

A mockery of data security

Failure to protect sensitive NID data shows government incompetence

With yet another incident of data leak coming to the fore, it seems those tasked with keeping our digitised data secure may not be aware of how to do their job. The latest case of data breaches reveals a rather perilous situation: personal details of nearly 55 million citizens who have been issued the smart national identification (NID) card are currently available on Telegram, an instant messaging service. According to our report, there is a channel on Telegram where a bot can provide all the details of a smart card holder enlisted on the national NID server when their 10-digit number is entered. The wing apparently learned of the matter on Tuesday, and found that the leak occurred through one of the 174 organisations that use the NID server. The authorities have yet to figure out who are behind the channel, and are apparently trying to get it shut down.

It is astounding to think that the safety of sensitive private information can be compromised to such extent, exposing millions of citizens to all kinds of threats, not to mention violating their privacy. The data includes names of card holders, names of their parents and spouses, photos, phone numbers, birthdates, permanent and present addresses, etc, all of which are up for grabs by anyone with an ill motive – be it identity theft or murder – without the fear of getting caught.

But what is more distressing is the nonchalance with which such data breaches are being dealt with. That our government web portals are not equipped to properly safeguard data is not news anymore. This year alone, we have learnt of quite a number of breaches into websites hosted by different government agencies, police stations, and even a state-owned bank and the national flag carrier. Yet, despite heavy criticism, there seems to be little effort by those in charge to address the vulnerability by employing stronger, more effective security measures.

Is the safety of our personal data a joke to the authorities? Or do they simply not understand the concept of data security? Given the frequency with which citizens' personal information is being exposed, both situations seem likely. This state of affairs is absolutely unacceptable – a mockery of the government's much-publicised mission to build a "Smart Bangladesh." It's time the government actively invested resources into making all state portals/websites secure. It must prioritise the safekeeping of the citizens' personal information.

A tragedy that exposed inequalities

Chattogram authorities must help slum fire victims to rebuild lives

We are saddened to learn of the plight of the 50 families living in a slum near Amin Colony in Chattogram, which was burnt to ashes by a fire on Wednesday morning. According to our report, the fire started around 6am, and although no one died, it ravaged everything within their houses before it was doused about two hours later. Apparently, firefighters faced difficulties accessing the slum due to narrow access roads. Evacuation also became a challenge as the slum was surrounded by fences and sidewalls, with the only entry/exit points being near two warehouses, which also caught fire.

On the face of it, the horrors that the survivors faced are a reminder that tragedies, especially fire-related ones, don't discriminate based on one's socioeconomic status. While such incidents have come to be expected in congested cities like Chattogram and Dhaka – with the country in general witnessing a massive increase in fire incidents, from 12,182 in 2009 to 24,102 in 2022 – the same happening in slums bears a special significance. It adds a layer of injustice which deserves to be recognised. Slums, and such places, are a testament to the inequality that plagues our society. These communities, characterised by inadequate housing, limited access to basic services, and precarious living conditions – as exemplified by the narrow access roads and shared electric lines in the Chattogram slum – are left utterly vulnerable in the face of a fire, which serves as a double blow for them. The stories of the families of Mohammad Hasan, who endured the fire just before his wedding, or Sumi Akhter, who escaped with flames nipping at her heels, show how victims from underprivileged backgrounds suffer disproportionately.

It is, therefore, important to recognise the larger societal implications of such tragic events. We urge the authorities to help the Chattogram slum fire victims to rebuild their lives. They must prioritise the well-being of the poor and marginalised in our society, provide better and safer housing for them, and ensure that they are properly supported through our social safety net programmes.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka needs affordable housing

The housing crisis in Dhaka city is impacting a significant portion of its residents. Almost 30 percent of the population bears substandard living conditions, often lacking basic facilities like clean water and sanitation. Property prices in Dhaka have surged by at least 20 percent in the past year, while people's average income has not. Policymakers and urban planners must take immediate and coordinated action. Subsidised housing for low-income families, stricter regulation of real estate prices, and investment in affordable housing infrastructure are urgently needed.

Kowshik Podder

North South University

‘Secret deal has been struck, nothing to worry about’

Is that how democracy works for us?

THE THIRD VIEW

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In a democracy, the heads of the government – both presidents and prime ministers – are the subjects of the most media coverage and the targets of most of its criticism. In Bangladesh's case, while the former is more than true, the latter is non-existent. Such is the state of our press freedom. What makes this phenomenon more disheartening is that there is no law that says the media cannot criticise the PM. Still, we have enchained ourselves to self-censorship, perhaps subconsciously remembering what Idi Amin once said when asked about press freedom in his country, "There is freedom of speech, but I cannot guarantee freedom after speech."

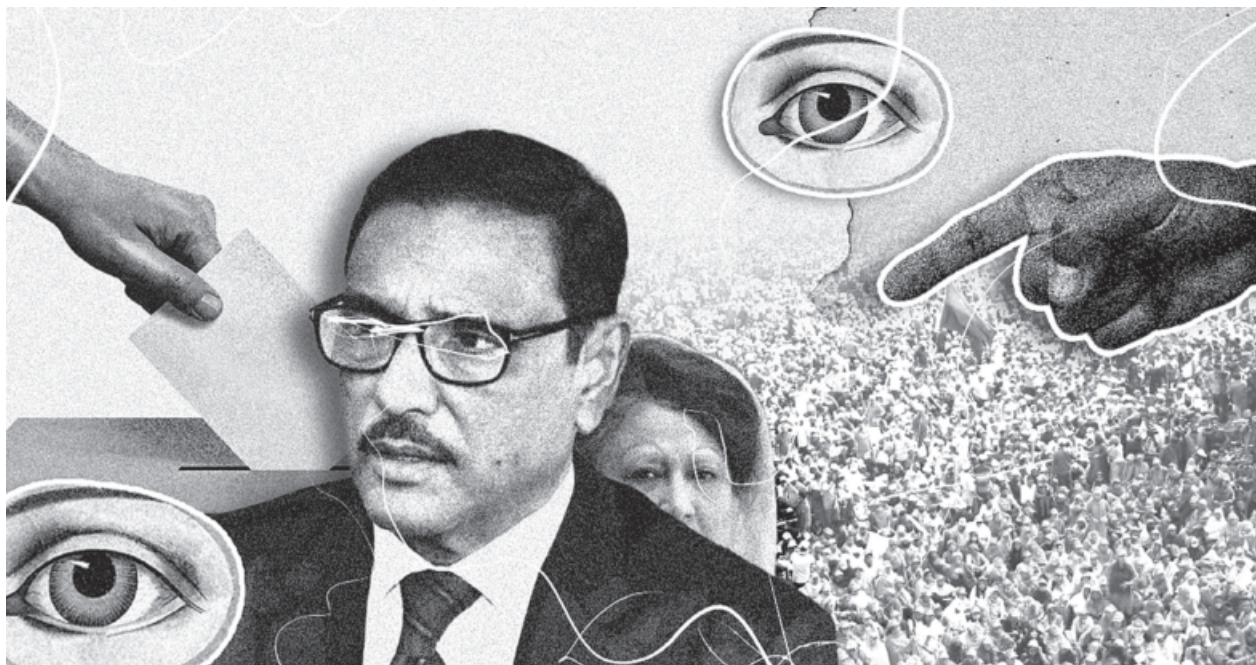
The promptness and severity with which some social media critics of our PM have been jailed has created an atmosphere of intimidation. The existence of laws like the ICT, DSA, CSA, etc, the misuse of defamation and other laws, and the collective demonisation of independent media by the pulpits of power and their cacophonous resonance from a domesticated media have taught us better.

It is against this backdrop that we raise a question about a remark made by the prime minister, last Tuesday, about the BNP chief's treatment abroad. Our PM said, "...she is 80 years old, at this age death is imminent; and she is also sick, so why this hullabaloo? No amount of crying will help this situation..." (own translation from the original in Bangla).

By this, did the PM mean that, as Khaleda Zia is 80 years old, we should stand back and see her wither away? Don't we believe that it is the Almighty who decides when a person's time comes to make the Eternal Journey? Is it not the practice in every country, culture and religion to extend all possible help to save a person's life? Whether a person will live beyond 80 or not is not our decision to make. Our duty is to try our best and do everything in our power to save the person's life. That's what civilisation is all about. One may have hundreds of reasons to despise their opponent, but such public comments can only further fuel hatred.

Our PM made another statement on Monday, in which she said, "Democracy must continue in Bangladesh at any cost. In no way should the undemocratic forces assume power."

We support her wholeheartedly on this score. It is a point of Bangladesh's pride that, however flawed it may be, we continue to practise democracy and have made significant economic progress while remaining within its broad framework. But is the PM's government and her party working to strengthen it? Did her continuous



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rule for the past 15 years – 20 years if we count her first term – enjoying unrivalled power and undisturbed tenure (no hartals or disruptions) – consolidate democracy? Did this unfettered rule, never before enjoyed by any other party or even military dictator, strengthen any of the institutions of democracy, such as the parliament, judiciary, media and statutory bodies, that ensure accountability and rights?

While the PM reiterated her commitment to democracy, her party's secretary general and roads and transport minister, Obaidul Quader, remarked in a public meeting on Tuesday, "Where is the sanction? Where is the visa policy? Secret negotiations have been completed so there is nothing to worry about." "Sanction" and "visa policy" point to the secret negotiations with the US. He further said, "The US needs Delhi. Delhi is there, we are there." This implies that the second party in the secret deal must be India. So, according to the secretary general of the ruling party, a secret deal has been worked out with the US and India so that the AL will have "nothing to worry about."

This implies, based on the words of the ruling party secretary general, as Delhi supports it, AL will continue to be in power. What else can "nothing to worry about" mean? And what does this say about our sovereignty and dignity as a country and a people? About the independence of our government, since its continuance in power is apparently determined by our neighbour? What does this say about the relevance of our elections?

Where does all this leave us, the voters? In the 2014 election, 153

of the AL secretary general is referring to when he says "*khela hobe*" ("The game is on")? It seems our election is all set to be an example of "match-fixing" rather than of "fair play."

Election season in a democracy is when power changes hands from the government to the people. Theoretically, it is an occasion when the people once again feel empowered. Tragically, this is not the case for Bangladesh.

If we analyse how the government is oppressing the opposition under a legal guise, it becomes evident that the "level playing field" does not exist for them. Whatever other records this government may have set, nothing compares to the use of court cases to victimise the opposition. According to sources at the BNP office, around 1.12 lakh cases have been filed implicating 39.78 lakh BNP leaders and activists since 2009. In addition, there are "unnamed accused" whose number exceeds those of the named. (The latter category is used by police to implicate anybody at whatever stage of an investigation, to extort bribes.) Even if we disregard 50 percent of these – taking into account possible exaggeration – nothing can explain this amount of lawsuits except political victimisation.

According to a September 20 report by Prothom Alo, Habib un Nabi, joint secretary general of BNP, has 450 cases against him; Saiful Alam, past president of Jubo Dal, has 350 cases against him; Jahangir Hossain, leader of the youth wing of BNP, faces 317 cases; Sultan Salahuddin, president of Jubo Dal, has 315 cases against him; Amanullah Aman, adviser to the BNP chairperson, is facing 250 cases; and 180 cases have been made against

who is more than 80 years old, has four cases against her, one of which is for arson – specifically for setting fire to a bus. Appearing in court for each case can easily take up the whole year. Most of these cases are 5-10 years old and have remained dormant for most of the ruling party's tenure. Now that the election is approaching, suddenly, these cases are acquiring a new life, with police becoming too eager to "serve the law."

We don't need any other statistic but the above example of cases against the biggest opposition to prove that all claims by the government and Awami League about holding a free and fair election is far from credible.

Our chief election commissioner (CEC) said on Wednesday that he is not worried about the "legitimacy" of the elections and is determined to hold "a lawful election." That is precisely what we are afraid of. Again, in 2014, as many as 153 MPs were "elected" uncontested. These so-called elections were legally "correct." But were they morally and ethically so? Was it an exercise in democracy? How do you think 9,19,65,167 felt when they could not cast their votes, for which they had waited five years?

Yes, we must have a "lawful election," but it must also be a "credible election" – credible to the voters and not simply to the winning party. By far, the most important aspect of an election is the "free and unfettered expression of the public will." Ensuring this is the most important task of the Election Commission, not only the formal compliance with the law. The CEC must be conscious of democratic, moral and ethical aspects of an election, not just the legal ones.

Neglecting public health literacy will cost us

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Let's imagine that you have a university degree and are proficient in both English and Bangla. Right now, you are on a trip to Nepal, perhaps in a mountainous village very close to the Himalayas, where Nepali and Hindi are widely spoken, but English is not. Sitting at a small eatery, while enjoying the natural surroundings, you suddenly feel a pain in your stomach. You realise that the medicine you need is in your hotel room. There is no clinic, medical centre or hospital nearby. When some kind individuals do come in your aid, you see that they cannot speak a word of English or even feel your distress from the symptoms you are displaying. Thus, despite having a high level of

functional literacy, you are unable to access necessary medical care.

This is quite similar to what people with inadequate or low health literacy experience at hospitals. They struggle to understand the signs, instructions and recommendations in a clinical setting. They find the language of healthcare providers to be alien to them.

Today, health issues are more complex than ever, and even individuals with a decent level of traditional literacy may face difficulty in dealing with their bodies, serious illnesses, unfamiliar medical terms and information, navigating healthcare facilities, and conducting self-care.

But the issue of poor health literacy

is not merely at the individual level. Rather, it has social, political, economic, and environmental dimensions. The high prevalence of inadequate health literacy causes health disparity in terms of access to and use of healthcare services. Several studies indicate that inadequate health literacy levels cause a severe economic burden on the national healthcare system, organisations' outputs, and individual pockets.

In our current complex informational, socio-political and environmental ecology, traditional literacy is not enough. What we need now is public health literacy. Recent studies and empirical experiences indicate that limited health literacy is a public health challenge in many countries around the world. An individual with limited health literacy often fails to benefit from available resources as they have a poor understanding of their health, illness and treatment, resulting in an increased risk of being hospitalised and high medical costs. Scientists also argue that the tendency to adhere to medical and public health recommendations is very low among people without adequate health literacy.

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing dengue crisis, we have seen how people tend not to adhere to public health recommendations. The cost of such ignorance has been very high in terms of national interest and disease prevention and control.

Along with investing resources in traditional literacy, it is high time to adopt national policies and programmes to improve health literacy among the common people of Bangladesh. Educational programmes should be made available through schools, colleges, universities and mass media. Hospitals and clinics should design and use carefully crafted communication materials, targeting the needs of different groups. In partnership with the government, private hospitals and donor agencies, a dedicated organisation can be established to improve health literacy in the country. Moreover, mobile apps and patient portals may be created to improve the availability of healthcare information and resources. We must recognise limited health literacy as a public health problem and treat it as such.