

## Lax cybersecurity a threat for us all

Why are government sites so vulnerable to cyberattacks?

We're alarmed by the recent surge in cyberattacks and data breaches targeting government sites in Bangladesh. The latest to expose our woefully lax data security procedures is a leak of personal data of 50 million people from the Office of the Registrar General, Birth & Death Registration (BDRIS). That's a massive number by any measure. While an investigation is underway to get to the bottom of the breach, the nature of the information disclosed – including birth dates and NID numbers – sends an ominous signal about its potential consequence should those fall in the wrong hands.

On Monday, the state minister for post, telecommunications and information technology acknowledged the incident – about two weeks after it was discovered by a researcher from a South Africa-based cybersecurity firm – calling it a “great loss” for the state. He said the website in question was “fragile” and didn't have “minimum security”. And despite being warned, responsible officials were negligent in following up on the threat intelligence, he added. We cannot say that we're surprised by this rather frank admission. In fact, one can say that the picture he drew of the “technical weaknesses” of one government website is not limited to it alone. It is a reality that the digital infrastructure of most public offices apparently shares.

The last few months have seen an alarming rise in data breaches and cyberattacks exploiting what we can only imagine to be such technical weaknesses. Our report on the latest development details a number of incidents, many apparently orchestrated by India-linked hackers, and the threat level of public websites. In March, for example, hackers demanded \$5 million in ransom from Biman Bangladesh while holding 100 gigabytes of data hostage. As the government was unable to retrieve the data in time, a vast amount of financial, human resource, training and satellite communications information was leaked. Unfortunately, despite the heightened cyber threat facing government, military, financial and educational institutions, we seem still unprepared to rise to the challenge.

This must change. The BDRIS data breach is a wake-up call to the authorities to strengthen our cybersecurity. The repercussions of sensitive data being breached are far-reaching, as those can be exploited for malicious purposes. To mitigate the risk of future breaches, the government must adopt a multi-pronged approach to cybersecurity, investing in advanced threat detection systems and undertaking regular security audits of government websites/servers.

## Poor quality control hurting projects

Authorities must ensure quality, prevent irregularities in construction projects

Hardly a week after the construction of a road in Faridpur's Sadar upazila, parts of it reportedly collapsed. This was the subject of a report published by this daily on Sunday. Such incidents, unfortunately, are getting too frequent for them to be considered “isolated”, thus revealing a pattern of mismanagement and lax quality control in the development projects undertaken by the government. In the Faridpur case, cracks were seen in at least eight locations along the 800-metre portion of the road in question, which was completed on June 21. The total budget for the two-kilometre road project is over Tk 2.17 crore, which means that nearly 40 percent of the fund has been wasted on a shoddy construction work.

Is it any surprise that the collapse is being linked to the use of low-quality construction materials and lax monitoring by the relevant authorities? As usual, when asked, they sought to shirk their responsibility by blaming heavy rainfall and sandy soil underneath the road for its damage. One cannot help but wonder why these very predictable factors were not taken into consideration before or during the construction.

The Faridpur incident reminds us of a bridge in Tangail, built at a cost of Tk 54 lakh, which had tilted even before it could be inaugurated and was then left in that state for five years. Or think about when, in March last year, a road in Kishoreganj was found damaged just a week after its construction. This trend of shoddy construction shines a bright light on our current development policy which is often marked by poor planning, rampant corruption, lack of monitoring and accountability. We have frequently raised our concerns in this regard in the past.

We urge the LGED authorities in Faridpur to immediately undertake repairs to make the road operational and ensure that the responsible contractor is brought to book. Such questionable practices undermine the purpose of development and rather increase public suffering. Quality control is a vital part of any construction project, and must be treated as such by all stakeholders.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## When will we start caring for the environment?

It has been reported that the forest department is planning to fell at least 1,246 trees for widening the Habiganj Shayestaganj regional highway. Already, 200 trees have been cut down. Locals have protested the move for the past few months, but to no avail. It is preposterous that older, mature trees are being felled without much care. The Habiganj Shayestaganj highway was once a beautiful drive, lined with trees and vast fields and haors on both sides. However, now it is interspersed with large-scale, ugly industries that threaten the natural ecosystem. Trees are one way to combat the ill-effects of rapid industrialisation, yet the authorities don't seem bothered. When will they really start to care?

Farid Ahmed  
Habiganj

# Why tie up EC's hands further?

## THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In Bangladesh, whether it is the Awami League or the BNP, the incumbent always vouches for the neutrality and independence of the Election Commission. On the other hand, whichever party is in the opposition camp, for its part, fervently maintains that the commission is nothing more than a puppet installed by the incumbent and completely subservient to the ruling regime. The people, i.e. the voters, have always tried to sift through the rhetoric to discern just how neutral the commission will be, come election day.

This issue has recently come to the fore following the amendment of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), which stipulates the powers the election office holds. This latest amendment, which was passed in parliament last week, curtailed the EC's authority to react to election-rigging, violence or irregularities. The law now stipulates that the commission can only suspend elections at specific polling centres where irregularities take place, and not in the entire constituency (as had happened during Gaibandha 5 by-polls last year). Furthermore, the commission can suspend elections only on polling day. But an election is not an issue of one day – it's a process spanning days and weeks, sometimes months. And its sanctity could be deemed to have been endangered at any time during the course of that process.

The provision empowering the EC to halt or suspend elections was included during the Shamsul Huda-led commission, and two elections – 2014 and 2018 – were conducted under this provision. There were no explanations as to why such a sudden change of that provision was necessary. Although the opposition lawmakers protested and questioned how the incumbent EC would conduct an impartial election if it was not given the power to suspend polls, when the bill was passed, Law Minister Anisul Huq said suspending polls in an entire constituency over disturbances in some polling stations



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was “undemocratic,” and that's why this amendment had been made. The law minister reasoned that each constituency usually has 100-150 polling centres. The EC's power of suspending polling at all centres is not democratic if violence and/or irregularities are reported at only a few centres. “It would impede people's right to vote because no violence or irregularities were reported at the rest of the polling centres,” he said. But does that justify the curbing of EC's power?

The move comes at a critical juncture when the demand for holding a free and fair election in Bangladesh is getting louder at home and abroad, with the next parliamentary polls just a few months away. With the commission's authority to react in the face of irregularities being restricted, the participating parties are also deprived

the entire constituency, there are dozens of such examples when a single instance of violence engulfed the entire constituency and even spilled over to other areas spreading fear and panic. In all this, Gono Forum MP Mokabbir Khan's comment rings true. He said in parliament, “Laws are enacted in the country for the benefit of some individuals, groups and the government.”

Coming back to the Gaibandha-5 by-polls, the incumbent Election Commission stopped the by-polls in October, saying the situation had gotten “out of control” due to widespread irregularities. The EC was lauded for such a brave and rare move, while many ruling party leaders criticised it. But when it came to punishing the alleged officials, the EC remained toothless and ineffective.

undermine its confidence and make it a powerless institution to conduct fair elections.

This sort of a move is nothing new for the incumbent government. The Huda Commission in 2008 had also introduced the provision of a “No” vote in the election if the voters did not feel confident about any of the candidates. A total of 0.55 percent votes cast in the ninth parliamentary election were “No,” and the highest percentage was found in the Rangamati constituency (9.66 percent). But the ruling Awami League cancelled that provision before the 10th parliamentary election held in 2014, most likely to prevent potential embarrassment. It appears the incumbents are becoming apprehensive of an increasing number of scenarios that might embarrass them in the upcoming election.

# Unleashing Bangladesh's energy potential through policy change

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Residents of major cities in Bangladesh find themselves gasping for clean air, their lives hanging in the balance. The air we breathe has become a silent assassin. The US-based Health Effects Institute (HEI) has estimated that in 2019 alone, poor air quality in Bangladesh led to approximately 173,500 deaths. This public health emergency requires immediate attention and a drastic shift in our energy policy for the next 50 years. The current energy policy bears significant responsibility for air pollution, global warming, urban heat, public health issues, and the strain on healthcare budgets. It is imperative to break free from an unsustainable energy policy and embrace the potential of renewable energy sources.

The energy sector, which contributes a substantial portion of global CO2 emissions, is responsible for 40 percent of Bangladesh's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This alarming statistic calls for an urgent reduction in emissions from our energy system. While we understand the importance of economic growth for the 170 million people in our country, we must question the costs associated with achieving this growth.

Over the decades, Bangladesh has made significant progress in increasing its power generation capacity, reaching

26,700MW in 2023 compared to 4,942MW in 2009, as stated by the finance ministry. However, our heavy reliance on coal, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and liquid fuel-based power generation using conventional quick rental technology raises significant concerns about the sustainability of our energy sector. There is a probable link between poor air quality, urban heat, and the current energy policy, which also hinders our ability to fulfil our commitment to reducing GHG emissions to limit global warming to 1.5°C by 2050.

According to the Power Division, a mere 0.38 percent of the country's electricity production came from renewable sources in the 2021-22 fiscal year. This disproportionate dependence on fossil fuels places an economic burden on us and raises concerns about our long-term energy security. The increasing need to import fossil fuels to meet our growing electricity demand further exacerbates the issues related to poor air quality, urban heat islands, climate change, and the additional healthcare costs associated with protecting public health.

Regrettably, the 2022-23 budget failed to prioritise renewable energy sources for energy security. Instead, it allocated a negligible portion of energy, approximately 894MW, generated from renewable resources. The focus was primarily on increasing fuel capacity, oil refinery storage, coal production, and gas collection. This approach disregards the immense potential of alternative sources, particularly hydroelectric, wind, and solar energy, which could offer sustainable and economically viable solutions.

As a tropical country, Bangladesh should seize the opportunity to harness renewable energy. Our neighbouring countries have already taken advantage of their geographic positions to utilise these promising options, which may also hold tremendous potential for us. Additionally, our long coastline and the winds during the monsoon season make wind energy a viable option worth exploring. The mountainous regions in our country could serve as potential hydroelectric resources. None of these options are expensive; instead, they are free, clean, and the most sustainable choices. When we utilise renewable resources for power generation, there are no air pollution or climate change issues.

We must also consider other renewable energy sources, such as municipal waste and biomass. By promoting initiatives that convert waste into energy and utilising agricultural biomass, we can address our energy needs sustainably and contribute to effective waste management practices. Our municipal solid waste is indiscriminately dumped in open sites, causing water, soil, and air pollution. A study published in 2023 by Saint Louis University highlights Dhaka as a hotspot for methane gas due to poor waste management. Since municipal solid waste contains a significant amount of carbon, this resource has immense potential for energy generation.

It is disheartening that Bangladesh has set a meagre target of 4,100MW of electricity generation using renewable energy by 2030. This indicates a continued inclination towards fossil fuel imports, despite our tremendous potential for alternative sources. We should aim higher and envision

a future where our energy policy is driven by renewable resources, setting an example for global climate change mitigation. The success of the California state government, which secures 100 percent of its power grid energy from renewable energy sources, and Saudi Arabia's exploration of possible renewable energy sources serve as inspirations for our own journey.

According to a study by Gulagi et al. (2020), transitioning to renewable energy has challenges, such as land availability. However, with efficient planning, a mere 10 percent of our land area can accommodate a substantial ground-mounted solar PV installation. Innovative solutions such as rooftop solar systems, small-scale solar with batteries, and floating solar systems can further overcome the limitations we face. It is crucial to recognise that our energy sector plays a pivotal role in our overall development. Prioritising renewable energy over poor operational practices, inefficient technologies, and inadequate maintenance is essential to address and alleviate our challenges. Embracing renewable energy is not a luxury, but a necessity for securing a prosperous future for Bangladesh.

In conclusion, the time for change is pressing. We urgently require a visionary and long-term energy policy that places renewable sources at its core. By fostering a sustainable economy with zero carbon emissions, Bangladesh can become a global leader in climate change mitigation while simultaneously improving the air quality and public health in our major cities. Let us seize this opportunity and take the necessary steps toward a brighter and greener future.