

## Caught between two crises

### Real solution lies in reassessment of government energy policy

After experiencing the worst load-shedding in a decade last year, we seem to be heading towards another sweltering summer, with no one the wiser about how to tackle the energy crisis. According to a report by this daily, independent power producers (IPPs) that use furnace oil risk facing severe shortage of fuel this year, unless they can import fuel worth \$1.05 billion between March and June. In a letter sent to the Bangladesh Bank (BB), the Bangladesh Independent Power Producers' Association pointed out that due to a shortage of US dollars, their members have been unable to import heavy fuel oil (HFO), adding that the country's "energy security is at peril" without the central bank's support.

The BB is reportedly waiting for instructions from the government. The problem is, whatever the government decides, we, the people, are looking at a lose-lose situation. Given the severity of the dollar crisis in the country, it seems illogical to expect the government to approve an amount that is roughly one quarter of the IMF loan, when it should prioritise plants that require cheaper fuel, like gas. But with these IPPs making up as much as 27 percent of the total capacity of the country's grid, this would inevitably result in frequent power cuts. Meanwhile, even if these plants sit idle due to fuel shortage, the government will have to continue to pay them a huge amount as capacity charges.

Weren't we in this exact position less than a year ago, when fuel prices skyrocketed in the international market following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war? Back then, we joined the experts in highlighting to the government the dangers of having relied on an energy policy that was so dependent on imports; we had implored it to move away from paying atrocious amounts of capacity charges to IPPs – a whopping Tk 90,000 crore in less than a decade – and coming up with short-, medium- and long-term alternatives that were sustainable, cost-effective and focused on building our national capacity.

Unfortunately, over the past year, we did not see any comprehensive plan for resolving the crisis, nor any acknowledgement of having learnt from the reckless policies that had pushed the country to such an insecure place in the first place. In fact, the new proposed Integrated Power and Energy Master Plan (IEPMP) endorses the decade-old policy of over-reliance on IPPs, foreign imports and foreign investments. In the absence of any meaningful reforms in the sector, it is only inevitable that the government will continue to find itself in such tricky situations from which there is no easy escape.

Thus far, the government has resorted to blaming external factors for the crisis, while passing down the cost of its own decisions to the public, even going so far as to curtail the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission's right to hold a public hearing before any price increase. We urge the government to review its energy policies and finally clarify to the people what steps it will take to address the crisis and ease people's suffering.

## The long march to a level-playing field

### Opposition parties must be allowed to hold peaceful political activities

We are frustrated at how things are unfolding in the country's political field, as the 2024 national election draws closer. Despite there being assurances by the ruling party leaders, including the prime minister herself, that the opposition parties would be allowed to hold peaceful political programmes ahead of the election, and promises by the Election Commission (EC) of a level playing field, we are regularly getting news of attacks on various programmes organised by the BNP. Its latest programme – a road march across the country on February 25 – also faced a similar fate, in which at least 100 people, including six policemen, were injured and over 100 of its leaders and activists were held by the police. All these are ominous signs for a country whose people are hoping to see a free, fair and violence-free national election next year.

In the latest case, attacks were reported in Natore, Patuakhali, Jhalakathi, Bagerhat, Netrakona and many other districts. The police tried to justify their baton charges on the BNP activists by saying that they did so to clear the roads or that they were attacked first by the BNP activists; the BNP leaders and activists, on the other hand, claimed that their protest marches were largely peaceful and that the Awami League activists and the police attacked them without any provocation. The general secretary of Natore city unit BNP also claimed that the "Jubo League and Chhatra League men hurled the bombs from motorcycles" to scare them.

Around two weeks earlier, we witnessed similar incidents of violence in which at least 200 people, mostly BNP activists, were injured. While the BNP's programme was pre-scheduled – a march in every union parishad to press home its 10-point demand, including the next national election under a caretaker government – the Awami League also held "peace rallies" at the union level on the same day. And naturally, clashes took place among both party members.

From the way every political rally and programme of the BNP has been attacked, obstructed or countered by the ruling party men – often in collusion with the police – it is clear that there is no level playing field for the opposition parties in the country at present. Holding rallies and processions is a constitutional right of any political party. By attacking such rallies, resorting to violence, and countering the programmes of the BNP, what message is the ruling party sending to the opposition, voters and the world at large? If the ruling party is really sincere about holding a free, fair and inclusive election, it must allow the opposition parties to hold their political activities, sit in a dialogue with them and come to a consensus about holding the next election in a credible manner.

People are eagerly waiting for the political atmosphere of the country to change for the better. The government and the Election Commission must not continue to disappoint them.

# The expanding horizon of thought policing



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George Orwell's novel *1984*, published in 1949, exemplifies the authoritarian idea of criminalising thoughts. Although the dystopian novel is science fiction, it is essentially a cautionary tale. The story takes place in the fictional totalitarian state of Oceania, where the ruling party led by Big Brother exerts total control over every aspect of the citizens' lives. The protagonist, Winston Smith, works for the government and later starts a rebellion against the tyrannical regime. Winston becomes disillusioned with the propaganda and conflict in society and begins to write his thoughts in a diary, although this is a forbidden act in the eyes of Big Brother. He meets a mysterious lady named Julia and the two begin a love affair, leading to Winston's further dissent against the government. He becomes involved with a subversive group and is eventually captured and tortured by the Thought Police until he fully surrenders to the government.

Throughout the novel, one core theme is the government's use of language as a tool of control and manipulation. The concept of "doublethink" and "Newspeak" are introduced, where citizens are made to accept contradictory ideas as truth and language is limited to prevent dissent. The novel is a political commentary on the dangers of totalitarianism and serves as a warning against the dangers of government surveillance and manipulation.

The themes of *1984* are relevant to this date, especially for government agencies dealing with surveillance, and misuse and manipulation of information. The novel rings alarm about the danger of absolute power in which the individual gives up their freedom for the illusion of security, and the consequences of that.

Now, the question is, how is George Orwell's *1984* relevant in Bangladesh? Since its independence, Bangladesh has hardly had a fair election under any party's rule. Almost all the past governments in the country have used

force to some extent to stay in power. However, since 2014, a different type of governance has been functioning here. In 2011, the caretaker government system – a temporary, non-partisan government under which the parliamentary election would be held – was abolished and elections under a party government were ensured. In 2014, we had a general election where the ruling party's victory was confirmed even before the polling took place. In 2018, voting allegedly took place the night before election day.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

The opposition's right to protest and assemble has been severely curtailed, and we have noticed increasing surveillance and harassment of opposition leaders, including denial of bail. Some establishments of political opponents have been silently taken over, or occupied.

The government has powerful surveillance networks, having acquired Israeli intelligence technology and Chinese AI driven big data processing software, according to media reports. Opposition political activists and journalists are routinely arrested under the Digital Security Act (DSA). Writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who was arrested under this law, died in prison. According to ARTICLE 19, about 40 percent of the cases filed under the

disappearance in Bangladesh, while at least 2,658 people were victims of extrajudicial killing. Moreover, the government rewarded a number of police members who are accused of torturing political opponents and even students. In January, the home minister himself told the parliament that "modern technology like Open Source Intelligence Technology has been included in the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre to prevent anti-state and anti-government activities through monitoring social media." Initiatives have been taken to launch an "integrated lawful interception system," he said.

In 2023, a prominent publication house in the country was banned from

participating in the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela for publishing three books. Being already under US sanctions, the regime wants to avoid records of hard censorship against books. Hence, they are imposing smart censorship. The ultimate purpose is to discourage criticism against the regime and its so-called development narratives. There are allegations of stopping newspaper advertisements against the agencies, submitting complaints to employers just for Facebook comments or critical writings. The government has reduced grants to various study centres too. Warning of cancelling passports have also been issued if expatriate citizens "spread misinformation against the state."

The chief justice himself suspended the High Court's verdict in favour of Adarsha Prokashoni. The country's highest court failed to take an unconditional position in favour of an author's rights and freedom of expression. There are more examples of using police and courts to criminalise thoughts and dissent. The draft of the new data protection law includes exemptions for state intelligence and law enforcement agencies, meaning that these agencies could violate privacy laws in a manner similar to Orwell's *1984*.

We also see the government's use of language manipulation in Bangladesh. "Unstoppable development," "constitutional elections," "Digital Bangladesh," "Who is the alternative?," "Phutonto korai theke jolonto unun (Out of the frying pan, into the stove)" – these terms and phrases are used to dismiss demands for the restoration of democracy, good governance and freedom of anti-regime criticism. All the anti-people activities of the government are being justified using the narrative of "development."

George Orwell's *1984* is indeed becoming relevant in Bangladesh. Authoritarian governments have expanded the practice of thought policing, criminalising thoughts to ensure unaccountable power. This moral and cultural policing to criminalise intellectual work, research and creativity is an ominous sign for a country. Attempting to trade off a writer's freedom in the name of blocking the government's criticism is just a tool to ensure a crippled nation.

## How agritech solutions can drive smart development

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Bangladesh has set a vision of sustainable, safe and profitable agriculture that is in line with smart development policy. However, agriculture has been struggling with on-farm productivity constraints with respect to 16.5 million small and scattered farm holdings. The average farm size is 0.60 hectares (ha), far below the world's smallholders' holdings of two hectares or less. This small farm size with high fragmentation and low productivity poses a big challenge for food and nutrition security. Arable land is also decreasing due to competing demands for infrastructure and housing settlements. In this context, the agritech vision of "productivity, sustainability and profitability" could be suggested as sustainable intensification solutions for Bangladesh.

Over the last five decades, Bangladesh has achieved productivity gains in rice production, while the productivity is low for non-rice cereal-pulses-oilseeds compared to the regional and global peers. Although Bangladesh is well-known for partial conventional mechanisation (i.e. mechanised land preparation, primary tillage, irrigation, harvesting and threshing, but other operations with human labour), gaps do exist in mechanised planting, application of pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers, and full-scale harvesting operations.

Moreover, the increasing scarcity of agricultural labour and rising real wage rate have fuelled productivity constraints. Most younger people are not interested in agriculture as a career.

Furthermore, the typical farming practices in Bangladesh are unable to reconcile economic and environmental goals. Overuse of synthetic chemicals and intensive whole-field sole cropping are limiting on-farm resources maximisation and regeneration. As historical evidence shows, Bangladesh's per hectare fertiliser application is substantially higher compared to India, Nepal, and Pakistan, and even cereal-oilseed exporting countries such as the US, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, and Argentina.

Agriculture in Bangladesh follows the typical pathways of agricultural transformation from partial-to-whole-farm conventional mechanisation.

However, conventional mechanisation favours larger, roughly rectangular fields, requires sole cropping, and follows the "get big or get out" principle. Indeed, sole cropping exacerbates soil health, climate change impacts, and in-field biodiversity challenges. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh needs sustainable intensification solutions for smallholders.

In this situation, low-cost small autonomous machines – also

known as "crop robots" – can be possible solutions. These machines, costing approximately the same as a motorcycle, could bring a paradigm shift in farming. Crop robots can increase the overall system efficiency even in small, irregularly shaped and fragmented parcels. For autonomous machines, there would be no special need for restructuring the rural landscape, nor removing the plot boundaries (*ail*), because crop robots can be programmed to work on predetermined paths in the existing fields.

Autonomous on-farm and/or remote field operations could efficiently complete crop establishment, plant protection and harvesting, while reducing labour problems and attracting youth to farming. On-the-go, site-specific, targeted applications could substantially reduce input use. On-farm data can guide farm planning and future decisions. Autonomous machines will transform sole cropping towards agroecological farming like relay, strip, patch, pixel cropping, etc suitable for many land and soil types.

Agritech solutions could also help to accelerate land productivity in a cost-effective way. As field size and shape diseconomies are reduced with smart autonomous machines, Bangladesh should ideally investigate the techno-economic feasibility. The autonomous machines are hypothesised to be a profitable solution for rice as well as pulses-oilseed and horticultural crops.

In the short term, adoption of autonomous machines can be subsidised. In the medium and long terms, economics of different owner-operated service markets and business models can be examined to guide farmers, entrepreneurs, agribusiness innovators, local manufacturers and policymakers. The

Bangladesh experience with custom hire service market for irrigation, tillage, harvesting and threshing may provide helpful examples. Involvement of venture capital funds can be encouraged, and start-ups providing credit to farmers and rural entrepreneurs in partnership with financial institutions could be strengthened.

Bangladesh's vision of agriculture should be linked with other macro-level visions such as Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, Digital Bangladesh, and My Village, My Town. A closer look at the agritech vision reveals how it is highly allied with Bangladesh's macro-level visions.

Agritech such as global positioning systems (GPS), sensors, satellites, machine vision, artificial intelligence, drones, etc could be reengineered considering the smallholder context in Bangladesh. With appropriate policies, availability of low-cost robots and other agritech could stimulate rural entrepreneurship and limit rural-urban migration.

Agritech research in Europe, Britain, and North America indicates that crop robots and other agritech could significantly reduce the costs of grain production. Crop diversification would ensure food and nutrition security related to good health and well-being goals.

Autonomous mixed farming and regenerative agriculture can increase soil health, biodiversity and carbon sequestration, and reduce synthetic chemicals use, soil compaction, and diseases and pest infestation related to climate action and life on land. While Bangladesh is poised to maximise the benefits of available technology, the country should be familiar with the new technologies on the horizon that could offer greater agronomic, economic and environmental advantages.