

## Persistence of human rights abuse alarming

Reforms within rule-of-law institutions must occur now, not later

Human rights organisations have again painted a sobering picture of the state of rights in Bangladesh. According to a new report by the Human Rights Support Society, at least 156 people were killed and 242 injured in 276 incidents of mob violence up to November this year, averaging around 14 deaths every month. Meanwhile, at least 1,909 women and girls were subjected to sexual violence, of whom 789 were raped, with more than half of the victims being minors. In a separate estimate, Ain o Salish Kendra has said that 29 people were killed extrajudicially or died as a result of torture in police custody, while 28 convicts and 55 under-trial prisoners died in jail. Political and non-political murders have also continued. The media has recorded numerous false murder cases filed against journalists and individuals allegedly associated with the previous regime.

These developments reinforce concerns that the interim government has not been able to curb some of the most severe forms of human rights violations as expected. It is true that the government has taken some commendable steps to end enforced disappearances, including passing an ordinance to punish violators and initiating legal action against some of the accused. But there have been many other violations taking place right under its nose, that should have prompted decisive intervention. It did not.

We must ask, for instance, why custodial deaths and torture continue under a government that emerged from an uprising promising an end to state repression. The continuation of this trend shows that although an autocratic regime has been removed, remnants of its abusive practices remain embedded within state machinery. Arbitrary arrests, torture, and deaths in custody persist because of a lack of accountability for law enforcement and security personnel. True, the long-awaited police commission has been approved through an ordinance recently, promising to curtail impunity and ensure transparency. But when will such reforms actually materialise?

Given the reality illustrated by the above figures, we urge the government to initiate independent investigations into all extrajudicial and custodial deaths and establish genuine accountability mechanisms within law enforcement agencies. It should be pointed out that the persistence of mob violence, often carried out in the name of religion, is largely due to the indifference or half-hearted attempts of the government, which must be addressed. It must identify both instigators and participants in these horrific crimes and ensure they face exemplary punishment. Of equal concern has been its inability to address the growing misogyny and violence against women, both in public and online. The government must provide stronger security for women in public spaces and take firm action against violence within private spheres. Online abuse must also be tackled through better training for law enforcers so they can effectively identify and act against perpetrators.

With the elections around the corner, concerns are mounting that the law and order situation may deteriorate further. So, the government must take up the urgent task of training and equipping law enforcers properly so that they act promptly, effectively, and sincerely in upholding human rights.

## Make tobacco products pricier

Study finds its economic losses far exceed revenue

We are deeply concerned by the staggering economic toll of tobacco use and production in Bangladesh. A new study by the Institute of Health Economics at Dhaka University shows that the losses caused by tobacco far exceed the revenue it generates. According to the findings, tobacco cost the country Tk 87,544 crore last year, more than double the approximate Tk 40,000 crore earned from tobacco taxes in FY 2023-24. The study further reveals that, far from contributing to the economy, tobacco depletes national resources, intensifies health crises, and accelerates environmental degradation.

According to a recent World Health Organization report, although tobacco use in Bangladesh has declined over the past 15 years, it still exceeds both the global and South-East Asia regional averages, an alarming reality that demands urgent intervention. Another study by Bangladesh Medical University (BMU) found that the slow pace at which tobacco use is decreasing in the country will make it difficult to achieve the UN set target of reducing consumption by 40 percent by 2030. Against this backdrop, the new findings underscore that the government must strengthen its tobacco control policies and take decisive action to curb consumption.

Reportedly, health-related costs alone amounted to Tk 73,063 crore, including Tk 30,771 crore in direct medical expenses and Tk 42,292 crore in productivity losses. Added to this are environmental damages worth Tk 14,525 crore—resulting from marine pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, waste clean-up, deforestation, and other ecological harms linked to tobacco cultivation and manufacturing.

Equally troubling is the availability of tobacco, particularly to the youth. A study, conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) on 121 schools across four divisions, found an average of 5.5 tobacco points of sale (POS) within 100 metres of each school. Nearly 70 percent of these POSs advertised tobacco products, while 21 percent actively promoted them to attract students. Moreover, the widespread sale of flavoured cigarettes and single sticks demonstrates the industry's aggression in targeting children. The placement of tobacco beside candies and toys in 66 percent of shops further exposes the manipulative marketing tactics at play.

The government must, therefore, impose a comprehensive ban on POS advertising, prohibit flavoured cigarettes, and end single stick sales. Taxes on tobacco products must be substantially increased to create real deterrence. Without decisive action, the country will continue to lose far more than it gains from this industry. Most importantly, protecting the youth is a national responsibility which should be backed by stronger laws and a more effective tax structure that makes tobacco products less affordable.

# EDITORIAL

## Stalled reforms leave journalists exposed amid poll security risks



Kamal Ahmed is consulting editor at *The Daily Star*. He led the Media Reform Commission under the interim government. His X handle is @ahmedkal.

KAMAL AHMED

As the country moves towards the much-anticipated 2026 general election—promised to be an exemplary one by the interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus—early signs of political intolerance and toxicity have become increasingly alarming. Amid this volatility, journalists are raising concerns about a hostile reporting environment, ranging from online harassment to physical threats, even at this early stage of election coverage. A new study, "High Risks, Low Preparedness: Journalist Safety in 2026 Elections," reveals that an overwhelming 89 percent of journalists expect to face physical assault while covering the election.

Based on a survey of 201 journalists across 19 districts, the research paints a picture of a deeply polarised and volatile landscape ahead. It shows that 89 percent of journalists anticipate high levels of physical violence; 76 percent expect verbal harassment, while 71 percent fear intimidation. The outlook appears even more troubling for women journalists: 50 percent fear sexual harassment, and 40 percent fear sexual assault during election-related reporting.

An especially disturbing trend is the widening scope of attacks on the press, extending beyond the field to newsrooms and media outlets themselves. Whether the threats originate from political actors, criminal groups, or law enforcement agencies, the intent appears consistent: to silence the media from exposing wrongdoing, abuses of power, violations of the law, and other conduct that undermines a fair electoral environment.

This was not the expectation. At least a dozen journalists spoke about their ordeals at the event marking the publication of the study report, and half of them were women, mostly working in broadcast media, which made them easily recognisable and exposed to increased vulnerability.

They are being targeted both offline and online, and the online vitriol is quite offensive, degrading, and ferocious.

The interim government had pledged to undertake reforms to ensure a "free, robust, and objective media." To that end, it established a commission in November 2024 and received its report and recommendations on March 22 this year. Since then, Information Adviser Mahfuj Alam has



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

repeatedly stated that the government is implementing the proposed reforms—most importantly, an act to safeguard journalists in the course of their work. On September 28, he told a seminar that the government would enact the Journalist Protection Act within two to three months "at any cost."

The proposed Journalism Protection Act and the setting up of a national media commission were the two most significant steps the reform commission recommended. It received strong and wider support not only from within the media industry but also from political parties of all colours as well as the international community. Notably, Unesco and the European Union offered their support in implementing this framework,

punishment to offending parties.

Another reason cited for shelving the act is the information ministry's insistence on retaining the much-criticised Bangladesh Press Council rather than replacing it with the recommended National Media Commission, a new self-regulatory body. The reform commission proposed that the media commission enforce higher ethical standards across the media industry and adjudicate public complaints involving print, broadcast, and online media. The press council's authority extends only to print newspapers, leaving broadcast and online outlets effectively unsupervised. The council is also subject to full budgetary and some administrative control of the information ministry.

According to informed sources, the advisers' committee's only notable initiative so far is a move to grant autonomy to Bangladesh Television (BTV)—an effort reportedly facing resistance from BTV employees and sections of the bureaucracy. This proposal also runs counter to the reform commission's recommendation to merge Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh Betar, and Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) into an autonomous national broadcasting organisation. Such a merger would enhance independence, improve efficiency, and yield significant savings for the public exchequer.

Most of the remaining 21 broader reform measures appear to have been consigned to cold storage. Among journalists, the greatest frustration stems from the government's failure to reform the financial foundations of the media industry. Many outlets lack economic viability and fail to provide adequate salaries and benefits, leaving journalists and media outlets vulnerable to pressure from powerful corporate, political, and other influential actors.

The study on journalist safety in the 2026 elections serves as a stark reminder that had the interim government fulfilled its commitment to enact the Journalist Protection Act in time, many attacks might have been prevented—or at least, a clear warning would have been sent to potential perpetrators that impunity would no longer be tolerated. The draft law proposed by the reform commission explicitly defined the forms of abuse requiring protection, including "violence, threats, and harassment ... endangering the life and property of a journalist engaged in professional work, including criminal intimidation, harassment, molestation, surveillance, physical or mental torture, insult, obstruction of work, coercion, sexual harassment, illegal detention, enforced disappearance, and abduction."

Our deepest concern is that the interim government led by Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus risks being held responsible for failing to prevent attacks on journalists despite its promises of a truly independent, robust, and objective media environment. There is still time to take decisive action: to enact the Journalist Protection Ordinance and establish a permanent National Media Commission.

## Why our economy looks rich on Facebook but broke in real life



MIND THE GAP

Barrister Noshin Nawal is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. She can be reached at noshinawal@gmail.com.

NOSHIN NAWAL

The world is warning of a looming economic downturn, yet many of us here are—scrolling, shopping, and insisting we are living our best lives, even as our mobile banking apps beg to differ. The focus remains firmly on flash sales and cashback offers. Economists globally compare the present moment to the years preceding the Great Depression, and many in Bangladesh are playing along with remarkable enthusiasm. We are a country where consumption for many has become a national identity rather than a financial act. Our GDP graphs tell one story. Our bank balances tell another, and our online personas tell a third story entirely, one usually involving brunch.

Back in the 1920s, Americans often spent money they did not have because keeping up appearances mattered more than financial stability. In Bangladesh, many of us have turned this instinct into an art form. Whether it is an Eid outfit, imported skincare, a birthday dinner in Gulshan, or a pair of trainers costing more than a month's rent in Mirpur, some of us buy to belong. We buy to feel modern. We buy because everyone else is buying—and God forbid someone thinks we are not doing well. And, much like the 1920s, Bangladesh has found its own version of mass debt normalisation. Our

grandparents saved cash in tin trunks. We save screenshots of instalment plans. The rise of buy now pay-later culture worldwide has been localised here through loan apps, informal credit, and bKash borrowing. Debt has become invisible, convenient, and socially acceptable.

But invisibility does not mean harmlessness. When a significant share of young people in Dhaka tend to juggle delayed payments, digital loans, and lifestyle expectations shaped by TikTok, you do not have a consumption boom—you have a brewing fragility. Around 97 percent of Gen Z says social media influences what they buy. The remaining three percent have never seen their Explore page. Most of these Bangladeshis seem to be buying under pressure, not capacity, and pressure is far more dangerous. Pressure pushes a lower-middle-income household to keep up with upper-middle-class spending to prove they are doing "fine." Pressure convinces a 24-year-old to spend half her salary on a handbag she cannot afford because everyone else in her office carries one. Pressure tells people to buy the lifestyle first and figure out the finances later.

The illusion of stability is maintained through small, delayed payments that create artificial demand. Back then, instalment plans

made people feel richer than they were. Today, loan apps do the same job quietly, efficiently, and without the inconvenience of paperwork. Instalments are the new meditation. Debt is the new normal. Shame is the only thing no one is willing to put on instalment.

Meanwhile, the actual economy is under strain. Inflation remains high.

**The illusion of stability is maintained through small, delayed payments that create artificial demand. Back then, instalment plans made people feel richer than they were. Today, loan apps do the same job quietly, efficiently, and without the inconvenience of paperwork. Instalments are the new meditation. Debt is the new normal. Shame is the only thing no one is willing to put on instalment.**

The dollar is volatile. Imports are expensive. Banks are wobbling. And yet our social media feeds resemble a country on the verge of hosting Fashion Week. If the West has New York Fashion Week, then Bangladesh has Instagram, where the vibrant activity drowns out the warnings. The bigger danger is structural. Today's economy relies heavily on a few dominant corporations. In Bangladesh, everything from food to fintech to mobile banking to consumer imports is controlled by a

small circle of powerful players. When one stumbles, the shock spreads quickly. The system looks stable only because debt wears excellent makeup.

The truth is simple: Bangladesh is living in a period of aspiration without stability. A generation raised on global content and local constraints is trying to merge two incompatible realities. They have a caviar taste in an economy that frequently offers tap water. They have dreams shaped by YouTube and salaries shaped by budget speeches. The mismatch is not a moral failure; it is an economic one. This is not a call for austerity. It is a call for awareness. A nation cannot rely on borrowed confidence forever. Households cannot outsource their futures to instalment plans. And young people cannot build financial security on the shaky foundation of trends that expire faster than your bKash balance on the 29th of the month.

If we continue mirroring the worst patterns of the global economy, we may discover the consequences the hard way. The Great Depression did not begin with one dramatic moment. It began with millions of small decisions layered upon each other until the system cracked. Bangladesh still has time to step back from that cliff. But that requires honesty about where our economy stands, how our society consumes, and why appearances have become more important than affordability. Because the world of easy instalments and digital glamour may look modern, but underneath, it carries the same fragility that history has already warned us about. And history, unlike debt collectors, never sends just one reminder.