

The Daily Star

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Address extremism proactively

We cannot defeat it using firepower alone

It is alarming to note that a number of young men have come under the Rab's radar for their alleged involvement in militant activities on our soil. According to Rab, at least 55 young men who left their homes in the last two years are currently training to make explosives in remote hilly areas and carrying out activities of a new terror outfit with support from one or two "separatist" groups. Although many of the details about them are still unclear, this revelation should serve as another warning to us as a nation, and to the authorities in particular, that extremism is far from being defeated in the country.

After the horrific Holey Artisan attack, our counterterrorism forces have done a commendable job in preventing any further major terror attacks. Even though we have been successful in tackling militancy through the hard approach, there is much more work that needs to be done to tackle radicalisation in society through different soft approaches. The fact that more young people are getting radicalised is a testament to our failure in that regard.

Militancy cannot be defeated simply through the use of greater firepower and force. Therefore, it is imperative for us to identify how and why young people are being radicalised, and by whom. Why are our youth getting alienated from society and their fellow citizens? Why are they leaning towards extremist ideologies? Why are more and more young people getting involved in one form of violence or another? These are questions that we must first find the answers to.

Needless to say, the absence of social and economic justice and basic dignity provides a fertile ground for extremists to exploit. Thus, while it is important for our counterterrorism forces to identify the masterminds who are providing the funds and other materials to radicalise the youth, we must all take action to ensure the restoration of justice, dignity and a form of social harmony and cooperation in society, which would be the anchor around which the youth can form their own individual identities.

Additionally, it is important for religious leaders and scholars to come forward, and enlighten the youth about the true messages of different religions – none of which condone violence against innocents. To avoid these subjects altogether, and leave them to be discussed by extremists alone would be a great mistake.

To overcome militancy, the authorities and society in general need to be proactive, rather than reactive. We must continuously work to ensure that radicalisation has no place in our country. Furthermore, we must ensure that our youth feel a sense of belonging in society, so that they don't fall into the trap of extremists looking to exploit them for their own twisted agendas.

Food court at the cost of heritage?

Construction of food court at Bahadur Shah Park must be halted

The Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) has reportedly taken it upon itself to construct a food court inside the historical Bahadur Shah Park of Old Dhaka. This park houses two memorials – one of them in honour of those martyred during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. And currently, it is one of the only open spaces wherein the old and young residents of Old Dhaka can get some respite and reconnect with nature. Yet, rather than preserving such a rare space of greenery, which is also part of Dhaka's hundreds of years of heritage, the city corporation itself is attempting to ruin the park's sanctity.

Already, a metal structure has been erected in the park, taking up space that should be reserved for visitors. What's more surprising is that all this is being done despite adamant protests from citizens. So, given that those who actually frequent the park do not want a food court there, whose good is it being built for? Is it just a way for city authorities to pocket some profit? Do they realise that not every bit of land needs to be profitable in order to be deemed useful?

It is disappointing that ruining heritage sites has become a fad for our authorities as of late. In Old Dhaka itself, ancient structures such as Bara Katra and Choto Katra are facing demolition. Earlier this year, Tetultala playground in Kalabagan had to be saved by locals from the police, who wanted to construct a police station there. Even Suhrawardy Udyan, a witness to so many crucial moments of Bangladesh's birth and early years, faced the threat of a food court last year.

Often, it is seen that those heritage sites which are being destroyed belong to the High Court's 2018 list of 2,200 buildings which it directed Rajuk to preserve. In fact, the Bahadur Shah Park itself has a place in that list. Are we to believe that, for our city authorities, so-called development is above the wishes of citizens and even above the law?

In the case of the food court being constructed in Bahadur Shah Park, the chief estate officer of DSCC told this newspaper that they had only allowed for the setting up of "a movable food van" in the park, and that they have already "instructed the contractor to remove the iron structure."

We hope the DSCC representative's assurance that "no permanent structure will be allowed" to be built in Bahadur Shah Park is something we can rely on. It is high time for government authorities to ensure that "development" does not get in the way of heritage, and for them to stop behaving as if the opposite is the case. Citizens care about historical structures and greenery – and authorities need to do the same.

The shocking contempt of the EC by civil servants



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KAMAL AHMED

The rude disobedience shown by the field-level administrators – deputy commissioners (DCs) and superintendents of police (SPs) – to the current Election Commission (EC) has once again shown us what's wrong at the core of our election management mechanism.

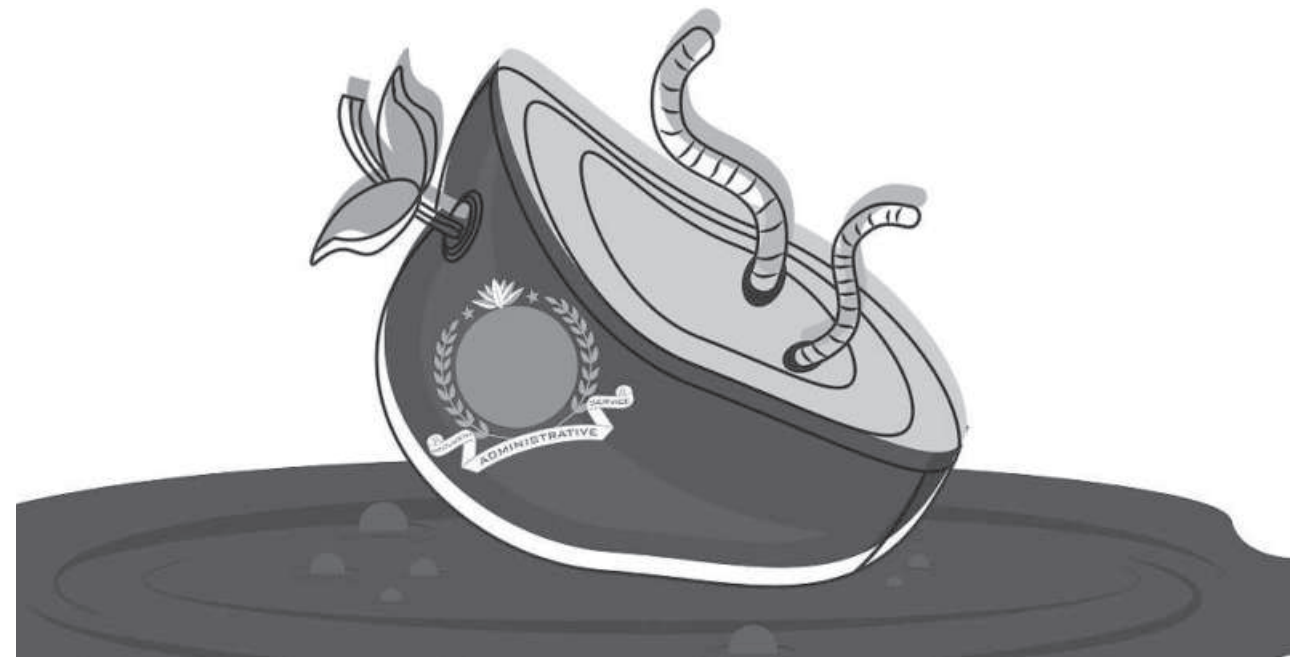
On the one hand, it shows that civil bureaucracy is now out of control due to the politicisation of the institution and their lack of accountability. On the other, it exposes the receding authority of a constitutional body. The faltering EC's struggle to earn public confidence has just gotten even harder.

Despite Election Commissioner Rashida Sultana's bold attempt to brush aside the civil servants' grievous misconduct by describing the incident to Deutsche Welle (DW) Bangla as a "simple misunderstanding," the nature of the friction between the EC and the returning officers during an ongoing electoral process should not be allowed to be swept under the carpet. Though

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the meeting was held on camera, the description of the untoward incident published in the media seemed well-substantiated. The narratives coming from both sides, albeit anonymously, were remarkably corroborative.

According to these reports, Election Commissioner Anisur Rahman expressed his dissatisfaction over the civil servants' emphasis on increasing their benefits for poll duties, but their silence about allegations raised



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against the way electioneering for the zilla parishad polls is going on. Reports quoted Anisur saying, "There are allegations that the officials work in league with the MPs and ministers. Many, while taking part in the talks with the Election Commission, also raised allegations of the officials' bias... have our officials become toothless?" The commissioner alleged that magistrates did not get the budget allocated for them as fuel cost.

His comments caused some commotion inside the EC's meeting hall – something one can visualise at college campuses, but not at official conferences. Several DCs protested his statement. Anisur said he had proof of those allegations and he wouldn't speak if the officials didn't want him to. According to these reports, Anisur stopped speaking after some officials shouted "no." He returned to his seat and none of his fellow commissioners or the CEC, who was chairing the meeting, spoke about the unpleasant misconduct by such senior officials.

When the Election Commission has decided not to consider this undesired misconduct as a contravention of service rules, why should it matter to other common citizens? It matters,

because it happened during a mini-national election, the zilla parishad election, scheduled to be held on October 17, in which all these DCs have been appointed as returning officers. We know how much power and authority these returning officers hold, and how their partisan activities have already been creating controversies. The Chattogram DC's infamous public

to police or law enforcement agencies, it is the Ministry of Home Affairs. The EC can, of course, ask these ministries to take disciplinary actions against the alleged offending officers, but there are plenty of examples where such requests were willfully ignored. However, making such requests public can, at least, shame those offending officers and their political masters.

prayer for the success of the ruling Awami League nominee during the submission of his nomination papers for the election is a good reminder.

Article 126 of the Bangladesh Constitution stipulates, "It shall be the duty of the executive authorities to assist the Election Commission in the discharge of its functions." There's no ambiguity in this provision that the officers of the state have to submit to the EC's authority, which clearly was not followed accordingly by those who have expressed dissent and forced one commissioner to give them instructions. Under the law, all these commissioners are equal and any attempt to isolate any of the commissioners and defy that particular commissioner is bound to be considered as a contempt of the commission as a whole. The CEC and other fellow commissioners of Anisur Rahman are constitutionally required to treat this incident as a defiance of the institution and act accordingly.

Often, it has been said that the EC lacks any meaningful authority to discipline any insubordination by civil servants as they are only accountable to the executive branch, i.e. the Ministry of Public Administration; in relation

Besides, removing them from electoral duties, which is fully the commission's discretion, can also make people aware about the mischievous behaviour of the offending officials and identify them.

Over the years, we have seen conferences of DCs and SPs take place as an annual event, but no one ever heard of any commotion at such an administrative meeting. Imagine a scenario in which the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), another constitutional body, was holding a similar conference of DCs to talk about corruption allegations. Would these civil servants even dare to stop the ACC chief from raising such allegations? Presumably, the answer will be a big no, and we all know why.

The reason behind the bureaucracy becoming ever more powerful is the rapid erosion in democratic governance and lack of accountability. When the ruling party relies more on the bureaucracy for electoral success, instead of winning the hearts and minds of the people, the end result can't be anything different. The most crucial question now is: will the EC do something to rescue whatever dignity of the institution still remains?

Big Tech and the right to know



Ilaria Fevola is ARTICLE 19's legal officer, focused on transparency.

ILARIA FEVOLA

The world observed International Day for Universal Access to Information last month, recognising the importance for every individual to be able to access information held by public institutions. Traditionally, it has been an opportunity to examine whether countries have adopted a law on access to information and if, in practice, public bodies adhere to their transparency obligations.

At present, 126 countries have access to information laws. This means 91 percent of the world's population can formally request information from a state or local authority.

But we know that the right to know doesn't end with the existence of a law. It is a right that empowers people to participate in decisions that affect them, a tool to hold entities that make such decisions accountable. Information is power, as we often say.

However, it is not just governments that make those decisions. From the extractive industry to Big Tech, private corporations hold enormous power over individuals, both online and offline.

Yet, laws do not make them accountable in the same way that access to information laws do public institutions. They are not obliged to be transparent, and individuals do not have the guarantees that the right to know gives them. So far, only data

their power, the transparency of Big Tech firms is becoming increasingly important.

There is a massive concentration of market power in a handful of companies that have total control over the content that is distributed and consumed: they actively control, select, and censor what we see online. This much power cannot

Crucially, the legislations put a strong emphasis on transparency, to shed light on issues such as the platforms' content moderation practices. That way, users can operate in a predictable environment and know the possibilities and limits on their behaviour online. Platforms will be required to explain and publish their terms of services, explain their content moderation decisions and make them publicly available.

Social media companies will also have to produce transparency reports, including information about requests from governments to remove user-generated content, notices submitted to flag alleged illegal content, and information about measures against misuse. This will benefit researchers, oversight bodies, and the public who will be able to better understand how content moderation decisions are made.

But while a law is a key and fundamental step, for it to be effective, it requires implementation on two sides. One, institutions need to know the law well and see it with a positive, instead of a suspicious, attitude. Second, people need to know that a law exists and that they can use it freely to ask for information.

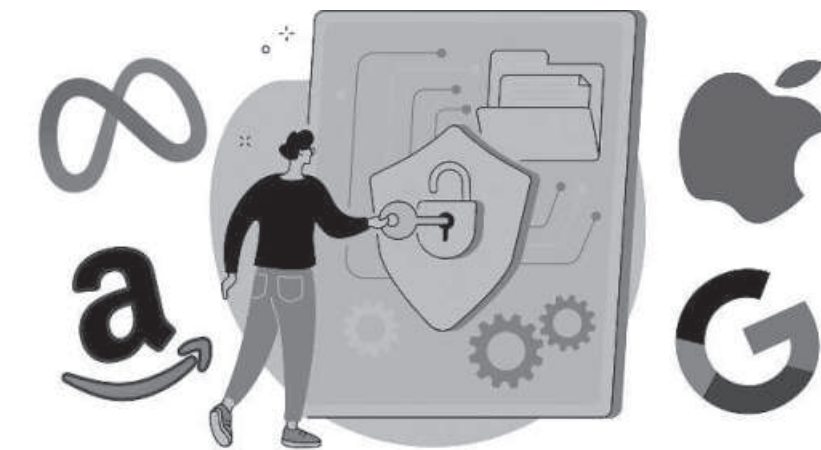
The same needs to happen with Big Tech. Companies need to understand how transparency will benefit them in the long run, through building trust with their users and the public at large.

It is also crucial that users are informed about their right to know and know how to use it. This two-way awareness of transparency is a long process and we're just getting started. The road ahead is long, but one thing is clear: companies have a duty to respect human rights, and the right to know is one of them.

protection laws have tried to fill this gap, allowing people whose data have been processed by companies to ask how it is being used.

Until very recently, the importance of the right to know for corporate transparency has been neglected, or perhaps just ignored. Nowhere is this more visible than on social media.

Social media platforms are no longer considered just private companies whose users simply accept terms and conditions. They are spaces where free expression, democratic debate and participation are realised. Given



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