

## A much-awaited verdict

### ICT ruling in Abu Sayed case marks a vital step towards justice for July killings

This was one of those cases that always seemed likely to be resolved sooner than most others being tried at the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) following the July uprising, not just because of its seemingly open and shut nature, but also because of what it symbolised: a defining moment of accountability for one of the uprising's most significant episodes. Abu Sayed's killing on July 16, 2024, as he stood with his arms outstretched before a marauding group of cops, became a turning point that transformed the movement from one of quota reform to a revolt against state repression and eventually ousted Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime. On Thursday, ICT-2 sentenced two former policemen to death, for directly shooting Abu Sayed, and 28 others to various jail terms in this connection. This is a moment worth reflecting on.

By holding not only those who pulled the triggers but also others accountable under the doctrine of command responsibility and complicity, the tribunal has reinforced an essential principle: that abuses of power, especially against unarmed citizens, cannot go unanswered regardless of the perpetrators' rank or position. In doing so, it has offered a measure of institutional response to a crime that came to symbolise the total breakdown of law, accountability, and trust in the very institutions meant to protect citizens.

This is the fourth judgment in cases filed on charges of crimes against humanity committed during the uprising, with two each delivered by ICT-1 and ICT-2. While reactions have naturally varied—from the victim's family and co-protesters expressing relief but also a sense that those higher up the chain of command have not been punished sufficiently, to the defence signalling its intent to appeal upon review of the full judgment—the verdict has nonetheless reopened the conversation on accountability for the July killings. However, the fact that only six of the 30 convicted were present in the dock to receive the judgment, with the rest remaining absconding, has raised concerns about whether it can be implemented fully. The credibility of this process will depend a lot on whether those still beyond reach are brought to justice.

The ICT's ruling is more than a legal conclusion in one case, however. It is part of a wider undertaking to assign accountability and offer some closure to wounds that still remain politically and emotionally raw. It is, therefore, vital that we don't remain fixated on the symbolism of convictions. The consistency and fairness with which justice is pursued across all cases arising from the uprising are of equal importance, especially amid allegations of impropriety levelled against a section of the tribunal's prosecution in recent times as well as questions surrounding the lengthy pre-trial detentions of some of the accused. Without sustained institutional follow-through, there is a risk that even landmark verdicts may come to be seen as inadequately reached.

Finally, this moment is also a clarion call for the authorities to ensure that the conditions and failures that led to a tragedy like Abu Sayed's are never repeated. Otherwise, the lessons of July 2024 may fade without truly being learned.

## Piloting hybrid classes a good move

### Parents', students' concerns should be considered

Amid an ongoing energy crisis, the government is set to introduce a blended learning model in selected schools in Dhaka from Saturday, combining physical and online classes in an effort to reduce energy consumption. Students will attend physical classes on Saturdays, Mondays, and Wednesdays, while classes will be held online on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. This schedule will not be applicable to primary schools. Given our previous experience of fully online classes during the pandemic, it will be prudent for the government to assess the pilot project's effectiveness carefully and in detail before making broader decisions about primary schools and institutions outside the capital.

Earlier cabinet-level discussions explored ways to adjust academic schedules to save energy while ensuring continuity in education. While the blended model has emerged as one option, it has faced resistance from stakeholders. At a recent seminar attended by the education minister and the state minister for primary and mass education, students, teachers, guardians, and educationists opposed the reintroduction of online classes at this stage. They argued that remote learning risks widening learning gaps and cannot match the effectiveness of in-person teaching. Teachers, too, raised concerns about student engagement, assessment, and maintaining instructional quality in a hybrid format.

During the pandemic, prolonged school closures exposed deep structural weaknesses in our education system. Many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and even many in urban areas, struggled with access, logistical support, and learning continuity. Studies show that learning losses from that period have remained largely unaddressed. A 2022 Education Watch report found that most students did not receive adequate remedial support when schools reopened after the pandemic, while a large proportion had to rely on private tuition to catch up. The current situation differs in that the energy crisis is not as much of an emergency as the pandemic was, nor is it as out-of-control. Still, reintroducing online classes, even partially, must not reproduce the aforementioned inequalities.

We appreciate the government's restrained approach to introducing a hybrid model and its awareness in including only well-established schools with large student populations in the pilot programme. Nevertheless, we urge authorities to ensure adequate logistical support, including reliable electricity and internet access for all students. Equally important is proper teacher training to make online instruction effective. The success of blended learning relies on infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and digital access—areas where gaps still persist. Unless these are addressed, hybrid education risks creating further inequalities in education.

## BLENDED LEARNING IN AN ENERGY CRISIS

# Innovation or institutional amnesia?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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"My classroom has four ceiling fans, but if we are to attend online classes from home, we will need 50 fans."

This social media post from a schoolboy has the potential to become a textbook arithmetical problem or a sequel to the *Emperor's New Clothes*. The simplicity of the comment reminds us how grown-ups obsessed with the big picture often miss out on smaller things. The boy was reacting to the government's move to switch to blended learning, splitting the week between three days of in-person and virtual classes each. By any measure, this plan is a policy born of constraint: shortage of fuel, spikes in fuel costs, and thickening traffic congestion. It probably offers a pragmatic solution by reducing the physical attendance of students in selected schools and digitising learning for those with the necessary infrastructure to keep the system running. But beneath the pragmatism lies a repetition of unresolved failures of Covid-era experimentation with remote learning. As this pilot programme is rolled out, the government must decide whether it is a pedagogical reform or an ad hoc adaptive innovation.

The education minister, when announcing the pilot programme, was right to point out that every crisis offers an opportunity. But before bringing in changes to our rigid schooling system, we need to analyse the risks and benefits further. After all, as the boy quoted earlier has shown, in energy terms, the solution redistributes demand rather than suppressing it. True, by halving physical attendance, the plan has the potential of reducing peak-hour congestion in cities like Dhaka. But is the traffic or communication problem the same in small towns and villages? If there is a plan to scale the model to include less urban areas in the future, adopting a national policy based on urban experiences would by no means be wise.

During our romance with blended learning, we saw the benefits of pedagogical diversification. We introduced our teachers to various digital platforms, trained them with asynchronous learning, and encouraged them to use multimedia content and adopt self-paced engagement. These features are still largely absent in conventional classrooms. The energy crisis can help us return to the digital

institutionalisation that began during the pandemic and accelerate the integration of technology into education. However, the problem with these initiatives is that the promised benefits are conditional. To benefit from the transition to online teaching, we need institutional infrastructure, continuous professional training, and socioeconomic readiness. Focusing on selected schools will expose the structural inequality as well as the digital divide. The immediate concern is far from technological; it involves our socioeconomic reality. According to a 2021 national survey, only 18.7 percent of children participated in remote learning during pandemic



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closures, with rural participation dropping to 15.9 percent and primary-level engagement to a mere 13.1 percent. These are not marginal gaps; they are systemic exclusions.

Our previous brush with blended learning made us aware of a two-speed education system: one for digitally equipped, urban, middle-class students, and another for those without devices, connectivity, or conducive home environments. The minister's "voluntary" framing, by urging "capable institutions" to opt in, may make resource-heavy institutions feel obligated. Elite schools will adopt and adapt under compulsion, while under-resourced institutions will lag to widen inequality.

Central to the teaching model lies teacher preparedness. Unless teachers are aware of online instructional design, assessment, and engagement, this system is likely to fail. This is

evident in the candid comment of a newly recruited teacher. With no experience with online classes, the teacher is worried about sustaining student attention and rightly so. Digital classrooms require a different set of protocols and etiquette. Many students may not have the required bandwidth, data, or gadgets for an entire school day. And if the camera is off, it is impossible to know what the student is doing on the other side of the black mirror. Engaging them online is a skill attained through training on digital pedagogy, content development, and instructional technology. Otherwise, online classes risk becoming passive lecture broadcasts with minimal interaction. In the worst-case scenario, classes become symbolic exercises to satisfy policy compliance without delivering learning outcomes.

The pilot policy must consider the household economy of education. For primary-level students, online learning requires adult supervision. Most households in the city rely on dual incomes. So, the policy must address the issue of working parents who

screen time, many students suffer from attention deficiency. The new model could impact social learning, formative assessment, and teacher-student rapport.

The absence of structured feedback loops during the pandemic led to significant learning loss, controversially complemented by an auto-pass decree. The assessment integrity was compromised because few schools have plagiarism software, and it was impossible to know who was doing the students' homework. Reintroducing a hybrid model without addressing these deficits risks normalising suboptimal learning outcomes.

But the greatest irony of all is that this solution addresses an energy crisis by increasing reliance on electricity-dependent digital systems. The policy assumes that all students of "capable schools" have reliable household electricity, uninterrupted internet access, and device availability. But given the prevalence of load shedding, unstable internet connectivity, and device scarcity, it is possible to guarantee that all students can join synchronous online classes?

Then there are the invisible concerns of exposing students to online spaces at an early stage. It would be interesting to see what measures the government has taken in terms of data security, student privacy, and platform dependency. What about the mental well-being of students who may be affected by the isolationist nature of online teaching? How about students with different needs? In many households, girls may face disproportionate domestic responsibilities during home-based learning days. Furthermore, a policy piloted in Dhaka may not translate to rural contexts, yet its eventual scaling could ignore these differences. Instead of seeing blended learning as a stopgap measure, the government must think of systemic transformation, aiming for a phased implementation of digital learning. It can start with higher education and senior secondary levels, where digital readiness is relatively higher. Teachers' certification in digital pedagogy should be made mandatory as this policy is rolled out. The implementation will require infrastructure investment, like subsidies on devices and internet, as well as availability of reliable power solutions.

While the government is right to insist that education must not stall in times of crisis, it must also admit that continuity without quality is a hollow achievement. The risk is not that blended learning will fail outright; it is that it will succeed in a fragmented manner while superficially masking deeper inequities and pedagogical erosion.

## Removing vendors won't fix streets



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Some days ago, while passing through Panthapath on my way to work, I saw many people, including day labourers and rickshaw pullers, gathered with sombre expressions: the roadside food stalls they depended on for affordable meals had been removed. This highlighted for me how urban street vendor removal disrupts essential economic and social lifelines and made me wonder whether city management can move beyond short-term clearances towards a more sustainable approach.

Dhaka's city administration has stepped up efforts to remove street vendors to improve traffic flow, urban aesthetics, and commuter safety. From a commuter's perspective, this may feel like a necessary intervention as stalls often block sidewalks and streets, causing congestion and making movement difficult. However, informal markets are an integral part of the economic chain. Small producers handle production of goods, middlemen handle transport to the vendors, and vendors sell directly to low-income consumers. Removing stalls disrupts this chain, reduces income, and limits access to affordable

food and essentials. Policies aimed at improving urban order can therefore unintentionally harm thousands of livelihoods and prove to be largely ineffective.

We have seen it before: authorities clear the streets of vendors, protests erupt and, within days, streets are reoccupied. Even after designated markets like Bangabazar and the Dhanmondi hawkers' market were established, thousands of vendors have continued to operate across the streets of Dhaka and other urban areas. Removing such a significant number of vendors is a measure that carries substantial risks, including breaking existing supply chains, triggering protests, and possibly disrupting the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. In this case, what long-term, formalised solution can protect the interests of citizens, aid in traffic management, and simultaneously safeguard the livelihoods of the street vendors while ensuring that low-income consumers are not overlooked?

One approach is to test solutions in a single zone before scaling up. Authorities could designate a street

or cluster where vendors operate under regulated conditions, monitor the results, and refine policies based on lessons learned. Interim measures might include time-bound vending permissions or temporary zones, ensuring that income and access to food continue while longer-term plans are developed. Physical measures can also prevent unsafe or unplanned vending. Raising dividers along busy roads can discourage vendors from setting up in the middle of traffic lanes. Footpaths—often used by informal shops—can be made unavailable with the installation of trees, benches, and waste bins, thus discouraging vendors from occupying these spaces. On the road, careful placement of bus bays, traffic signalling, and speed regulation can prevent vendors from setting up in unsafe places. These well-planned measures will not only keep streets safe for commuters but also prevent the recurring cycle of vendors setting up shop in dangerous or obstructive locations.

A long-term strategy may begin with rehabilitating existing vendors, although this requires further resources and planning. The government could develop a database capturing vendors' skills, experiences, and locations to guide pilot projects. Migrants from rural areas could be offered alternative employment, vocational training, loans, or support for freelancing or overseas opportunities. Dedicated vending zones could help generate government revenue, provide consumers with convenient access to goods, and sustain livelihoods. Allowing vendors

to operate during off-peak hours—such as in the early morning for breakfast stalls—ensures commuters can move safely while consumers retain access to affordable food. With thoughtful urban planning, areas where informal markets can coexist with city traffic can be identified, supported by infrastructure such as shelters, waste management, and pedestrian pathways. Formalisation is also essential as licensing of vendors provides legal recognition, access to training, and support for hygiene, business management, and microfinance. In return, the government could collect revenue systematically, improving city finances while supporting small-scale entrepreneurship.

Dhaka's planners face a complex challenge: modernising infrastructure and managing traffic while keeping the informal economy alive. Current practices, which prioritise street clearance over inclusive planning, fail to serve commuters, residents, or vendors effectively. The solution must be holistic; balancing traffic management, pedestrian safety, urban aesthetics, and economic sustainability. Policymakers must seek solutions where all stakeholders see their interests reflected. The goal is not merely to remove vendors but to rethink urban management in a way that balances order and opportunity. When cities are planned to account for both mobility and economic activity, they give way to spaces where growth, social equity, and order can coexist. In a rapidly expanding metropolis like Dhaka, such an approach is essential.