

Criticism over WHO Regional Director nominee

Bangladesh's nomination of Saima Wazed as Regional Director of South-East Asia has raised questions over transparency and nepotism. Talha Burki reports.



Three WHO regions will elect new regional directors this year: the Eastern Mediterranean, South-East Asia, and the Western Pacific. The positions are among the most important roles in global health, especially in times of crisis. The election for the Western Pacific post comes in the aftermath of the dismissal of the previous director, Takeshi Kasai, for misconduct. Member states will choose their candidates by secret ballot at meetings of the regional committees in October, 2023. All three WHO regions have promised an "open, fair, equitable and transparent process". But the authenticity of this commitment has been called into question.

Saima Wazed is one of two candidates for Regional Director of South-East Asia. She was nominated by Bangladesh. Her mother, Sheikh Hasina, happens to be the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Wazed's highest academic qualification is an MSc in clinical psychology from Barry University (Miami, FL, USA). The 11 other candidates for the regional director positions are either medical doctors or have PhDs, or are medical doctors who also have PhDs. On the platform X (formerly Twitter), Wazed posts under the username @drSaimaWazed, presumably on the strength of an honorary doctorate she was awarded earlier this year by a Bangladeshi university named after her grandfather. Her feed has photographs of her with her mother at the summits of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa bloc (known as BRICS) and G20 earlier this year, where she met world leaders such as US President Joe Biden and China's President Xi Jinping. The Bangladeshi regime has been criticised by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as independent experts appointed by the UN, for repressive internal policies.

"It is important that the individual chosen to be WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia has advanced training in medicine and public health, and has a demonstrated record of leadership", said Salmaan Keshavjee, Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine in the Field of Medical Anthropology at Harvard Medical School (Boston, MA, USA). Wazed's publicly available application form summarises her experience as a school psychologist and her history of advocacy for autism. In the section on organisational management, she describes her work with a non-governmental organisation that she founded and which employs 12 people. In the public health leadership section, Wazed writes, "I have designed and provided technical expertise to several international conferences, side events at UNGA [UN General Assembly] and other national conferences" and adds that she has spoken on numerous panels.

"This is completely unacceptable", commented an expert in global health with knowledge of Bangladesh. "Wazed has very limited experience in public health and no experience of high-level leadership. If she becomes Regional Director, WHO will be supporting nepotism. It will lose a lot of credibility." WHO stated that "the Secretariat neither comments on, nor assesses candidates' qualifications, this is a matter for Member States' consideration". The expert in global health retorted that "it is simply not good enough for WHO to sit on the sidelines; they should be taking a proactive role to ensure this sort of thing cannot happen".

Emails *The Lancet* sent to the address provided by Wazed on her application form bounced back, and we did not receive a response to text messages. The media will not have the opportunity to question any of the regional director

candidates. The candidates are not obliged to take interviews.

Kent Buse is a Professor in the School of Public Health, Imperial College London. He co-signed an open letter to the WHO Executive Board urging increased scrutiny of the regional director candidates. "The entire system needs reform. A closed-door process does little to instil public confidence in WHO. This is particularly damaging at a time when we need a stronger WHO that is fit for the challenges we now face", he said. Buse advocates recruiting a professional human resources firm to assess the applications.

"Politics always plays a part, but the regional director position is a technical role and if it is appointed purely on personal connection, WHO will have its reputation seriously undermined", said an individual who has worked closely with WHO. The individual also noted that if Wazed was campaigning at the global summits she attended, then she is likely to have breached the WHO code of conduct for the nomination of the Regional Director and the candidature could be declared void. "This matter should be referred to the WHO Legal Counsel", they said.

Sophie Harman is Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary University of London, (London UK). She believes that it is naive to assume that expertise in health is the primary consideration when it comes to choosing the regional directors. "WHO is not distinct from world politics, and political connections matter", she told *The Lancet*. "The global health community must absolutely push back on this, but we are kidding ourselves if we think the Bangladeshi nomination is an anomaly in an otherwise fair system based on merit."

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For more on Takeshi Kasai's dismissal see [World Report](#) *Lancet* 2023; **401**: 890