

# The Daily Star

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## SC rightly asserts the independence of EC

### But will the EC live up to its obligation?

We welcome the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court's verdict that none of the government organs, including the executive, can interfere with the Election Commission's (EC) functions, as the commission is an independent body as per the constitution. While delivering the verdict, the SC sent out the right message with its observation and from the correct legal position. But this is just one part of the story. In Bangladesh, we have many institutions that have been granted independent power by the constitution. But because of a lack of principled stances, individual courage, and the willingness on the part of some people to aid those in power for self-benefits and self-aggrandisement, they unfortunately do not work.

And this, ultimately, is the crux of the issue. Therefore, while we greatly appreciate what the SC said while delivering its verdict, the fact of the matter remains that, unless election commissioners use their legal powers with resilience and courage, or if they are intimidated by the prevailing political environment and by politicians, the system will not work in favour of the country or its people. And we can see plenty of evidence of that, just by how the EC has performed in the past.

The power vested upon the EC is not something new. It had a lot of power before, but that did not pay off in terms of delivering free and fair elections where the people could satisfactorily exercise their right to franchise. In the absence of people getting to choose their own representatives – and, as an extension of that, hold those who claim to represent them to account – we have arrived at a situation where accountability and transparency in governance have gone out the window. Those in power no longer even pretend to value the opinions of the people, nor have any respect towards them. The open display of arrogance, intimidation, and apathy towards the public by those in power – or even those who are connected to it – are direct results of the failure of our so-called “independent” institutions to justly and courageously perform their duties.

Under such circumstances, we cannot help but wonder if the EC will truly utilise its powers to ensure that the sanctity of voters' rights remains unviolated.

Having said that, we must also admit that we are enthused by some of the early signs from this EC. But it has to build on what it has done so far and the commissioners have to rightly assert themselves. Undoubtedly, the biggest source of their support are the people who, we have no doubt, will support them should the ECs' aim truly be to deliver free and fair elections, as per their constitutional mandate.

## So much for Digital Bangladesh!

### Imposition of Bijoy on users impinges on their personal freedoms

It has become increasingly clear that the carrot of a pre-installed “free” app being dangled in front of our noses is covering up intentions that are far more insidious. We are talking about the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission's (BTRC) order to pre-install the Bijoy app in all imported and locally-manufactured Android phones. This order has come with the veiled threat that, if the BTRC-supplied Bijoy APK file is not installed and displayed to the commission, a no-objection will not be issued for marketing the phone.

The decision to impose this on consumers and sellers, with very little explanation for taking away their freedom of choice, has drawn criticism from across the board. The issue is made murkier by the obvious conflict of interest: the BTRC operates under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology, and the patent of the Bangla typing software Bijoy has belonged to its minister, Mostafa Jabbar, since 1988.

The minister has tried to make light of this order by arguing that the app will be provided free of cost, and that customers are free to uninstall it from their phones at will. But if customers are truly free to make this choice, why make its pre-installation mandatory?

The truth is that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The use of a product always increases its commercial value, and given that Bijoy is far less popular than other, more user-friendly keyboards, like Avro and Riddmik, there seems to be a very transparent reason behind the plan to suddenly have Bijoy downloads go up by hundreds of thousands at once. Because if the reason really is to make a Bangla typing software available to users, as the minister suggested, then why not provide one that users already prefer?

The issue here is not only the total disregard for citizens' right to choose. The process of putting forward this so-called order is in itself dubious since, legally, no government organisation has the right to make using a specific product or service mandatory. According to news reports, the BTRC order is based on an announcement from the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution terming Bijoy as the standard keyboard to follow. So under what due process did it suddenly become mandatory?

Then there are the concerns over digital security. Experts have criticised the fact that Bijoy is not an open-source product, and that even its own privacy policy on app stores admits that there are holes in its security. This is extremely concerning since, when an app is pre-installed, consumers can be asked to give away their right to give it permission to access their personal data. This lax attitude towards data protection only confirms how little the current regime values citizens' right to data privacy.

At the end of the day, this is not just about a keyboard. This is yet another step towards the slow erosion of digital rights and personal freedoms in the country. Before going forward with this decision, the authorities must ask themselves: is this really what they want Digital Bangladesh to be known for?

## BTRC MANDATE FOR BIJOY KEYBOARD PRE-INSTALLATION

# A glaring example of government intrusion



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The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has mandated the use of Bijoy keyboard on all imported and locally manufactured Android smartphones. Smartphones will have to install and demonstrate the APK file supplied by BTRC prior to getting marketing permission, and failing to do so will result in not being granted a no-objection certificate (NOC).

Usually, the Android Package Kit (APK) of the mobile handset app is verified and approved by Google Play Store on the basis of its international standard. In this case, the source code is checked to see if there are any privacy-infringing elements, malware, or any viruses or data theft interfaces. Contradicting this, the direction of BTRC, bypassing Google Play Store's safe and standard practice to install an APK separately, has triggered suspicion and mistrust in users.

In the past, a Bangladeshi IT firm called SK Technologies had raised questions about Bijoy's activities on social media with evidence. It alleged that Bijoy was stealing customers' information by adding malicious code to its software and that a Trojan was found in Bijoy Ekushe and Bijoy Ekattor softwares. According to antivirus software company Avira's virus lab report, the task of a Trojan virus is to steal user information.

Recently, the home minister confirmed that modern technology, like Open Source Intelligence Technology (OSINT), has been added to the NTMC (National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre) to stop various activities against the country and government through social media monitoring (surveillance) on the internet. At the same time, an initiative has been taken to launch an integrated lawful interception system (a system of lawfully intercepting communication through mobile phone and internet). Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) expressed concerns over this and stated that such a move threatens citizens' rights.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

BTRC's directive to pre-install the Bijoy keyboard on all Android phones is an absurd, ridiculous, and rights-violating decision. The government has announced massive telecommunication, broadband, and internet data interception infrastructure deployment recently. Moreover, Israeli media outlet Haaretz alleged that Israeli spy tech has been sold to Bangladesh. Reportedly, advanced cyber tools to intercept mobile and internet traffic were sold to the Interior Ministry, internal security agency, and armed forces via Cyprus.

Bangladesh does not yet have any citizen data privacy protection legal framework. In such a vulnerable context, the BTRC's directive is a matter of great concern that should be checked for any intention to steal users' location, confidential information, financial information, passwords, or to trace their financial transactions.

The biggest risk of the Bijoy keyboard being pre-installed is the threat it poses to citizens' privacy.

As internet security and VPN expert KG Orphanides has written for *Trusted Reviews*, “You wouldn't think a smartphone keyboard could impact your digital privacy. But this is actually the case. Powered by machine learning, many smartphone keyboards apps send back samples of what you type to the company that

of confirming this because Bijoy's keyboard is not open source. The APK file may be clean in the beginning but, later on, location, confidential, and private data might be harvested by the keyboard. So, even if the APK file remains on the phone without use, it could become unsafe. Although the app is free, there are

owns them.”

Also, there is a conflict of interest here. Being the Minister of Telecommunication, Jabbar cannot give instructions to the BTRC to use his own company's software. According to LIRNEasia's senior policy fellow Abu Saeed Khan, “This unlawful decree unequivocally raised a conflict of interest as the incumbent telecoms minister is Bijoy's patent-holder.”

Bijoy is only used in some public sector computers, Bangla printing outlets, and partially in the publishing industry. To put this into perspective, as of January 17, the Bijoy keyboard, which has a 2.9 stars rating, was downloaded 50,000 times from the Google Play Store, while Riddmik Keyboard, which has a 4.3 stars rating, has over five crore downloads. But other businesses and innovative competitors will surely lag behind if the BTRC directive is implemented.

Though it has been said that no information will be collected by the keyboard, non-technical BTRC management have no way

sources of income within it for Bijoy from the in-app ads. So, there is also a possibility of crowd-sourcing app data being sold.

When switching the keyboard option from Google to Bijoy, the Android system alert itself warns that the particular keyboard input method could steal personal information like passwords or credit card numbers.

Apart from the conflict of interest, this monopoly would be considered punishable under the Competition Act 2012 of Bangladesh. It cannot be ruled out that there may be a link between the government's crackdown on mobile phones and the BTRC's directive. As the general election is approaching, there has been more than a glimpse of growing unrest within the government.

It is people's right to choose what method they use to input personal data in their devices. As such, the BTRC should recall the above-discussed instructions. If not, the upper court must be urged to intervene.

## Welcome to the Machine



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I had my birthday on the 17th, and I am already feeling old. The op-ed editor suggested I write on plagiarism in the age of AI – ChatGPT, for instance. For the first time, I heard of ChatGPT. Now that I think of it, a former student-colleague, now teaching in Canada, posted on Facebook a reference letter using machine-generated language. The reference letter was pretty impressive, and how I wish I had that mechanical genie!

It would have come in handy in this season of application. It's hard to say no to requests for recommendations of students or colleagues. The problem arises when they apply to 5 to 15 universities each; on average I have to attend to 30 requests. Uploading customised recommendation letters can be bothersome. Last week, I woke up at 5am to get a drink and, lo, there was a recommendation seeker. The university to which the person applied needed an immediate response. She was waiting all night long for me to wake up. And my sin was I used my phone to check the time, thus being online and prompting the person in-line to ping me.

“Welcome to the machine,” I hummed a Pink Floyd song. “What did you dream? It's alright we told you what to dream?” the song continued. Yes, the machine is dictating my thoughts (although Pink Floyd probably had a different connotation for the machine – a system that generates material desires, war,

mechanical life and so on). But where was I? Oh right, ChatGPT!

I went to my colleague's Facebook page to verify the name of the app he used. It's ChatGPT alright. By now he had posted a second message saying he gave the app a prompt to distinguish strong from weak vowels. The machine has got it all wrong. The linguist posted a cautionary note for those seeking shortcuts.

Probably the same reason why I was prompted to write on this topic. A group of accomplished scholars were commissioned to write the textbook for secondary school students. Evidently, in the science book of Class 7, a few passages were lifted from a popular magazine and machine-translated into Bangla. The senior-most editor publicly apologised for their oversight, arguing that they never expected the writer, a university professor with overseas pedigree, to reproduce a source text in such a way, especially when such information is common knowledge and did not merit the trouble of copying.

I will not get into the pedagogical issue of materials development, which is a specialised area that requires a conceptual framework where many circles need to be squared. Judging by the public furore, it is clear that the university professors who teach at an advanced level are not often in tune with how young children access and process materials. These authors are

writing beyond their comfort zones. How do I know? I listened to the reactions of some school-goers and realised that not enough research was being done on the difficulty levels of textbooks.

Among other reasons (such as being overwhelmed by the topic, time management, etc), the desire to

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copy can also arise from a sense of discomfort. I will not be surprised if it is found that the machine copy is due to discomfort from the writer's ability to write in Bangla. The one who detected this plagiarism sensed something wrong with the syntax. Unfortunately, the series editor, who is one of our celebrity authors, found no fault in the faltering Bangla. The mistakes became even more glaring when these texts were translated for the English version.

The pressure to write more, become more visible, master more, and claim mastery over issues beyond one's discipline or format can make one seek shortcuts. The illusion of instant fame acts as a catalyst. The aggressive growth of technology has further aggravated the situation. Coming out of the pandemic cocoon, the butterfly of technology is now everywhere, with its full vibrancy and vigour. The plague of academic plagiarism came on the

heels of the coronavirus pandemic.

The menace of plagiarism is everywhere. The line that separates the right from the wrong is becoming blurrier by the minute. Why rely on memorising when your memory card can store the information you need? Our human agency is compromised by the machine.

What prompts us to copy without giving credit to the source? Why this urgency to hide the original? Referring to Humayun Azad, who paraded his borrowed narrative on women as his own work, critic Ahmed Sofa once used an analogy of young piglets testing out their teeth on the flesh of their progenitors. Harold Bloom calls this desire to replace the “anxiety of influence.”

Technology has allowed more avenues to remove traces of the source. Ironically, the opposite is equally valid; there are more advanced technologies to catch academic thieves. Most institutions now have plagiarism checkers.

Then again, the thrill of beating this originality-seeker serves as another incentive for our tech-savvy young generation. The methods our students adopt to camouflage their crime will beat anybody's imagination.

Some of the digital techniques they use to fool the machine include: text modification by using white invisible letters, using Cyrillic letters “o,” “e,” and “a” instead of English letters, uploading the document for a check in an image format, and translating a text into a foreign language and retranslating it into English. I am trying to catch up.

As I write this piece, someone in our Facebook group of music lovers posts how ChatGPT is being used to produce music covers; you can change your voice to that of your preferred singer or format using the app.

Welcome to the machine!