

The Daily Star

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Is being political a crime?

DSA cases disproportionately filed against politicians, journalists

SINCE its enactment in 2018, the Digital Security Act (DSA) has been repeatedly used to target critical voices. The arbitrary enforcement of some of its overly broad and vague provisions meant that the victims came from all sorts of backgrounds, although it was always feared that journalists and political activists would be disproportionately targeted. A review of court cases by the DSA Tracker, a project by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), now reveals that politicians did form the majority of victims. After studying the professions of approximately 400 individuals being prosecuted under the law during 2020-2021, the team found that at least 167 of them were politicians. Journalists were a close second, with at least 160 facing prosecution during this period.

The numbers of DSA cases and accused are, of course, much higher. But what makes the CGS findings significant is that it puts a number on two categories of victims who, by virtue of their professions, are closest to the citizens—thereby their most authentic representatives. While we await more exhaustive analysis of the defendants in DSA cases, it's safe to say that most were targeted because they said something deemed "offensive." "Freedom of expression has its limits," said the organising secretary of the ruling Awami League while defending the law. We beg to disagree, because the freedom to speak is precisely the freedom to offend, shock or challenge, and the offended are welcome to protest it, but not gag the offenders.

But this is exactly what is happening now. Political activists, rights campaigners and even journalists—after a promise of undue concessions in DSA case filings from the law minister—continue to be at risk. Two oft-parroted excuses for filing such cases are "hurting the spirit of the Liberation War" and "hurting religious sentiment." Between 2020 and 2021, the DSA Tracker reportedly logged over 2,000 DSA cases filed against 1,530 people, of whom at least 90 were prosecuted for hurting religious sentiment and "provoking unrest." Of them, at least 55 belonged to the minority Hindu community. Equally frighteningly, police have been solely empowered to decide whether the spirit of the Liberation War or anyone's religious sentiments have been hurt.

The existence of these undefined terms and vague provisions in a legal document that is supposed to be unambiguous is as much to blame as our general culture of intolerance. The CGS findings show how far the rot has spread. At a time when people, especially the youth, are showing increasing disinterest in joining politics and assuming the mantle of leadership, such targeted, ill-motivated use of DSA is bound to send a very wrong message. We can't expect them to be politically active without being politically vocal. We urge the government to repeal the law—or at least amend its questionable provisions.

The odious 'guest room' culture

Purge the loathsome practice from the university halls

WHAT should one make of the report published in this daily that, in the last five months, at least 18 students of Dhaka University (DU) have been either assaulted or mentally tortured at the "guest rooms" of six dormitories in 10 incidents, mostly by "BCL" men? What is equally reprehensible, if not more, is that the university authorities have not taken any action as yet against the alleged perpetrators. On top of that, three university correspondents of different media outlets were also victims of these culprits. This horrific story was revealed by a newly formed rights-based organisation, Students against Torture (SAT), which is monitoring the human rights issues of students.

Predictably, the allegations have been denied by the leader of Bangladesh Chhatra League's (BCL) DU unit, who explained it away as one of those unexpected incidents that happen in the dorms, and that some "unpopular" organisations were bringing allegations against the student front of the ruling party to garner attention.

The Chhatra League explanation cannot wash with the public. One would perhaps have accepted their account were it a one-off incident. Unfortunately, such is not the case. Reportedly, in November last year, five students of Sir AF Rahman Hall in DU were beaten up, allegedly by BCL activists, for Facebook posts calling for a halt to the guest room culture. A similar incident occurred last Sunday, as reported in a leading Bangla daily, when a student of Kazi Nazrul Islam University was severely abused in a "torture cell" by BCL leader Rakib's group. The beating was so severe that the victim, a second-year student of the university, had to be admitted to the hospital.

We must voice our serious misgivings and alarm at what can only be described as a brutal practice, unbecoming of the highest seats of learning in the country: the universities. Reportedly, these cells are used to indoctrinate newcomers, or chastise those that fall out of line or refuse to join the party bandwagon. The BCL cadres even brag about their political connections openly, and of their power that, they claim, supersedes that of the powers of the VC. Such practice must be stopped forthwith. The university authorities owe it to the general students, as guarantors of their well-being, to take appropriate measures to stop this horrible practice. They must put their personal political predilections aside and serve the general students. Failure to do so will mean abdication of their duty, and a slur on their credibility and honour as teachers.

Looking beyond the official arithmetic of inflation

The BBS statistics don't portray the real effect on marginalised households in Bangladesh



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SELIM RAIHAN

DO the official inflation figures in Bangladesh reflect the actual inflation faced by the economically marginalised households in the country?

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) calculates the official inflation rates in the country. It constructs Consumer Price Indices (CPIs) for national, rural, and urban areas, and calculates inflation rates for these areas using the respective CPIs. The reference groups for the constructed CPIs are the average urban and rural households of Bangladesh. The consumption patterns of these households are derived from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of 2005-06. In the urban consumer basket, 422 commodities are included, while the rural basket consists of 318 food and non-food items. Using the data of HIES 2005-06, the BBS derives the weights of items in the baskets based on the average expenditure incurred by a household on the item, expressed in terms of its percentage share in the total expenditure on all items.

There are two major concerns related to the process of the BBS's estimation of CPIs and inflation. First, it is difficult to understand why the BBS is still using the 2005-06 HIES data to derive the weights of the items in the consumption baskets, whereas the latest data, HIES 2016, has been available since 2017. It is quite reasonable to argue that the food habits of people in Bangladesh—both poor and non-poor—have changed since 2005-06. But these changes are not addressed while calculating the CPIs by the BBS. Second, and more importantly, the CPIs calculated by the BBS hardly reflect the inflation faced by low-income households in Bangladesh—in both urban and rural areas. The average consumption baskets used by the BBS to calculate the

CPIs are not truly representative of the consumption pattern of many low-income households.

Therefore, the official figures of inflation do not reflect the reality of the marginalised households—the stress that they suffer—in the wake of price hikes. In this exercise, we offer an alternative estimation of the inflation rates for

food price indices and food inflation rates are calculated based on retail price data collected by the Department of Agricultural Marketing under the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). The results are striking!

First, food consumption baskets of the selected marginalised household groups are concentrated on much smaller items than the food baskets used by the BBS. Second, the average food consumption is 61.13 percent of the total consumption expenditure of the urban marginalised household groups, and 65.36 percent of the total consumption expenditure of the rural household groups under consideration. These are much higher than the food shares used by the BBS in their CPI calculation: 45.17 percent for the urban areas and 58.54 percent for the rural areas. Third, the calculated average food inflation rates in February 2022 for the marginalised households under consideration in the urban and rural areas are 12.47 percent and 12.10 percent, respectively. In January 2022, these figures were 11.36 percent and 11.21 percent, respectively. This suggests that not only the food inflation rates have increased in February, but the rates are also much higher than the official inflation figures. For example, in January 2022, according to the BBS, the food inflation rates for the urban and rural areas were 4.85 percent and 5.94 percent, respectively. However, our estimation suggests that the marginalised households in Bangladesh are facing food inflation rates that are more than two times the officially reported food inflation rates.

Inflation is the "cruellest tax" for marginalised people. Our analysis shows that the officially reported food inflation figures are grossly underestimating the actual food inflation faced by financially marginalised households in Bangladesh. Due to the high reliance on the necessary food items, poor people cannot cut down on necessities and are hit the hardest by the soaring prices of necessities. The policymakers in the country need to address this concern with utmost priority.

Household groups	% share of food expenditure in total expenditure	Food inflation rate Jan 2022 over Jan 2021	Food inflation rate Feb 2022 over Feb 2021
URBAN			
BMC workers	60.52	11.33	12.45
Day labourers	61.59	11.47	12.50
Rickshaw/Van-pullers	60.91	11.37	12.48
Small traders	61.51	11.28	12.45
Average for four groups	61.13	11.36	12.47
RURAL			
Landless farmers	65.85	11.04	11.96
Day labourers	65.99	11.27	12.11
Rickshaw/Van-pullers	65.01	11.31	12.08
Small traders	64.59	11.21	12.27
Average for four groups	65.36	11.21	12.10



such households. We have identified eight marginalised household groups in Bangladesh, who are vulnerable to food insecurity due to the rise of essential food item prices. In the urban areas, these household groups are ready-made garment (RMG) workers, day labourers, rickshaw/van-pullers, and small traders. In the rural areas, these groups include landless farmers, day labourers, rickshaw/van-pullers, and small traders.

We have constructed CPIs for each household group by using the detailed and disaggregated data of the nationwide survey of 10,500 households, conducted by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem) and the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission of Bangladesh in 2018. From this survey data, typical food consumption baskets of these eight household groups are constructed, and respective weights of items in the food baskets are calculated. Using these food baskets, the monthly point-to-point

Another grim warning on climate change



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

THE Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a global body under the United Nations (UN), has been conducting periodic reviews (every six or seven years) of the state of scientific knowledge on climate change for the last 30 years. The agency is currently in the process of publishing its Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) in three parts. The first part was published in August 2021 by Working Group 1 (WG1) based on scientific modelling by physical sciences. The first part of AR6 made the unequivocal claim, for the first time in three decades, that the impacts of human-induced climate change are now evident due to the global temperature rise of over one degree Celsius due to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions since the First Industrial Revolution. This was the first time that such scientific attribution could be made.

The second part of AR6, prepared by Working Group 2 (WG2) on vulnerability, impacts and adaptation, was just published this week, and it has reinforced the message that climate impacts are clearly visible everywhere in the world.

Having had the opportunity of being a lead author of the IPCC's AR3, AR4 and AR5 in the past, I can provide some context on what the IPCC reports do (and don't), and what the AR6 means for Bangladesh as well as the world.

Firstly, the IPCC has grown to become the biggest global collaborative scientific enterprise in the world, with several thousands of scientists from all countries, representing many different disciplines and assessing tens of thousands of scientific papers in different languages from around the world. However, there are two main limitations that must be kept in mind. The IPCC doesn't do any new research, but only assesses existing peer-reviewed scientific publications. And its reports must be policy-relevant, but not policy-prescriptive. In other words, the scientists provide options for policymakers—the decisions are left to the

policymakers.

Each cycle of the IPCC produces a number of reports that include the reports by WG1 on science, WG2 on vulnerability, impacts and adaptation and WG3 on actions to tackle climate change, and finally the synthesis report by all three working groups. The remaining reports of the AR6 cycle will be published before the 27th UN Climate Change

conference of the WG2 report, emphasised the need for the rich countries to step up and contribute to the funds to help poorer countries adapt to these adverse impacts.

At the same time, there is also a need for focusing on the consequences of climate impacts, namely the losses and damages associated with those impacts. However, one reason that the AR6 doesn't



▲ The impacts of climate change are already being experienced in vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, which is once again confirmed by the newly published WG2 part of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Conference (COP27), scheduled for November this year in Egypt.

Secondly, in addition to these regular reports, the IPCC sometimes commissions special reports on specific issues as well. The climate-vulnerable developing countries pushed for such a special report in the last cycle on capping the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, which proved to be significant in getting this target included in the Paris Agreement during COP21 in 2015.

One of the most significant results of the WG2 report is the fact that the impacts of human-induced climate change are occurring in all countries, poor as well as rich, and that all countries must now focus on enhanced adaptations in a whole-of-society manner.

It also points out the fact that the most negative impacts are already occurring, and will continue to occur, in the poorest countries who have the least capacity to tackle the said impacts. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his remarks

have a great deal of analysis of loss and damage is the lack of solid research on this topic until now.

Finally, every IPCC report has serious implications for global decisions, especially at climate summit that follow the report's publication, as we saw happening at COP26 in November 2021, where the Glasgow Climate Pact included a recognition of the results of the WG1 report. It is expected that the results of WG2 report will also receive similar recognition at COP27, especially the need to ramp up investment in adaptation as well as start funding for loss and damage, which COP26 failed to achieve.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, there is some recognition of our success in adaptation to climate change at both local and national levels. We will need to step up our investment in both adaptation and addressing loss and damage going forward, so that Bangladesh can remain a global leader in tackling climate change.