REZAUDDIN STALIN'S SHILPAKALA and its unfinished reform

DOWEL BISWAS

When Rezauddin Stalin took charge as Director General (DG) of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy last September, he inherited an institution he describes as "disorderly and chaotic", marked by political divisions, corruption and deep disillusionment among artists and employees.

He was taking over an institution already struggling with the consequences of a turbulent political transition. Liaquat Ali Lucky, who had led the Academy for more than a decade, resigned in August 2024 after the fall of the Awami League government. Theatre personality Syed Jamil Ahmed took charge soon after, raising considerable hope among cultural practitioners, but resigned barely six months later. After a brief period under temporary leadership, Stalin took over.

Nearly a year into his tenure, Stalin says much of the disorder has been addressed through tolerance, discipline and greater engagement. But his account of a functioning and increasingly accessible institution raises a larger question: has Shilpakala's internal culture actually changed, or has its structural dependence on political and bureaucratic authority simply acquired a different face?

Stalin says his first priority was to restore order without turning the Academy into an instrument of partisan retribution.

"I did not look at the officials and employees from the standpoint of any political party or partisan interest," he says. "I looked at who was involved in corruption, who had committed wrongdoing, and who was working outside the rules."

He says some officials involved in wrongdoing were transferred and departmental cases filed against others. At the same time, he sought to address long-standing grievances over promotions, time scales and grades, which he says had contributed to employee demotivation.

His assessment of the Academy's past problems is striking. "I have found that the corruption here has been more political than financial," he says.

"The Academy is still running according to partisan politics. Favoured personnel of the ministry, the government and political parties now occupy key positions, and many of them belong to the same political or ideological spectrum. The people sitting in those positions have changed, but the corrupt internal mechanism is still operating under a similar but differently coloured umbrella."

The former official also questions whether Stalin's stated principle of not punishing people simply because of political association has been consistently applied.

"If that is true, then why have so many of us been transferred or left without positions, while a few have risen to power in our places after July, who haven't worked at the Academy before the July uprising?"

That contradiction matters because Stalin's approach is deliberately different from a wholesale political purge. Employees appointed during the previous government, he argues, should not automatically become victims of a political transition.

"If that person has done nothing wrong, removing them from their job would only make them a victim. Their families depend on those jobs." "I try to look at everything from a human perspective," says Stalin. "I did not want anyone who was innocent to suffer."

The question, then, is whether such decisions are being made according to transparent and consistently applied criteria. Faiz Zahir of Aranyak Natyadal, who recently headed the Academy's Drama and Film Department, sees the problem at a deeper institutional level. For him, changing personnel will not be enough if the structures governing Shilpakala remain vulnerable to political influence.

"Shilpakala's autonomy cannot remain merely on paper," Zahir says. He argues that the Academy's Parishad should be insulated from partisan politics, while the DG's role should be clearly defined within an accountable structure that gives cultural practitioners a meaningful role in decision-making.

For Stalin, reform means accountability, dialogue and negotiation with the state. For his critics, those measures cannot be enough if the underlying structure remains vulnerable to political patronage, ministerial priorities and bureaucratic control.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

That question becomes particularly important when the law itself is examined.

Under the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act, 1989, the general direction and administration of the Academy vest in a Parishad. The governing body is headed by the minister in charge of cultural affairs and includes senior government officials alongside representatives and nominees from the cultural sector. The structure therefore places Shilpakala's cultural mandate within a governance framework with a significant state presence—raising the question of how much institutional autonomy the Academy can exercise in practice.

Stalin does not deny the ministry's role. He embraces it. "I represent Shilpakala Academy, and I will continue to do that," he says. "At the same time, I recognise the ministry's oversight and its role as our guardian because it provides the funds."

"Shilpakala cannot become an event-management arm of the ministry," says Faiz Zahir, arguing that the Academy must be driven by cultural policy rather than ministerial priorities and an expanding event calendar.

Under Stalin, the Academy has organised programmes spanning religious and cultural communities, alongside festivals, exhibitions and training initiatives. But Zahir argues that activity alone cannot constitute reform.

"The Academy's budget should be planned around its cultural mandate, not around individual events," he says. "A predictable allocation would allow Shilpakala to build long-term programmes instead of depending on event-based funding and ministerial priorities."

He also calls for a permanent policy and planning mechanism involving cultural practitioners. "Without a proper policy-making structure, we will continue to see programmes being organised one after another without a coherent long-term cultural vision."

Shilpakala was created to do more than host events. The question is whether its institutional machinery can fulfil that mandate beyond the programme calendar.

Stalin says structural reforms to the governing board and legal framework are underway. He also says the bureaucracy has been cooperative. "No one can accomplish anything alone. Every initiative is ultimately a collective effort."

He says the distance between the Academy and artists has narrowed, with people now able to bring their complaints directly to him. But access to one DG cannot substitute for institutional participation and accountability.

The harder question is whether artists, employees and cultural practitioners have a permanent voice in how Shilpakala is governed, funded and shaped.

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The real test of post-July Shilpakala is whether the institution can become bigger than the person occupying its highest office—and independent enough to outlive the politics surrounding it.

For an institution created to be the country's cultural spearhead, events can demonstrate activity. Institutional reform has to demonstrate permanence.

NEWS

US Democratic primaries deliver split results

AFP, *Washington*

Primaries held across several US states delivered a mixed verdict Wednesday in the battle roiling the Democratic Party, with the anti-establishment left notching another victory in Minnesota but suffering an unexpected defeat to a centrist in Wisconsin.

With the November midterms looming, this internal clash -- playing out across the United States -- is set to define the direction of a party searching for the best way to take on US President Donald Trump and wrest control of Congress from Republicans.

In Minnesota, the left-wing Democratic candidate for a Senate seat, Peggy Flanagan, defeated her moderate rival, Angie Craig, to replace retiring Senator Tina Smith with 59 percent of the vote, according to US media reports.

Flanagan had the backing of Smith and prominent left-wing senators including Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, while Craig was supported by Democrats who argued her record of winning competitive elections made her the safer choice for the general election.

"I am truly honored and humbled to be Minnesota's Democratic nominee for US Senate. Thank you, Minnesota -- for everything," Flanagan posted on X after her 59-39 percent victory.

Immigration enforcement has become particularly charged in Minnesota after the state emerged as a focal point of Trump's crackdown.

Flanagan had attacked Craig over her support for the Laken Riley Act, a Republican-backed immigration measure, while Craig had emphasized electability and later expressed regret over her vote.

Ninth pay scale

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The committee will meet today to resolve the judiciary-related issues. The meeting is scheduled for noon at the finance ministry.

Once the committee submits its recommendations, the final draft would be placed before the cabinet.

'Has the govt learned nothing from the past?'

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from independently investigating disciplined forces.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said in the statement, "It is a major concern that the NHRC can only seek reports from the government or force chiefs in cases of human rights violations by disciplined forces."

TIB said this shortcoming had prevented commissions during the AL era from holding disciplined forces accountable for rights violations or preventing such violations.

Similarly, the draft Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Redress Act, 2026, retains provisions that could facilitate impunity for members of agencies accused of involvement in the majority of enforced disappearance cases during the authoritarian period, TIB said.

It also criticised the draft law for placing investigations into enforced disappearances entirely under the police while keeping such cases outside the NHRC's jurisdiction. TIB said this was particularly problematic as many of those accused of involvement in such cases are members of disciplined forces.

"If a senior official is accused of involvement in an enforced disappearance, the draft requires a junior investigating officer to prepare and submit an 'interim report'," Iftekharuzzaman said.

If the report fails to find sufficient evidence against the senior official, the competent magistrate may order the official's discharge from the proceedings, TIB said.

Iftekharuzzaman questioned whether such a mechanism could realistically remain free from influence. "Will this provision actually help prevent and redress enforced disappearance, or will it in practice ensure impunity for the crime?"

TIB also said the draft's definition of enforced disappearance does not include the involvement of elected representatives, ministers or other important state officials.

"As a result, the definition does not reflect Bangladesh's actual experience or conform to relevant international conventions," it added.

It further pointed out that the Enforced Disappearances Prevention and Redress Ordinance, 2025, enacted during the interim government, had empowered the NHRC to monitor compliance with detention safeguards, inspect prisons, lock-ups and detention centres, visit facilities to identify secret detention centres, and take lawful measures.

"These important functions have not been incorporated into the cabinet-approved draft."

TIB also criticised the proposed selection committee for appointing the NHRC's chairperson and commissioners, which would include the Speaker, law minister, home minister, a ruling party MP and the cabinet secretary.

According to the anti-graft watchdog, the government would retain control over nominating at least two of the committee's three other members, posing a serious risk of government dominance over appointments.

The draft also does not make it mandatory to appoint a woman among the five commissioners or ensure women's representation on the selection committee, TIB said, adding that it lacks provisions requiring the representation of minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

"Civil society had demanded that at least two of the five commissioners be women and one member be from a small ethnic group to ensure pluralistic representation in line with international standards," it said.

Iftekharuzzaman said that although the approved draft describes the NHRC as independent and impartial, it does not clearly state that the commission will remain outside the control of any government ministry or division.

He also criticised provisions requiring government approval to open offices outside Dhaka and to determine the commission's organisational structure and appoint its staff.

"The provision allowing up to 30 percent of government employees to be appointed on deputation, along with the option of naming serving officials as commissioners, could effectively turn the commission into a government body," he said.

TIB urged the government to revise both draft laws before placing them before parliament, taking into account the views of victims and stakeholders.

Total solar eclipse to cast its shadow over Europe

AFP, *Burgos*

Millions of people will turn their gaze towards the heavens on Wednesday to witness one of nature's greatest spectacles -- a rare total solar eclipse -- as it sweeps over mainland Europe to briefly turn day into night.

The Moon is first expected to blot out the Sun, leaving only the shimmering glow of its outer corona, in Russia's remote Arctic north, before parts of Greenland and Iceland are enveloped in the arc of its eerie shadow.

Excitement was highest in Spain, where tourists thronged the streets of normally quiet villages to experience the dramatic natural phenomenon as the eclipse's narrow path cuts across the Iberian Peninsula from the northern Atlantic coast to the Mediterranean Sea in the south.

Govt goes for long-term US LNG supply

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Officials said the pricing formula was designed to hedge against volatility in global LNG markets.

Of the 117 cargoes, 14 will be delivered between 2026 and 2028 at a price linked to the Japan Korea Marker (JKM) index, at JKM plus $0.0875 per million British thermal units (MMBtu).

Gunvor will deliver five cargoes in 2026, six in 2027 and three in 2028. With the JKM rate standing at around $21 per MMBtu last week, the price would be about $22 per MMBtu if the purchases were made now.

The remaining 103 cargoes will be delivered between 2029 and 2038, at a rate of 10 cargoes a year, under a US Henry Hub-linked pricing formula.

With domestic gas reserves failing to keep pace with demand, Bangladesh is increasingly reliant on LNG imports to meet the needs of industries, transport and households.

The government is also planning to set up two more floating LNG terminals and another land-based terminal, in addition to the two existing floating terminals.

However, the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran has heavily disrupted global LNG supplies. Qatar, Bangladesh's largest LNG supplier under long-term contracts, has cut scheduled deliveries to Bangladesh, putting further pressure on domestic supplies.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has pledged to increase imports from the US under the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade with Washington.

To meet immediate gas requirements, the purchase committee also approved delivery of six cargoes under spot and direct procurement contracts.

It approved delivery of two LNG cargoes from the UK's Blackcube International at $15.50 per MMBtu and two from Oman's Maxwell International SPC at JKM plus $0.54 per MMBtu.

Another two deliveries, for 2026, will be purchased from Hong Kong-based Zhenyu Shipping at $14.95 per MMBtu.

Separately, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs gave in-principle approval for the direct purchase of eight more LNG cargoes to avert potential energy shortages.

Two cargoes each will be sourced from Zhenyu Shipping, Malaysia's PETRONAS LNG Ltd, China Runze Holdings Group Limited and US-based DARAB Inc. The prices will be approved later by the purchase committee.

TABS, RICE, FERTILISER

The purchase committee also approved a proposal from the Department of Social Services to procure Android tablets under the Strengthening Social Protection for Improved Resilience, Inclusion, and Targeting (SSPIRIT) project.

The tablets will be used to implement the Family Card programme and will be procured directly from Bangladesh Navy-operated Dockyard and Engineering Works Limited, Narayanganj, at a cost of Tk 320.71 crore.

The committee also approved rice and fertiliser imports to safeguard food security and agricultural production.

Under a government-to-government deal with Vietnam Southern Food Corporation (VINAFOOD II), Bangladesh will purchase 1 lakh tonnes of non-basmati parboiled rice at $416 per tonne.

Under another G2G arrangement with Morocco's OCP NUTRICROPS SA, Bangladesh will import 40,000 tonnes of DAP fertiliser at $891.67 per tonne and 30,000 tonnes of TSP fertiliser at $677.33 per tonne.

Besides, 40,000 tonnes of bulk granular urea will be procured from Saudi Arabia's SABIC Agri-nutrients Company at $421.67 per tonne for the 2026–27 fiscal year.

Death penalty

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"They don't deserve any mercy. They don't have any mitigating factors; rather, there are aggravating factors."

Referring to Quader as a "political joker" or "political clown", Aminul said some of his remarks and statements at different times could not be considered those of a political leader.

The other accused are AL Joint General Secretary AFM Bahauddin Nasim, former state minister for information Mohammad Ali Arafat, Jubo League Chairman Sheikh Fazle Shams Parash, General Secretary Moinul Hossain Khan Nikhil, and Chhatra League President Saddam Hussain and General Secretary Sheikh Wali Asif Enan.

All the accused are absconding.

During the arguments, the prosecution alleged that Bahauddin helped organise and facilitate the party's response, while Arafat played a role in controlling the media and suppressing reports of killings and violence. It accused Parash and Nikhil of mobilising Jubo League activists. It said Nikhil had opened fire on protesters.

It said BCL leaders Saddam and Enan were involved in assembling armed cadres and coordinating attacks.