

Don't dismiss human rights violations

ASK report paints disturbing picture of first six months of 2024

We are disturbed by Ain O Salish Kendra's (ASK) report on the human rights situation in Bangladesh in the first half of 2024. According to one of the leading human rights organisations—which prepares the report every year based on news published in national dailies, alongside its own findings—political killings have tripled, and custodial deaths doubled this year compared to the same period in the previous year. At least 250 women were raped across the country from January to July this year, 631 children became victims of killings, torture, and repression, 35 people were lynched by mobs and 21 temples and 25 Hindu homes were vandalised. If this is how the first six months of the third term of the Awami League government has played out, can citizens be blamed for worrying about what the future holds?

At least 41 people were killed in incidents of political violence in the first six months of 2024. The alarming increase in political violence can be traced back to the general election on January 7, city corporation elections, and upazila polls held in four phases across the country. Although the polls were boycotted by the main opposition parties, including BNP, it is unfortunate that we still witnessed untoward killings and violence, mostly among supporters of Awami League candidates and independent AL candidates or, in the case of local elections, among AL-affiliated candidates. We have not seen any acknowledgement from the government, its law enforcement agencies and the Election Commission about its failure in preventing intra-party violence and an intimidating election-time environment. Instead, in a controversial move, the home ministry deleted all data relating to 1,524 complaints of electoral violence and breach of electoral code of conduct received between December 19, 2023 and January 10 this year.

Meanwhile, at least eight individuals, including two women, died in custody during this period. Again, we have not seen any meaningful action to hold accountable law enforcers involved in allegations of torture and extrajudicial excesses, despite repeated appeals from national and human rights bodies. In fact, there has only been one conviction for custodial death over the past decade, though ASK documented at least 138 deaths that have been allegedly caused by physical torture by law enforcement agencies.

Over the years, we have observed a concerning dismissal or downplaying of human rights abuses by the government, even when presented with compelling statistics. Will the third term of the Awami League government be more of the same, or will it finally realise that no amount of economic growth and infrastructural development can make up for gross human rights violations, and that it is ultimately in its best interests to address them? For the sake of citizens, we hope it is the latter.

Stop ignoring militancy threats

Focus more on deradicalising ex-militants in prison

A recent police intelligence report has confirmed what we have been warning about in this column for years: militants in prisons, far from being rehabilitated and deradicalised, are continuing their communications with members of militant outfits outside of prisons, possibly gathering strength and reorganising. This indicates that the soft power approach being pursued by the authorities in prisons are not working at all.

Militants in prison, like all other prisoners, need to be rehabilitated and shown a better path. But because of the way our prisons are presently operating—with prisoners crammed beyond prison limits, inadequate resources allocated for them and very little focus on their rehabilitation—they are doing the exact opposite. Only a year ago, this newspaper reported on how militant leaders have been taking advantage of gaps in surveillance to form new outfits and recruit members inside and outside prisons. By intercepting communications, intelligence officers also managed to learn that Neo JMB leader Saiful Islam Khaled, now on death row at Kashimpur High Security Prison for the 2016 Holey Artisan cafe attack, was contacting Bangladeshi IS militants in Afghanistan, asking for financial support to reorganise the militant group in Bangladesh. This, of course, should seriously concern the authorities. Unfortunately, it seems that has not been the case as surveillance gaps continue to persist in our prisons, according to police report.

What is further concerning is that militants in prisons have apparently been able to smuggle cell phones into the jails with the help of some prison guards. Due to such neglect, even militant leaders living abroad are regularly communicating with jailed members in Bangladesh. With that being the case, it is difficult to imagine that the jailed members will ever become deradicalised. What then, will be the outcome when they finally get out of prison? Will they not again bolster the ranks of different militant groups? It seems that the government has no plan on what to do with these people. And the militant outfits are taking full advantage of that.

Hence, we once again reiterate the importance of cutting off the communication of these prisoners with outside militant forces. Authorities must put greater focus on deradicalising and rehabilitating them, and also increasing surveillance in prisons to ensure that these measures are actually working. After all, militancy poses one of the greatest threats to our national security, as well as our secular social fabric—and strongly contradicts the religious values held by the majority of our citizens.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Frida Kahlo was born

On this day in 1970, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, noted for her intense, brilliantly coloured self-portraits, was born.

The paradox of whitening black money while fighting corruption



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedkai

KAMAL AHMED

Bangladesh is often described as a “paradox”; it excels in crucial social indicators while scoring poorly on the quality of governance. This paradox was evident when two contrasting news stories emerged from the same session of the Jatiya Sangsad on June 29: one about the prime minister's vow to crack down on graft, and the other about retaining amnesty for possessors of black money. How does one reconcile such contradictions? Has the government redefined corruption by excluding proceeds from illegal transactions, graft, and tax evasion, commonly known as black money?

Critics argue that the definition of black money varies depending on who holds it. This money seems less problematic if the holder is connected to the ruling party. Despite loud proclamations of “zero tolerance,” government efforts rarely make a lasting impact on curbing corruption.

Currently, the country is abuzz with complaints about bureaucratic corruption. Previously, there was noise about traders' excessive profits and syndicates. A few years ago, Awami League embodied the zero-tolerance mantra when it tackled illegal wealth from casinos, gambling, and extortion. There was no shortage of theatrics when alleged casino kingpins were arrested in raids, which included quite a few Jubo League leaders, such as Ismail Chowdhury Samrat, Khaled Mahmud Bhuiyan, Kazi Anisur Rahman, and AKM Mominul Haque. Now, however, prosecutors seem to have forgotten about pursuing conviction for the accused, with all of them out on bail.

Considering the slew of unresolved large-scale financial crimes such as fraud and embezzlement of bank loans, insider trading, and manipulations in the stock market involving thousands of crores, one may wonder why there is even talk of a crackdown on corruption.

In the past decade and a half, the stock market has experienced at least three major manipulations. Those who looted investors' wealth faced no significant consequences. Similarly,



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

fraud and embezzlement of bank loans have been long standing issues. In 2012, the late Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith downplayed Hallmark's Tk 4,000-crore fraud, saying, “It is not a big sum.” At the time, his words seemed incredible, but now, with the scale of corruption being uncovered, his statement appears less mistaken or humorous. Banks being used to break rules and create precedents for anonymous loans in the billions is now commonplace.

Despite the noise about corruption, the corrupt seem largely unaffected. Government measures, like transfers or demotions after grand corruption allegations, suggest a “hate the sin, not the sinner” approach. Thus, criminals have no trouble withdrawing money or transferring assets before fleeing abroad. Critics of the government or opposition members, however, struggle to secure court permission just to travel.

Everyone wants corrupt bureaucrats tried, but the belief

(integrity) Award, intended as part of the anti-corruption drive, ironically has been bestowed upon record-setting corrupt individuals like former police chief Benazir Ahmed.

The one-sided election on January 7 has probably faded from many of our memories, along with the asset lists of candidates. Since the election was boycotted, and most candidates were from Awami League, the wealth disclosures in their affidavits highlighted how lucrative politics is. Transparency International Bangladesh found that the assets of the top 10 wealthiest MPs multiplied by up to 55 times in five years. The wealth of the richest MP's wife increased about 35 times, and over 15 years, his wealth surged 2,436 times. Many of these politicians are businessmen, yet such business growth is rare even in the West. Transparency's analysis of ministers' and state ministers' wealth also found up to eleven-fold wealth growth and 22 times income growth in five years.

analysing their assets and income statements, and confiscating any illegal asset through proper legal processes. They also recommended seizing land exceeding legal limits, which was not too difficult as these disclosures came in their affidavits. None of this happened. Had politicians' illegal land been confiscated, bureaucrats might have been deterred from pursuing dreams of becoming zamindars.

It has already been proven that raising alarm bells about the corruption of various professionals and groups will achieve little if the political sponsors of corruption are kept out of the reckoning. What's happening now is best described as mega-corruption, and at the rate at which complaints are heard, corruption has become decentralised. Whoever has the power, the maximum of it is being used for corruption. There is no solution to this problem unless there is a change in politics and a return to accountable democracy and the rule of law.

Why Macronism failed



Jan Werner Mueller is the author, most recently, of Democracy Rules

JAN-WERNER MUELLER

Following his party's decisive loss to the far-right National Rally in the European Parliament election, French President Emmanuel Macron shocked everyone by dissolving the National Assembly and calling a snap election. He has justified his decision by claiming that an election will “clarify” the political situation, but his compatriots do not share this view.

As Edouard Philippe, Macron's prime minister from 2017 to 2020, put it, the president has needlessly “killed the presidential majority.” A hung parliament with National Rally as the largest party is now considered the most likely outcome. Still, Macron's decision has clarified one thing: his strategy to create a powerful centrism in France has failed. Other European leaders should take note.

Legend has it that the first question Napoleon would ask about a military officer was not whether he was talented, but whether he was lucky. In 2017, Macron was extraordinarily lucky. The incumbent was so unpopular that he did not even bother to run for a second term, and the likely conservative winner was felled by a scandal. Macron seized the moment to offer what one might call a Second Coming of the “Third Way.” Just like Tony Blair, the British Labour Party leader who came to power in 1997, Macron held that the old ideological cleavage of left and right was dépassé, and that centrists should simply pick the policies that “worked best.”

Macron appealed to both socialists and conservative Gaullists, on the assumption that all reasonable people could unite happily in the moderate middle. For a while, this approach had traction, because Macron's seemingly ever-expanding was flanked by Marine Le Pen's National Front (now National Rally) on the far right and by the firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Unbowed on the far left. But the technocratic approach—“if you're not with us, you're unreasonable”—ultimately failed to transform the political landscape.

The far right, far left, centre left, and centre right each still tend to win at least a fifth of the vote in the first round of French presidential elections, on average. But the centre-right Republicans have been hemorrhaging votes to National Rally, prompting the party's leader, Eric Ciotti, to endorse an alliance with the far right. This matters, because Macron's overwhelming support in the second round of the 2017 and 2022 elections—when he was facing off against Le Pen—was largely due to voters' hostility to the far right, not burgeoning enthusiasm for Macron-style technocracy.

Macron's haughty style—already in 2017, he let it be known that he wanted to rule like “Jupiter”—certainly did not help. But quite apart from the personal failings of a man who fancies himself a philosopher-king, a centrist project aimed at taking the best from the left

and the right was always more likely to alienate both than to harmonise their contradictory agendas.

Once Macron had lost control of the National Assembly in 2022, his prime minister, Elisabeth Borne, heroically tried to cobble together ad hoc majorities to advance the president's agenda. But on more than 20 occasions, she resorted to constitutional shortcuts to ram

Macron's haughty style—already in 2017, he let it be known that he wanted to rule like “Jupiter”—certainly did not help. But quite apart from the personal failings of a man who fancies himself a philosopher-king, a centrist project aimed at taking the best from the left and the right was always more likely to alienate both than to harmonise their contradictory agendas.

through measures that clearly lacked popular support.

Macron's centrism not only looked increasingly authoritarian; it also acquired a rightward tilt. Hence, his hardline interior minister went so far as to accuse Le Pen of being soft on Islamism, and Borne introduced an immigration law that seemed to legitimise the claims made by the far right. Constantly shift rightward, and you eventually will reach a point where you can no longer blackmail

voters with the argument that you are the only thing standing in the way of right-wing extremism and the end of the Republic.

Some commentators speculate that Macron wants the National Rally to govern until the 2027 presidential election so it will prove itself incompetent and set the stage for a triumphant shift back toward the centre. But this kind of quasi-pedagogical project—with the headmaster showing his pupils that the substitute teacher doesn't know how to do the job—is misguided for several reasons.

For starters, not all far-right populists have overly simplistic policy ideas or are amateur administrators. In cases where they do prove themselves incompetent, their fortunes can recover. When Austria's Machiavellian Christian Democratic chancellor, Wolfgang Schäussel, brought Jörg Haider's far-right Freedom Party into government in 2000, the populists descended into infighting and revealed their incompetence and corruption. But after splitting up and licking its wounds, the Freedom Party sailed to victory in last month's European elections.

Moreover, since the French system allows for “cohabitation”—when the president and the prime minister belong to opposing parties—an incompetent-seeming governing party can blame the other side for tying its hands. Wielding the extraordinary powers of the French presidency, Macron will doubtless find an outlet on the international stage. But it is sobering to see that his vision has been downgraded from a “revolution” in 2017 to a “renaissance” in 2022 to what it is today. Macron failed to transform the movement he started into a proper political party that is not dependent on a charismatic leader. His charisma gone, the centre's prospects for 2027 look bleak.