

How can abuse of privacy be legal?

Govt must address concerns about the draft data protection act

Data is knowledge and knowledge is power. This is why protecting data is so vital, but some of the provisions in the draft act that Bangladesh is considering in this regard are something that we can do without. The invasive nature of the bill is neither respectful of citizens' privacy nor democratic in spirit. It is certainly not in step with international data protection standards. A recent assessment by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) – that it will “put the entire society under surveillance” – shows that there is more at stake here. At a time when concerns are being raised over such attempts by the government, the length to which this bill, if passed into law as it is, could be potentially used is certainly worrisome.

One of the reasons behind this assessment is the bill's strict data localisation requirements. It makes it mandatory for every person or organisation dealing with data to enrol in a “data protection register”, where they must state what type of data they are collecting and processing and why. Not only is this logistically impractical, it also adds a layer of bureaucracy at odds with how the internet functions. Furthermore, according to the TIB, even though stakeholders have been demanding that an independent commission be formed to oversee the implementation of the law, the bill puts a government-controlled agency in charge, giving it “unlimited powers” to access data without citizens' permission or explicit knowledge, and even without any judicial oversight. Ideally, along with operational independence, any institution in charge should have in-built provisions to check abuse of authority. The bill ensures neither.

Although recent changes to the draft sought to allay some concerns about data localisation requirements – creating scope for transferring data in case of international trade and international relations – the Data Protection Act (DPA) is still too restrictive, invasive and vague, just like its ideological cousin Digital Security Act (DSA). For example, there is no clear, detailed definition of data, and no mention of the definition and standard of privacy. All this has led to legitimate fears that it will “allow deep government surveillance in the guise of data governance and interference with individuals' privacy rights, not to mention increase the space for abuse of power,” as one of our columnists put it. Thanks to the DSA, we now know that it is mostly political rivals and critical voices who will be subjected to such abuse, all in the name of state interests.

This is totally unacceptable. We urge the government to immediately revise the draft in light of the concerns raised by experts, human rights defenders and our international partners. Personal data shared on various online platforms must be protected at all costs from any kind of breach and abuse, particularly from government agencies and law enforcement forces. The law must clearly address all potential loopholes, and provide for an independent data oversight authority which can be trusted to check any breach of privacy. Otherwise, there will be no point at all for a data protection act.

Drop in life expectancy an ominous sign

It shows the overall quality of people's lives has deteriorated

It is disheartening to know that the average life expectancy of Bangladeshis went down by six months to 72.3 years in 2021. Even though it might not be a big drop statistically, it illustrates that people's living conditions have deteriorated in recent times. According to a former chairperson of Dhaka University's population sciences department, the impact of Covid-19 and its post-effects, including reduced access to healthcare facilities, poverty, reduced intake of notorious food, and lifestyle, could be the reasons for the decline in life expectancy and the simultaneous rise in crude death rate, which increased from 5.1 per thousand people to 5.7.

According to data, men's life expectancy declined more than women's. In 2021, men's life expectancy came down to 70.6 years from 71.2 years, and women's from 74.5 years to 74.1 years. The study also revealed an increase in the maternal mortality rate in 2021, with 168 maternal mortalities reported per lakh childbirths. Since the beginning of Covid until now, life has gotten harder for most people in the country due to numerous disruptions to essential services. Prices have continually kept on rising, with inflation hitting record highs at various times. This has forced many people to change their daily diets, including by cutting down on protein and other nutritious food.

The inability of people to afford the same quality of diet they once did is surely going to have a significant effect on their long-term health. Additionally, the mental stress that they are experiencing due to the rising cost of living and from various uncertainties, as well as increased unemployment post-Covid, could also be factors affecting their life expectancy. Another reason which is likely contributing to it is the quality of air that those living in places like Dhaka are having to breathe day in and day out. A few recent studies have also confirmed this.

High levels of depression, a sense of hopelessness and stress are all known reasons that lead to a decline in people's life expectancy. According to the 2022 Global Emotions Report, Bangladesh ranked seventh among the world's angriest, saddest and most stressed nations. In the World Happiness Report 2023, Bangladesh slipped 24 notches to rank 118th out of 137 countries, which shows Bangladeshis have become less happy in recent times. All of these are connected factors that are affecting people's life expectancy.

The increased uncertainty and a sense of overall injustice in the country, decreased security – including financial security amidst rising inflation and declining savings and sources of incomes – coupled with greater squalor and other poor environmental factors are all leading our citizens to become more miserable, stressed, unhealthy and likely to live shorter lives than a few years ago. All this shows that the country is, in large parts, heading in the wrong direction. We urge the authorities to address the underlying reasons behind it and rectify them for the sake of a happier and longer life for citizens.

Who will be AL's main challengers in the city polls?



THE STREET VIEW

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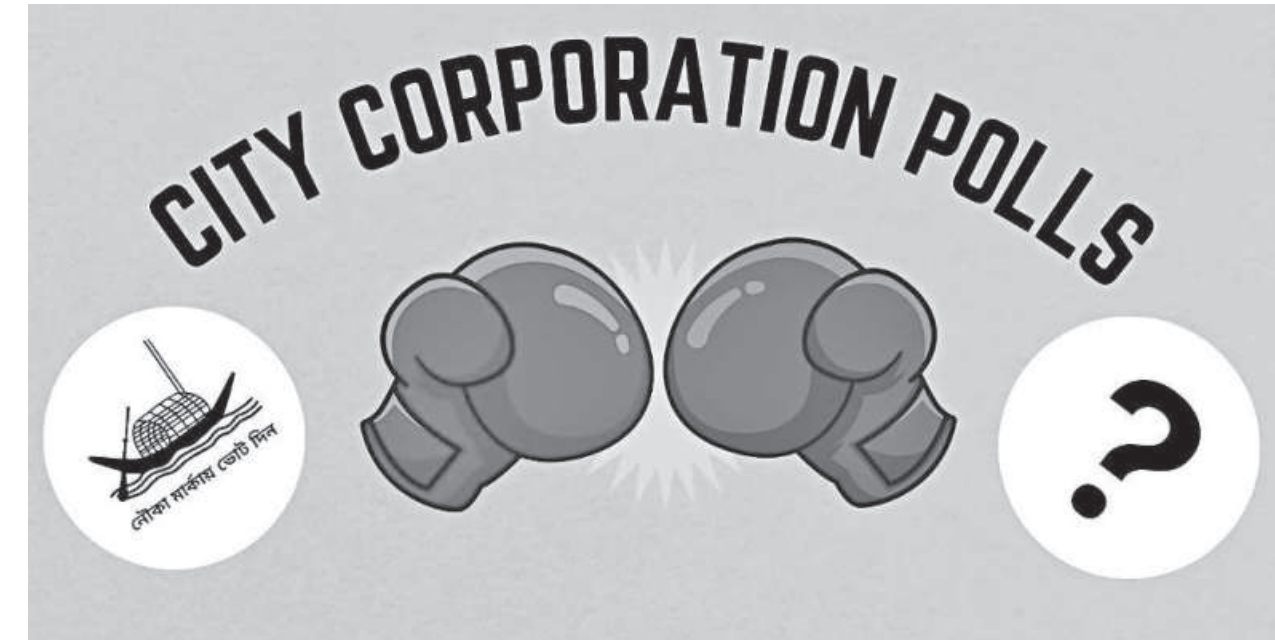
MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Amid the rising mercury that has brought hardship to many across the country, the heat has been slowly and surely rising in our political sphere as well, with the potential to bring about a different kind of turmoil. In this context, the upcoming elections to five city corporations, scheduled to be held between May 23 and June 29, will act as catalysts for the political heatwave. And political commentators believe that this wave may continue all the way to the parliamentary elections, which are slated to be held between December this year and January next year.

Although a month away from the city elections, the ruling Awami League has already nominated its candidates, two of whom are new faces while two others are experienced and tested leaders. The exception is Azmat Ullah Khan, who ran in the 2013 elections but lost, and was not given the party ticket in the 2018 city polls.

Judging by the nominations, the Awami League is telling its leaders and activists that those who were expelled from the party can return, but there is no guarantee of getting the party ticket. It is also sending out the message that if its leaders can demonstrate that they are still popular among the electorate, then party blessings will follow in the form of a nomination. But perhaps most importantly, those who tarnish the image of the party with controversial activities will not win the nomination, no matter who they are.

Analysts agree that the upcoming general elections are crucial for the ruling party as, this time, it might not be a repeat of 2014, when the BNP boycotted the polls and the ruling party contenders were elected uncontested in 153 constituencies, or of 2018, when



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

the BNP joined the polls but ballot-stuffing allegedly took place the night before. The party may face a huge challenge from the opposition parties, although the BNP still maintains that it won't participate in the polls under the Awami League government.

It would be risky for the ruling party to bank on controversial leaders to form the next parliament. Thus, it is perhaps through this round of nominations that it is conveying to the aspirants that this policy is likely to remain for the general elections too. That means we might see a good number of new faces in the general elections as MP contenders with Awami League tickets.

The upcoming city elections are likely to be less challenging compared

As the BNP and its like-minded political parties are likely to boycott the city polls as part of their ongoing campaign demanding elections under a non-partisan interim government, who will be the main contender against the ruling party? Though it is not confirmed yet, it is assumed that the main opposition in parliament, Jatiya Party, and the right-wing Islami Andolan Bangladesh may participate in the city polls. Jatiya Party is yet to finalise its candidates, and it is still uncertain whether it will file nominations for all five city corporations. According to media reports, Jatiya Party leaders said their top leadership was not interested in city corporation elections for various reasons: first, the party does not have

results: in Rangpur city polls, the party's candidate managed to bag the second place with around 50,000 votes.

If any BNP leader contests the elections violating their party position, the current state of complacency within the ruling party will be severely disrupted. And if any ruling party candidate contests as an independent candidate, the situation may become all the more interesting.

But the question still remains: who will be the main challengers against the ruling party candidates in the city polls? We have to wait a few more days to find out. As the nation waits for a heavy downpour to cool down, it seems politically things are about to heat up.

More heatwaves are coming our way. Are we prepared?



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently completed its sixth assessment report (AR6), with the Synthesis Report coming out in March. The Synthesis Report carries some key messages about the impacts of climate change and the actions needed to avert the worst of them.

The first new message in the AR6 report came from Working Group I, according to which the scientific community is now able to credibly attribute the impacts of human-induced climate change to the greenhouse (GHG) emissions happening since the industrial revolution began. That message was followed by Working Group II reporting that there are numerous examples of unprecedented weather events that are now causing losses and damages, thanks to human-induced climate change, and that these impacts will only get worse.

The other key message, regarding the possibility of keeping the global mean temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius, as decided in the Paris Agreement in 2015, is losing attention day by day. It is still theoretically possible to stay under the 1.5 degree limit if all the countries take emergency measures to reduce their emissions within this decade, but that seems unlikely. The likelihood of crossing the 1.5-degree threshold within this decade is real now; in fact, efforts have to be made so that the temperature rise does not exceed two degrees Celsius. This is quite bad news for us.

Another message coming out of AR6 is the enhanced likelihood of extreme heatwaves around the world, especially in South Asia. And, as if on cue, Bangladesh is now experiencing



Exhausted by the ongoing heatwave, a construction worker tries to cool down during a break at work in Khulna.

FILE PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

the hottest weather in over six decades, and this is likely to become the new normal going forward.

While Bangladesh has a lot of positive knowledge and experience in tackling cyclone and floods, we have not taken heat stress into consideration until now. In fact, we don't even maintain statistics of heat-related deaths.

Hence, we need to rapidly start to find ways to deal with heat stress, including providing training to doctors so they are able to diagnose

Among those who are most vulnerable – and hence need to be prioritised – are farmers working in the fields, as well as day labourers and rickshaw pullers. The protective measures can range from simply staying out of the sun to ensuring plenty of water intake and knowing where to get medical treatment for heat-related health issues if needed.

People also need to be made aware of how to keep themselves cool at home; this is particularly relevant for slum residents in major cities like Dhaka.

Bangladesh. Similar heat action plans need to be developed quickly for other cities and towns as well as for the rural parts of the country.

The scientific community has made it crystal clear that the whole world has entered the era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change, and that no country is prepared for what is to come. While this is certainly bad news, Bangladesh can lead the world in tackling the climate change impacts in coming years.