

## A victory for free expression

### We support the interim govt’s decision to repeal the CSA

The information adviser to the interim government, Nahid Islam, has said that the Cyber Security Act (CSA)—which replaced the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) but retained its controversial aspects—will be repealed within a week. And we fully endorse this decision by the interim government. Additionally, adviser Nahid said that all cases under the act will be withdrawn, which we hope includes all cases filed after August 5 as well.

The CSA—like the DSA before it, and the draconian sections of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act of 2006—is a perfect example of a bad law. The definitions of crimes under it were vague, and the punishments for them were extremely severe—more so than some of the worst crimes one could commit. This made it obvious from the very outset that the law was framed to suppress dissent, rather than prevent cybercrimes, as the former regime propagated was its purpose. And that is exactly how it was used.

According to data collected by the Centre for Governance Studies between October 2018 and August 2022, a total of 1,109 cases were filed under the DSA against 2,889 individuals. And we saw time and again the accused being held in custody and effectively being punished before trial, even if the investigation report was not given within the stipulated 75 days. Politicians belonging to opposition parties and journalists ranked the highest in terms of those who were accused under the law, with ruling party affiliates specifically being the largest group of people prosecuting journalists.

That being the case, ordinary citizens were also not spared from its wrath, as the law was largely used to suppress any and all dissent against the former autocratic government. During the regime’s tenure, we saw journalists and dissenters being picked up in the middle of the night and disappeared, and the CSA (and DSA before that) being used to provide a veneer of legality for their human rights being violated—as the law was frequently used to file cases against them afterwards. In fact, there have even been cases of people who were accused under the law dying while in custody of security forces. All these tactics were ultimately used to instil fear in society, so that no one dared to speak out against the regime’s crimes, corruption, and misrule.

This environment of fear and the suppression of free expression formed two of the most important pillars of the Awami League’s fascistic rule. And we hope, going forward, such a law will never again be framed or passed. We can see from our independence struggle, as well as from the 2024 mass uprising, the importance of freedom of expression, which is explicitly tied to freedom of thought, democracy, and the people’s right to know. Therefore, if we are to truly establish a democratic country, we must hold onto our freedom of expression, and establish it as a core value in society—and no law should ever force us to compromise on that again.

## Holistic approach needed for safer roads

### DMP’s new app should accompany other long-term strategies

We commend the Dhaka Metropolitan Police’s new app, designated to report and collect real-time road crash data in the capital. While this is a positive step towards preventing road crashes, the app should not be the sole solution for preventive measures.

Unlike the current method, where crashes are recorded manually by the police’s crime division, this app—Database and Analysis of Road Crash (DARC)—will be used by traffic police, who are usually the first responders to road crashes. They will enter and report information such as time, location, date, weather, road crash type, and other contributing factors to road crashes. This way they will be able to record not only fatal crashes but also non-fatal ones and those where the death occurs later in hospitals. The data can be analysed to identify accident-prone areas and also the reasons behind them. Nevertheless, it is not that we are oblivious to the causes of road crashes in Dhaka. For years, we have known reckless driving, unfit vehicles on roads, lack of formal training among public transport drivers, the total disregard for traffic laws, and the absence of traffic lanes—to mention a few—as some of the major reasons behind road crashes. Addressing these obvious issues is as important, if not more so, than digitalising the road crashes reporting mechanism.

In the past, we have seen the launch of many apparently useful applications, but often, after the initial hype, their usage remained poor with the outcome falling short of expectations. Therefore, for this app to be effective, not only do all traffic police personnel need training on its proper usage, but the DMP must also ensure police have the device, proper internet connectivity, and the aptitude and willingness to enter the data correctly following a road crash. Besides, the usage should be expanded nationwide in phases to create a national road crash database. Finally, authorities must approach road crash prevention measures holistically by developing mid- and long-term strategies to address the underlying causes, instead of simply taking ad hoc steps.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Attack on Gaibandha Santal village

On this day in 2016, a tripartite clash broke out between the Santals, staff of Rangpur Sugar Mills, and police over the eviction of Indigenous people from the disputed land at Shahebganj cane farm of Rangpur Sugar Mills. The clash left three Santal men dead and 20 others, including nine policemen, injured.

# Crony capitalism stifled investment and growth



Dr Selim Raihan is professor at the Department of Economics in the University of Dhaka and executive director of South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM). He can be reached at selim.raihan@econdu.ac.bd.

SELIM RAIHAN

During the last decade, under the immediate-past Awami League government, the economic landscape of Bangladesh was defined by deepening crony capitalism, a situation in which business success is not determined by competitive advantage but by political connections and favouritism. Crony capitalism discouraged the growth of private investments on both domestic and foreign fronts. At the heart of crony capitalism lies the fact that business entities that enjoy intimate company with political elites always turn out to be at an undue advantage. These advantages range from preferential access to government contracts and resources to leniency in regulation and tax exemptions.

The quintessential example is the banking sector, in which a few politically connected conglomerates grabbed a disproportionately large amount of loans by showing little or no collateral. Lack of proper regulatory oversight resulted in increased non-performing loans (NPLs), which now stand as one of the major potential risks to the financial sector’s stability. Furthermore, there were instances of a high level of contractual agreements in the power and energy sector, with firms having obvious political connections, irrespective of their doubtful feasibility or efficiency, especially regarding IPPs.

Crony capitalism essentially cannot avoid giving more undue privileges to the chosen few in business at the cost of a majority of private investors. This uneven playing field thus discourages genuine entrepreneurs who don’t have any political connections from competing effectively. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are crucially important for employment generation and diversification of the economy, usually cannot scale up because of exclusion from lucrative markets dominated by politically connected firms.

This is not easy for foreign investors either. They are eager to invest in those sectors that offer high growth possibilities, but they keep away because the playing field is never really level. A lack of transparency in regulatory matters and the threat of arbitrary policy changes persisted during the previous regime, which prevented the emergence of a

favourable business environment for foreign investors. This is one of the reasons why foreign investment didn’t register pace in Bangladesh.

Inefficiencies in regulatory mechanisms and bureaucracy, along with non-transparency of systems, posed serious problems concerning doing business. For example, essential permits, licences and approvals took a long time and involved excessively high costs unless moved by political patronage.

Besides, the legal system related to the protection of intellectual property rights and enforcement of contracts remained weak—a fact that is of primary concern for both



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

local and international investors. In a nutshell, without strong legal protection, companies risk losing their investments or intellectual property to powerful competitors who could utilise their political networks for their benefit.

Several policies and practices were tailored to benefit politically connected businesses at the expense of the broader economy. The banking sector saw a lot of new licences, many of which were given to businesses close to power, which therefore enjoyed preferential credit access, leading to increased NPLs. Defaults were all over the place due to inadequate due diligence, with hardly any consequence for the high-profile large defaulters. Tax evasion was a common feature, with selective enforcement allowing politically linked businesses to escape through

waivers and amnesties. In the power sector, independent and quick rental power producers were given privileged treatment on account of political connections, while megaprojects of infrastructure construction were usually awarded in a non-transparent manner to politically favoured companies. Real estate dealings had preferential land allocations, while strong groups manipulated the stock market. Politically connected industries benefited from export incentives and trade policies, which disadvantaged smaller competitors. This dominance of crony capitalism was facilitated by a strong “anti-reform coalition” among corrupt political elites, corrupt business elites, and corrupt bureaucrats.

One of the more disquieting features of crony capitalism in Bangladesh was the degree to which the politically connected businesses were able to influence policymaking, a phenomenon often referred to as “state capture.” Examples of state capture include those in industries such as telecommunications, RMG, banking, real estate, and energy, where major

the cost of doing business for those who do not indulge in corrupt practices.

Corruption has led to wealth from the public sector being syphoned off, since money that would have been used to build infrastructure, healthcare or schooling was instead spent on self-serving interests. Resources that ought to be contributing to inclusive economic development has been misallocated.

The solution to the problem of crony capitalism needs to be multifaceted. First, there needs to be a far greater commitment to the rule of law. Anti-corruption measures have to be enforced; regulatory bodies must be given full independence to do their job without any kind of political interference. In that way, enterprises will have equal opportunities to compete with each other, where success will be determined by competence and competitiveness rather than by political relationships.

Second, government procurement and policy formulation processes must be made more transparent. E-procurement systems reduce personal contact between businesses and officials, thereby reducing avenues for corruption. Besides, policies should be aimed at encouraging fair competition, innovation, and investment across all sectors, not just chosen sectors.

Third, institutions involved in monitoring the financial system need more strengthening. Banking regulations have to be tightened, and the Bangladesh Bank must have the authority as well as resources to enforce compliance without discrimination. The NPLs will require not only financial restructuring but are also underlined for future fresh lending to be based on full transparency and risk-based criteria.

It is equally important to outline a culture of accountability among political leaders and business elites, and they must be made accountable for unethical practices, while at the same time, civil society organisations must be encouraged to raise their voices for greater transparency and reform. A strong legal framework that punishes corrupt practices and protects whistleblowers would go a long way in undermining the structures of crony capitalism.

Crony capitalism is deeply ingrained and has gotten in the way of a truly dynamic and inclusive economy in Bangladesh. Unless the structural issues that create and sustain crony capitalism are resolved, a propitious investment climate cannot be achieved and sustainable economic development through broad-based domestic and foreign investment cannot be ensured.

# Conversation about youth mental health must evolve



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

“Mental illnesses did not exist in our time, why do you struggle with so many mental health issues?” A father asked his teenage daughter. Talking to the 10th-grader, I discovered that her sister was struggling with depression, but their father was not seeking treatment. He was unaware of the fact that adolescents can suffer from mental illness. Even after learning that one of her classmates committed suicide due to parental scolding over exam results, the father remained unmoved.

In Bangladesh, 361 students, a significant percentage of whom were elementary students, succumbed to suicide between January and August in 2023. According to a study conducted by Aachol Foundation, mental illness, particularly among the youth, has become a silent pandemic, which is often aggravated by social stigma and misapprehension surrounding the condition. Countless parents remain either unaware or in denial regarding their children’s mental health issues. This attitude represents a grave challenge that cripples our ability to

address this growing crisis.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as not merely the absence of physical ailments, but as a combination of physical, mental, and social well-being. Mental health is our ability to manage emotions, face societal challenges, and live without fear or frustration. It is equally important as physical health. A 2018 survey conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health of Bangladesh states that the rate of mental illness among individuals aged 18 years and above is 18.7 percent in the country. WHO states that more than half of mental health issues take root before 14 years of age, while suicide is deemed the second leading cause of death between ages 15 and 29, globally. Yet, mental health issues are often the most overlooked.

Mental health is also included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a recognition of its significance in achieving global development goals. Despite this, misconceptions about mental illness proliferate Bangladesh. Those who suffer are frequently

ridiculed, ostracised, and even feared. This stigma prevents individuals from seeking help and further compounds their suffering. Children are vulnerable beings, living in a society that places tremendous academic pressure on them while providing little in the way of healthy recreation outlets.

As society grows increasingly competitive, the older generations cannot imagine the level of stress faced by the youth today. Most adolescents experience stress with the onset of puberty, facing academic, peer and social pressures, which are at times coupled with major changes such as changing schools, separation of parents, chronic illness, financial issues, etc. While small amounts of stress can be beneficial as it motivates them to excel in high-pressure situations, it is when stress spirals out of control that it negatively impacts our mental and physical well-being.

According to the US National Institute of Mental Health, if a child attempts to harm themselves or others, they should seek immediate psychiatric help. If guardians become aware of such propensities, it is important to arrange treatment at the correct time. In young children, the following symptoms should be checked by a psychiatrist for examination and diagnosis: if a child has overt anger issues or is severely irritable most of the time; often speaks of fear or anxiety; complains of repeated stomach aches or headaches for no reason; is generally restless; sleeps too much or too little, has nightmares; is disinterested in

playing with or making friends with other children; gets bad grades in exams suddenly, etc.

Psychiatric help should be sought for adolescents if they lose interest in things they used to enjoy, feel physically weak, sleep too much or are drowsy throughout the day, become socially avoidant, are afraid of gaining weight and/or eating too little, harm themselves, smoke, drink or abuse drugs excessively, engage in risky or aggressive behaviour alone or with friends, have suicidal thoughts, and/or are paranoid or have hallucinations.

Some parents and guardians lament that had they been better educated and aware, they could have sought treatment earlier for mental health issues as they can be managed through proper care and support. That is why it is important to seek professional support at the earliest. We hesitate to consult mental health professionals due to fear of social stigma. This must change.

The conversation about mental health needs to shift—now. The notion that mental illness is a personal flaw must be eradicated. Our children are not immune to the struggles of mental illness, and they deserve empathy, understanding, and above all, access to appropriate medical care. Public awareness campaigns are essential in dispelling the myths surrounding mental health. It’s high time we prioritised mental well-being as part of our overall health framework. After all, a healthy society is one where the mind is cared for just as much as the body.