

Govt should also effectively arm up all election offices

THE council of advisers to the interim government has approved amendments to two laws — the Election Commission Secretariat Act 2009 and the Election Officers (Special Provisions) Act 1991 — aimed at affording more authority to the Election Commission. The Election Commission Secretariat (Amendment) Ordinance 2025 and the Election Officer (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Ordinance 2025 would ensure free, fair and impartial elections, making the Election Commission more dynamic, granting it more authority to recruit all its officials and ensuring accountability of all officials engaged in election management. The amendment would allow the establishment of the Election Commission Service for the appointment of officers to the Election Commission Secretariat. In view of this, the move that the government has taken to amend the electoral laws is a good move forward. The amendment would also place back the preparation, maintenance and preservation of the national identity card database under the Election Commission, which was officially placed under the home affairs ministry with the passage of the National Identity Registration Act 2023, which was repealed after the August 2024 political changeover.

Whilst all this remains a good move on part of the government, the move alone may not strengthen the Election Commission and ensure the holding of elections to the level needed. This is because whilst the Election Commission can look into electoral management at the centre in Dhaka, the management in districts and upazilas lies with deputy commissioners, who are returning officers and upazila nirbahi officers, who are assistant returning officers. And, officers of both categories are, in fact, part of the executive, which leaves ample scope for them to manipulate the elections in a partisan manner. The Election Commission has offices down to upazilas, but the structure is too weak to take on the executive. Besides, the Election Commission people who run the district and upazila offices of the commission are no match — in neither qualifications nor powers nor skills nor experience either — for the people of the executive who oversee the election management at the levels. A procedural enhancement of authority of the commission's people without its practical application would hardly work to head off electoral ills in outlying areas. It is, therefore, imperative that the government should adequately arm up all offices of the Election Commission with people having the qualification, authority and experience required to run the electoral show. The amendment to the laws could shield the election administration from political interference if the government would mind the other issues effectively.

The Election Commission would be officially empowered to hold the elections keeping itself away from political interference to some extent, but the government should staff all election offices with people having the needed qualifications, authority, skills and experiences to take on the executive and to make the independence of the election authorities effective and meaningful.

Extrajudicial killing must stop to uphold rule of law

HUMAN rights violations at the hands of law enforcement agencies were expected to completely stop in the changed political context, but that has not been the case. Since the interim government was installed in August 2024, as Ain O Salish Kendra report, at least 35 people have become victims of extrajudicial killing, which is higher than the number of similar death during the last year of the Awami League government. Another rights organisation, Odhikar, also reports that at least 29 people fell victim to extrajudicial killings from August 2024 to June 30, 2025. There are allegations that the joint forces deployed to restore law and order were involved in a number of cases of extrajudicial killings. The inspector general of police has, however, said that they have no data on extrajudicial killings, which is alarmingly familiar because denial was also the rhetoric of the fallen regime. The government should know that the continued abuse of power by the law enforcement agencies cannot establish the rule of law and, therefore, it should take extraordinary measures to materialise its promises of zero tolerance of extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearances and custodial torture.

The cases of custodial torture during the tenure of the interim government marked a decline but are still significant, considering that the goal is to prevent any death in custody. On September 15, two people were found dead in the custody of the Rapid Action Battalion in Sylhet and the Police Bureau of Investigation in Moulvibazar. In February, the joint forces cited a 'gunfight' at Mohammadpur in Dhaka where two young people were killed, echoing incidents from previous years that were often discredited by rights groups. The continuation of custodial death and extrajudicial killing under ambiguous circumstances, a violently repressive tendency that characterised the fallen regime, suggests that the institutional machinery that enabled such abuses remains intact. The interim government has formed the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and the police administrative reforms commission to investigate past abuses and make recommendations for reforms, but without ensuring credible investigations of all allegations of rights violations and legal accountability of the perpetrators, it is not possible to break the cycle of impunity that errant law enforcers have enjoyed for decades.

The interim government was installed in the aftermath of an uprising with promises for dismantling the authoritarian structure and reorienting state power towards democratic accountability. The recurrence of extrajudicial killing and custodial death not only undermines the promises but also spells out a failure to break from coercive methods of the previous regime. The government must give clear directives and ensure transparent investigation or effect institutional reforms to end extrajudicial killings.

Pseudo-unemployment and illusion of growth

by HM Nazmul Alam

UNEMPLOYMENT has always haunted Bangladesh, but in recent years its character has changed in troubling ways. It is no longer only about people who cannot find work at all. Increasingly, it is about those who do work but in ways that neither match their qualifications nor fully utilise their skills. The problem has shifted into what economists describe as pseudo-unemployment, and it has quietly spread into an epidemic. The country's official statistics suggest only a few million people are unemployed, but when one looks beneath the definitions, the real crisis comes into view.

Every year, about two million young people enter the job market. Some do not find work at all, others accept positions far below their skill levels, while many remain trapped in jobs that fail to pay a living wage. At the same time, private investment, the engine of employment creation, has slowed to a crawl. Business confidence is weakened by the dollar crisis, the rising cost of imports and political uncertainty. Bank credit to the private sector has stagnated, and foreign investment has shown little sign of growth. The connection is straightforward. When investment falters, jobs do not appear. When jobs do not appear, unemployment deepens.

The statistics paint a worrying picture. Between 2013 and 2022, the country's working population grew by an average of 1.5 per cent annually. Yet employment growth during the same period was only 0.2 per cent. The labour supply has expanded while the demand for labour has stagnated. The result is a widening pool of underemployed or pseudo-unemployed individuals whose work adds little to real productivity. Many graduates now find themselves working in occupations far below their qualifications, wasting the human capital that higher education was supposed to create.

The Labour Force Survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics for 2024 revealed that the official number of unemployed rose from 2.49 million in 2023 to 2.66 million in 2024. On paper, this appears as a modest rise of 170,000 within a year. Yet these figures are deceptive. They obscure the millions of workers who fall into categories of underemployment, shadow employment, or partial employment. To call such people 'employed' is to ignore that their labour is not being fully utilised, and that their incomes do not provide security or dignity. The country continues to mistake statistical employment for real employment.

This problem is compounded by a lack of decent work. The vast major-



ity of jobs that exist are concentrated in the informal sector. These jobs are insecure, poorly paid, and without protections. Even during the years when GDP growth was celebrated as one of the fastest in the world, employment did not grow in proportion. The so-called miracle of high growth was in truth a mirage, hiding the reality that the benefits were not translating into opportunities for the youth. Employment stagnated while the labour force swelled, producing frustration and instability.

The heart of the problem lies in investment. The monetary policy for 2024-25 set a target of 9.8 per cent growth in private sector credit, but the actual growth reached only 6.4 per cent. This was the sharpest slowdown in recent memory, and in response, the new monetary policy reduced the target further, to 7.2 per cent by December 2025 and 8 per cent by mid-2026. These figures reflect the hard truth that entrepreneurs are reluctant to borrow in an environment of high interest rates, volatile exchange rates, and uncertain policies. Without credit flow, investment contracts. Without investment, there are no new factories, no new businesses, and no new jobs. The entire cycle of employment creation stalls.

Small and medium enterprises suffer the most under these conditions. Lacking access to affordable credit, many SMEs have been forced to reduce production or shut down entirely. This has ripple effects. Families lose income, consumption falls and domestic demand weakens. The cycle becomes self-reinforcing. Declining demand discourages further investment, and declining investment perpetuates unemployment.

The political climate adds another layer of uncertainty. Investors, both domestic and foreign, hesitate to

commit capital when the rules of the game are unclear. Without predictable policies, contracts and guarantees of stability, businesses prefer to wait. The cost of this hesitation is borne by the youth who crowd into the job market only to find doors closed. Political stability, sound macroeconomic management, and reliable access to energy are not just technical concerns. They are the foundations upon which employment depends.

At the centre of this picture is a wasted demographic dividend. Bangladesh's working-age population has grown rapidly, and for a time, this was celebrated as the country's greatest asset. But an asset unused becomes a liability. Educated youth are entering the labour force in unprecedented numbers, yet their potential is being squandered. They either remain unemployed or drift into pseudo-employment where their education brings little value. This mismatch between capacity and opportunity corrodes productivity at the national level.

It is important to remember that employment is not only about having a job but about the quality of that job. Work that fails to pay a living wage, that offers no security, that does not match a worker's skill, or that keeps them trapped in low productivity activities cannot be considered real employment. To continue counting such jobs as signs of progress is to fool ourselves with illusions.

Breaking out of this trap requires a rethinking of policy priorities. Credit and investment must be revived, not stifled. Monetary policies must balance inflation control with the need to fuel private sector activity. Interest rates that remain intolerably high choke off borrowing, innovation, and expansion. At the same time, education must be reoriented toward

employability. An education system that produces graduates without relevant skills only feeds the reservoir of pseudo-unemployment. Coordination between universities and industries, as well as a stronger focus on technical and vocational education, is essential.

Above all, policymakers must face reality with honesty. The country cannot continue to celebrate growth statistics while ignoring the jobless reality that millions face. Development is not measured by GDP alone but by how many people can secure dignified, productive work. Without that, progress remains an illusion.

Unemployment, both real and pseudo, is not just an economic issue. It is a social and political fault line. Frustrated youth, denied opportunities, are at risk of disillusionment, despair and unrest. Families burdened with unemployed members strain under financial and emotional pressures. The broader society becomes less stable. If unaddressed, these pressures will not only slow economic growth but threaten the cohesion of the nation itself.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. The choices made now will determine whether the youthful population becomes the foundation of prosperity or the source of instability. A future of secure employment, sustainable growth and social stability is possible, but only if investment is revitalised, education is transformed and the illusions of pseudo-employment are abandoned. Otherwise, the demographic dividend will decay into a demographic disaster, leaving behind a generation betrayed by promises that never translated into reality.

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Does the BNP leadership get it?

by Md Mahmudul Hasan

ONE of my earliest childhood memories is walking with my elder brother in our village market and experiencing an overwhelming sadness that radiated all around. It was May 30, 1981 — the day when President Ziaur Rahman was brutally assassinated in Chattogram. Entire Bangladesh was seized by the horror of his death. The enormity of shock and a sense of great loss that the sad news triggered were evident on people's faces.

The radio — the main source of instant information in those days — broke the news and was buzzing with Islamic recitals. My brother and I were holding hands and going from one shop to another in the bazar unnoticed. We found everyone listening to the radio and processing the grief. Truly, it was a day of national mourning and a day when people from all walks of life were united by sorrow.

I have never witnessed a day of such collective grief and mourning in our country since then.

The grief visited upon our family in an equal manner. Life came to a sudden halt because of the death of Ziaur Rahman. From that day on, I knew that my parents and others in the family as well as many of our near and distant relatives had great sympathy for the martyred president.

Among all our extended family members, my *nana* (maternal grandfather) was perhaps more indulgent in his fondness for the Zia family and in his support for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). During the last years of his life in the 1990s, he used to read all news stories involving BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia that were printed in the newspaper made available in the family. This led some of my cousins to make mischievous jokes behind his back.

During the 1991 general elections, I followed some of my maternal cousins to nanibari — as we call our ma-

ternal grandparents' home. Nana was also part of the convoy that went from Dhaka to the village. We gathered to celebrate and enjoy the first taste of electoral democracy after the country had suffered from a democratic deficit during the Ershad regime in the 1980s.

I was not of voting age, but since nana was quite old and had chronic eyesight problems I accompanied him to the polling centre at the village primary school. The polling officer — who knew nana — allowed me to enter the balloting-room with him. Nana was looking for BNP's electoral symbol on the ballot paper and said to me, '*Dhane shish-ta koi re*' (where is the sheaf of paddy?). I helped him find it and he got his job done.

Partly because of my family background and partly because of the distasteful Awami League politics I always had a soft spot in my heart for BNP. During political conversations with my friends, a debate on the comparative merit of Awami League and BNP creeps in quite often. Friends and acquaintances argue that there is virtually no difference in the conduct and comportment of these two major political groups.

I always disagreed and tended to maintain that BNP and Chhatra Dal people were much better than their counterparts in Awami League and its student wing, Chhatra League. As my argument went, at least BNP people profess to prioritise our country and do not put it up for sale in the interest of a neighbouring country (I am not sure if I can make such a claim now).

In most cases, my friends and I went our separate ways unconvinced by each other's counterarguments. Deep inside, I always believed that BNP was relatively better than Awami League. That is not to say that I was dismissive of the corruption and abuse of power allegedly perpetrated by BNP leaders, especially when they were in power. Like many others, I was aware of the bad elements within the party. However, when comparing it with Awami

League, BNP was always in my good books.

My inclination to defend BNP continued up until the end of Sheikh Hasina's mafia-style autocracy. During her fifteen-and-a-half-year misrule, innumerable BNP people were subjected to horrendous human rights abuses including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Like members of other opposition parties, thousands of BNP activists went into hiding within the country or sought to protect themselves from oppression through concealment of identity. Thus, many of them were internally displaced within Bangladesh or fled to other countries. All such stories of atrocities garnered huge public sympathy for BNP and its affiliates during the Hasina regime.

Unfortunately, soon after Hasina fell and fled on August 5, 2025, it didn't take long for BNP people to change their tune and for the people of Bangladesh to change their mind about BNP. The bad apples within the party rushed to replace their Awami counterparts in hooliganism and greed for power and ill-gotten wealth. Upon the scandalous end of Awami misrule, many BNP people who were victims of Hasina's autocracy themselves became oppressors in no time.

For example, in the absence of Awami reprobate criminals, businesses and other financial institutions in many parts of Bangladesh experienced no respite from *chandabaji* (money extortion). This is because soon after Hasina was ousted and the Awami extortionists became inactive or left their localities to avoid public wrath for their misdeeds, BNP men stepped in and became hell-bent on extorting money in equal or more extreme form.

Upon the fall of Hasina and her cronies, BNP people seemed euphoric and thought that they were on course to come to power. The attitude they have exhibited towards the people of Bangladesh suggests that, in the absence of Awami League, the only party

that can rule Bangladesh is BNP.

More than a year on since Hasina's fall, it is now clear that BNP misread the sentiment of the public. People of Bangladesh, especially the youth, laid down their lives or were ready to risk their lives and limbs not simply to remove Hasina from power. They launched the July uprising to break the corrupt system that had been in place during much of the time since the birth of our country in 1971.

For decades we were deceived by slogans or in the name of this or that *chetona* (spirit). Dominant political groups sought to make us oblivious to our real problems. Our country was being plundered by successive governments to different extents; our lives became cheap; thugs of various student organisations forced students to live in serfdom at the country's universities; women, especially female university students, had no safety and were sexually harassed and exploited; and the list goes on and on.

The way BNP and Chhatra Dal people have been behaving in post-Hasina Bangladesh has made it clear that they are fixated on perpetuating and exploiting the old system to their advantage. This realisation is more pronounced among our students who are alarmed to see Chhatra Dal members exhibiting symptoms that marked the behaviour of Chhatra League thugs. Therefore, Chhatra Dal's debacle in the student union elections at Dhaka and Jahangirnagar Universities came as no surprise to me.

If BNP follows in the footsteps of Awami League, I don't think I will ever feel encouraged to defend the political party for which my nana voted. What is more, if BNP leaders fail to read the writing on the wall, it will augur ill for them and for the future of our country.

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