

NHRC must be freed from partisan influence

Its probity must be above board

THE basic human rights are enshrined in universal declarations and guaranteed by our constitution to every individual, irrespective of cast, creed or colour. But human rights involve much more than written guarantees, legislation or ratification of international conventions. What is required is the correct attitude and fair application. Unfortunately, in countries like ours, laws and conventions are observed more in their violation than in their application.

While our leaders were eloquent about human rights, they are found wanting in upholding those. Because of bias and prejudice and a certain lack of respect for individual rights and dignity—not only among the ruling party, but also among many in the administration—the application of basic rights is done selectively, while gross violations are overlooked.

That being the case, it is imperative that the national watchdog on human rights should be made more eclectic, by appointing people with differing opinions and from all across the political spectrum. That would lend it the gravity and importance it deserves and engender public confidence in it. Our experience has been, regrettably, quite the opposite. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has been made up of people with affiliation to the ruling party. This belief has once again been affirmed at a discussion event organised by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) on Wednesday.

Undeniably, there are flaws in how the NHRC recruits—not only the chairman and other members of the committee, but staff in various capacities as well. It is also true that the NHRC has done little to fulfil its mandate. Its tendency to tread gingerly on issues of human rights points to its restricted independence in functioning. For example, it is surprising to see the very tepid reaction, if at all, of the NHRC to the extrajudicial killings that have made our government the focus of international human rights watchdogs.

We believe that the observations made in the ASK discussion are worth noting and acting on. The Paris Principles must be followed in letter and spirit. The first imperative for institutions like the NHRC to be credible is to be independent—something that a statutory body composed of people with party affiliations cannot be expected to be. Having credible people at the helm is a basic requirement. Apart from that, the commission should be invested with adequate power to ensure that its recommendations are followed unflinchingly.

Since the only reason for the NHRC's existence is to protect the human rights of the country's citizens, it should be willing to pursue and point out any violation of those rights. And the government should ensure that those violations are dealt with appropriately under the law. Unfortunately, as with many other national institutions and statutory bodies in Bangladesh, our NHRC has been crippled by partisanship over the years. This must change. The administration would do well to take note of the ASK observations and allow the NHRC to fulfil its mandate.

Much-needed education reforms closer to reality

Proper implementation of the new curriculum could be a huge game changer

ON Monday, Education Minister Dipu Moni unveiled the revised National Curriculum Framework, which, in its current form, looks set to bring major positive changes to our education system. According to the draft new curriculum, there will be no public exams before Class 10, and no exams of any kind for students up to Class 3. Students will be introduced to the stream system—science, humanities and business studies—from Class 11 instead of Class 9. And the evaluation process in schools will also significantly change.

It is important to mention that educationists and experts have been demanding most of these changes for a long time now. Although it was disappointing to see the government take so long to act on their recommendations concerning such a critical matter, we commend the authorities for finally acknowledging the ground realities and being open to changing things.

As educationists have long been saying, exams such as the PECE and the JSC do nothing but put immense mental and physical pressure on students. The present national obsession with tests has steered students' focus more towards memorisation and rote learning, and away from critical thinking and problem solving. Education has become mostly centred on guide books and coaching centres. As a result, students are losing out on the chance to obtain the benefits of a wholesome academic experience. Therefore, scrapping these exams is an excellent first step. Additionally, the new curriculum proposes greater emphasis on continuous assessment—i.e. regular school work—over the overall assessment, meaning exams.

While we are delighted with the changes proposed in the new curriculum, we must highlight that the teachers will have a much more important role to play now. Under the new evaluation process, teachers will be required to evaluate the performance of their students throughout the year. For that, they need to have proper training. Moreover, the way students are given lessons under the new system will also have to change. The government should set up training programmes for teachers to familiarise themselves with these new teaching techniques and evaluation methods.

In order to have a smooth transition from the current curriculum to the new one, the government will begin implementation of the new plan from 2023, in phases. That should give the authorities ample time to train the teachers and formulate a step-by-step guide for the transition. We urge the government to keep academics and experts in the loop of things during this process, to make the switch quick and effective.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

The shaky roots of democracy revealed by a pandemic



pandemic. Democracy has not been spared either, with its very foundation shaken to the core because of the pandemic's wide-ranging socioeconomic impacts witnessed over the last 18 months.

A report by Freedom House—an organisation actively advocating to strengthen democracy around the world—revealed that the condition of democracy

COVID-19 has accelerated the pace of change around the world. From the way we live and work to the way we think and act—everything has gone through dramatic change due to the ongoing

Orban to rule by decree in the name of the coronavirus, to the more struggling nations such as Chile that had postponed constitutional assembly polls in view of rising Covid-19 cases—democracy around the world has been hit hard by the pandemic.

Freedom House has identified four major issues that have become even more complicated due to Covid-19: lack of government transparency and information on Covid-19; corruption; lack of protection for vulnerable populations; and government abuses of power.

These challenges are universal; the case is not so different in Bangladesh either, where press freedom, human rights, and the performance of vital institutions have all been affected during the pandemic.

The government in Bangladesh has perhaps been less ruthless in leveraging the challenges posed by the pandemic



Free press, the fourth pillar of democracy, has taken a hit during the pandemic.

ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

and human rights has worsened in 80 countries, with “particularly sharp deterioration in struggling democracies and highly repressive states.” The organisation's president, Michael J Abramowitz, suggested: “What began as a worldwide health crisis has become part of the global crisis for democracy... Governments in every part of the world have abused their powers in the name of public health, seizing the opportunity to undermine democracy and human rights.”

From strong European nations such as Hungary, where the parliament had initially voted to give the right and authority to Prime Minister Viktor

to erode people's democratic rights, as opposed to some other democratic governments that have pressed home their own vindictive agendas—case in point: India, where the minority Muslims have been targeted during anti-Covid drives (The Wire published a column titled “The Coronavirus Has Morphed Into an Anti-Muslim Virus” elaborating this socio-political injustice)—but it cannot be denied that democracy in the country has suffered overall.

The government's lack of transparency regarding its Covid-19 management plan has been highlighted by the media multiple times, and has caused the common people immense suffering. The

government's mass immunisation drives and vaccine sourcing strategies suffer not only from a lack of proper planning and execution, but also from a lack of clarity, accountability and a meaningful engagement with the public. The government has yet to elaborate on how it plans to inoculate 70 percent of the population, and its measures so far can at best be termed as “kneejerk reactions” to the various Covid-19 waves the country has experienced.

Similarly, the lack of transparency and accountability in the government's plans to distribute relief goods among the affected people have allowed these drives to be mired in corruption and misappropriation, as many public representatives embezzled rice, among other relief commodities. While punitive action has been taken by the authorities in some cases, there has been no initiative to address the systemic loopholes that allowed this to happen in the first place, potentially leaving room for future transgressions.

And when the media reported these incidents, many journalists came under fire—or should one say sticks and weapons, as it happened in the case of SA Television district correspondent AH Bhuiyan Sajal. Sajal was beaten up by the henchmen of Amirganj Union Parishad Chairman Nasir Uddin Khan, when he and his colleagues were investigating Nasir's alleged involvement in the misappropriation of relief commodities.

One would also remember the government-imposed censorship on medical professionals—especially nurses—who were asked not to talk to the media amid reports of the shortages of PPE and meals, at the onset of the pandemic.

The government initially also warned that it would monitor the news outlets and social media, and the information they broadcast and share on Covid-19, to apparently stop the spread of fake information. In the face of protests, however, the government took a step back and only suggested keeping an eye on the social media platforms to observe if misinformation with regard to Covid-19 were being circulated.

In March 2020, the government also arrested six individuals for allegedly spreading misinformation about Covid-19. The Digital Security Act, which experts termed “draconian” due to its nature, has been used on multiple occasions to smother the dissenting voices.

Even the notorious colonial-era law, Official Secrets Act, 1923, has been used to suppress press freedom. Prothom Alo journalist Rozina Islam, who has exposed many irregularities in the country's public

health sector, has been sued under this act for the apparent theft of confidential official documents. Before handing her over to the law enforcement officials, health ministry officials confined her in their office for around five hours and also “searched” her, raising serious questions about the abuse of power by a quarter of state officials and their deep distrust of the free press.

While human rights, transparency, and press freedom are still struggling to rise above the challenges posed by the pandemic, the damage done to democracy and our democratic values are not permanent.

Some elements within the executive and the legislative bodies may have taken advantage of the pandemic for their own gains, but one can argue that many of the problems predate the pandemic. A case can even be made that the government, over all, has been comparatively pro-people during this time. However, we cannot ignore its shortcomings in fighting the pandemic (especially its indecisiveness and inefficiency in managing Covid-19 challenges), the corruption it has allowed to go on, and its suppression of free speech in the name of combating fake news.

The government, if it genuinely aspires to achieve a true democracy, must work on changing the system that enables the gagging of democracy. It can start by reforming and strengthening the democratic and regulatory institutions, the statutory bodies and other public sector institutions, including the Election Commission, the Bangladesh Public Service Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, various ministries, law enforcement bodies, and the central bank, among others. These institutions should be allowed and necessarily empowered to function with fairness and without external influence.

The government needs to identify the individuals who are using the pandemic to their advantage, and take punitive actions against them in order to make examples of these greedy, unscrupulous people who are hurting the democratic ethos of our nation in these trying times.

The authorities must demonstrate strong political will to flush out these elements and reset the system to salvage the democracy we so cherish and take pride in. Otherwise, the misdeeds of a few—albeit influential—will cause permanent damage to the democratic values of our nation. This scenario should not be desirable for anyone—most of all our democratically elected government.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @TayebTasneem

Tackling climate emergency requires a global pact



of human-induced climate change. The same has been proven unequivocally by the science of attribution for having raised global mean temperature above one degree Celsius above the pre-industrial revolution period, as stated by the recent Sixth Assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Thus, it is now clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that the world has crossed over the threshold into the era where loss and damage from climate change has become a reality. This means that every day an unprecedented extreme weather event is likely to occur, causing both economic as well as non-economic loss and damage around the world.

While these adverse climate change impacts in the next decade or so are no longer preventable, the worst impacts in the longer term can still be avoided—but only by taking emergency measures commensurate with the urgency of the problem.

Hence it is absolutely essential for global actions to be taken everywhere every day, by everyone, to tackle the global climate emergency.

This was recently emphasised by the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which consists of nearly 50 of the most vulnerable developing countries currently led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. Prime Minister Hasina called for a global Climate Emergency Pact (CEP), to be agreed upon and adopted at the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), due to be held in Glasgow, Scotland, later this year.

The main focus of this proposed CEP is for every country to enhance its efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) to keep the global temperature below 1.5 degrees, which is still possible, but only if every country enhances its emissions reduction plan as quickly as possible. The CEP calls for every country to provide information on their actions on an annual basis, rather than every five years as currently required, as there is no more time to lose.

countries is that half of the funds must go towards supporting adaptation actions in the most vulnerable developing countries, and the other half should go for mitigation actions. This is in contrast to the current ratio of 80 percent of the fund going into mitigation in the form of loans, and only 20 percent for adaptation in the form of grants.

In addition to grants for adaptation and loans for mitigation, the CEP also calls for debt swaps to enable the

including Bangladesh, requiring delegates from these countries to be quarantined in hotels for 10 days on arrival in the UK prior to participating in COP26, has caused a lot of consternation about the ability of the most vulnerable developing countries to participate in COP26. It is incumbent on the UK as the host country to either drop the Red List requirements or pay for the hotel quarantine and reduce the time to only a few days. It is good to see that the UK may be willing to do this.



If the current trend of climate change continues, around 17 percent of Bangladesh will be submerged by 2050 due to rising sea levels, rendering 20 million people homeless, according to climate experts.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

The second requirement in the CEP is for the developed countries to provide a firm plan on how they will deliver on their promised funding of USD 500 billion over five years from 2020 to 2024, which they pledged back in 2015. So far, they failed to deliver even the USD 100 billion that was due in 2020.

The CEP calls for the UK as the presidency of COP26 to get the developed countries to provide their plans to deliver this funding over the next few years. After 2025, the annual funding amount is also supposed to be enhanced to more than USD 100 billion.

An associated demand from the CVF

Covid-19 affected developing countries to convert their debts to support actions in order to tackle climate change and also to preserve nature. The case of Belize in converting its debts to conserve a major maritime reserve in the Caribbean is a good example.

Finally, the CVF countries are asking for the UK presidency of COP26 to elevate the topic of tackling loss and damage from human-induced climate change to a high priority status in every COP, starting with COP26, as we are now already in the era of loss and damage from climate change.

The recent imposition of Red List by the UK on many members of the CVF,

In the case of Bangladesh, the parliamentary declaration of Planetary Emergency has already laid the foundation for the country to treat both climate change as well as biodiversity conservation as a national emergency. Now this needs to become a part of national priority and should be implemented urgently.

Bangladesh, thus, has an opportunity to show the rest of the world how to deal with climate change as the genuine emergency that it is for every country.

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh.