

## No innocent should be harassed legally

### Directive for police officers must be enforced properly

One of the most immediate and rather disturbing side-effects of the August 5 regime change has been the surge in legal cases targeting individuals associated with the Awami League government. While cases over the crimes committed during the preceding days and weeks were expected, the legitimacy of many that have since been filed was dubious as they lacked credible evidence, and were potentially used as a means of harassing the accused. Among others, even academics, journalists, and artists have been targeted through such frivolous lawsuits—a trend that continues to this day.

Against this backdrop, it is heartening to see the police headquarters finally take steps to address these concerns. In a directive issued to police stations across the country, the authorities have recently instructed officers to remove the names of individuals from murder and other cases connected with the movement if no evidence of their involvement is found in initial investigations. Officers were also ordered not to arrest any government employee without proof. While such instructions were already in the CrPC and service rules, reiterating them in specific terms reflects wider concerns over the surge in arbitrary cases and also marks a policy departure from the previous administration's practice of harassing critics and political rivals through so-called "ghost cases."

The new directive, however, can open a Pandora's box of legal issues as it will mean rewriting the First Information Reports (FIRs) of many cases or withdrawing them altogether as there cannot be two FIRs in a single case. An even more concerning issue is the influence behind these arbitrary cases. Why would police officers indulge in writing unsubstantiated FIRs even after the regime change? In some murder cases predating August 5, BNP-Jamaat leaders who were previously named as accused have been replaced by Awami League leaders. In many instances, plaintiffs have admitted that they do not even know the accused. Clearly, the motive behind these lawsuits has been political. This is why it is essential to not just order the cessation of politically motivated cases, but also investigate how these cases were accepted in the first place and the complicity of officers and political actors responsible.

We must remember that the shift in power cannot be a justification for continuing such practices. If we are to hold to account those truly responsible for the indiscriminate killings in the lead-up to August 5, it is crucial that investigations be based on solid evidence. Blanket accusations and arbitrary cases risk not only the chances of justice but also further division at a time when national unity is vital. Innocent individuals who may have supported the previous government but had no involvement in crimes must not be subjected to any legal harassment.

## A sheer waste of public money

### Why is Bangabandhu-1 satellite still incurring losses?

It is disappointing to see the woeful state of the much-advertised Bangabandhu-1 satellite, which was launched in 2018 at a cost of around Tk 3,000 crore. Reportedly, the Bangladesh Satellite Company Limited (BSCL), which was formed to operate the satellite, has not yet been able to make any profit from this project. Worse still, for all the losses it has incurred since, it has not shown that in its records. According to BSCL's last audit report (2021-22), its profit was Tk 85 crore; however, if the depreciated cost of the project is taken into account, its annual loss would stand at Tk 66 crore. Moreover, the delay in launching the satellite had led to an increase of project cost by about Tk 200 crore. The question is, was its financial feasibility thoroughly assessed before approving this costly project?

In its feasibility study, it was projected that the capacity of the satellite could be sold to Indonesia, the Philippines, SAARC countries, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and some other countries. But the Awami League government failed to create a market in these countries over the last seven years. This indicates that the project's feasibility was not studied properly. Also, due to some technical issues, Bangladesh has not been able to acquire the landing rights in those countries, meaning that the satellite has remained largely underutilised. In the process, it has truly become a white elephant, for which citizens are having to pay.

Unfortunately, this is not the only prestige project undertaken by the old regime without careful consideration of national interests. We can talk about the energy projects like Matarbari or Rampal power plants. Recently, the energy adviser has termed the Matarbari project as a "luxury project" with little benefit for ordinary people. Experts also repeatedly warned about the environmental costs associated with the Rampal project built in the Sundarbans. As such, we expect the interim government to critically re-evaluate all such projects draining national coffers and take decisive actions about them.

Regarding the Bangabandhu-1 satellite, the government should investigate why the project has failed to take off even after all these years and see if it is still feasible to operate. It should also hold to account officials involved with the project for failing to reap its benefits. In the future, the government should refrain from taking up such prestige projects and rather focus on initiatives that actually benefit the people in the long run. In a country where a large percentage of people still live below the poverty line, any wastage of money through ill-conceived projects is totally unacceptable.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Bomb hits Wall Street in New York City

On this day in 1920, bombing at Wall Street in New York City killed 38 people and injured hundreds more. No group claimed responsibility for the crime, which remains unsolved.

# 101 of the RTI Act for our youth activists

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### SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Since the formation of a new popular government in Bangladesh in August 2024, the prevailing theme in the country has been reform and change of the entire governance mechanism. A popular outcry, particularly from students and the youth in general who led the movement to oust the previous regime, has called for a complete overhaul of all branches of the government, which have been mired in years of corruption and malpractice. The catchphrase for change is the establishment of transparency and accountability for all public servants to the people they serve.

While experts work out the reforms, citizens are also responsible for playing a more decisive role in holding all future

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governments and their administrative units accountable. For that, they can resort to an existing, readily available law: the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009. Similar laws exist under different names in various parts of the world, mostly known as Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. In Bangladesh, the RTI law was first introduced as an ordinance by the caretaker government

in 2008 and later adopted as an act by the new parliament in 2009. As per the preamble, the law's primary goal was to empower citizens to monitor government work and ensure that it followed the laws of the land and was corruption-free.

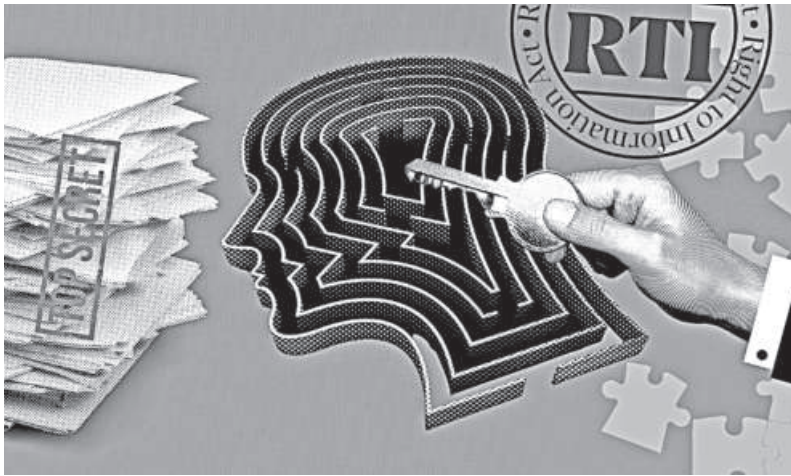
The law specifies two ways for citizens to obtain information from

of information to be published by government bodies on their website and by other public means, which are often benign and innocuous and hide more than they reveal. They include information such as organisational structures, functions, duties, powers, etc. While some countries disclose as much information as possible,

contain provisions on the right to access all official documents, which is a manifestation of the principle of public access to information, which includes all registered documents in the country. Let our young visionaries decide what the traffic would bear in our country.

Not all information available to public authorities can be disclosed proactively, as there is information within a piece of information that must be pried open through a reactive disclosure mechanism based on citizens' requests. For example, there could be a proactive disclosure as to who was awarded a tender, but there is little scope to know if the tender receiver was selected based on any favour or if any unfair means were involved. This can only be found through the reactive disclosure mechanism. Most sensitive information is obtained through this procedure. For example, the demolition order for the illegal construction of the BGMEA building on Hatirjheel Lake in Dhaka resulted from an RTI request submitted by Syeda Rizwana Hasan, now one of the advisers of the interim government. To appreciate the scale of information application under the reactive process, consider India, where an average of six million RTI requests are made annually to different public offices. In contrast, the average in Bangladesh is 10,000 annually.

Finally, what information should citizens seek from the authorities, and for what purpose? The short answer is that any government project or activity of any public body that affects public interest could be the object of inquiry by citizens to find corrective measures. Let our awakened student groups and the youth nationwide form citizen groups to identify issues on which to seek information from government bodies, in order to monitor their work and keep the pressure on them to be transparent and accountable. In the process, they will also discover why they must keep an eye on the formation and work of the Information Commission, which plays a crucial role in taking the law forward by, among other things, resolving disputes between the demand and supply sides of information. There could be no better law for our youth to be engaged in making a new Bangladesh where people's power reigns supreme in the true sense of the term.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

the government: i) through "proactive disclosure," which means citizens can demand that the government disclose on its own, without asking, all disclosable information, particularly those related to financial and human resources of the government; and ii) through the "reactive disclosure," which deals with information that is not proactively disclosed and must be specifically sought. Citizens are entitled to seek any information except what is exempted by the law, such as those that, if disclosed, may endanger Bangladesh's security, integrity or sovereignty, foreign relations, sensitive military or intelligence-related information, and citizens' privacy.

Beyond the exempted categories, citizens have the right to seek information related to governance from the public authorities, including NGOs that use public funds. It is best if governments use the proactive disclosure mechanism to disclose as much information to the people as possible, so the latter don't have to use the reactive disclosure mechanism. Unfortunately, that is often not the case.

The Bangladesh law provides a list

in Bangladesh, even innocuous information is often not disclosed, and the public shows no interest in this regard, partly due to a lack of awareness about the RTI Act and partly due to fear of reprisal from those providing information. Now that the younger generation is actively working to change these practices and undemocratic tendencies, it is time to consider the law more seriously.

Those among our youth who are charting change for the future should look at the proactive disclosure list in our RTI Act and decide how much more the government must disclose to be more transparent in its work. Many international guidelines are available online, where the sky is the limit. The most important thing is what we, as citizens, wish to obtain.

In Canada, for example, proactive disclosure includes financial and human resources-related information by all government departments and agencies, travel and hospitality expenses, and more. In Sweden, on the other hand, the principle of public access to information is considered the most fundamental principle of the government. Swedish laws

# The steep economic challenges the interim govt faces



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### SELIM RAIHAN

The political upheaval in Bangladesh is having a profound impact on the country's economy. For the country to recover and stabilise, the interim government must prioritise political stability and the restoration of law and order. These steps are critical to setting the stage for economic recovery.

The ongoing political crisis can significantly slow down economic growth. Political instability breeds uncertainty, which in turn undermines investor confidence. As a result, both domestic and foreign investors can become more cautious, leading to reduced private investment. Political instability also affects the broader economic environment by disrupting business operations and creating an unpredictable financial climate.

Bangladesh has been experiencing high inflation since early 2022, with inflation rates reaching 11.66 percent in July 2024—highest in 13 years. Food inflation has been even more severe, hitting a record 14.10 percent. The ongoing supply chain disruptions and shortages are likely to keep inflation elevated, which disproportionately impacts low-income households. For many families, the rising cost of living is a significant burden, further straining their financial resources.

Unemployment, especially among educated youth, remains a pressing issue. Around 41 percent of young people aged 15-24 years are neither in education, employment, nor training (NEET), nearly double the global average. This high rate of NEET youth

exacerbates social and economic challenges, contributing to a sense of disenfranchisement and economic frustration among the younger population.

The country has been facing a worsening macroeconomic situation since the beginning of 2022, manifested by the decline in foreign exchange reserves and slow growth in exports and remittance earnings. During the ongoing political turmoil, small businesses and production units are particularly vulnerable to these challenges, facing disrupted operations, decreased productivity and, in some cases, forced closures. This affects the business owners and has a ripple effect on employees and suppliers, further compounding the economic difficulties.

The interim government's role is crucial in navigating these economic challenges and laying the groundwork for a stable transition to a permanent government. Immediate economic priorities should include combating inflation and restoring macroeconomic stability.

Addressing high inflation requires a coordinated approach involving monetary, fiscal and tariff policies. Effective market management is essential to stabilise prices. The appointment of a new central bank governor has raised expectations for better use of monetary policy tools to control inflation and stabilise the economy.

The government must work

to stabilise the macroeconomic environment by improving forex reserves, increasing remittance inflows through formal channels, and boosting exports despite the political crisis. These measures are crucial for restoring confidence in the economy and ensuring sustainable growth.

However, to address the country's structural economic challenges, comprehensive reforms are essential in several key areas:

Banking sector: Reforms are needed to tackle high levels of non-performing loans, poor governance, corruption, inadequate risk management, and regulatory weaknesses within the banking sector. Strengthening transparency, enhancing regulatory oversight, and ensuring sound financial practices are vital for restoring confidence in the financial system.

Taxation system: Bangladesh's tax-GDP ratio is notably low, standing at 7.8 percent in December 2023. Reforms should focus on broadening the tax base, improving compliance, and enhancing the efficiency of tax collection. Administrative and institutional reforms are necessary to strengthen the tax collection authority, curb corruption, and ensure a more equitable and effective tax system.

Trade and investment policies: To foster a more favourable environment for export diversification and foreign direct investment (FDI), reforms should address the heavy reliance on ready-made garments and the challenges in attracting FDI. As Bangladesh approaches its graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in November 2026, it is crucial to liberalise trade and investment regulations, remove structural barriers, and improve the ease of doing business.

Public expenditure: With public expenditure at around 15 percent of GDP, significantly lower than its

comparators, reforms should aim to improve allocation efficiency and enhance spending in key social sectors. Prioritising investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure will help address critical needs and support long-term economic growth.

Institutional capacity: Strengthening state capacity is essential for effective governance and service delivery. Institutional reforms should focus on improving efficiency and accountability within government institutions. This includes enhancing the capabilities of public servants, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and combating corruption to ensure that government actions are effective and transparent.

Addressing Bangladesh's economic challenges requires not only political stability, but also a robust and comprehensive approach to reform. The interim government must focus on both immediate economic priorities and long-term structural reforms to foster a stable and prosperous economic environment. By taking decisive action in these areas, the government can set the stage for sustained recovery and growth.

While the interim government may face limitations in implementing all desired reforms within its term, it is crucial to focus on setting a strong foundation for future changes. Establishing effective and robust frameworks for reform can ensure that progress is sustained beyond the interim period. By mobilising support from key stakeholders—including political leaders, civil society, and the private sector—the interim government can foster a collaborative environment that drives reform forward. This strategic groundwork will help pave the way for a more comprehensive and successful implementation of reforms in the long term, even if the immediate results fall short of expectations.