

AMENDMENT TO ICT ACT

Investigators can now search, seize docs sans tribunal's permission

President promulgates ordinance

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The president promulgated an ordinance on Monday, amending multiple sections and introducing a new subsection in the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973.

The amendment empowers investigation officers to conduct searches and seize documents without prior permission of the tribunal and send them to a competent authority for examination. This provision existed in the original 1973 act but was later dropped, ICT Prosecutor Gazi Monawar Hossain Tamim told journalists yesterday.

Another amendment reduces the time for an accused to prepare a defence from six weeks to three weeks, he added.

Last year, the act was amended to authorise the tribunal to allocate an accused's seized assets to victims or the state. The ordinance now empowers the tribunal to order the freezing or confiscation of assets to prevent evasion or flight, ensure justice, and facilitate compensation under section 20A of the act, said prosecutor Tamim.

Through the "International Crimes (tribunal) (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025", a sub section has also been added to section 19 of the act that reads, "Notwithstanding anything contained in this section, the tribunal shall not be bound by technical rules of evidence and may adopt and apply expeditious and non-technical procedures."



US Charge d'affaires to Bangladesh, Tracey Jacobson, meets Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at state guesthouse Jamuna yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Probe team should include accuser's representative

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the concerned department at the Police Headquarters requested corrections and resubmission of 635 inquiry reports.

A total of 268,721 police officers faced departmental punishment for various offences and disciplinary breaches from 2009 to September 2024.

Among them, 23,550 received major punishments like termination, suspension or demotion while 245,171 faced minor consequences like warning, reprimand, or temporary wage cut.

However, the benefits corrupt members can get by abusing their power often surpass the departmental action by far.

The police investigate allegations and impose punishments for policemen with the ranks of constable to sub-inspector. For Class 1 officers, a committee comprising police officers assigned by the home secretary conducts investigations. The secretary holds the authority to punish an officer if found guilty. In rare cases, a home ministry official is included in the committee, said a top officer.

Allegations of police's involvement in crimes ranging from extortion, abduction, and torture to bribery, drug dealing, framing people and unlawful detention are reported in the media quite often.

Criminologists blame lenient disciplinary measures for these incidents.

Omar Faruk, a professor of criminology and police science at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, said police continue to get involved in crimes because the punishments of police personnel often do not match the severity of their crimes or offences.

"Somehow the offenders [in police] are getting spared and so, they are becoming repeat offenders," he told The Daily Star.

In 2020, a total of 22,623 policemen were punished. Among them, 2,935 received major punishments, while 19,688 faced minor penalties. The number was 22,186 in 2021, with 2,660 facing major punishments and 19,526 minor punishments.

Punishments of 26,105 police personnel were recorded in 2022, including 3,201 major and 22,904 minor penalties. In 2023, the total was 24,534, including 2,461 major and 22,073 minor punishments.

From January to September 2024, police personnel faced punishments in 14,751 cases, with 1,678 categorised as major and 13,073 as minor consequences.

Influential police officers who were loyal to the previous Awami League government did not face any punishment although investigators found evidence of corruption and abuse of power.

The Police Headquarters fired 18 Narayanganj constables over serious irregularities in their recruitment in 2019 and recommended departmental action against at least 10 inspectors and sub-inspectors for their "false" verification reports or recommendations.

The PHQ, however, did not recommend any action against the ultimate decision-maker, the then Narayanganj superintendent of police Muhammad Harun Or Rashid although a three-member team in 2020 found the irregularities in the recruitment of constables under a district quota.

The reform commission report says the management of complaints against the police is considered a very important regulator in ensuring a democratic and accountable police service.

Effective complaint management to hold the police accountable plays an important role in ensuring public satisfaction, it adds.

BNP to keep pressing govt for roadmap

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current political situation.

On Monday, a three-member BNP delegation met Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus. After the meeting, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir stated that the government was working towards having the election in December.

Later that night, the BNP's standing committee, the party's highest policymaking body, held a meeting at the chairperson's office in Gulshan, where Fakhrul briefed party leaders on the discussions with Yunus.

A standing committee member, wishing not to be named, told The Daily Star that elections were the only way out of the current crisis, and it appeared that the interim government has realised it.

However, a political group is trying to create fear among people. The BNP intends to support the government in overcoming this and ensure the polls are held as promised, the member said.

During the standing committee meeting, BNP leaders pointed out that a particular group was exerting pressure on the government to delay the election.

Leaders of the July uprising have recently announced that they would be forming a new political party.

They want political reforms before election so that they get more time to form and organise the new party,

BNP leaders believe.

As a pushback, the BNP must launch nationwide programmes to counter the pressure, BNP leaders believe.

They hope that large turnouts at district-level rallies would demonstrate the public support the party enjoys. Large rallies would not only put pressure on the government to announce the election roadmap, but also reassure party supporters.

BNP Standing Committee member Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku told The Daily Star that the chief adviser's assurances have provided a glimmer of hope.

He stressed the need for a roadmap to guide the country towards the election, which would end the ongoing political uncertainty.

At the standing committee meeting, BNP leaders asserted that a credible, free, and fair election was the only way to stabilise the situation, given the conspiracies by remnants of the fallen regime.

The government also informed the BNP that the first meeting of the National Consensus Commission would be on February 15, to which political parties would be invited. Yunus would explain the interim government's reform initiatives at the meeting.

The programme would continue until February 25.

Fakhrul, along with standing committee members, vice-chairmen, and senior leaders would join the rallies.

Bangladesh ranks 14th from bottom

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He said widespread public sector corruption, particularly in public procurement and project implementation, is a key reason behind Bangladesh's continued poor performance.

He also noted that while Bangladesh's score declined, the scores of other countries dropped more.

"Our score has dropped, but since the decline in other countries was deeper, our relative position appears somewhat better."

"Such a score is extremely concerning and disappointing. Our ranking has fallen significantly compared to previous years," he added.

Iftekharuzzaman emphasised the need for positive changes in the country's political and bureaucratic culture to effectively control corruption.

"Without these changes, reform will not be possible, no matter how much we talk about it," he said.

The Berlin-based graft watchdog also stated in the report that risks persist in terms of freedom of dissent, free media and civil space.

It has been publishing the report every year since 1995. When Bangladesh was included in 2001, the country was ranked the lowest with a score of 0.4 out of 10 and held the same position until 2005.

Like last year, the TI took into account data from eight international surveys conducted in Bangladesh between November 2021 and September 2024. No nationally generated data, including the TIB research, were considered.

The TI prepares the CPI based on the perception of corruption, mainly

in the public sector, particularly bribery, the use of public office for private gain, diversion of public funds, nepotism in public sector appointments, red tape, and groups with narrow vested interests given a free rein in capturing policy.

South Sudan was ranked as the most corrupt country with a score of just eight, and Denmark remained the least corrupt country for the third year in a row with a score of 90.

Bhutan made a remarkable development in curbing corruption as it topped the list of South Asian countries by scoring 72, eight points up from last year. Nepal also moved up one notch, scoring 34.

The theme of this year's CPI is "Corruption and the Climate Crisis".

At the press conference, Iftekharuzzaman said, "According to the current analysis of the index, Bangladesh is at the level of countries that are losing control over corruption. The level of corruption in Bangladesh is extremely alarming."

Analysing Bangladesh's position, he said, "Our score is lower than the countries that are at the lowest level in the indicators of civil liberties and human development."

Even compared to the most corrupt regions, such as Sub-Saharan African countries, Bangladesh's score is 10 points lower, he said.

The TIB executive director said the money laundered from Bangladesh is going to countries that are in better positions according to the index.

"So, while Bangladesh is responsible for the corruption in the country and the failure to prevent money laundering, the overall responsibility is not of Bangladesh alone."

Iftekharuzzaman said there is no

adviser, BNP leaders gave Yunus a letter that pointed out that some advisers of the government were involved in forming political parties. The party cautioned that no group should be allowed to manipulate the government's agenda for their political gain.

Signs of their influence in the process of party formation were increasingly evident, which the BNP sees as detrimental to democracy.

The party, however, stated that it welcomes any political party emerging from a legitimate democratic process, provided it is not used as an excuse to delay the election.

A senior BNP leader said the July proclamation was also discussed during the BNP delegation's meeting with Yunus. The party may hold talks on the proclamation with leaders of Students Against Discrimination in the coming days.

BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said the party would start holding rallies at the district level to protest the soaring prices of essentials, deteriorating law and order, and to demand the swift announcement of an election roadmap.

The programme would continue until February 25.

Fakhrul, along with standing committee members, vice-chairmen, and senior leaders would join the rallies.

scope for a complete analysis of the interim government's tenure in the index. However, even after the fall of the previous authoritarian regime, evidence of continued abuse of power and corrupt practices persist in political and governance space as a change of turn, he added.

WAY FORWARD

Iftekharuzzaman called for the implementation of the Anti-Corruption Reform Commission's recommendations in accordance with the proposed roadmap, with a particular emphasis on reforming the ACC to make it truly independent and accountable.

He urged authorities to set concrete examples of success by prioritising the accountability of high-level corrupt individuals and entities.

He also emphasised the need to depoliticise state institutions to ensure professional integrity and excellence, particularly within the ACC, bureaucracy, law enforcement, and judicial services.

Additionally, Iftekharuzzaman advocated for rescuing strategically crucial sectors of public interest from the grip of policy capture, conflicts of interest, partisan politics, and other influences. These sectors include public procurement, banking, trade, power and energy, health, education, land, and infrastructure.

Iftekharuzzaman also called for ensuring freedom of the media, civil society, and the general public to freely disclose, report, and comment on corruption.

He stressed the need to transform political culture and practices to eliminate the use of political and public positions as a licence for personal gain.

Iftekharuzzaman said there is no

EC targets Dec to get all its tasks done

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The government will decide the scope of the local government elections and which institutions to involve. Only then, the EC will be able to tell whether that will delay the national election.

EC'S PREPARATION

The EC usually needs to update voter lists, set boundaries of constituencies, register new political parties, prepare polling stations, and if necessary, amend electoral laws.

This time around, the EC must wait for the outcomes of the reforms.

Regarding the constituencies, an EC official said a lot of work needs to be done if the number of constituencies is increased to 400 from 300.

Primarily, the EC has begun the process of changing the law concerned. The EC has already received at least 240 objections against raising the number of constituencies to 400. It has received at least 10 applications from political parties seeking registration.

Meanwhile, officials are working on possible changes on the guidelines for international and domestic observers and journalists. The matters were

discussed at a meeting of election commissioners on January 28.

EC Sanaullah said policies and guidelines would be reviewed and a committee was scrutinising it.

Bangladesh has witnessed 12 national elections since independence.

Of them, only two -- in 1986 and June 1996 -- were not held in the typically dry months between October and March. Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, six of the seven national polls were held in winter.

The seventh general election was held on June 12, 1996, barely four months after the sixth election, as the Awami League and other opposition parties forced the BNP-led government to step down and hand over power to a caretaker government.

Meanwhile, Stefan Liller, UNDP Bangladesh resident representative, said, "We are supporting the Election Commission to conduct a free and fair election, hopefully the best election in the history of Bangladesh, and that is the aspiration."

The timeline for the polls is solely the decision of the interim government and the EC, he said, "We have nothing to do with that."

Verdicts in ICT cases, including Hasina's, likely by October

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begin. The verdicts in the cases are expected by October, he added.

It will take one year to complete the whole trial process of an ICT case whereas it took at least two and a half years on average to finish the trial process of an ICT case when the Awami League was in power, he added.

Mentioning about the cases of "speech offences", Nazrul said 396 such cases were under trial during the rule of the AL government, of which 332 have already been withdrawn.

Besides, 61 cases are set for withdrawal, but the remaining three are pending due to a stay order from the High Court, he said.

Cases involving speech offences under the Cyber Security Act were filed due to expression of opinions.

About "ghost cases", the adviser

said 1,214 ghost and politically motivated cases filed during the past 15 years of Awami League government would be withdrawn within a week.

He added that of the cases, gazette notifications withdrawing 53 cases will be issued within a day or two.

Prof Nazrul said the interim government has prepared a list of 16,439 ghost and politically motivated cases for withdrawal.

Meanwhile at another programme in Rajarbagh, the adviser stressed the importance of maintaining law and order during the challenging times, urging caution when granting bail in serious criminal cases, particularly those linked to the July massacre.

Nazrul highlighted the risks of releasing accused of serious crimes, warning that some might exploit their freedom to disrupt the justice system.

Disturbing accounts of 'police abuse'

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an unknown number but the young protester, aged 18, thought it was a fellow protester. Soon, she realised she was wrong, and quickly hung up the phone. Several more calls followed, but she did not pick up.

Then she received a message: Hello ... we are withholding the victim's name. It's Javed. AC DB Ramna, Minto Road, Dhaka. Need to talk with you for our purpose & also for your safety."