

How Bangladesh has been building a digital police state



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Bangladesh, like many modern states, has a deeply embedded architecture of a surveillance state. But ours was not constructed overnight; it was forged in crises. From the presidential assassinations of the 1970s and 1980s to the attempted assassination of a foreign diplomat, from paramilitary mutinies to terrorist attacks over the last two decades—each national trauma has become a justification to tighten the government's grip on citizens. With each incident, the surveillance apparatus grew stronger and less accountable. What started as a response to security threats has morphed into a system for political consolidation and control.

Since the early 2000s, successive governments have steadily restructured Bangladesh's legislative and regulatory landscape to normalise expansive surveillance. Under more than 15 years of Awami League rule, this system has enabled the routine suppression of dissent, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Yet, this shift has not occurred in isolation; all arms of the state have been complicit in normalising a surveillance regime that undermines the very principles it claims to protect, whether through active enforcement, silence, or institutional abdication.

Surveillance at the source

Bangladesh's surveillance capacity does not begin with a camera; it begins with a budget line. In FY2023-24, over Tk 63,000 crore (approximately \$5 billion) was allocated for the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces Division, and the Public Security Division—the institutional core of the country's civilian and military intelligence apparatus. This sum feeds the backbone of Bangladesh's surveillance infrastructure, yet how much is spent on technologies that track, profile or monitor citizens remains undisclosed. There is no parliamentary scrutiny and no statutory human rights protection guiding procurement decisions.

According to an investigation by Tech Global Institute, between 2016 and 2024, the country's law enforcement and intelligence agencies procured over 200 surveillance devices and software systems, although the actual number is likely higher given the

opacity surrounding these transactions. These include IMSI catchers, GPS trackers, drone systems, facial recognition technologies, and communication intercept tools—acquired without any meaningful public consultation, export-import controls or legal safeguards.

While laws like the Public Procurement Act, 2006, the Public Procurement Rules, 2008, and the Import Policy Order establish standards for transparency, competition, and import regulation, these frameworks remain conspicuously silent on human rights. There is no legal requirement for the authorities to conduct due diligence or audit to ensure that imports capable of tracking, profiling or monitoring individuals are compliant with the Constitution of Bangladesh or international human rights obligations. Worse still, procurement decisions made “in good faith” are insulated with legal immunities, effectively shielding them from challenge even when rights are violated. In the absence of robust accountability mechanisms, state actors encounter little institutional friction for overreach and, in many cases, are incentivised to pursue it. By design, therefore, the laws are structured to allow systemic and sustained impunity, shielding state actors from legal challenge while leaving citizens with no meaningful avenue for redress.

A legal system built for control?

Existing legal and regulatory architecture governing surveillance in Bangladesh is a fragmented patchwork of laws that confer expansive, largely unchecked powers to state agencies. Tech Global Institute research found that more than 20 different laws enable surveillance. Often, terms like “monitoring” and “interception” appear repeatedly across laws, not as narrowly defined legal authorisations, but as vague placeholders that open the door to arbitrary surveillance under the catch-all justifications of public safety and national security.

At the heart of this framework lie legacy statutes such as the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act, 2001 and the Telegraph Act, 1885, which allow the executive branch to monitor, intercept, record, and collect vast troves of user data throughout the entire telecommunications value chain—

from international gateways to mobile network operators and internet service providers. These provisions are neither accidental nor incidental; they are rooted in colonial-era and colonial-inspired statutes designed for domination, not democracy. Their continued enforcement in the 21st century reflects a deliberate choice in statecraft, one that preserves a legal order that treats citizens not as rights holders, but as subjects to be monitored, managed, and marginalised.

Complementing the statutes are licensing conditions issued by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) that, in effect, institutionalise surveillance as a non-negotiable requirement of doing business in the sector. Clause 25 of the 4G licence agreement, for instance, obligates mobile network operators to enable real-time access to user information, bulk data interception, and live database monitoring by security agencies like the

limited to telecommunications. An illustrative example is the collection and retention of expansive demographic and biometric datasets by the Bangladesh Election Commission under laws like the Representation of the People Order, 1972 and the National Identity Registration Act, 2010. Once collected, these datasets are routinely cross-linked with other databases, including health records, passport data, banking information, and tax filings maintained by other state agencies. Data flows across these networks through opaque bureaucratic pipelines, leaving citizens visible to power, and power invisible to them.

Even more concerning are the state's intelligence agencies operating in near-total darkness. Central state intelligence agencies like the NTMC, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), and the National Security Intelligence (NSI) operate without public-facing mandates or accountability. Other surveillance behemoths—like the

in legitimate aims such as national security or public order. In practice, however, these safeguards are routinely ignored, reinterpreted or bypassed altogether. What was meant to be the exception has become the norm.

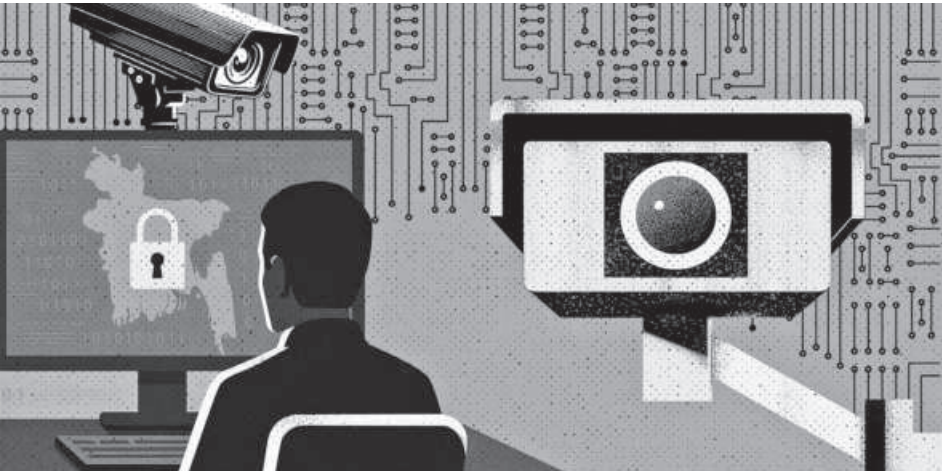
Exacerbating this structural permissiveness is a judiciary that has largely remained on the sidelines. Unlike comparable jurisdictions such as India, where courts have articulated strong constitutional limits on surveillance, courts in Bangladesh have remained largely passive. A rare exception is *The State vs. Oli* (2019), in which the High Court held that warrantless, routine collection of telecommunications data violates the right to privacy under Article 43 of the constitution. Yet, no clear guidelines were issued, nor has there been consistent judicial oversight since. Surveillance continues, undisturbed and unaccountable.

Rather than reversing this trajectory, emerging policies appear to entrench the status quo. Take, for example, the proposed Personal Data Protection Ordinance, which adds newer dimensions of risk. With expansive exemptions for crime prevention and national security, and vague provisions for data localisation, the law risks legitimising, rather than restricting, invasive surveillance. History has shown us that such provisions function less as protective safeguards and more as tools for consolidating state power in Bangladesh.

A panopticon state by design

Bangladesh now possesses the infrastructural capacity to watch more people, more closely, and for more arbitrary reasons than at any other time in its history. Surveillance in itself is not inherently illegitimate; the state has both the right and the responsibility to ensure national security and public safety. But over the past three decades, the balance between liberty and control has tilted decisively away from constitutionalism and towards authoritarianism. Surveillance is no longer a targeted tool; it is the default operating system of governance. It is embedded in the circuitry of daily life, normalised through bureaucracy, and reinforced by fear. What stands today is the quiet entrenchment of a panopticon state. The result is an Orwellian reality in which the state sees all, knows all, and answers to none.

Despite its reported extensive use during the 2024 “Monsoon Revolution” and promises of reform by the interim government, no meaningful efforts have been made so far to dismantle or restrain this machinery of control. Too many lives have already been lost, too many freedoms eroded, for the state to persist in these excesses. Now is the time to act, not with rhetoric but with reform. And it must be done with urgency and resolve, to honour those who have suffered and to ensure that such abuse is never repeated.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

National Telecom Monitoring Center (NTMC). Operators must also identify and report users flagged as national security threats. While the exact nature of compliance remains opaque, these obligations are likely carried out without meaningful user knowledge or informed consent. What is clear, however, is that compliance is not optional; it is enforced not only through the threat of criminal prosecution and financial penalties, but also through coercive administrative pressures such as licence non-renewal or permit withholding, making resistance commercially untenable. Nevertheless, the silent acquiescence by multinational subsidiaries reflects a profound abdication of corporate responsibility, and raises serious concerns under both domestic legal standards and international frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Government surveillance overreach is not

Special Branch, Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab)—are only nominally governed by colonial era laws like the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, Special Powers Act, 1974, and Police Act, 1861, with their methods often outpacing both legal text and judicial oversight.

Violation of constitutional rights

These sweeping powers have gutted the very rights the constitution promises in at least two critical ways. First, the lack of legal clarity and institutional accountability undermines articles 31 and 32, which guarantee equal protection under the law and prohibit the deprivation of liberty without due process. Second, while articles 39 and 43 allow the curtailment of fundamental rights to privacy and freedom of expression, such restrictions must be reasonable and grounded

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY

Young people need opportunity and mentorship, not token gestures



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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Bangladesh, with its demographic dividend and more than one-third of its population under the age of 35, stands at a critical crossroads that tests the nation's preparedness. As the World Economic Forum continues to highlight emerging jobs and essential future skills, including critical thinking and complex problem-solving, we must ask: are our systems, institutions, and mindsets equipping young people to thrive in this evolving landscape? Alarming, even students at Stanford University, in the heart of Silicon Valley, are voicing concern that they are not learning anything in class. This points to a global disconnect between education and employability. If even the most elite institutions are falling short, what does that say about our own theory-based and exam-driven classrooms in Bangladesh? Are we truly preparing our youth to lead in the age of disruption?

Beyond the challenges of formal education, there is a quieter crisis unfolding in the everyday lives of young people in Bangladesh: the steady erosion of social skills. With the average youth spending several hours a day scrolling through social media, the ability to hold meaningful conversations, practise empathy, and engage in real human connection is gradually weakening. What was once a vibrant culture of community gatherings, spirited dialogue, and shared lived experiences is

gradually dissolving into a device-driven existence where likes, shares, and filtered images often replace authentic human connection. Streets that once echoed with laughter, debate, and spontaneous conversation now fall silent as heads remain bowed to glowing screens. As virtual validation begins to outweigh self-awareness, we must pause and reflect. Are we raising a generation that is slowly forgetting how to connect person to person without using digital tools?

Another critical concern is the persistent wave of brain drain. Each year, thousands of Bangladesh's brightest minds leave the country in search of better education, meaningful work, and environments that reward merit, creativity, and innovation. Many do not return. While global mobility is a natural part of a connected world, the alarming rate at which our top talent is seeking opportunities abroad signals a deeper problem. Young people are not just looking for higher salaries or foreign degrees, but dignity, purpose, and opportunities free of corruption, red tape, or stagnation. The Bangladeshi passport's low global ranking not just limits travel opportunities for many young people but hinders global recognition as well. When a nation invests in its youth only to lose them at their most productive stage, it must ask itself: do we have a country our young people want to

shape, or is it one they feel forced to escape?

The struggle to find meaningful employment has become one of the most disheartening realities for young people in Bangladesh. Each year, thousands of university graduates face a job market that offers more rejection than opportunity. Many find themselves waiting endlessly, moving from one temporary role to another, or simply settling for jobs that do not match their skills or aspirations. The formal economy remains limited in its capacity to absorb the growing number of job seekers, pushing many into the informal sector, where work lacks future security. In Bangladesh, many young people turn to startup dreams as an escape from unemployment, hoping to innovate and succeed on their own terms. Yet global research shows that it is often older founders, with experience and deeper insight, who build the most successful ventures. How can we expect young entrepreneurs to thrive when they face a world that romanticises youth but offers limited ground support or space to grow?

Many young people in Bangladesh are also grappling with deep confusion brought on by the double standards they see around them. Both globally and locally, the contradictions are striking and hard to ignore. Tech companies preach privacy rights, while at times, quietly profiting from user data behind the scenes. Climate summits are filled with pledges to reduce emissions, yet the same leaders arrive in private jets and approve new fossil fuel projects. Superpowers advocate for democracy abroad while maintaining alliances with authoritarian regimes that serve their interests. Nuclear-armed countries call on others to denuclearise while refusing to dismantle their own arsenals. Nations

open their borders to some refugees while closing them to others based on race, religion, or politics. Athletes are praised for activism until their views challenge powerful sponsors. For young people trying to make sense of right and wrong, values and ambition, these contradictions disorient them, eroding their trust. How can we expect this generation to follow a clear moral compass when the world around them keeps shifting the lines?

In the face of contradiction,

disillusionment, and structural barriers, a growing wave of young people in Bangladesh is choosing not to be silent or sidelined. They are stepping into leadership roles, organising within their communities, creating civic platforms, and using digital tools not just for expression but to drive meaningful change. From climate advocacy to education reform, from championing social justice to promoting green enterprise, young voices are not only asking for inclusion

but also proving their readiness to lead. What they need now is not symbolic praise but genuine space, consistent mentorship, and institutional support. The future of governance cannot be shaped without the participation of those who will live it and inherit its consequences. If we choose to trust our youth, challenge them with purpose, and include them in building the present, we will not only nurture better leaders but also build a stronger and more just Bangladesh.



Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Chattogram City Corporation
Tigerpass, Chattogram
www.ccc.gov.bd

Memo No. 46.11.1600-002.14.PD-17.2025

Date: 11/08/25

e-Tender Notice-DRIIDARP/2025-26/01

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following works:

Package/ Lot No.	Tender ID	Identification of lot	Tender document last selling date and time	Tender closing & opening date and time
DRIIDAR/2025-26/CCC/W3/L2	1138662	Construction of RCC Girder Bridge over Shitol Jhama Khal with approach road at Bayezid Bostami Road near Starship Factory at 2 No. Ward	21-Aug-2025 13.00	21-Aug-2025 14.00
DRIIDAR/2024-25/CCC/W-08/L-01	1138669	Repair and maintenance work from Lalkhan Bazar to Bahaddarhat Flyover	21-Aug-2025 13.00	21-Aug-2025 14.00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and offline hard copies will not be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered bank branches up to particular date and time specified on the tender notice. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

CCC/PRD-14/25-26 (5"x4")

GD-1267

Md. Jashim Uddin
Project Director
"Different Roads and Important
Infrastructural Development including
Airport Road under
Chattogram City Corporation."
& Superintending Engineer
Chattogram City Corporation