

Will the political deadlock discourage first-time voters?



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AZMIN AZRAN

I remember learning in school that it was the citizens' responsibility to the state to participate in the democratic process by casting their votes in elections. I always took my textbooks seriously, and even on an intuitive level, it made sense. As a citizen of a democratic country, of course it's my responsibility to vote, to contribute to the running of my country.

During the last national election, I was 19 and was excited to be able to vote for the first time. But having

me and my demographic? The youth horn is tooted at every turn these days. The demographic dividend is here, and the youth must be empowered—we have been hearing so for years now. But are the Bangladeshi youth being put to work?

As a working professional in my mid 20s who is trying to make life go his way in an increasingly expensive Dhaka, I wonder what is being done to make sure my employment potential does not diminish in the coming

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received my national ID (NID) card shortly before the election, my name did not appear on the list of voters. Fast forward five years, and I have learnt a lot more about the democratic process. Another election is in the offing, and even though I want to feel excited again, I simply cannot.

Less than a month out from the election, as a voter, I'm looking for discourse on the issues that concern me. If I'm going to vote for someone, is it not fair to ask whether or not that individual—or the party they represent—is going to do anything for

years. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 says that 12 percent of individuals with higher education in the country are unemployed, up from 11.2 percent in 2016-17. The situation is bad, the trend seems worse, but this presents a ripe opportunity for any politician to attract the votes of young individuals who are new to the employment race or are just about to enter it. Yet, there seems to be little space left for them when conversations are laser-focused on seeking flaws in the opposition camp.

Politicians may be unaware of an interesting aspect of the young voters



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

who will be queuing up to vote for the first time on January 7, 2024: their perception of what a democracy can be is different from what those who came before them thought.

The 20-year-old of today was born in, say, 2003. The ruling party has been at the helm for as long as this demographic has been socially conscious. While the horror stories of the opposition's actions may be enough to sway older voters, it will never have the same impact on most first-time voters, who were mere children the last time the mantle of power had changed on these shores. On the internet, Gen Z have grown used to the spectacle of Western democracies, wherein public debates take place on the eve of elections. They also see elections taking place in neighbouring India, where one party wins one state but fails to hold on to their majority in another. The young Bangladeshi knows that plurality is important in politics, and plurality of opinions should come to the fore during elections. Yet, so close to the election, it takes more than a thorough look at the news to find a

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Road safety has been a massive point of concern for students all over the country, as young people are fed up with watching their friends and peers die unnecessary deaths. In 2020, the country erupted in protests against sexual violence, a mobilisation mainly dominated by students—young women and men who want to see change. The state of higher education in the country has been a worry for all, with the best universities in the country languishing at the lower end of global rankings. Added to this is the fact that politics and administrative mismanagement have held back public universities from becoming fully fledged centres of knowledge. Bangladesh is known on the global stage as a country that is on the frontlines combatting climate change, but not much is being done

to address the concerns of the young individuals who will have to live on a planet that is way hotter than it should be.

Looming in the backdrop is the fact that speaking up about anything comes at a premium now. There is widespread confusion—which often turns into abject fear—over what the Cyber Security Act might do to someone practising their constitutional right to freedom of expression. Cases like that of Khadijatul Kubra of Jaggannath University—who languished in jail for over a year for hosting a webinar where a guest made comments deemed contentious—only add to this fear. A recent study conducted by Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) and Brac University's Centre for Peace and Justice found that 71.5 percent of respondents aged between 16 and 35 feel unsafe expressing their opinions on public platforms like social media.

Of course, whenever their hand has been forced, the youth have broken through these fears to voice their concerns. But far too often, these

concerns have been brushed aside by the powers that be. The Road Safety Movement of 2018 captured the country's attention. The murder of Abrar Fahad at Buet triggered massive protests against rampant politics in public universities. The construction of a coal-fired power plant in Rampal, adjacent to the Sundarbans, was protested for years. But such demands from young people are usually met with promises of reforms that either do not materialise or are toothless in nature. In some cases, the demands are altogether ignored.

Some may point to a lack of political organisation as a reason behind young people's demands being unmet. Many say that subversive political influences have foiled these protests. But the opportunity that an election presents to politicians is that they can reverse the attempt to disregard and depoliticise the youth's concerns. A party that shows any level of awareness towards the youth's demands could buy enormous political capital with the most important demographic of this country for the next 20 years. But such efforts are yet to be seen. It will represent a monumental failure in our politics if discussions leading up to the election address neither the most common concerns of Bangladesh's largest age demographic, nor the fears that impede their inclination to express themselves freely.

It's understandable that the political climate will dictate political discourse, and as long as the political climate remains dysfunctional, it's practically futile to hope that the discourse will offer anything else. Yet, sitting in traffic jams induced by processions protesting the 20th political blockade in 25 days, the youth are waiting for a politician to bring up, say, intersectional feminism, or at least to mention a framework to ensure long-term employment of graduates in this country. Someone needs to talk about protecting free speech, protecting the climate, about road safety and the safety of women in public. Otherwise, Bangladeshi politics risks alienating an entire generation.

Our Information Commission has mettle after all

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It has been a regular feature of this column to moan over the slow progress of the Right to Information (RTI) regime in Bangladesh. The excitement witnessed in the early days since the adoption of Right to Information Act, 2009 was soon gone, leaving a few die-hard enthusiasts and NGOs—plus those using the law primarily for personal reasons—to keep the ball rolling. The expectation that our politically conscious citizens would use the law to monitor the government's work never materialised.

We identified two main reasons for this: the lack of sufficient civil society engagement with the law, and the impulsive attitude and lack of leadership of the Information Commission of Bangladesh in nudging the law forward. While the former reason persists, there have been some positive developments on the latter front.

In the last few months, we have received some very encouraging feedback from users of the RTI law about the Information Commission's work. The atmosphere at complaint hearings held by the commission is reportedly much less intimidating and more congenial these days. The commission is apparently more inclined to listen to complainants and take a firmer stance against flippant public officials. More importantly, its recent decisions indicate a greater resolve to apply the law more even-handedly.

Wishing to learn more about the use of funds allocated to Dhankora union parishad, in Saturia upazila of Manikganj, under the much-hallowed Local Government Support Project (LGSP), journalist Arup Roy (of Savar upazila) submitted an RTI request to the DO and secretary of the union parishad. He wanted to know how much money was allocated to the union parishad under the project, how much was raised from programmes like Kabikha and Kabita and other local sources, and how they were spent. As he received no response to his request or to his subsequent appeal, Arup complained to the Information

Commission.

After a thorough hearing, where the DO was grilled for failing to take action on the RTI request in time, the commission reprimanded him for dereliction of duty, warned him about future lapses and directed him to provide the requested

Orphanage.

Not receiving any response to his request, Hasanuzzaman submitted an appeal to the District Social Welfare Office, whereupon the assistant director of the office directed the DO of Baghmara to provide the desired information to the



VISUAL: STAR

information to Arup within a fixed period. In addition, the DO was fined Tk 3,000 for "causing impediment to the free flow of information." More significantly, the commission also fined Muhammad Abdur Rouf, chairman of said union parishad, an amount of Tk 3,000 for "not being respectful to the law." These are rare impositions of sanctions under the law and are likely to serve as a warning to other recalcitrant public officials.

In another instance, in an RTI request submitted by Hasanuzzaman of Rajshahi to the DO and upazila social welfare officer of Baghmara, the applicant wished to find out how the government programmes for disabled and disadvantaged persons in the upazila were faring. His RTI request included: 1) a list of names, with addresses, of disabled students who received stipends under safety net programmes from education institutions in Bashupara and Goyalkandi unions; 2) a list of names and addresses of burn victims who received loan for relocation under the government's poverty alleviation and economic-social development programme in the same unions; and 3) a list of names and addresses of children and their parents who live at Achinghat

applicant. As this too yielded no result, Hasanuzzaman filed a complaint with the Information Commission.

After hearing the parties over two sessions, the commission, peeved by the wilful disregard of duty by the DO, rejected his plea of incapacity due to an accident and chided him for not providing the information before the accident. In its decision, the commission directed the DO to not only provide the information to the complainant within seven days, but to also pay him Tk 1,800 as compensation, as entailed in the RTI Act. This, too, is a rare use of the sanction provisions of the law.

In yet another case, the Information Commission was unhappy with the wanton disregard for the RTI Act by two public officials of the Waqf Office of Bangladesh and decided to impose sanctions on them under the law. Mominul Sarkar, an RTI activist from Taraganj upazila in Rangpur, was concerned with the alleged corruption of officials engaged in administering Waqf property in his upazila. To get to the root of the allegation, he filed an RTI request to the DO of the Waqf inspector's office in Taraganj asking for 1) a copy of the Waqf

allocation law; 2) the year of its enactment; and 3) a list of persons allotted upazila Waqf land.

Not receiving a response, Mominul filed an appeal to the Waqf administrator in Dhaka, in reply to which the assistant administrator of the office informed Mominul that the information requested could not be provided as it was not preserved. Mominul filed a complaint with the Information Commission.

Two virtual hearings took place, in the first of which the complainant claimed that he was not only denied the information but also harassed by the DO for seeking it. At the second hearing, the complainant admitted having received some information subsequently, but only partially. In response, the DO again claimed that the remaining information was not preserved in his office.

Not being satisfied with this, the commission directed the DO to find the remaining information and provide it to the complainant within a given period. It further directed departmental disciplinary action against the DO under the RTI Act for refusing to receive Mominul's application initially. The commission further directed the Waqf administrator to take departmental disciplinary action against the assistant administrator who had responded to the appeal without any legal authority and without a hearing. This is indeed a proper application of the law.

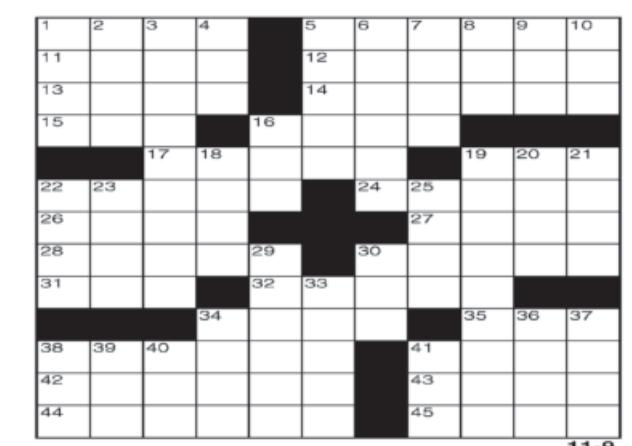
The Information Commission of Bangladesh deserves to be commended for the objectivity it has demonstrated in its most recent decisions. Its reputation suffered over the years in the eyes of RTI users due to its alleged unfriendly treatment of complainants and lack of firmness towards derelict public officials. This is likely to change now.

Let us conclude with some statistics to illustrate the situation. While in 2022 only six sanctions of various sorts were imposed by the Information Commission on defaulting public officials under the RTI Act (and none in the first six months of 2023), in the months that followed, seven sanctions have been imposed. This will certainly send a stern message to public officials who fail to fulfil their responsibilities under the RTI Act, and will encourage civil society members to use the law more as a duty than as a right to monitor the work of the government.

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