

AI election threat quite concerning

EC must implement effective safeguards to protect electoral integrity

It is reassuring to see the chief election commissioner (CEC) address the challenge posed by artificial intelligence (AI) ahead of the upcoming election, which he described as "more dangerous than [conventional] weapons" due to its capacity to spread misinformation and disinformation. "It is now possible to circulate content using my exact image and voice," said AMM Nasir Uddin, calling the misuse of AI a "modern threat" capable of disrupting election campaigns and influencing the polls. He also mentioned other election-related challenges—such as the threat of illegal arms, restoring trust in the voting process, and ensuring voter turnout—but these are discussions for another day.

Knowing the problem, however, doesn't guarantee that meaningful steps will follow. It is vital that the Election Commission implements effective safeguards including establishing robust monitoring mechanisms to detect AI-generated content, collaborating with experts and media houses to minimise its impact, updating legal frameworks, and raising public awareness. Currently, the electoral code of conduct lacks clear directives on this issue, which must be addressed. While conventional measures meant to ensure a level playing field are important, it is far more urgent now to curb the misuse of AI. This necessity is underscored by both global and local experiences, with a report by *The New York Times* revealing in June that AI was used in more than 80 percent of elections in 2024. AI has already played a role in at least nine major elections this year, it added.

Locally, one may recall the circulation of fake content, including cloned voices of candidates, during recent elections. However, with AI now making such fabrications easier and more convincing, the threat has multiplied. For example, a recent investigation by Dismislab catalogued 70 AI-generated political campaign videos, including reels, between June 18 and 28. These videos, created using Google's Veo text-to-video AI model, portrayed entirely fictional individuals (e.g. rickshaw drivers, teachers, garment workers, Hindu and Muslim women, young people, etc) offering endorsements for different political parties. The initial waves of AI generated messaging seemed to benefit Jamaat-e-Islami, but campaigners for rival parties such as BNP and NCP were not far behind. The widespread circulation of such emotionally charged, synthetic content raises serious concerns about its disruptive effect as we near the election.

Clearly, we need better safeguards against this trend. While it is impossible to completely eliminate the threat of AI-generated content—nor is all such content produced with malicious intent—the EC must do all it can to limit its misuse with the help of relevant state agencies, political parties, and social media platforms. It is crucial to learn from the experiences of other countries where AI has already disrupted elections. Without swift, informed interventions, Bangladesh too risks seeing its much-awaited election marred by such technologies.

Revive drug approval committees urgently

Govt must help pharma industry navigate LDC graduation challenges

It is quite concerning that over a year has passed since a sub-committee under the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), responsible for reviewing new drug registration applications, last convened. Worse, the Drug Control Committee, responsible for the final approvals, has not met in two years. As a result, applications for 617 new medicines—including 15 costly biologic drugs—remain pending, according to a report by this daily.

This bureaucratic inertia could prove costly, especially as our pharmaceutical companies race against time. Bangladesh, as a Least Developed Country (LDC), currently enjoys a waiver under the World Trade Organisation's Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement, allowing it to bypass patent enforcement on pharmaceutical products. This means local companies can produce many patented drugs at a fraction of the global price, making life-saving treatments more accessible.

For example, a cancer patient can now buy a locally produced immunity boosting drug for Tk 7,000-8,000 per pre-filled syringe, while the imported version would cost Tk 85,000-95,000. Experts note that local companies have kept biologic drug prices 30-40 percent lower than the global average. However, this advantage will end once Bangladesh graduates from an LDC to a developing country status in November 2026. Post-graduation, pharmaceutical companies will either have to pay hefty royalties or invest heavily to secure patent rights—costs that will inevitably be passed on to patients.

Bangladesh already bears one of the world's highest out-of-pocket health expenditures, much of which goes towards purchasing medicine. Medical expenses often push families into poverty. A projected 25-30 percent price hike in essential drugs could further deprive many of affordable healthcare.

Given these stakes, pharmaceutical companies must make the most of the limited time left to produce biologic drugs royalty-free. The government should be doing everything possible to support the industry during this crucial phase. Unfortunately, nearly a year after the political changeover, we are still seeing apathy within the responsible quarters. There can be no excuse for the delay in reconstituting or reviving these critical committees. The health ministry, already under heightened scrutiny for persistent irregularities in public healthcare, must act urgently. It has a mandate to safeguard public health, and that includes streamlining the drug approval process and taking measures so the pharma sector can meet the looming challenges of LDC graduation.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

World War I begins

On this day in 1914, using the assassination of Austrian archduke Francis Ferdinand as a pretext to present Serbia with an unacceptable ultimatum, Austria-Hungary declared war on the Slavic country, sparking World War I.

KHAIRUL HAQUE AND THE 13TH AMENDMENT JUDGMENT

A travesty of justice or a convenient scapegoat?



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The arrest of former Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque from his Dhanmondi residence on July 24 has reignited a fierce debate surrounding his legacy, particularly his pivotal role in abolishing the non-partisan caretaker government system through the 13th Amendment judgment. While he currently faces murder charges linked to the tragic killing of teenager Abdul Kaiyum Ahad during the July uprising last year, the timing and nature of the cases raise critical questions. Is this truly about criminal accountability or is it political reckoning wrapped in legal formalism?

Justice Khairul Haque served as Bangladesh's 19th chief justice from September 2010 to May 2011, and later as the chairman of Bangladesh Law Commission until his resignation in August 2024, following the collapse of the Awami League regime. Now 81 years old and reportedly in poor health, he faces three separate cases—two in Dhaka's Jatrabari area and one in Narayanganj—including charges of sedition and issuing a fabricated verdict. These developments are unprecedented, and while no judge should be above the law, the manner and motivation behind these cases demand closer scrutiny.

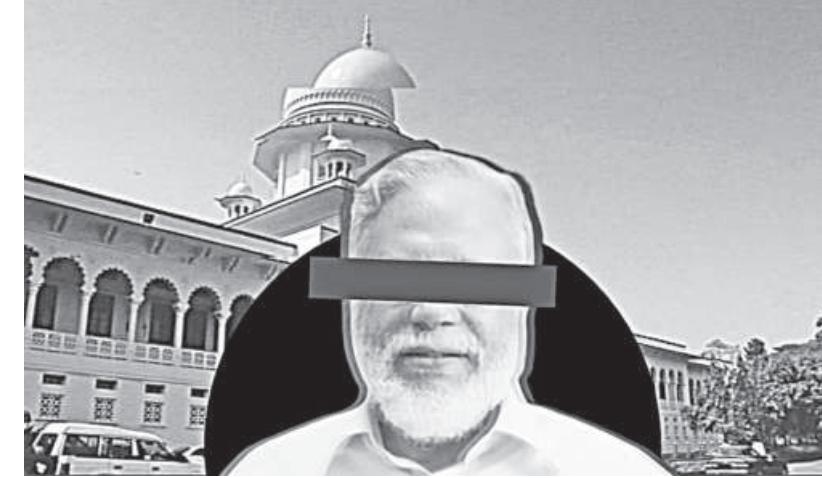
At the centre of this legal storm lies the 13th Amendment judgment, delivered by the Appellate Division in 2011, which declared the caretaker government system unconstitutional. Introduced in 1996 through the 13th Amendment to address rampant political distrust and ensure free and fair elections, the caretaker government system was largely successful in its early years. The elections of 1996 and 2001, both conducted under caretaker governments, were widely viewed as credible and peaceful.

However, the 2006-07 crisis, during

which the caretaker government overstayed its mandate and ruled under emergency powers, discredited the system. This became the pretext for challenging its constitutionality, eventually leading to the Appellate Division's verdict in 2011. The lead

What particularly raises eyebrows is the discrepancy between the short order issued by the court on May 10, 2011—just days before Khairul Haque's retirement—and the full verdict published over a year later in September 2012. The short order had allowed for the 10th and 11th parliamentary elections to be held under the caretaker government system, invoking legal doctrines of necessity and state safety. It even recommended amendments to exclude former chief justices or Appellate Division judges from leading the caretaker government, but did not abolish the system outright.

However, when the full judgment



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judgment, authored by Chief Justice Khairul Haque, held that the caretaker government system violated the basic structure of the constitution by allowing unelected individuals to exercise sovereign executive powers.

Yet, controversy surrounds not just the substance of the judgment, but also the process. The final decision was split 4:3, with Justice Khairul Haque joined by justices Md Muzammel Hossain, SK Sinha, and Syed Mahmud Hossain, all of whom later became chief justices. In contrast, the three dissenting judges—justices Muhammad Imman Ali, Md Abdul Wahhab Miah, and Nazmun Ara Sultana—did not ascend to the top post. Whether this is coincidence or consequence remains open to interpretation.

This raises profound constitutional

emerged, it included entirely new directions. Most notably, it proposed that future elections be held under an interim government comprising elected members of parliament, with the sitting cabinet (albeit reduced in size) overseeing day-to-day governance. These modifications were not part of the original short order and were sharply criticised by Justice Md Abdul Wahhab Miah in his dissent, who called them "not in conformity with the short order." These additions ultimately paved the way for the Awami League to hold three consecutive elections (2014, 2018, and 2024) under its own authority—elections widely criticised for irregularities and lacking credibility.

Justice, even when correcting injustice, must never become a tool of revenge. The arrest of a former chief justice is not an act to be taken lightly. It marks a significant moment in the country's legal and political history—a moment that should force us to reflect not only on Khairul Haque's controversial legacy but also on the integrity of our institutions, and the delicate balance between accountability and political vendetta.

Why ESG standards matter now more than ever for Bangladesh



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The global investment landscape is no longer what it used to be. Today, investors are looking beyond profits; they want to know where their money is going and what kind of impact it is having. Is it helping clean the air, making workplaces safer, and encouraging fair treatment and sound governance? Such questions are being raised. This is where Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards come in.

For Bangladesh, ESG standards matter now more than ever. We will officially graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) status of the United Nations on November 24, 2026. It is a significant step forward, but it also means losing trade preferences and access to concessional development finance that were arranged under the LDC status. As we enter a more competitive global market, the quality of our growth and how we earn investor confidence will be crucial.

Globally, ESG performance is becoming a key indicator for investment decisions.

Countries that score well on ESG are seen as safer bets, more stable and future-proof. ESG is not just about image; it is about demonstrating a genuine commitment to sustainability, equity, and transparency.

Let us pause for a moment and break down the ESG concept. This is not some development buzzword. "E" stands for environment, covering issues such as climate resilience, clean energy, and pollution control. "S" refers

to social factors, including working conditions, community impact, and gender inclusion. "G" is governance, such as how rules are made, whether they are being enforced, and how institutions hold up under pressure.

Investors now treat ESG as a core part of assessing long-term risk. This means ESG is no longer a "nice to have"—it is a key factor in economic decision-making.

Bangladesh has taken some steps in the right direction. The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) has made ESG reporting in annual reports mandatory for listed companies, in line with the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines (SRG). The Bangladesh Bank has issued guidelines on sustainability and climate-related financial disclosures for all banks and financial institutions operating in the country. Moreover, several NGOs are voluntarily reporting on ESG performance. However, real ESG integration remains limited. Most businesses are still at an early stage, if they are engaging at all.

Awareness of ESG remains limited, particularly among small and medium enterprises. Even among larger firms, ESG reporting often reads more like a marketing effort than a reflection of measurable progress. There is no unified national roadmap, which has led to fragmentation.

Social and governance challenges remain serious. Issues such as child labour, workplace safety, and uneven enforcement of labour laws continue to attract negative attention. When

these are combined with slow judicial processes and inconsistent regulation, it becomes clear why many investors remain hesitant.

Another major hurdle is the lack of mandatory ESG disclosures. Most firms can simply choose not to report anything. Banks and financial institutions also do not consistently assess ESG risks. This allows weak practices to go unchecked. Agencies such as the BSEC, Bangladesh Bank, and various ministries are each working on parts of the ESG agenda, but rarely in coordination. Our financial sector also needs modernisation. Instruments such as green bonds and ESG-linked loans are still rare. Without

them, companies have limited options for funding sustainable growth.

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ESG is not just relevant for foreign investors; local companies also stand to benefit. Strong ESG performance can reduce operational risks, cut costs, and build better relationships with workers and consumers. With more Bangladeshi firms entering global supply chains, particularly in garments, pharmaceuticals, and leather, complying with international ESG standards is no longer optional.

What needs to happen? First, ESG reporting should be mandatory not only for listed companies but also

for large private firms. Reporting must follow clear, internationally recognised standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB). When companies report in a comparable way, it builds trust and enables proper evaluation. This kind of transparency will foster real investor confidence.

Second, the Bangladesh Bank could do much more to encourage long-term thinking within financial institutions. If banks offer more ESG-linked loans or promote green bonds, businesses will have a stronger incentive to prioritise sustainability.

Third, small and medium-sized businesses need targeted support, including plain-language guides, workshops, and hands-on assistance, to help them begin the ESG transition.

Fourth, a national ESG task force, comprising representatives from business, government, and civil society, could help coordinate efforts and bring coherence to currently fragmented initiatives.

Finally, ESG must be integrated into national planning. It cannot be an afterthought; it needs to be embedded into our climate goals, industrial policies, and our very definition of progress.

Bangladesh is entering a new era. The choices we make now will determine how the world views us in the years ahead. ESG offers a way to rethink how we measure success. It brings people, the environment, and governance into the conversation—elements we too often treat as secondary but which, in truth, hold everything together. When these elements are ignored, progress tends to unravel. But when they form the foundation, we can build something more stable, more inclusive, and more humane.

ESG will not solve everything, but it gives us a framework to do better, if we choose to take it seriously. The path is there. It is up to us to walk it.