

The Daily Star

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The message that US visa sanctions convey

Are we reading it properly?

The announcement by the US Department of State that it is taking steps to impose visa restrictions on Bangladeshis is not surprising, considering that the US's intentions to do so had been expressed several months ago. But now it seems quite definite that these restrictions would be implemented, although the State Department has not revealed the names of the individuals restricted. Its spokesperson has said that they include members of law enforcement, the ruling party and the political opposition, current and former Bangladeshi officials, the judiciary and security services.

Such stringent actions, we must say, are embarrassing for an independent, sovereign nation. There are other countries that have come under visa sanctions but those usually came after the national elections, not before. In Bangladesh's case, they arrived several months before the elections. While we may feel disconcerted with such a policy, we must try to understand what has provoked the US to impose these restrictions/sanctions.

The first sanctions came in December 2021 on Rab and seven of its current and former officials for alleged enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture. In May this year, Washington announced the visa policy applied to actions that undermined the democratic process. It was in view of the allegations of irregularities committed in the 2014 and 2018 elections. So what is the reality on the ground now? Have any of the issues flagged by the State Department been addressed?

While the number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances dramatically reduced after the 2021 announcement of sanctions, they did not disappear completely. Moreover, the government, instead of investigating these crimes, decided to adopt a policy of denial. The intimidation of opposition has continued quite unabashedly in the form of counter rallies by the ruling party on the very day that the BNP decided to hold its rallies; an absurd number of cases filed against opposition leaders and activists just before the elections; hundreds of opposition members arrested and put behind bars as well as excessive force used by police and attacks on peaceful rallies. Add to that the choking effects of the Digital Security Act (DSA) on journalists, activists, human rights defenders, and civilians expressing any kind of dissenting view. The new Cyber Security Act (CSA), which replaces the DSA, continues to retain its provisions restricting freedom of speech.

So while there has been a lot of lip service from the government regarding its commitment to free and fair elections, the actions on the ground do not show this. Leave aside the US visa restrictions – which we find insulting – what is the general perception of our people on the prospect of the coming election being free and fair? The overwhelming view, if an open poll was taken, would, we feel, be of serious doubt. Thus, we should take more credible steps that will raise public faith in the polls being free and fair, not because of the visa restriction but for our own sake.

Dhaka's monsoon woes

Authorities must build a proper drainage system to prevent waterlogging

The latest bout of monsoon rains has once again exposed the capital city's woefully inadequate drainage system and the extent of the damage it can cause to people and businesses alike. The tragic incident of four individuals, including a family of three, being electrocuted on a waterlogged street in Mirpur on Thursday – after a live electric wire fell on the water – may be an extreme case in point. But it does serve as a grim reminder of the dangers posed to people when recurring issues such as poor drainage and infrastructure are left unaddressed.

On Thursday night, as incessant rain showered the city, numerous neighbourhoods in Dhaka were plunged into chaos. Even major thoroughfares like Manik Mia Avenue and Mirpur Road near Dhanmondi-27 remained waterlogged and gridlocked until late into the night. As a result, not only did residents and commuters suffer, but businesses also incurred heavy losses. Many areas remained under waist-to-knee-deep water even on Friday, leading to all sorts of troubles. A city that saw 113 millimetres of rain in a single evening – the highest in a day this year – should have a functional drainage system capable of channelling away the excess water. But Dhaka's current infrastructure is evidently falling drastically short.

The question is: how long must residents suffer from what has become an inescapable outcome of any above-average rainfall? In recent weeks, we have seen similarly crippling instances of waterlogging in other major cities as well, including Chattogram. You hear of initiatives taken to dredge canals and clean up drains, but those remain clogged nonetheless. In Dhaka, the two city corporations officially took over the responsibility of managing canals and drains from Dhaka Wasa on December 31, 2020. The changing of the guardianship was meant to make things work better and faster, neither of which has happened. There are also bigger issues involved: given the chaotic nature of urbanisation in Bangladesh, with low-lying areas being filled, is only clearing existing drains and connecting canals enough anymore?

Dhaka's inadequate drainage system is but one of the fallouts of how the overall urban infrastructure is being planned. Given the gravity of the situation at present, where even regular rainfall exceeds its drainage capacity, the urgency of addressing Dhaka's woes cannot be overemphasised. It's time for the authorities to step up and do whatever necessary to build a functional drainage system that can protect the city from perennial waterlogging.

Why is the EU pulling out of observing our election?



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It was on October 18, 2018 that the then EU delegation chief in Dhaka communicated their decision to the then chief election commissioner, KM Nurul Huda, that they would not be sending an election observation mission. At that time, the EU didn't cite any reasons for its decision. However, they said that they would send two experts with a mandate to work on the electoral process and submit their recommendations to the European Commission. Till recently, we had not heard anything about the visit, recommendations, and the purpose of such an exercise.

A couple of days ago, and after four years and 11 months of waiting, we have received news that the European Union decided not to deploy a full-fledged election monitoring mission in Bangladesh for the upcoming parliamentary election.

This time, the EU has explained its reasons for refraining from election monitoring to the Election Commission. But there has been no public announcement. According to EC Secretary Jahangir Alam, the EU decision has nothing to do with the EC's lack of preparation or that of a conducive environment, but the EU's budgetary constraints. A copy of the letter written by the current EU ambassador in Dhaka, Charles Whiteley, and seen by journalists, indeed stated the issue of the EU's election monitoring budget. But it comes along with "the fact that, at the present time, it is not sufficiently clear whether the necessary conditions will be met at the point in time when the elections take place."

It is almost unthinkable that the European Union, a composition of 28 nations akin to being a superstate, would be abandoning a crucial election observation mission for lack of funding. It is even more incredulous that the EU has just cancelled a \$5 million grant to Zimbabwe's election commission over concerns about their independence and transparency in election management. This incredulity led some journalists to the EU spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy, Nabila Massrali. Responding to a question about whether the budget crisis is the reason behind the EU's recent decision, she said that the decision was taken based on the opinion of the EU investigation team and independent experts.

According to Massrali, "the [exploratory] mission's mandate was to collect factual information and assess, from an independent and



FILE PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

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technical point of view, whether the deployment of an EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) to the upcoming parliamentary elections would be feasible, useful and advisable in line with the international standards that Bangladesh has signed up to." She also said that the mission, including four external experts, met with a wide range of election stakeholders including the foreign affairs ministry, election management bodies, the judiciary, representatives of political parties, the media and civil society, as well as those from security forces and the international community, and concluded that "an EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) would not serve its purpose this time." Another notable point in the EU statement is that currently it is exploring other more suitable options to accompany the electoral process, should these be welcomed by the government and the Election Commission. This raises questions about a possibility that they might have felt unwelcomed by the government and the EC.

The EU European External Action Service (EEAS) spokesperson's words make it clear that the reason behind the EU decision is our failure to

convince the world that we are trying everything possible to ensure that a free, fair, and democratic election takes place in Bangladesh. Some analysts may find it symptomatic of a coordinated move on the part of Western democracies, as the US announced the beginning of its visa restriction policy implementation from September 22, a day after the

The ruling party, however, managed to bring in quite a few friendly (and fake) observers, who had praised the election as a "global model."

In a surprise move, the EU on January 2, 2019 issued a statement saying that despite various complaints about the 11th national parliamentary election, it would stand by Bangladesh in the interests of the people. Now, the

EU's decision to abandon election observation came out.

Whether these actions are coordinated or not, one thing is clear: the government's pledge about a free and fair election is no longer satisfying our international partners, as it has failed to take meaningful steps to create a conducive environment. In addition to the continuous refusal to initiate political dialogue, the ruling Awami League's continued confrontational strategy, harassment of political opponents, and abuse of government institutions for partisan gains are bound to frustrate everyone.

It is true that the EU ambassador warned us as early as last March that if the next election is not a participatory one, the EU would not send an observer mission. In 2018, we saw a maximum number of parties taking part in the elections, but it was tainted by such unprecedented manipulation and disenfranchisement that the people dubbed it a "midnight election", as the ballot boxes were stuffed the night before the polls. The 2018 election was conducted almost without any international scrutiny as, like the EU, most other foreign observers were kept away using procedural barriers.

initial reactions from our ministers – brushing aside the likely impact of recent EU-US actions – suggest that they may be hoping for a repeat of this approach.

This time, however, it's unlikely that the same history will repeat itself, as the European parliament recently passed a very strong resolution on Bangladesh's state of democracy, human rights, and the upcoming election. Moreover, the latest statement on the US' visa policy stated, without any ambiguity, "Our actions today reflect the continued commitment of the United States to supporting Bangladesh's goal of peacefully holding free and fair national elections, and to support those seeking to advance democracy globally."

For now, one can only hope that next month the US exploratory mission for election observation will commit a full-fledged deployment of poll monitors, and that this will encourage the EU to reverse its decision. International recognition is undeniably crucial to verify the legitimacy of any national election, and this cannot happen without closer observation by certain international bodies.

The role of Bangladeshi universities in the era of AI



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Adopting an educational system that enables graduates to find jobs is one of the primary responsibilities of a university. And this role is even more crucial now, as we are in the era of artificial intelligence (AI), which has advanced enough to compete with human brains in many fields. So, what are the universities of Bangladesh doing to adapt to this change?

AI has attained the capability to understand language, recognise patterns, make predictions, compose creative work, and do much more. Once these algorithms are as intelligent as human beings, there will be almost nothing they cannot do – or cannot learn to do quickly. As a result, it is anticipated that a good number of jobs involving direct human participation may be eliminated. Because of this, people seem to be cautious about welcoming such technological advances.

During the first industrial revolution, human- and animal-powered machinery was replaced by steam-driven ones, the second revolution increased mass production using electric energy, and the third revolution replaced a lot of jobs with partial automation using advanced technology.

People welcomed the three revolutions because even though they eliminated many jobs, especially for workers who engaged in manual labour, many new employment opportunities were created. A new socio-economic class – the middle class – emerged, and education reached the masses during the second and third revolutions. However, many countries still follow the traditional educational system, which is unsuitable for the times we live in. So, when AI came along to shake up how the world works, people began to fear it.

But it is predicted that AI could create jobs as well. What kinds of jobs it will create is still somewhat unknown. However, jobs that require human ingenuity, creativity, morality, judgement, and critical thinking, and work relying heavily on social and emotional skills, will not be replaced, at least in the near future.

How many jobs will disappear in a country depends on the industry, type of work, and pace of AI development. To predict and prepare the future job market in Bangladesh, it is necessary to conduct a study on the willingness of industrialists to use AI-powered automation and the interest of companies to use advanced technology in daily operations. The application of AI in governance, service delivery, health, banking, and retail is growing fast in Bangladesh, and industrialists will likely accept AI to remain competitive in a globalised economy. Bangladesh will therefore need graduates with the knowledge and skills needed for the ever-evolving job market.

Universities in Bangladesh are now primarily responsible for producing graduates with knowledge of technology and enduring skills that can be applied in a variety of settings. These skills include effective collaboration, high-order thinking, as well as cognitive and interdisciplinary

dexterity, along with a drive for lifelong learning.

The best way to go would be to incorporate these skills in the curriculum and allow students to practise in professional contexts. Education researchers have proven that the traditional instructional paradigm that relies on the lecture is a highly cost-effective way of teaching, yet an ineffectual way of learning. Test and lecture methodologies have been proven to result in 70-90 percent learning loss only a few short months after the semester's end. It is well known that our ability to retain information decreases fast over time, as demonstrated by the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve. Adopting the "fully active learning" pedagogy – in which teachers do not lecture but instead actively engage students to improve their comprehension of concepts – is a powerful strategy.

Undoubtedly, we are in a situation where none of us can foretell how the world will change or what kinds of jobs will dominate the future. But that is precisely why universities should equip students with enduring skills and the cognitive ability to transfer them into new and unknown contexts. However, this will continue to be little more than a pipe dream unless we change the way we educate students.