

A chilling reminder of past legal abuses

Circumstances surrounding a model’s arrest raise alarm

Repressive laws have no place in post-uprising Bangladesh. It’s unfortunate that such a thing needs to be reiterated even now—after over eight months since the political changeover—following an abuse of the Special Powers Act that led to a model being incarcerated. Both the manner in which she was first picked up and her subsequent detention under this law have brought, for many, painful memories of similar abuses of draconian laws during the rule of now-deposed dictator Sheikh Hasina. For decades, this law has been a symbol of state repression. That it is still being invoked today, under a non-political government no less, raises questions about whether the state machinery has truly turned a corner, or whether it remains addicted to the same old authoritarian tools of control.

Reportedly, former Miss Earth Bangladesh Meghna Alam was forcibly taken from her home by men identifying themselves as police officers on Wednesday. They produced no warrant, and even violated the High Court guidelines on warrantless arrests—that officers must properly identify themselves, explain the reason for arrest, and allow the person to contact a lawyer or meet their relatives. Moreover, Meghna was held incommunicado for over 24 hours, and later sent to jail under vague and sweeping allegations—mostly based on a personal dispute involving a Saudi diplomat—that fail to meet the threshold of a “prejudicial act” as defined by the law, according to legal experts. We understand the sensitivity of the issue involved, but that is all the more reason why due process should have been followed from the start.

On Sunday, the law adviser of the interim government acknowledged that the arrest procedure was flawed. The authorities have already removed Detective Branch chief Rezaul Karim Mallick from his post. This can be indicative of the government taking accountability measures or, alternatively, it is just damage control amid fierce criticism by rights activists and social media commentators. Whatever the reason may be, the fact is, such statements and initiatives mean little if they are not followed by concrete actions to repeal the very abusive law in question and bring in systemic reforms to ensure that officers never bypass due process under any circumstances.

The incident serves as a wake-up call for the interim government. The people did not hold a bloody uprising simply to change the faces in power. Their want a complete overhaul of the way power has been abused, whether by police or powerful political actors. So, all repressive laws like the Special Powers Act must go, and overzealous officers still beholden to past abusive tendencies must be duly punished. The authorities also must allow for a fresh, impartial investigation into the whole Meghna Alam saga, ensuring her rights and dignity as an accused.

Preventive steps vital to control dengue

Public awareness is also crucial

The scorching summer sun may give us a false sense of safety regarding dengue threats, as we often associate the disease with rainfall. The reality is, 16 people have already died from dengue this year. Some 2,074 have also been hospitalised, according to data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

A report in this daily warns of the growing risk of dengue with the Bangladesh Meteorological Department forecasting rain and thunderstorms in many parts of the country this week. Entomologists say that even light rain can lead to an increase in dengue cases, as the mosquito population will proliferate once the first generation of Aedes mosquitoes matures after rain. Therefore, the larvae must be destroyed now to keep the mosquito population under control. Such preventive action is crucial to help us avoid a situation similar to 2023, when Bangladesh saw the highest number of cases and fatalities from dengue in recorded history. That year, a total of 321,179 people were hospitalised, and 1,705 people died from it.

By comparison, last year’s dengue prevalence was better—101,214 hospitalisations and 575 deaths. These numbers, however, can be disputed as last year’s political turmoil upended anti-mosquito drives at the local government level, with almost all councillors and public representatives arrested or on the run since the July uprising. Over eight months later, the situation has somewhat improved, with public officials now supervising basic municipal duties including cleanliness. However, proactive early actions to tackle the threat of dengue in advance of the monsoon are still not visible. This is particularly true for areas outside Dhaka, where mosquito populations are nowhere near under control and almost no anti-mosquito drives are being carried out.

We urge the authorities to act early to keep dengue in check. They must identify and eliminate breeding grounds not just in Dhaka but also in places like Barishal, which has seen a spike in cases this year. Anti-mosquito drives should be carried out in neighbourhoods where people have been infected with dengue. Larvae should be destroyed using environment-friendly methods before they hatch, and public awareness campaigns must be launched before the regular downpours begin. Preventive measures will not only save millions in public health expenditure but also hundreds of precious lives.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



275 girls abducted in Nigeria

On this day in 2014, the Islamic sectarian movement Boko Haram abducted more than 275 girls from a boarding school in Chibok, Nigeria, sparking worldwide condemnation.

The law is blind, but so are the people



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In 1835, Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay laid down the framework for the Indian Penal Code, a legal system meant to be clear, comprehensible, and universal across the subcontinent. His vision was pragmatic: law should be a self-evident truth, requiring no special knowledge to understand. It should be, in essence, as obvious as the laws of nature. And yet, nearly two centuries later, the legal landscape in many “Third World” nations has become a confusing maze of incomprehensible statutes, selective enforcement, and mass disobedience.

Today, the reality of law in many developing nations, including Bangladesh, is anything but self-evident. Rather than being a respected pillar of civilisation, law often becomes an alien, distant force—feared, manipulated or outright ignored. Public beatings occur under the watchful eye of cameras, legal verdicts are swayed by corruption rather than justice, and police forces often act as enforcers of power rather than defenders of the rule of law.

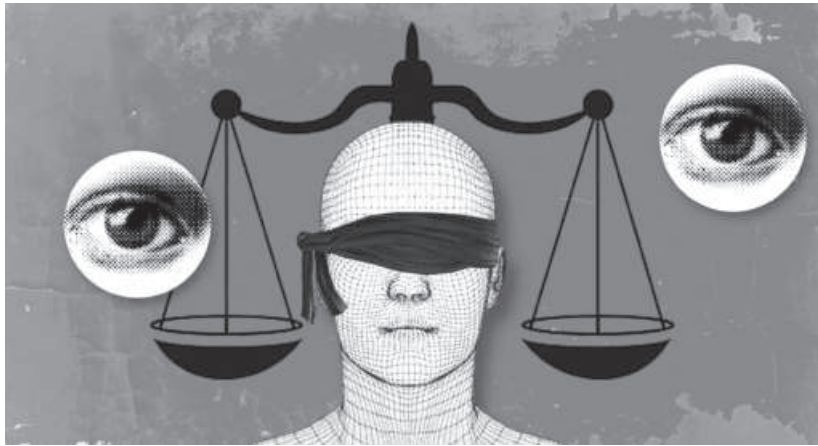
How did this happen? How did Macaulay’s dream of a transparent and rational legal system morph into a fractured, distrusted institution?

Jean Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, famously argued that laws are legitimate only when they stem from the general will of the people. However, in many developing countries, the law does not feel like a social contract; it feels like an imposition. Legal codes, drafted in colonial times or shaped by elites, are written in legalese so convoluted that even the educated struggle to grasp them. As British jurist Jeremy Bentham noted, “The power of the lawyer is in the uncertainty of the law.” This uncertainty has bred a system where the common man feels alienated from the very institution that’s meant to protect him.

Consider the phenomenon of mob justice, a manifestation of this alienation. If the law is perceived as distant, corrupt or ineffective, people take justice into their own hands. In recent months, viral videos have captured brutal street beatings across

Bangladesh, where mobs—aware that they are being recorded—continue their violent acts unfazed. Why? Because the fear of legal consequences is absent. The legitimacy of law is undermined when its enforcement is selective, corrupt, or incompetent.

In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls emphasised that justice must not only be done but must be *seen* to be done. Yet, in many developing countries, justice is either unseen or glaringly absent. The powerful evade punishment with impunity, while the weak suffer the full brunt of a draconian legal system. This inconsistency erodes the very foundation of legal respect.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The adage “Justice delayed is justice denied” is nowhere more relevant than in the slow-grinding judicial systems of developing nations. Court cases often drag on for decades, sometimes outliving the accused and even the complainants. The legal backlog in countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan runs into the millions, leaving justice not only delayed but effectively denied.

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, argued that laws derive their power from their ability to discipline and surveil society effectively. However, when enforcement is inconsistent, the disciplinary function collapses. This is why a corrupt minister, despite glaring evidence, may walk free, while a poor labourer is jailed for a minor infraction.

Selective enforcement further

citizen of Sweden or Canada receives a traffic ticket, they pay it not just because they fear punishment, but because they believe in the fairness of the system. In many developing nations, however, laws are often seen as arbitrary.

Furthermore, cultural narratives shape legal perceptions. In many “Third World” countries, the “hero” archetype is often someone who defies the system—a rebel rather than a law-abiding citizen. The celebration of outlaws in folklore, cinema, and literature reflects an ingrained scepticism towards authority. This narrative, reinforced over generations, makes it psychologically difficult for societies to develop an intrinsic respect for legal institutions.

One of Macaulay’s core ideas was

How will LDC graduation impact our RMG sector?

RMG NOTES



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Set to officially graduate from the United Nations’ Least Developed Country (LDC) category in November 2026, Bangladesh is on the brink of entering a new chapter in its development journey. The decision to proceed with the graduation on schedule, despite recent global economic shocks, was reaffirmed by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus last month, dispelling any lingering uncertainty surrounding a potential delay. While this move symbolises remarkable progress and reflects our steady economic growth since the country’s war-torn beginnings in 1971, it also brings with it significant challenges, particularly for our ready-made garment (RMG) sector, the backbone of our export economy.

Bangladesh’s graduation from the LDC category is a long-awaited milestone, achieved through meeting all three of the UN’s eligibility criteria: Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, Human Assets Index (HAI), and Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI). It shows the nation’s impressive strides in poverty reduction, human development, and economic resilience.

Initially designated an LDC in 1975, Bangladesh benefited from a wide range of international support measures. These include duty-free, quota-free market access to many

developed nations, as well as relaxed rules around intellectual property rights and development finance. These preferential treatments have helped power our rapid industrialisation and trade growth, especially in the dominant RMG sector.

The RMG sector is the crown jewel of our economy, accounting for over 80 percent of the country’s exports and employing around 40 lakh people. The industry has leveraged LDC trade privileges to become the second-largest global apparel exporter after China, becoming highly dependent on the trade preferences. Presently, 78 percent of Bangladesh’s exports enjoy duty-free or reduced-tariff access in 38 countries under LDC schemes. Removing these preferences will significantly alter the cost dynamics of our RMG exports, which are highly price-sensitive.

Once the LDC benefits expire, we will potentially lose over \$8 billion in trade annually, and face tariffs of 12 percent or more in many major markets. For a sector built on low-cost competitiveness, these added duties could erode the price advantages that have long fuelled our global rise.

The decision to stick to the 2026 graduation deadline has stirred mixed reactions. Some economists, industry insiders, and even cabinet members

have called for a deferment of two to three years, citing the economic toll of the COVID pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and persistent global inflationary pressures. Their argument is that Bangladesh needs more time to build resilience and adjust to the impending loss of preferential market access.

Yet, the interim government, after consulting with experts, has chosen to embrace the transition, acknowledging the potential drawbacks but also preparing mitigation strategies.

One of the critical aspects of this transition is that certain LDC benefits will remain in place for three years post-graduation. This “grace period,” extending to 2029, offers a window of opportunity for industries to adapt. Encouragingly, key trading partners like the European Union, the UK, Canada and Australia have signalled their willingness to maintain favourable trade terms during this transition period, albeit with some conditions.

While the concerns are valid, this graduation also presents new opportunities for our RMG sector and broader economy. Removal of the LDC status can bolster our international reputation, potentially leading to better credit ratings, increased foreign direct investment (FDI), and a greater bargaining power in global trade negotiations.

The transition could also serve as a catalyst for much-needed reforms in the RMG sector. It would incentivise manufacturers to climb up the value chain, shift towards more sophisticated products, and invest in quality, branding, and sustainable practices. There is also an urgent need to diversify export markets and reduce overdependence on a few destinations,

that law should be clear and self-explanatory. Yet, in most post-colonial countries, legal texts remain obscured in archaic, technical jargon. German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, argued that true democracy requires transparent, comprehensible laws that enable public discourse. But when laws are written in dense, colonial-era language, they alienate the average citizen, rather than empowering them, as they are unable to comprehend the legal talk.

Legal philosopher Lon L. Fuller, in *The Morality of Law*, argued that the law is not just a set of rules but a reflection of a society’s moral fabric. If people do not see morality in the law, they will not respect it. In many developing countries, laws are perceived not as ethical guidelines but as bureaucratic obstacles. The result is legal nihilism—where people follow the law only when convenient, and break it when they can get away with it.

The consequences of this are dire. When legal respect collapses, the rule of force takes over. The weak are left defenceless, and the powerful operate with impunity.

What happens when people lose faith in the legal system? The rise of “people’s courts”—extrajudicial mobs delivering instant justice—is a disturbing trend in many areas. From lynchings in Bangladesh to vigilante killings in Latin America, these acts are not mere crimes but symptoms of a society that no longer trusts its judiciary.

Italian criminologist Cesare Beccaria, in *On Crimes and Punishments*, warned that when laws become instruments of oppression rather than justice, society will naturally rebel against them. This rebellion manifests not in political uprisings but in the daily disregard for legal structures—whether through bribery, mob justice, or outright anarchy.

In many ways, “Third World” societies are walking a precarious tightrope. The monster of lawlessness, once unleashed, is not easily contained. Macaulay envisioned a law that would be obvious and self-evident, but in much of the developing world, the law is neither respected nor feared—it is merely *negotiated*.

The legal crisis in developing countries is not just a governance problem, it is a moral and social one. As long as the law remains distant, selective and incomprehensible, it will continue to be ignored. And if that remains the case, the anarchy of the jungle will continue to reign.

such as the EU and the US.

Additionally, the industry must improve efficiency and productivity through automation, upskilling of workers, and infrastructure enhancements. Innovation and environmental sustainability will become critical in ensuring long-term competitiveness in a post-LDC landscape.

Our strong performance in sustainability certifications, green factories, and labour compliance could serve as differentiating factors in an increasingly conscious global market.

The garment industry, which has been both the symbol and engine of Bangladesh’s rise, now stands at a pivotal moment. How well we adapt to this new environment will largely determine our economic trajectory in the coming decades.

A collaborative approach is essential. The government must actively support the private sector through targeted policy measures, including export subsidies, tax incentives, and upskilling programmes. Trade negotiations should focus on securing duty-free access under alternative frameworks such as GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus) with the EU, or bilateral and regional trade agreements. Equally important is fostering innovation and value addition within the industry. Only by moving away from dependency on basic, low-margin apparel can Bangladesh truly future-proof its RMG sector.

With the right mix of policy, innovation, and global cooperation, we have the potential not just to survive the post-LDC era, but to thrive as a confident, competitive developing nation. The path ahead is steep, but not insurmountable, if navigated wisely.