becomes a theatre of control rather than a tool of stability. Above all, the public sector must sync its tempo with the private economy during recovery periods.

Austerity, in other words, must be intelligent. The danger is not austerity itself, but austerity that is poorly timed and distributed, which can lead to increased social unrest and economic instability if not managed effectively. The government must demonstrate its sincerity in addressing structural asymmetries while urging citizens to conserve, endure, and adapt. Any administrative imposition must have narrative coherence. The ongoing energy crisis is real, as are its fiscal constraints. But crises do not only test economies; they test political imagination. The question is not whether we conserve energy but how we conserve legitimacy. At this moment, we must fuel our economy with trust, not abstinence, to return to our rhythm.



Motorcyclists wait in long queues to purchase fuel at a refilling station in Narsingdi.

FILE PHOTO: JAHIDUL ISLAM JOY

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due to the US-Iran war." Although the government sources cited in the report vehemently deny any such possibility, recent austerity measures make the warning quite likely.

Attempts like fuel price passes,

just begun to restart from a prolonged festive shutdown. Then there are the fun-seekers who are already eyeing another long weekend by manoeuvring the Bangla New Year holiday next week. Even under normal conditions, the post-holiday economic recovery phase produces friction. With austerity overlaying this moment, when fuel becomes pricier and less available, the friction can deepen further. On top of that, there are some mixed administrative signals: rationing of fuel, school openings on alternate days, and a plan to allow tax-free EV buses for educational institutions.

Then there is this divide between public and private sectors. The private sector does not have the luxury of getting a salary from a national exchequer. It must maintain its cash flow despite different shutdowns. Export-oriented industries—particularly RMG—operate under rigid delivery schedules dictated by global buyers. The deadlines do not get obliterated; they simply get

facilitate recovery efforts. This is where austerity begins to feel less like policy and more like imbalance.

To be clear, Bangladesh's current measures are not austerity in the classical deflationary sense. The situation is not akin to the European context marked by wholesale fiscal contraction. Instead, the approach is a hybrid model where automatic fuel pricing shifts global cost fluctuations onto the consumers in smaller increments. The administrative controls are imposed to manage demand as well as to signal discipline. But the underlying logic is not free from familiar risks.

First, let us consider the question of distribution. The austerity measures have created a sensation that prices may go up, leading scrupulous traders to hoard essentials, including fuel. If the government is forced to adjust fuel prices, the charges will cascade through transport costs into food prices and eventually affect every household, particularly the low-income ones. The

Remembering our songbird, Dalia Nausheen

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I woke up before dawn on Wednesday to a call from my younger sister, Nazia. The ICU doctors had asked that the family come in. A quiet fear settled in my chest. And then, as gently as a song reaching its last note, my first cousin Dalia Nausheen, our beloved Dalibu left us.

She fought for so long, decades of illness, a relentless battle with cancer that would have dimmed most spirits. But not hers. Nothing could keep her from what she loved most: music, travelling, friendship, and above all, her fierce independence. Even in her final days, when the body was tiring, her mind was moving ahead, planning the next journey, the next performance, the next step. That is how she will remain with us: always looking forward, always alive with purpose.

Dalia was the daughter of legendary architect Muzharul Islam and Husne Ara Islam, born into a home where

art, intellect, and culture were not just appreciated but lived. Our childhood in Paribagh was not ordinary. It was a world of constant movement, of voices and ideas, of music that never quite stopped. We grew up surrounded by artistes, thinkers, and leaders, absorbing without even realising—a way of life rooted in creativity and expression.

We took our first steps into music together at Chhayanaut. Those early lessons shaped us, but more importantly, they bound us. Whether it was music, cricket, drama or dance, we cousins shared a closeness that defined our lives. In that shared world, Dalibu stood out, not by trying but because she was. Her voice carried something deep, something that stayed with you long after the song ended.

In 1971, while still so young, she crossed into then Calcutta and joined the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha. With nothing but her

voice, she became part of the struggle, singing for freedom fighters, for refugees, for a nation just born.

Music, for Dalibu, was never just performance; it was devotion. Whether she sang DL Roy, Atul Prasad, or semi-classical compositions, there was always depth, always meaning. It was a lifelong journey of refinement, even till her final days.

But her creativity could not be contained within music alone. It flowed into everything she touched: jewellery design, cooking, hand painting sarees. When I began my journey with block-printed sarees in early 1984, she was there, designing my first exhibition with care and imagination. That was Dalibu—present, engaged, quietly shaping the worlds of those she loved.

She was also the centre of a vast and vibrant circle of friends, many of whom had stood at the forefront in 1971, and many who continue to shape our cultural life today. People were drawn to her, not just because of her talent, but because of her spirit. She was warm, gracious, and deeply loyal, but not quite predictable. Her wit could disarm you, her dry humour could catch you off guard, and when she chose, her words could land with sharp, unflinching clarity. She spoke her mind, always.

Life asked much of her. She lost her husband, Azad Hafiz, in 2014. Her sons, Diraan and Ayan, built their lives

abroad. Elder brother Sajjad Shahrear passed away recently. Yet, she never allowed loneliness or hardship to define her. She carried herself with dignity, choosing resilience over compliance, independence over dependence. Her other elder brother, Tanvir Mazhar, stood by her with unwavering devotion, a constant presence in her life.

Even towards the end, she remained connected to her arts. Her last performance at *The Daily Star*, organised by Gems of Nazrul on the birth anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam in October 2025, was a memorable one—a refusal to step away from the stage that had defined her.

Her contributions did not go unrecognised. The Ekushey Padak in 2020 and the Nazrul Padak in 2024 were acknowledgements of a life given to music and to the cultural soul of this country. But for us, her true legacy lies in the memories she leaves behind, in the lives she touched, and in the music that continues to echo.

Saying goodbye is never easy. It asks us to accept what the heart resists. But perhaps with Dalibu, we can hold on to something more enduring. Not the loss, but the presence she created. The gatherings she inspired and the courage she embodied.

Your battle was long, your music was our solace. Now you rest, my dear Dalibu. And in the quiet that follows, we can still hear you...