

Protect the polls from digital manipulation

Hold platforms, parties accountable to curb misinformation and data misuse

The recent surge in digital manipulation in Bangladesh has justifiably raised concerns about its likely impact on the upcoming national election. This threat, emerging in an already charged sociopolitical atmosphere, could prove more complex and consequential than anything witnessed in recent electoral cycles. Speakers at a roundtable organised by *The Daily Star* and the Tech Global Institute therefore emphasised the need for rigorous scrutiny and policy interventions, warning that, without these, the playing field could be tilted not only against certain political parties and actors but also against voters themselves.

The speakers—political leaders, digital experts, and civil society representatives—identified online misinformation, data misuse, and AI-driven propaganda as key challenges. They also highlighted how defamation and religiously charged cases are increasingly being filed to intimidate opponents or silence dissent. Concerns were raised about the judicial system being pressured by fears of backlash, leading to the misuse of vague provisions under laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act and the Penal Code. This cascade of legal and digital manipulation indicates that electoral integrity cannot be protected by state institutions alone. Political parties and social media platforms must also be held accountable for failing to prevent abuse down the line.

In this context, several speakers underscored the vulnerability of citizens' data. With 183 institutions having access to the National ID database and a large pool of candidates likely to receive constituency voter lists, how do we ensure this access is not abused? Clearly, safeguarding personal data is no longer merely a privacy concern; it is also a matter of electoral fairness. Without strict oversight, voter information could be exploited for targeted intimidation, profiling, or micro-manipulation. Compounding these risks is the spread of AI-generated content. Fabricated videos, synthetic images, and doctored materials are already circulating—often produced by politically aligned actors—with women candidates and minority communities particularly exposed. In the absence of digital literacy and a strong fact-checking infrastructure, such attacks may not only damage reputations but also discourage participation, suppress votes, and inflame communal tensions.

The fact that Bangladesh has nearly 80 million Facebook users, along with a substantial presence on YouTube, gives the government some leverage to demand responsible behaviour from these platforms. Yet, they continue to operate with minimal accountability. As one expert noted, the government should negotiate election-time protocols with social media platforms—protocols that many countries have already implemented. Their absence here represents a policy blind spot, much like the lack of a robust regulatory framework for online political campaigns. These gaps must be addressed by the Election Commission. It must regulate online campaigning and coordinate with relevant state bodies, media organisations, fact-checkers, and global tech giants to establish clear rules, rapid-response mechanisms, and meaningful accountability. Without such measures, the election risks being compromised.

Act now to reverse the poverty backslide

Economic slowdown, job losses, rising inequality demand policy shifts

Bangladesh is witnessing one of its most troubling reversals in poverty in over a decade, and recent assessments emphasise the scale of the crisis. According to the World Bank's Bangladesh Poverty and Equity Assessment 2025, nearly 20 lakh people have fallen into poverty this year, pushing the rate to 21.2 percent, while more than 30 lakh slipped below the line last year. The country's total poor population has now reached around 3.6 crore, driven by job losses, soaring inflation, and declining household consumption. Despite repeated policy assurances, scattered relief measures, and incremental social assistance, the slide continues. The WB found that between 2010 and 2022, the poverty reduction elasticity of growth fell to 0.9; in other words the country's economic growth was less effective in reducing poverty, reflecting weakened governance, shrinking labour opportunities, and a growth model increasingly unable to shield vulnerable households.

Labour market data shows that Bangladesh lost nearly 20 lakh jobs between 2023 and 2024, with another eight lakhs expected to vanish this year, with women and young people being the hardest hit. Most new jobs are concentrated in low-productivity agriculture, signalling stagnation in industrial and service sector dynamism. The WB report revealed entrenched failures in the social protection system, with only half of the poorest 20 percent of households receiving benefits, while the richest quintile continues to benefit from various subsidies—evidence of chronic mistargeting and political leakage. The survey further highlights that 6.2 crore people now hover just above the poverty line, vulnerable to slipping below it due to illness, shocks, or minor income disruptions.

Nationwide, poverty dynamics is increasingly visible in altered consumption patterns, livelihood adjustments, and falling living standards. Real wages, particularly in rural areas, have stagnated or fallen even as food prices remain elevated. Rising rural poverty is eroding household resiliency as families are reducing meals, borrowing at high interest, or selling productive assets to cope. Stagnation in job creation also risks undermining Bangladesh's hard-won progress in women's economic participation.

The persistence of this crisis reflects a failure of coordination, accountability, and long-term planning. Budgetary constraints, administrative delays, and fragmented policymaking are no longer sufficient explanations. Job creation strategies must be revamped, market access improved for rural households, skills development strengthened, and transparency ensured in welfare programmes. Bangladesh has overcome adversity before, but the current trajectory demands decisive, coordinated, and accountable action. Without it, the poverty reversal could become entrenched, undermining national progress for years to come.

EDITORIAL

The birth pang of a university



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

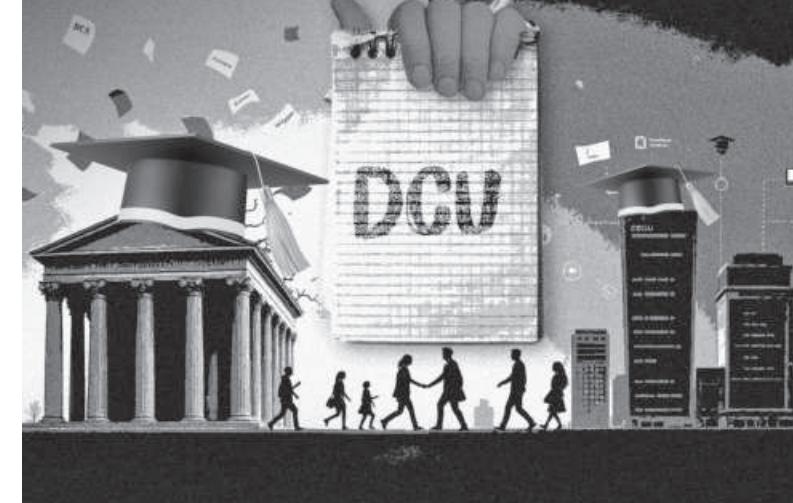
As the Chinese word for "crisis," *wei ji* (danger and opportunity), suggests, we do not need to see all crises as catastrophes but as thresholds for reinvention. The standoff over the seven government colleges formerly affiliated with Dhaka University (DU) offers one such moment. The problem, which started as a protest against DU administration, evolved into a decoupling process that promised the establishment of a new university.

Dhaka Central University (DCU) was hurriedly conceived and delivered under pressure, with authorities now struggling to start classes after admissions, to formalise its ordinances, and to decide on the existing cadres of teachers. These crises have pushed the limits of our inherited university model and now require the urgent need to craft alternatives. The seven colleges—Dhaka College, Eden Mohila College, Begum Badrunnesa Government College, Government Bangla College, Kabi Nazrul Government College, Government Titumir College, and Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College—have operated under shifting jurisdictions. Their status as degree colleges was initially governed by DU, then by the National University, and returned to DU in 2017. On the surface, such a shift was an attempt to fix dysfunctions in governance, examinations, and staffing, but the hasty decision hints at a foundational flaw related to the current situation. The uncertainty surrounding the future of students, faculty, and staff may prompt the interim government to implement temporary solutions. But let us not waste this "crisis" to address the deeper design flaws experienced by our universities. It is time for the new university to move beyond colonial-era templates and focus on our demographic, social, epistemic, and economic realities.

In a provocatively titled book, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die*, Peter Fleming diagnoses some of the ills of late capitalism for the conceptual death of universities. Fleming argues that the factory model of education, which insists on auditing, key performance indicators, and metrics while pursuing ranking, sustainability, and competitiveness, simply serves a corporate bureaucracy and undermines academic freedom. The mechanical process takes the

soul out of the universities and turns the institutions lifeless. More and more, universities have become self-referential machines incapable of adaptation. The question before us is whether or not we want the new university as an extension of the colonial legacy from which the seven colleges want to liberate themselves.

Dhaka University, like its peers—Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras University—was established not to cultivate public intellect but mostly to produce clerks who would run and reinvigorate the administrative machinery of the British Empire. DU's colonial mindset persists in its



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHARYAR

obsession with BCS exams and its claim to produce almost half of the country's civil servants. Structurally, the university, along with its public counterparts, maintains a hierarchical administrative system and discipline-bound departments. People worldwide raise questions about this structure's ability to meet current demands.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), which oversees all universities, maintains ties to this colonial structure and has accepted many of the institutional contradictions of such structures. Dealing with the crisis of the seven colleges exposed the impossibility of running an examination system for lakhs of students through a decade-old administrative logic. Bangladesh has expanded access to higher education without articulating a philosophy for it. Are public universities meant to be

elite research institutions? Are they meant to serve as providers of mass access? Credentialing hubs? Are they considered engines of social mobility? It is unclear. Both DU and its foster child, DCU, need to contemplate this question.

While we only begin to address the problem, which includes a dispute over BCS General Education Cadre positions that many teachers and staff fear may jeopardise their posts at DCU, concerns from students regarding degree recognition, and issues related to the rapid construction of infrastructure, we must view the opportunity presented by this crisis as a chance for philosophical reorientation. The alleged treatment of students from seven colleges as second-class citizens holds some truth in it. DU had to sever its ties with these colleges because it did not have the managerial capacity to administer seven colleges, which spread across the city with tens of thousands of students each. The problem was scale, not quality. For DCU to succeed, it

on transparent criteria might ease the tension. Some BCS teachers have strong academic profiles, favourable teaching evaluations, and years of service. They should be absorbed into DCU's faculty under clearly defined evaluation frameworks guided by the best practices of transition. Then again, there should not be any new recruitment for university teaching under a colonial-style general education cadre system. New recruitment should be discipline-specific and merit-driven. Teachers not absorbed in university roles should be redeployed to other government colleges or retained for the higher secondary streams within the seven institutions. Similarly, officers and staff must know whether they are migrating into DCU or being redeployed elsewhere.

The concern with DCU is also about retaining old ideas. It would be a waste of time and resources to simply recreate old departmental silos in a new setup. The proposed university must create a breathing space for the just transition of its current students and staff while working towards interdisciplinary clusters needed for the 21st century world, e.g., climate and society, technology and ethics, digital language and media, and public health and community studies. The university, based in Dhaka, must address urban issues to effectively serve its communities by focusing on urban studies, riverine ecologies, linguistic diversity, community health, and informal economies.

UGC has already proposed a hybrid learning framework, which will take time to be popular. Incentivising the stakeholders (e.g., low-priced or subsidised gadgets or Wi-Fi provided by sponsors or donors) can ease the tension. The university needs to move away from the closed credit systems of its parent institution. The philosophy of the university must involve intellectual openness and social accountability. The ordinances are a beneficial place to bring changes and establish trust among the stakeholders. The Federated School Model, using the seven campuses as distributed schools linked by central governance until infrastructure matures, is a good initiative. The government must sit with the agitating teachers to specify teacher absorption mechanisms, service rules, and redeployment pathways. It must freeze new BCS cadre recruitment for university-level teaching. For future expansion, in the second phase, the university must prioritise interdisciplinarity, community engagement, and Bangladeshi realities. Planning should not consider the existing resources only. Let the crisis of the seven colleges not be a failure, but an invitation to shape the identity of a newborn university.

Civil registration system needs a citizen-centred upgrade



GM Saiful Islam
is a development professional specialising in local governance, urban planning, and results-based management.

GM SAIFUL ISLAM

Every year, lakhs of birth certificates are issued to establish the civil identity of citizens, and this document later becomes essential for obtaining a National ID (NID) card. Before the introduction of online birth registration, the process was entirely manual, slow, fragmented, and prone to errors. NID issuance began in 2008, and in 2010 Bangladesh modernised its civil registration system by launching the online Birth Registration Information System, reinforcing the legal requirement to register every birth within 45 days under the Birth and Death Registration Act, 2004.

Despite these advances, interoperability remains a major challenge. The Birth and Death Registration Information System (BDRIS) currently exchanges limited data with 22 government agencies through MoUs and API-based connections. Previously, in the absence of a unified legal mandate or a standardised data-protection framework, these arrangements relied more on administrative goodwill than enforceable safeguards. The recent introduction of the Personal Data Protection Ordinance (PDPO), Cyber Safety Ordinance (CSO), and the National Data Governance and Interoperability Architecture (NDGA)

provides much-needed regulatory clarity and institutional mechanisms for secure, transparent, and lawful data exchange. Together, these policy instruments signal the government's commitment to strengthening interoperability and establish a clear legal foundation for expanding future BDRIS linkages with other government systems.

However, the lack of full integration continues to create real-life complications for citizens. To obtain an NID, an individual must first have a birth certificate; yet an adult applying for a birth certificate is often required to present an NID as proof of age. For many, the experience resembles the classic question: which comes first, the egg or the chicken?

Even birth registration rate among children aged 0 and 11 months are not 100 percent in Bangladesh. However, major opportunity to link the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) with BDRIS exists. Such integration would allow birth registration to take place automatically at the point of delivery or during a child's first vaccination, ensuring accuracy and preventing children from being left out. Beyond easing the burden on families, this approach would reduce duplicated

data entry across government offices and cut the number of steps citizens must navigate. Similar integrations are needed to bring birth and death registration closer to frontline health services, creating a more transparent, efficient, and citizen-friendly system.

The government's commitment to making BDRIS accessible to all is clear, but that commitment must

To obtain an NID, an individual must first have a birth certificate; yet an adult applying for a birth certificate is often required to present an NID as proof of age. For many, the experience resembles the classic question: which comes first, the egg or the chicken?

now translate into more timely and forward-looking technical upgrades. The expansion of hosting capacity from 72 terabyte to 500 terabyte and the increase in document upload limits from 200 kilobyte to two megabyte are welcome steps, but they come long after the system began straining under its own weight. These fixes should not be viewed as enhancements; they were overdue necessities for a platform expected to manage crores of records across the country.

Interoperability is also beginning to show promise. The April 2025 collaboration with the Election Commission, through which BDRIS data supported e-ID delivery for 1.25

crore students demonstrates what coordinated digital services can achieve when systems finally begin to talk to each other.

Despite these improvements, the current BDRIS interface still works only partially on mobile and tablet screens, even though smartphones remain the primary digital access point for many rural registrars and citizens. Without a fully responsive redesign, the platform risks excluding precisely the communities it aims to serve. A dedicated mobile app, designed around real user behaviour rather than technical assumptions, could simplify registration and deepen public engagement. Bangladesh does not lack talent; a national design challenge or hackathon involving universities and private sector partners could inject fresh, practical ideas into the redesign process. Such an initiative would help BDRIS evolve into the intuitive, citizen-centred digital service it has the potential to be.

Improving BDRIS is not just a technical necessity; it is a matter of identity, access, and dignity. Civil registration platforms responsible for documenting the very beginning of a person's legal existence cannot afford to be slow, disconnected, or difficult to navigate. It must be interoperable, easy to use, and designed around the realities of citizens' lives, not the limitations of legacy systems. Stronger coordination, user-centric design, and long-term planning are needed to close the remaining gaps. If these reforms are prioritised, BDRIS can truly fulfil the promise with which this journey began: ensuring that every individual is recognised, protected, and able to participate fully in public life.