

## Young people being ignored, neglected

### We must get off this suicidal path

Bangladesh is facing enormous economic challenges caused by both external and internal factors. But it is also in a deep moral crisis, as corruption and lawlessness have spread their tentacles in every sphere of society. Among the most affected are young people who are supposed to be our future leaders. But how optimistic are they about their own future? Do we know how they feel or what they think? Most importantly, do our leaders even care?

These are burning questions that our policymakers and all those in positions of power must think of and try to answer. In a population of 169.8 million, almost 28 percent are between the ages of 15 and 29. Having so many young people would put any country at a natural advantage, but to reap the benefits of this demographic dividend, the right policies, opportunities, and visions need to be there. Unfortunately for Bangladesh, it is this very vital demographic that is being completely neglected.

A recent column in this paper has brought this issue to the fore, citing a survey of young people aged 16-35 that offered some damning findings: that 55.3 percent of the respondents think Bangladesh lacks peace, 71.5 percent are not comfortable about expressing their views publicly, and 68.6 percent are frustrated with the education system. An overwhelming 89 percent said corruption affected their wellbeing. They also cited unemployment, inflation, and climate change as contributing reasons. It is no wonder, then, that so many young people see no future for them in their own country; a large number are looking for opportunities to migrate to other countries.

Educationists and potential employers have been crying themselves hoarse about the lack of skills of young people applying for jobs. Only a minuscule percentage actually qualify and get employment. Those who are left behind either stay jobless or take up low-paying jobs in the informal sector. Many become involved in criminal or corrupt activities, which seem to offer the only means to survive. Crime in the name of student politics has also turned many young people away from politics. The rising number of criminals connected to power and wealth, who get away with the most heinous crimes, has created a deep mistrust in the system. The perception is that there is no justice for the ordinary person. When young people see their seniors taking the unethical route and getting away with it, they either become disillusioned and frustrated, or decide to follow suit. The number of teenage gangs committing serious crimes such as extortion and murder is on the rise.

The lack of role models, the trend of rewarding corruption and punishing honesty, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and a huge dearth of opportunities to acquire the right education and skills for the desired employment or entrepreneurship—these are some of the overriding factors robbing our youth of their potential.

The high dropout rates in secondary schools, the prevalence of child marriage (with a staggering 41.6 percent of girls still married under 18), and 39.88 percent of the youth being involved neither in studies nor in work—these are foreboding indicators of economic and social decline, hurting the future of both our young generation and country at large. A nation that does not pay attention to the anxieties gripping most of its young people is just plain suicidal. We, for our own sake, must get off this dangerous path.

## SUVs for bureaucrats amid economic woes?

### Govt cannot waste public money like this

Last year, a proposal to buy 261 SUVs—worth about Tk 1.46 crore each—for deputy commissioners (DCs) and upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs) was approved. But after severe criticism against the backdrop of a struggling economy, the government decided to halt the buying process. It is, therefore, quite puzzling to see the revival of that decision, especially when the country's economic condition has worsened. Going ahead with this decision, rather than using facilities that are already available, will be nothing but a waste of public money.

On May 11, Bangladesh's foreign reserves fell below the \$19 billion-mark for the first time in 11 months; on May 21, it stood at \$18.61 billion. Despite the crisis of dollars, it is quite baffling that the government is okay with importing these vehicles which will likely further impact the reserves. As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, officials say foreign currency won't be used to buy the cars, but the parts will be imported and assembled to make them, which, as they admitted, will require foreign currency. It's clear that this logic does not stand. The authorities are going through with this decision after the taka further depreciated against the dollar, standing at approximately Tk 117. This means the initial total expenditure—Tk 381 crore—will increase. This is nothing but an ill-considered initiative.

The rationale for buying these vehicles originally was to ensure that the national election was successfully conducted, maintaining law and order. Now, the public administration ministry has a new reason: to maintain the efficiency of public works. These changing arguments diminish the declared need to buy these SUVs. Maybe this is why the administration is pushing the move in a clandestine manner. Reportedly, the public administration and finance ministers bypassed the purchasing committee to approve the proposal, which points to ill-intent. As an expert has stated, this sets a dangerous precedent for moving other questionable proposals in this manner.

Last month, food inflation hit 10.22 percent—the first time it hit double digits in five months—while non-food inflation stood at 9.34 percent. When our people are struggling to make ends meet, how can the government be this liberal while spending their hard-earned money, that too going against its own austerity policy? We strongly urge the authorities to reconsider this initiative, and prudently evaluate all financial decisions to restore our economic health.

# In a parliament of businessmen, conflicts of interest reign supreme



Kallol Mustafa  
is an engineer and writer who focuses  
on power, energy, environment and  
development economics. He can be  
reached at kallol\_mustafa@yahoo.com

### KALLOL MUSTAFA

In parliamentary democracy, parliamentary standing committees are important tools for holding the government accountable. These committees, consisting of members of both the government and opposition parties in various democratic countries, scrutinise the activities of the respective ministries of the government, review the proposed draft laws, and investigate corruption allegations.

As the absolute dominance of the ruling party has been established in the National Parliament of Bangladesh, the parliamentary committees are not seen to play any strong role in bringing the relevant ministries of the government to account. According to Article 188(2) of the Rules of Procedure of the National Parliament, "No member shall be appointed to a Committee who has a personal, pecuniary or direct interest in any matter which may be considered by that Committee." But due to the dominance of the ruling party and businessmen in parliament, these conflicts of interest have so far not been considered during the formation of parliamentary standing committees.

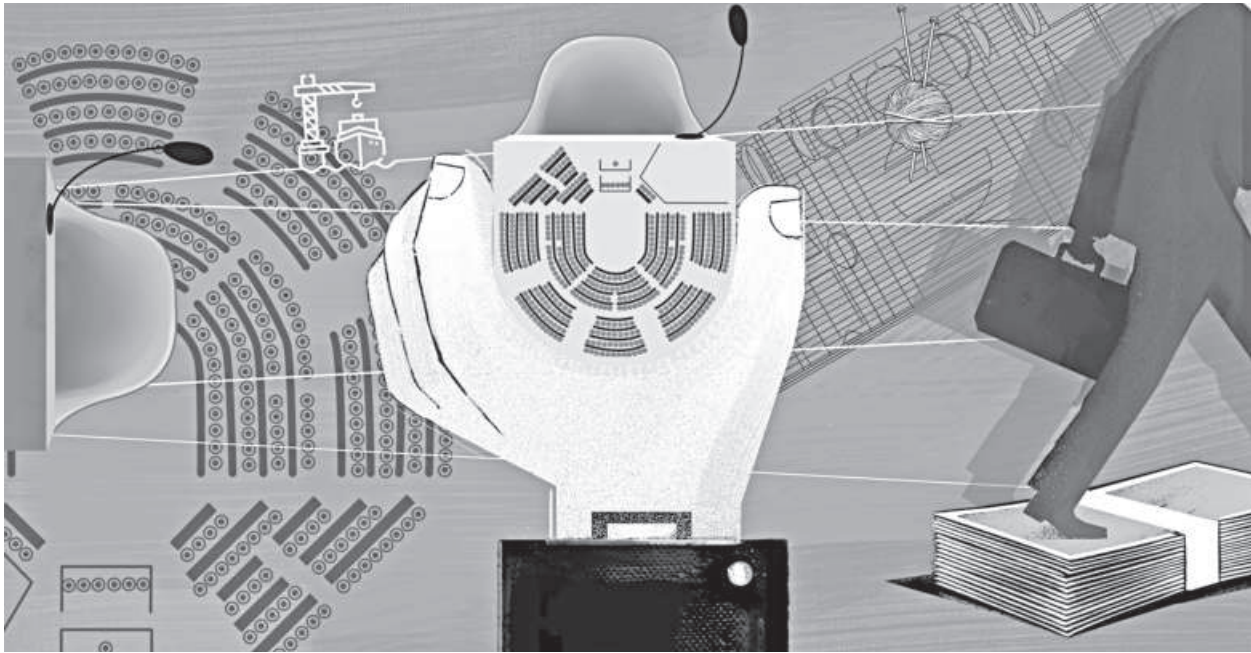
A study conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) on the matter showed that, according to the information declared in their affidavits submitted to the Election Commission, the members of six committees of the 9th Parliament and five committees of the 10th Parliament had committee-related business involvement. But according to information collected from the local level on 38 members of 11 committees included as case-studies, 19 of these members of nine different committees had business in related areas. There have been allegations of exerting influence for promoting personal or business interests during decision-making within the committees. Besides, allegations of influence-peddling in decision-making have also been reported in instances where the ministers of relevant ministries are ex-officio members and where former ministers were appointed as chairs of the concerned standing committees.

The current 12th National Parliament is no exception in this regard. With an overwhelming majority comprising Awami League nominees and party supported "independent" candidates, 50 parliamentary committees were formed within just five working days of starting of the Parliament, of which 39 are related to the activities of various ministries. The remaining 11 committees are on parliamentary affairs. According to a report in *The Daily Star*, many

members of 20 parliamentary standing committees own businesses in sectors they are supposed to watch over.

For example, Shamim Osman, a member of the standing committee on labour ministry, owns the garment factory "Wisdom Knitting Mills", while another member of the committee, SM Al Mamun, is involved in ship-breaking yards. Golam Kibria Tipu, a member of the parliamentary standing committee on shipping, has several launches.

Nizam Uddin Hazari, who has a manpower export business, is a member of the parliamentary committee on the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Overseas Employment. Selim Mahmud, member of the parliamentary standing committee on the Ministry of Power, Energy and Minerals is a consultant on international laws and energy related issues. Abdur Rauf, another member of the committee, has petrol pump businesses. Mohammad Ali, who works as a contractor, is a member of the standing committee on the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives.

Moreover, as many as 12 MPs who were ministers and state ministers of the last government are appointed as chairmen of related standing committees, which may create obstacles in independent and objective scrutiny of allegations of corruption of the ministry during the former minister's tenure. For example, former commerce minister Tipu Munshi is

alone have been elected as members of Parliament. In 1973, 25 percent of the 283 members in the first National Parliament were lawyers, 23.67 percent were businessmen, 14.84 percent were farmers, 12.36 percent were politicians and 9.89 percent were teachers. Since then, the share of businessmen in the Parliament has only increased year-after-year and, as a result, there is almost no representation of people from other classes and professions in the current Parliament.

This has led to a dominance of businessmen in the policy-making of the state, which they are using to increase the expanse of their business and wealth. As there is no effective opposition party in the Parliament, there is no opportunity to bring these businessmen under accountability. They are making or amending laws and policies for their own

entanglement, Parliament enacted the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provisions) Act 2010 with immunity provisions. Under the protection of this law, one power and energy project after another have been implemented without competitive bidding, leading the country's economy to bear the burden of excessive capacity charges and increased energy imports. For this same reason, garment industry owners get more benefits from the government than any other sector in the country, including tax exemptions, cash assistance, exemption from customs duties, low interest loans from the Export Development Fund (EDF) and import of duty-free raw materials.

Democratic accountability of the government cannot be ensured unless this state-business nexus is brought to an end.

# Government mishandling of personal data: Where does it end?



Zarif Faiaz  
is a journalist at the Tech &  
Startup section of The Daily Star.

### ZARIF FAIAZ

The news of a handful of government employees selling the personal data of citizens—including National Identity (NID) card numbers and phone call details—has raised alarms in the last few days. On May 21, this newspaper reported that a few crooked government employees were stealing the sensitive personal data of citizens from the national intelligence servers and selling it in exchange for money in over 750 groups, pages, and profiles on different social media platforms.

In a world that makes sense, this news would have made a much bigger splash. Not here though. Here, we are too used to indifference. The National Telecommunication Monitoring Center (NTMC), the body that discovered the breach, did notify the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU), and RAB 6, the two government security units harbouring the accused officials, and the two units did assure that appropriate actions are being taken. But there's no guarantee that this will be the last of such incidents.

Indeed, the NTMC itself was accused

of mishandling our data not too long ago. In November last year, *WIRED*, an American magazine, published a story on the NTMC leaking sensitive, private data of the citizens. *WIRED* claimed that NTMC was unknowingly publishing scores of personal data—phone numbers, names, blood groups, professions, parents' names—through an insecure database linked to its system. *WIRED* reported that hackers had gained access to this insecure database and proceeded to steal and sell the data.

NTMC denied the leak to the local media later but the proof *WIRED* presented in its investigation was quite comprehensive. The leak was discovered and confirmed by Viktor Markopoulos, a cybersecurity researcher who was the first to identify the earlier massive data leak from the Office of the Registrar General, Birth and Death Registration where over 50 million citizens' personal data remained exposed online for anyone to grab through a simple Google search.

Incidents like these are not

uncommon in the country. With a poor record of cybersecurity, Bangladesh has been home to some truly eyebrow-raising breaches in recent years. In March last year, hackers stole over 100 gigabytes worth of personal data from Biman Bangladesh, the state carrier, and demanded \$5 million in ransom.

In July, notorious hacker group ALPHV stole over 170 gigabytes of sensitive personal data—including employees' names, passport and NID information—from Bangladesh Krishi Bank's servers and demanded a large sum as ransom. In October of the same year, this newspaper reported that NID information of citizens was available for sale in a Telegram channel managed by unknown miscreants. Most notably, the entirety of the stolen funds from the 2016 Bangladesh Bank heist that made numerous international headlines, has still not been fully recovered.

Has anyone at the highest levels of the government stopped to think, for a moment, about the consequences of these massive data leaks? From identity theft to financial scam, small and large, the possibilities are dangerously endless. A Bangladeshi I know who resides in Finland only found out last week that his personal MFS account was terminated because apparently another account was opened with his same NID details the week before, and you can only have one account against each NID. The poor fellow—and his NID—never left Finland in the last two years.

A victim claimed that his NID was

used to create an MFS account in his name, while he never even picked up his card from his hometown. Another person I know found out last month that there was an MFS account created in his name and phone number while he has no idea who or how.

This is just the tip of the iceberg: the few cases that get disclosed, the few cases that get discussed and dissected. If one looks deeply into the issue, there's bound to be many more incidents like these. Who will take the blame for the many lapses in our cybersecurity? Why should we, tax paying, law-abiding citizens, be okay with our data being sold off to scammers and hackers?

Is our government really that careless, or just completely incapable of even comprehending the graveness of the situation that they put us in? The government generally loves to boast about "Digital Bangladesh" and "Smart Bangladesh." Higher-ups of the government proudly boast our "robust" IT infrastructure, our data centres, our booming freelancing economy and routinely incite tech giants to open local bases of operations. Are these incidents of data breach and data leaks not contradictory to the very image of the smart, digital, developed Bangladesh that they are desperately trying to portray or advertise? In the end, the question that really matters is, where does this mayhem stop? With a lack of accountability, disciplinary actions, and in many cases any acknowledgement at all, the answer—with complete and total despair—is seemingly never.