

Is Boeing deal more about geopolitics?

It creates long-term financial obligations for Bangladesh

The decision to spend \$3.7 billion on American jetliners is partly a calculation of geopolitical intent. Under a deal with Boeing, Biman Bangladesh Airlines will buy 14 new aircraft—eight 787-10 Dreamliners, two 787-9s and four 737 MAX jets. It fulfils a commitment made by the interim government in February, when Dhaka and Washington signed a reciprocal trade agreement to address Bangladesh's \$7 billion surplus with the United States.

The politics behind all this is not difficult to read. The Trump administration, now in its second term, has been clear about its preference for reciprocal arrangements. As Washington began signalling tariff threats, Dhaka moved quickly to commit to buying American goods—and to make those commitments visible. Purchasing Boeing aircraft fit neatly into that logic and appeared to have resonated in Washington. Navigating a fragile transition, the interim government ultimately yielded to American pressure, leaving a large financial obligation for the next administration to inherit, just days before Bangladesh's national election.

The choice of Boeing over Airbus carries its own subtext. The Awami League government had announced plans to purchase ten Airbus jets, a move that would have deepened Biman's ties with European manufacturers and signalled strategic diversification. After the mass uprising of 2024, the interim government reversed course. Airbus argued, reasonably, that its aircraft would diversify Biman's all-Boeing fleet. Boeing, however, made the stronger case that it had influence in Washington. What stands out is not Boeing's victory over Airbus, but the circumstances in which the decision was made. The original trade agreement was presented as a diplomatic success, yet it was concluded without any scrutiny, at a time when no parliament was in place.

Geopolitical logic and commercial logic do not always align. Biman currently operates around 19 aircraft on international routes, well below the 30-35 it is believed to require. The government will provide a sovereign guarantee to underwrite the purchase, meaning that if Biman cannot service the debt, the state will. Payments are expected to extend over 20 years, costing between Tk 1,500 crore and Tk 2,000 crore annually.

To be fair, the timing is not entirely misplaced. The near completion of Dhaka airport's third terminal offers Biman an opportunity to expand capacity and position Dhaka as a regional hub. The wide-body Dreamliners, designed for long-haul efficiency, could strengthen services to Europe and the Gulf. Passenger demand is rising. A flag carrier that consistently under-invests in its fleet risks losing routes to competitors. The harder question is governance. Biman has not historically operated as an airline where aircraft are ordered solely based on network strategy, yield management or fuel economics. Political considerations have shaped its routes, staffing and procurement decisions. Unless there is a break from that pattern, Bangladesh will be left with an expensive fleet and a generation of debt.

Appeasing the US with a massive Boeing order, some believe, is a shrewd way to mitigate tariff risks. But the deal's real value will depend on the less visible work of running a better-managed airline. That is the more difficult commitment—and the one that ultimately matters most.

Stop the use of toxic chemicals in plastic

Govt must restrict high-risk additives in consumer products

While the debate on plastic largely focuses on visible waste and pollution, the invisible chemical hazards present in everyday plastic products have received far too little attention. Now, a new report by the Environment and Social Development Organisation (ESDO) has underscored the risks of exposure to two unregulated toxic chemicals—phthalates and bisphenols—in plastic products. Found in food containers, children's toys, school supplies, receipts, adhesives, and packaging materials, these substances can cause hormone disruption, reproductive disorders, developmental problems in children, and cancer. That such chemicals continue to be used freely in consumer goods should alarm both policymakers and the public.

Bangladesh produces more than three million tonnes of plastic annually, with the domestic market valued at over \$3 billion and growing rapidly. The industry is heavily reliant on imported raw materials and chemical additives, with around 15 shipments of bisphenol A (BPA) imported in 2025 alone. Unfortunately, chemical safety oversight has failed to keep pace with this expansion. An earlier ESDO study found phthalates in 30 out of 47 erasers used by schoolchildren. Another joint study found BPA in a majority of thermal paper receipts collected from retail outlets in Dhaka. Research in industrial areas such as Savar and Tongi detected significant concentrations of phthalates, posing ecological and carcinogenic risks. A separate study by ESDO and BAN Toxics found hazardous chemicals such as lead, mercury, cadmium, and chromium in many plastic toys sold in Dhaka markets, with some items containing levels far above accepted international safety limits.

However, existing laws do not adequately address hazardous additives, mandatory labelling remains absent, while consumers are largely unaware of what they are handling or bringing into their homes. Over the past decades, poor regulation, weak monitoring, and lax enforcement have allowed plastic pollution to persist across the country. Although polythene bags were banned in 2002, they remain widely used. Likewise, the High Court's directive to end the use of single-use plastic in hotels, motels, and restaurants in coastal areas has largely been ignored. Plastic pollution is choking our rivers, canals, and waterbodies, but existing regulations have done little to address the crisis due to a serious lack of political will.

This must change. We urge the government to take urgent policy action to protect people from the harmful impacts of plastic. It must regulate high-risk additives, introduce chemical-specific rules, and make labelling and disclosure mandatory. It must also set modern standards for plastic manufacturing, closely monitor imports of raw materials, and carry out regular product testing. Industries, too, must ensure that their growth does not come at the expense of public health and safety.

Politicisation of our professions

Partisanship is destroying ethics, values, and professionalism



THE THIRD VIEW

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A fact that we don't discuss much, and seem to have taken as a given, is the politicisation of our various professions. Over the years, this phenomenon has destroyed our ability to achieve professional excellence, substituting meritocracy with mediocrity, ability with obedience, ambition with lethargy, critical thinking with sycophancy, and the desire to build self-worth with a lack of sense of shame. We would rather genuflect than be genuine.

Most of our professional bodies are divided on partisan lines; as a result, professional standards are getting sidelined to promote partisan interests, which serves personal ambition—to occupy leadership positions or take advantage of opportunities—masquerading in the name of party loyalty. Our doctors, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and members of many other professions have openly allowed professionalism to take a second place to party interests, thereby lowering the standard of our respective professions. One of the key factors that have prevented our modernisation and progress is politicisation of public service bodies like the bureaucracy, administration, and law enforcement institutions, whose accountability has shifted from the people and transformed into loyalty to the ruling party of the day.

We start with the doctors because it is a profession that deals with our lives. The politicisation of doctors' representative bodies like Doctors Association of Bangladesh (DAB) and Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad (Swachip) started several decades ago. They were set up in 1989 and 1993 with the backing of BNP and

Politicisation also afflicted bureaucracy and the law enforcement bodies in a deadly way. Being part of the government, they could not publicly take sides, but the undeclared affiliations were well-known and proven by the benefits that one group got as against the other. The cost of such affiliations in bureaucracy was clearly visible in terms of accountability and efficiency. The most significant impact was on nurturing merit.

Awami League, respectively. These two bodies practically took over the health sector when their respective parties came to power. They determined all the key government postings and new appointments and had a say in allocation of funds and major projects. How successful one is as a doctor does not matter; how powerful one is in these bodies determines everything. Can a health sector, whose basic ethos is public service, operate this way? Doesn't the sector's present-day ills—after 55 years of our independence—prove it? Obviously, every doctor has the right to have their political affiliation, and they may even participate in their respective party activities freely. But to allow politics and partisanship to dominate all relevant policies, priorities, decisions, and appointments is suicidal.

The politicisation and partisanship of teachers, especially those at the university level, have greatly damaged our higher education. The formation of various teachers groups—white, blue, and pink panels, linked with BNP-Jamaat, Awami League, and the left, respectively—created serious division within the teachers' community, greatly affecting the academic atmosphere in most of our public universities. Important postings and granting of scholarships and research funds all followed party lines.

Appointment of pro-VCs, proctors, hall provosts and even house tutors showed clear signs of favouritism. Scholarship disappeared as a condition of success or recognition.

Partisan teachers' groups gradually linked up with students' parties of similar leanings, giving rise to a shameful teacher-student divide that crossed all lines of dignity and courtesy, with party lines becoming the only factor for success. Partisan students felt empowered to insult teachers in opposition groups, and sometimes would even assault them

receive all official support and foreign appointments (at press wings), and get official patronage. During the 15-plus years of rule by Sheikh Hasina, we could hardly see any pro-BNP journalists at any official functions. Not even at the National Press Club, just as we don't see any pro-AL journalists there now.

The journalists who were part of this process did not seem to realise that having political affiliations revealed a bias that was antithetical to the values of neutrality and objectivity—the core values of this profession. This significantly reduced public trust in journalism, which journalists themselves did not seem to realise, or they ignored it knowingly. Today, hundreds of journalists from one side are accused of murder, without a shred of proof even after nearly 21 months, and journalists from the other side are not uttering a word. Okay, don't protest, but at least ask. Such is the political tilt.

Politicisation also afflicted bureaucracy and the law enforcement

lawyers. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) cancelled the nomination papers of 42 lawyers out of 90 candidates in the election scheduled for May 13-14, citing their affiliation with the Awami League whose political activities have been banned under the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act, 2025. With one stroke, electoral rivals were totally removed. The SCBA should disclose under what provision of their own article of association did it take that action. The fact that the association has so far refused to make its formal resolution public raises questions about the attempt to hide something that the public deserves to know.

An organisation's activities may be banned, but an individual's rights cannot be taken away without due process. Not allowing 42 lawyers to participate in an election, for which they are legally and professionally qualified, means depriving them of their legal and constitutional rights.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

physically with behind-the-scenes encouragement from teachers of the same political line. One can easily imagine the near-total loss of academic atmosphere in these universities and how muscle power gradually prevailed over freedom of thought, ideas and speech. Teachers devoted to academics were gradually sidelined and could only survive by remaining totally silent.

What perhaps caused the greatest damage to these academic institutions were the appointments of VCs that were determined on political considerations. Many of them were not even remotely qualified for such appointments. They formed their own groups of teachers and students and ran these academic institutions as personal fiefdoms, totally destroying their academic atmosphere. Sadly, VC appointments during the interim government era did not extricate themselves from this legacy.

Appointments of principals at well-known colleges across the country regrettably followed the same pattern. Those who got the posts because

bodies in a deadly way. Being part of the government, they could not publicly take sides, but the undeclared affiliations were well-known and proven by the benefits that one group got as against the other. The cost of such affiliations in bureaucracy was clearly visible in terms of accountability and efficiency. The most significant impact was on nurturing merit. Good officers, if they wanted proper evaluation, had to exhibit, if not direct party loyalty, at least a clear tilt. Promotion and evaluation became based less on merit and more on partisanship, and the louder they stood out, the bigger the award was. Accountability disappeared and sycophancy took over.

The administration entered perhaps their darkest phase when elections started to be usurped after 2014. To manipulate the elections, the then ruling party needed the bureaucrats and law enforcers more; consequently, their power and privileges became literally unquestioned, as exemplified by the wealth accumulated by former IGP Benazir Ahmed and others.

Most of our professional bodies are divided on partisan lines; as a result, professional standards are getting sidelined to promote partisan interests, which serves personal ambition—to occupy leadership positions or take advantage of opportunities—masquerading in the name of party loyalty. Our doctors, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and members of many other professions have openly allowed professionalism to take a second place to party interests, thereby lowering the standard of our respective professions.

of their party affiliations were more beholden to the local MPs and student parties in running their institutions.

In both these categories of academic institutions, merit and scholarship gradually disappeared, making students miserable victims of politicisation.

My own profession, journalism, is a victim of this politicisation as well. Like the doctors, journalists have also been divided along partisan lines. Maybe it started earlier, but from 1991 onwards, we could clearly see that whichever party would be in power, its journalist-affiliate bodies would dominate the professional bodies. They would

The lawyers whose nominations were cancelled did not submit their applications as candidates of the Awami League; they reportedly did so in their individual capacity. Today, the SCBA is practically taking away their right to contest elections, and tomorrow, they may use the same law to deprive them of their right to practise. So, the decision by SCBA has serious implications and must be thoroughly examined.

What worries us is the fact that legally questionable actions are being taken by a body that is supposed to uphold the law at the highest level of the state—the Supreme Court. Lawyers practising at the apex court are expected to act as the highest representatives of the law and the legal system as a whole. They are considered officials of the law, an essential part of the justice delivery system. They are definitely the moral torchbearers of justice and upholders of its highest standards.

As an ordinary citizen, my understanding is that, along with the "letter of the law," there is the bigger horizon of the "spirit of the law." The SCBA must see the wider picture of the impact of its decision on society, democracy, personal rights, individual freedom, and the overall values of the legal system. To use it for the political benefit of the moment, and the personal benefit of some, is to play with the law, justice system, the image of the apex court, and public trust. This is not only dangerous but extremely damaging for the reputation of the present government whose head, the prime minister, has strongly declared that he is against such a phenomenon. It lowers public faith in the law and in our constitution. We should never let that happen—definitely not by lawyers who are members of the Supreme Court Bar Association.

I conclude by repeating the initial question about how politicisation of our professions has held Bangladesh back. Take a look at the world and realise where every profession has gone, is going, and where they are headed. Do we have any chance of competing without transforming ourselves? The place to begin is to restore professionalism in every profession and institution in our country.