

The Daily Star

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Why such lacklustre handling of pre-polls violence?

The EC can only blame itself for voter panic, apprehension

It seems improbable that a national election, boycotted by major opposition parties, including the BNP, should be fraught with so much violence, bloodshed and violations of electoral codes. And yet, that is exactly what we have witnessed since electioneering began on December 18. According to an internal police document cited by the *New Age*, at least 221 clashes and 256 other violations of electoral codes were recorded in a month, and at least six people have been killed in factional clashes or attacks. As electioneering comes to an end amid continued reports of violence, deaths, brandishing of firearms and torching of campaign booths, we cannot but be apprehensive of what awaits the country and its people come election day.

On Thursday alone, two people were killed by supporters of rival candidates. Dalim Sarker, a supporter of the Awami League candidate, was shot dead at a makeshift campaign office of Munshiganj AL nominee, allegedly by the supporters of Mohammad Faisal, an AL leader who is running for parliament as an independent. In another incident, Jahangir Panchayat, a supporter of Shamim Shahnewaj, an independent vying for Pirojpur-3, died hours after being stabbed. Additionally, 43 others were injured as supporters of rival candidates clashed in six districts on Wednesday night and Thursday. Unfortunately, across the country, such wanton violence, including the use of sharp weapons and guns, has become the norm, with both the law enforcement agencies and the Election Commission turning a blind eye towards the aggressive show of strength by various camps, perhaps because they, too, are unsure where their loyalties should lie in a competition between the AL and the AL.

In an election already mired in controversy, it is shameful that the EC has failed to do even the bare minimum—ensure peaceful electioneering and a festive atmosphere ahead of the election. With the absence of major opposition parties from the polls, it is more important than ever for the EC to ensure voter turnout at the centres, and surely the commission understands that such violence will only deter voters. We are at a loss to understand why the EC has not taken any effective measures against those who are blatantly violating electoral codes of conduct and putting the commission's own mandate to shame. As for the ruling party, it should send a clear message to its nominees and the independents that such aggression and violence will not be tolerated, no matter the perpetrator, if it wants any semblance of a peaceful election tomorrow.

We are also worried about reports of threats and intimidation against ordinary people, particularly those relying on social safety net benefits, to the effect that their benefits will be cut off if they fail to show up to the polling centres on election day. Despite videos making the rounds on social media which clearly show members of the ruling party making such threats to the public, no action has been taken against them by the EC. This raises grave concerns about voter intimidation on election day. In an election where people are denied real choices, they must at least have the option to vote—or not—in peace.

Watch out for Covid-19 infections

Hygiene rules must be diligently followed to prevent another surge

The latest development regarding Covid-19 infections in Bangladesh should not be taken lightly. According to a report published by this daily, the country has been seeing a surge in infections from the pandemic disease, caused by the highly contagious Sars-CoV-2 virus. The daily infection rate, which was less than one percent on December 20 last year, jumped to 4.53 percent on Thursday—in the span of 15 days. The health directorate reported 21 new active cases in the 24 hours between Wednesday and Thursday mornings. The day before, 16 infections were recorded. Thankfully, there have been no reports of death during this time.

The whole world has been seeing an uptick in Covid infections in recent weeks, especially since the emergence of the JN.1 strain, a descendant of Omicron, the most infectious variant of Sars-CoV-2 known to us, a few months ago. Given its fast-spreading nature, the World Health Organization (WHO) termed JN.1 a "variant of interest." There have been no reports of JN.1 infection in Bangladesh as yet, but local experts believe that it may cross over to the country from India, if it hasn't already.

However, we don't believe there is anything to be alarmed about just yet. WHO has said the overall risk from JN.1 is "low" and the existing vaccines are strong enough to counter its effects. But that doesn't mean we should be complacent and careless. The memory of the havoc the coronavirus disease wreaked all around the world in 2020 and 2021, upending our way of life as well as the global economy, is still fresh in our minds. We do not want a repeat of that, especially when Bangladesh is still grappling with the prolonged bout of dengue. If the new Covid surge does go out of control, our already fragile health sector will be even more burdened to provide the critical care more serious Covid patients would require.

In this situation, we believe it wise to err on the side of caution. The relevant authorities must keep a watchful eye on the progress of JN.1 strain and plan ahead to tackle all possible situations. The National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) has already advised to enforce hygiene rules such as wearing masks in public and washing hands frequently, and stock adequate amounts of testing kits and other medical equipment at all treatment facilities, which the authorities will do well to follow. Prevention is always better than cure; we hope our health authorities will act proactively rather than reactively this time around.

The price we pay with each deleted word



THE SOUND & THE FURY

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SUSHMITA S PREETHA

There are few things as draining—or as depressing, I imagine—as being the op-ed editor of a newspaper under constant scrutiny of an authoritarian regime.

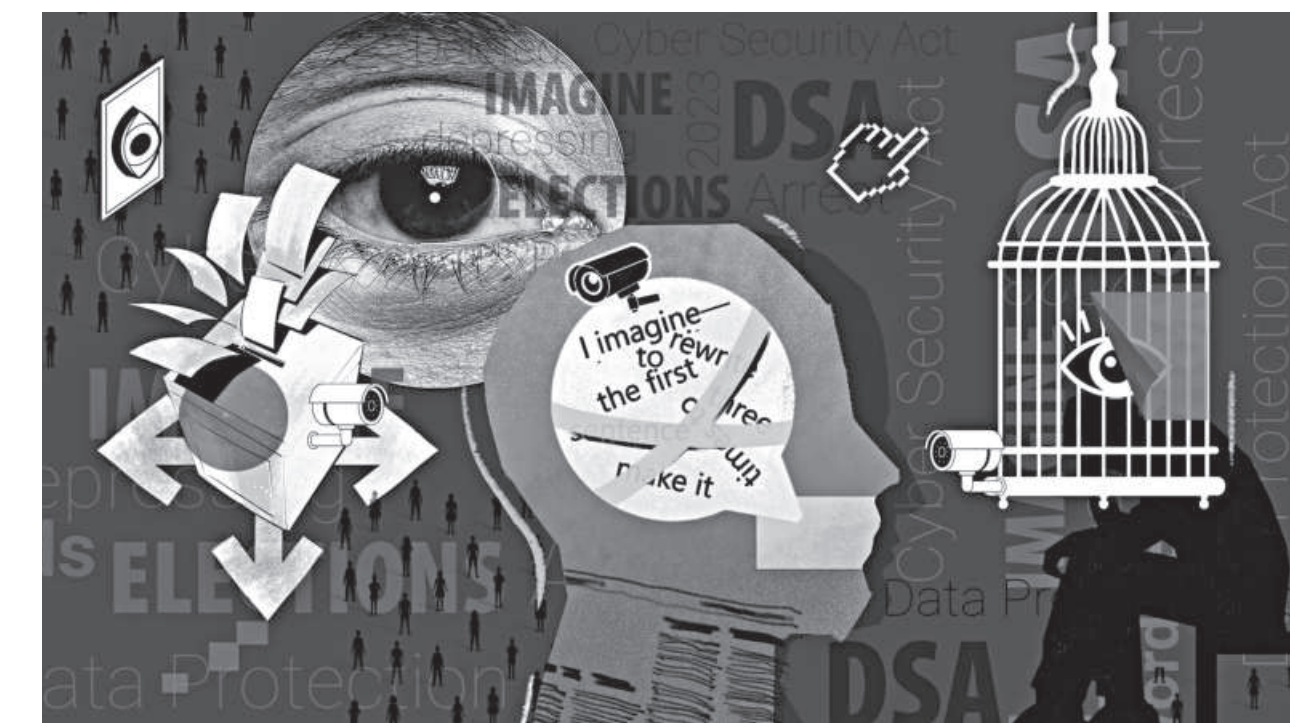
Not least because I had to rewrite the first sentence three times to make it palatable for print. When you do that often enough—or rather, when that becomes your default setting—words eventually start to melt and evaporate into each other until they lose meaning altogether. And your life, built around those deleted sentences, becomes a burden from which you desperately want—but know not how—to escape. Every so often, I fool myself into believing that what we say after scraping off all that cannot be said will still serve some purpose, as if people will be moved to revolutionary actions by words that we do not have the courage to say out loud.

Whenever I ask someone to write, they tease me: can you publish what I say? I smile sheepishly. They smirk knowingly. Sometimes I retort: will you really say what you want to say, though? In fact, will you say anything at all?

It's incredible how little there is to say about the national election anymore despite the overwhelming urge to say and do something. Let's face it. We all seem to have grudgingly accepted our extended sentence under this regime. Whatever frustration and anger—but also excitement and anticipation—that could be felt in the beginning and middle of 2023 somehow turned into a disquieting resignation at the end of it. Even the ordinary people, whose anger reverberated through the streets earlier in the year, now just want to move on from the tragicomedy the election has been reduced to, and figure out what lies ahead with the inevitability of another term of Sheikh Hasina's government.

There can be little doubt that the space for dissent will shrink even further in the days to come, with the rebranded Digital Security Act (DSA)—now the Cyber Security Act (CSA)—yet to claim its first victim. During its five-year stint, the DSA has

been strategically and systematically deployed to criminalise any sort of criticism of the government under vague provisions that can be arbitrarily (mis)used. The DSA's greatest success, if seen from the government's perspective, is not the cases against and subsequent harassment of thousands of dissenters, including 464 politicians and 442 journalists (the biggest victims of the DSA, as per the analysis of The Centre for



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Governance Studies), but the fear it has been able to generate among the common people about the imaginary lines one may not cross—lines that have been drawn and redrawn many times over the past 15 years of AL rule. We now know that one does not need any merit to persecute and prosecute people under the DSA—the sheer act of suing a person under it, the many irregularities in procedures and the denial of bail for months on end, if not years, are harassment enough for a lifetime. It's no surprise, then, that an

consolidate power for the fourth consecutive term, the question one would rather not ask is: who's next? Once the political opposition is silenced, the powers that be will likely redirect their attention to gagging free media (or what's left of it) and eventually the populace at large, whose frustrations with the cost-of-living crisis and rampant corruption are unlikely to simply disappear with the staging of the election. Dissent and disappointment in an authoritarian regime must be contained under any cost, and no one knows this better than

learnt to censor ourselves a bit more, to behave ourselves, to not cross the line no matter the temptation—in short, we have learnt to accommodate the powers that be and live by their rules.

But there's a price we pay for such subservience; every time I swallow a thought, delete a word, or tone down someone's anger, I kill a little bit of myself and all that I desire for myself and for the country I love. With every nail in the coffin of democracy, we lose who we were and who we had wanted to be when we fought for freedom in 1971.

Is Yunus's sentencing an ominous message for foreign investors?



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ZINA TASREEN

"Handle at your own risk"—is what the foreign investors will take away from Monday's extraordinary sentencing of Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus.

It is this unintentional but unequivocal message that may prove to be most damaging for Bangladesh and the economy: it poses to further shrink the historically modest inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI).

Policymakers and academicians have long acknowledged that FDI is a key element of a successful development strategy as it generates the capital and technology transfer at the scale needed to bring about economic transformation. Bangladesh's FDI inflows have always been low for a host of reasons including red tape, inadequate facilities and human resources—and less-than-ideal enforcement of the rules and regulations and the laws of the land. With Yunus's verdict, this cynicism surrounding the enforcement of the laws of the land may only amplify. Why so? Because it took a great deal of legal and mental gymnastics and suspension of logic to ensnare him.

A noble provision in the Bangladesh

Labour Act, 2006 that calls for sharing five percent of the company's profits with the employees and various worker funds was deployed to hook Yunus. Yunus, who chairs the board of Grameen Telecom, did not comply with this provision. In other words, Grameen Telecom did not share its profits with its employees.

All very well, but this argument comes caving down when one learns that Grameen Telecom is a not-for-profit organisation. How can a company that does not make any profit share any profit with employees?

Here, too, another loophole was created by brute force: Grameen Telecom owns 34 percent shares in Grameenphone, the country's leading mobile phone operator and the biggest company in the bourses. Grameen Telecom surely takes its share of profit from Grameenphone, but that amount is ploughed back into social businesses.

However, the employees of Grameen Telecom felt they were entitled to five percent of Grameenphone's profits. An irrational demand, but one which Grameen Telecom agreed to indulge.

Even here, faults were found, with this court-agreed settlement between Grameen Telecom and its employees labelled as a bribe. And the fact that this transaction was done belatedly was viewed as money laundering.

Another issue that was found with Grameen Telecom's conduct was that it did not regularise its 60-odd contractual employees.

When Grameen Telecom started, it aimed to empower rural women by equipping them with mobile phones that would be used for moneymaking activities. With the easy availability of mobile phones, this core activity of Grameen Telecom has now become redundant.

The non-profit has subsequently let go of many of its staff, keeping 69 of them on a contractual basis while enjoying the frills of a permanent job. The reason they are kept on a contract is that their job is dependent on as and when Grameen Telecom gets a work order.

At this point, one must wonder how many establishments are taken to court for not sharing five percent of their profits with their employees and not turning all contractual workers into full-time staff.

If a globally-revered, upstanding citizen like Yunus—who faces nearly 200 cases—can be harassed legally in this manner, what hope is there for foreign investors?

The message is clear: if they do not toe the line, they can be implicated by hook or crook.

Already, Grameenphone, where Norwegian state-owned Telenor has controlling stakes, had to face the