

Are we becoming incorrigibly corrupt?

Latest CPI score paints a sorry picture of Bangladesh’s progress

THE latest edition of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International (TI) is now out. And just as predictable as this publication is at this time of the year, it pains us to see that Bangladesh’s performance in this annual undertaking by the global corruption watchdog has become equally predictable. In the 2021 edition, the country has once again scored 26 out of 100—the same as in 2020, 2019 and 2018. Once again, we have ranked second-worst in South Asia, above only Afghanistan, and third-lowest among 31 countries in the Asia Pacific region. In fact, a 10-year CPI trend analysis shows that Bangladesh has stagnated in the neighbourhood of the same score over the last decade, meaning there’s been no real progress during the two latest tenures of this government.

Since the CPI measures “perceived” levels of public-sector corruption, we may soon see a firm rebuttal from the government, disputing this badge of shame. True, there are questions about the methods used for measuring corruption. But one doesn’t need TI to reaffirm what we already know to be true: that corruption has permeated every aspect of our lives, ranging from bribery, use of public office for private gain, diversion of public funds, and nepotism in public sector appointments to red tape and ineffective mechanisms for corruption control—to name a few areas of measurement cited by TI. We have seen repeatedly how a section of officials and politically influential people, including public representatives, indulged in various forms of corruption using their connections and poor institutional safeguards, and how they have been let go. In fact, the all-encompassing nature of corruption means that spillover effects of public sector corruption have ruined any chance of progress in the private sector too.

As a consequence, corruption has become a way of life. We can’t get rid of it, but since the system has become so crooked, we can’t live without it either. A key factor in the non-delivery of the pledges of “zero-tolerance” for corruption, according to the chief of the Bangladeshi chapter of TI, is the intrinsic linkage among politics, money and corruption, causing a disconnect of public decisions and actions from the common people’s interests. “Without a paradigm shift in our political culture to put public interest first, replacing the practice of treating political affiliation as a licence for abuse of power, corruption cannot be controlled,” he says. We cannot agree more.

To see a change in this scenario, we need drastic reforms, starting with building a political consensus on the need for insulating public institutions from the influence of politics, money and criminality. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) must be empowered to do its job. There should also be legal provisions to manage conflict of interest transparently, depoliticising institutions of accountability, and establishing professional integrity and impartiality of all vital institutions, including public service, administration and law enforcement agencies. We can’t continue to repeat the mistakes of the past or allow the corrupt elements to eat away at the hard-earned achievements of our nation.

A war heroine can’t beg for survival

Take urgent steps to address her woes

IT is disheartening to know that a brave woman who had endured torture during Bangladesh’s War of Independence is now facing eviction from her house for failing to pay her rent. According to a report in this daily, Birangana Shila Guha said she had been abused by her landlord for money and, not finding any help or way out, was contemplating suicide. The 70-year-old now has to beg for survival in the streets of Sreemangal.

It is disturbing enough that her supreme sacrifice in 1971 has not been officially recognised yet. She has not been listed as a Birangana even though 50 years have gone by since those days of horror. The declaration was supposed to come by December 16 last year, but it has not happened till date. That she is going through such trouble and harassment at this stage of her life also speaks volumes about the negligence of the state about our poor elderly individuals.

Shila Guha’s story of misfortune is as horrendous as that of other girls and women who had been taken to the Pakistan Army camps. She survived that experience by a stroke of luck. Her second round of tryst with fate began when her father refused to take her in after the war ended, as she had been picked up by the Pakistanis. Her life since then has been one of despair, denial and betrayal. Even her husband, when he came to know about her war-time ordeal, left her. She has been lending for herself and her daughter since then.

Shila Guha saw a ray of hope when the prime minister, in a video conference on June 20 last year, reportedly assured her that she would be accorded due respect, and her days of misery would end soon. In this regard, Sreemangal Upazila Nirbahi Officer Nazrul Islam told *The Daily Star* that her documents had been sent to the authorities concerned, but he had yet to receive any reply. We hope the government will soon intervene in this regard, and Shila Guha will finally find peace and recognition. Meanwhile, she needs succour on an urgent basis in the form of cash and kind. It’s a shame for the nation when a war hero has to beg for survival.

We must be rational in fighting the new Covid wave



A CLOSER LOOK
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IN view of the surging Covid-19 cases across Bangladesh, the government issued new sets of guidelines earlier this week to curb the spread of the virus. The directives that were issued on January 21, 2022 directed the closure of educational institutions for two weeks—from January 21 to February 6. It also said that any event—government, religious, social or political—should not allow more than 100 people to attend, and even those attending must produce their vaccine card or PCR test results, not older than 24 hours prior to the event. Individuals working in various offices and factories must have their vaccine certificates, and the guidelines also made mask wearing mandatory in all public places, including shopping malls, bus stands, launch terminals, mosques, etc.

However, how effective these new set of directives will be in containing the new wave of the pandemic needs thorough scrutiny.

If one takes a closer look at the three set of guidelines the government issued on January 10, January 21, and January 23, respectively, covering 17 rules in total, one would see that significant emphasis has been attached to social distancing measures and Covid hygiene practices. Looking at these, one can safely assume that perhaps the end objective of issuing these guidelines is to fight the pandemic through social distancing in public spaces and adherence to the best Covid-19 hygiene practices.

However, while the initial 15 guidelines issued on January 10 and another one issued on January 23 had been well contemplated, the five directives issued on January 21 could perhaps be better thought out—especially the one regarding the closure of educational institutions.

To start with, while in-person classes in schools and colleges have been suspended for two weeks to lower the risk of infection among students, the children remain exposed to high-density public gatherings, as multiple fairs are taking place across the country: the Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF), for one.

A video by this daily of the Police Women Welfare Association (Punak) fair in Lalmonirhat, which began on January 12, shows the unhealthy gathering of people at the fair premises. And the crowd



▲ **No masks, no social distancing—people crowd around street food stalls in front of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). The photo was taken recently.**

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

▲ **Half-hearted, hasty measures will only increase public sufferings, which will not be a palatable outcome for any party involved.**

the effectiveness of closing down the educational institutions to lower the risk of infections among children, the education minister said, “Effectiveness depends on everyone maintaining the hygiene rules.” If that is the case, the parents who are taking these children to these fairs are not following hygiene rules.

And not just these fairs, the children are being taken out to attend weddings—this being the “wedding season”—and parties, shopping malls and hangouts. When this is happening, how the two-week school closure alone would help prevent the spread of the virus among the students, one might be pardoned for asking.

In addition to this, the decision to allow the fairs to continue and the shopping malls to run like business as usual, while restricting the number of people who could attend events, also does not make much sense. So many people visit these fairs every day, and so many people visit shopping malls every day, so why this curb on events only? If the government’s objective is to prevent public gathering, then they must come up with a holistic strategy to discourage people from congregating in one place. This should include fairs, shopping malls, airports—especially the one in Dhaka, which is turning into a breeding ground for the

virus, given the 16-hour packed flight schedule and the lacklustre enforcement of social distancing rules—and other places where people might gather.

The government’s U-turn to allow buses and launches to operate in full capacity, despite previously instructing them to run in half capacity that came with the set of 11 guidelines issued on January 10, also does not help in

enforcing social distancing in public. Under the pressure from various actors in the transport sector, the authorities allowed public transports to operate in full capacity, meaning people are now being forced to commute in cramped public buses and water vessels.

If containing the infections through enforcement of social distancing and adherence to basic Covid hygiene is the objective, then the government needs to adopt a strategic way forward that will facilitate achieving this, not the contrary.

Also the authorities must realise that piece-meal measures and knee-jerk reactions such as closing down in-person classes, while still leaving the children vulnerable to exposure at public gatherings, would not help in keeping them safe. Nor would it help if their parents keep commuting in cramped public transports, potentially exposed to the virus. The same goes for restricting the number of people at events only.

The government must take a hard look at the measures taken so far, and its strategic plan to battle the new wave—if it has one in the first place—and take a rational and comprehensive approach that would yield effective results. Half-hearted, hasty measures will only increase public sufferings, which will not be a palatable outcome for any party involved.

The unenviable camaraderie of public university vice-chancellors



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I see—and perhaps others do, too—some lights at the end of the tunnel. Reportedly, 35 public university vice-chancellors have expressed their willingness to resign from their posts if the controversial Vice-Chancellor Farid Uddin Ahmed of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) has to resign. I see some positivity in their declaration of solidarity with their favourite “cousin” in SUST, as this may well help resurrect the spirit of Bangladeshi higher education.

About 25 years ago at Dhaka University, most of my friends who studied the economics course under the now-VC Farid had failed to secure passing marks and had to retake the course or sit for an improvement examination. It is well-known that students of the economics department are considered as the highest-ranking ones, and the word “failure” does not align well with their academic records. So, why did a majority of students fail the current SUST VC’s course? According to them, they could not ask any questions to this professor. He came to class with his ancient, handwritten notes, followed a copy-and-paste routine on the board, and silently departed from the class when the time was up. He would be annoyed, even angry, at the questions of his students.

As an education researcher interested in the political economy of education, I was curious to know about his personal profile, and browsed a research database

to read his peer-reviewed journal articles—but found none. With some anticipation, as a last resort, I downloaded his CV from the SUST website. It says the gentleman acquired a second-class 11th position for his Bachelor’s degree, a first-class 6th for his Master’s, and received a second Master’s from Monash University in Australia. Without going into excessive detail, his CV also read that



▲ **Waving goodbye to all 35 vice-chancellor friends of VC Farid Uddin Ahmed of SUST may well resurrect Bangladeshi higher education from its ashes.**

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

he had written “20 articles and/or books published in national and international journals.” What is most interesting in his profile, however, is that the number of professional associations he is involved in is half of the number of recreational clubs he belonged to.

Some months ago, the education minister observed that most of our teachers were “teachers by accident.” Now I realise what she may have meant. The VC of SUST may be a good example for this phenomenon. Such an “accident” is detrimental to Bangladesh’s aspirations of being an upper-middle-income country and having a knowledge-based society.

So, why should we let the like-minded VCs leave? In an undergraduate research interview, the Dean of the Faculty of Law at DU shared an interesting story. Once, a group of student leaders went

to him with the recommendation to hire the then-second-best student as a lecturer at his faculty. He explained to the student leaders why universities need the brightest students as its faculty members. Even if the student in question did not perform well, the judiciary could still place him in various non-critical positions. However, the university did not have that luxury. A second-class teacher may continue teaching in a third-class manner, which would be a disservice to students for years to come. This seems to me a good reason for why we should welcome the wishes of VC Farid’s comrades and arrange a grand farewell for all 35 of them.

One may argue that the VC’s job is administrative and is therefore “non-critical”, with no chance of denting the quality of education in classrooms. The controversial individual in question, however, has failed to prove his ability to safeguard his students and has reportedly relied on law-enforcing agencies and student cadres of the ruling party to protect himself from the agitating students. Police, as always, went the extra mile. They hurled sound grenades, beat up the students, and filed cases against hundreds of them, many of whom were injured and hospitalised. The students’ attempt to exercise their freedom of speech did not please the university administration.

A more serious (rumoured) misconduct is of the VC’s gratuitous comments about the female students of Jahangirnagar University, which do not warrant repetition here. I believe this person and his 35 friends do deserve a grand farewell as a first step towards improving the academic environment in our universities. The next critical step would be to ensure that people with better academic and leadership qualities, as well as integrity and self-respect, are chosen to lead higher education in the country.