

Oversight without independence?

Replacing NTMC won't matter if government retains the helm

The Bangladesh Telecommunication (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025—approved on Wednesday by the council of advisers—appears to be little more than a repackaging of existing frameworks and practices, embellished with cosmetic changes. While the proposed dismantling of the controversial National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) is a long-awaited and widely supported step, its replacement with a body vested with nearly identical powers and under similar government control renders the reform largely superficial. Under the ordinance, a new entity, called the Centre for Information Support (CIS), would be established within the home ministry, effectively continuing the NTMC's role as an intelligence-gathering arm of the state responsible for internal security and law enforcement.

Reports indicate that the ordinance introduces a three-member "quasi-judicial council" tasked with reviewing, approving, amending, or rejecting interception requests. However, as the council is to be chaired by the minister of law, justice and parliamentary affairs, and will include the principal staff officer as well as the secretary of the home ministry as members, the ordinance effectively expands the government's ability to deploy surveillance against its citizens. It is difficult to believe that such a body could operate independently, free from political or institutional influence.

For years, the NTMC has faced criticism for alleged human rights violations and for facilitating illegal and unregulated surveillance, including enforced disappearances carried out by various security and law enforcement agencies. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has also documented the NTMC's involvement in several such cases in detail. Yet the new draft ordinance largely overlooks concerns repeatedly raised by human rights defenders. Expecting aggrieved individuals to seek redress through a so-called quasi-judicial council composed of senior government officials is neither convincing nor reassuring.

Although the ordinance includes some positive measures—such as banning internet shutdowns and criminalising unauthorised interception, data collection, retention, and misuse—it still falls far short of meaningful reform that aligns with international human rights obligations. Provisions promoting transparency in interception approvals and requiring council decisions to be auditable are commendable. However, so long as the government retains full control over the oversight mechanism, these measures risk becoming ineffectual. The replacement of the NTMC, coupled with the expanded scope of surveillance and weakened accountability in the approved draft, requires urgent reconsideration.

A genuinely independent oversight body with quasi-judicial authority can only exist when government functionaries are excluded from its composition. The original proposal—calling for one representative nominated by the president, one by the prime minister, and one by the speaker of parliament, alongside a retired High Court Division judge and a retired district and sessions judge—should be reinstated. Without such safeguards, the CIS risks becoming not a reform but a regression, potentially even more concerning than the NTMC it seeks to replace.

Corruption threatens clean energy drive

TIB study on solar power projects raises concerns

The transition to clean energy has emerged as an urgent priority for Bangladesh, yet it is disheartening to learn of rampant corruption and exploitation within the sector. A recent Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study has revealed that around TK 250 crore has been siphoned off through corruption in land acquisition and compensation in five solar projects, with irregularities spanning every stage from approval to completion. The study also highlights a significant gap between official cost estimates and actual spending.

These projects were designed to deliver affordable clean power and are already in operation. Landowners interviewed for the study alleged that coercive measures were used to pressure them to sell land at dismally low prices, and in some cases, they did not receive their promised compensation at all. Another six projects examined by the TIB show that their combined cost was TK 6,970 crore, far above the TK 4,043 crore that would have been expected as per the Bangladesh Power Development Board's estimate of the average costs of setting up solar plants. In other words, about TK 2,926 crore was overestimated compared to actual costs. Alarmingly, the study has found that the average electricity tariff of these projects is about \$0.124 per kilowatt-hour, which is significantly higher than tariffs in our neighbouring countries.

According to the TIB, a syndicate of plant officials, local land registration officials, union and upazila land office staff, middlemen, local public representatives, and even members of parliament were involved in the corruption. From the outset, vested interest groups exerted influence over policymaking and strategy formulation. The same networks reappeared during land acquisition and environmental clearance, leading to coordinated manipulation of compensation, leasing arrangements, and approval processes.

Such story of corruption during Awami League's tenure is widely known, but its impact on the renewable energy sector should particularly alarm policymakers. Renewables now account for about five percent of total generation capacity, with solar contributing more than 80 percent of that share. Solar remains a largely untapped resource to this day. Experts note that diversifying our solar approaches—such as floating photovoltaics, agrivoltaics, and advanced PV technologies—can expand capacity without displacing farmers or inflating costs, which can also address a lot of the irregularities identified by the study.

The interim government has set ambitious targets to raise the share of renewables to 20 percent by 2030 and 30 percent by 2041. But intention or initiation alone cannot deliver results. Current and future authorities must ensure proper execution as well. Land acquisition processes must be transparent, project costs must be subjected to timely review, and tariffs must be determined fairly. The promise of solar power will only be real if it meets proper planning and execution.

Persistent violence threatens our democratic transition

Anu Muhammad
is a former professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University.



ANU MUHAMMAD

In the early hours of December 19, horrific attacks were carried out on Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, and later on two cultural organisations, Chhayanaut and Udichi, along with Nalonda School. These incidents mark an unprecedented episode in Bangladesh's recent history. The attackers entered the buildings and deliberately destroyed documents, equipment, and valuable archives. There was widespread looting as well. Inside The Daily Star building, the lives of journalists and others, women and men alike, were put in grave danger. When New Age Editor Nurul Kabir tried to go inside to help rescue those trapped, he too was attacked. At the same time, a violent madness was unleashed against several institutions, homes, and individuals across different parts of the country. Bangladesh has rarely witnessed such a coordinated outbreak of violence against its cultural/intellectual heartlands.

As unthinkable as these events may seem, they were by no means sudden. For quite some time now, certain institutions have been repeatedly targeted through misleading information and aggressive rhetoric, with clear attempts to incite the public. These provocations came both from within the country and from abroad. It is therefore inconceivable that the government, intelligence agencies, or those who regularly monitor the situation were unaware of what was unfolding. The effort to manufacture tension and to create, or legitimise, an environment conducive to organised violence was unmistakable.

Following the killing of Inquilab Mancha leader Sharif Osman Hadi, this group became even more active in exploiting the situation. Yet within hours of the attempt on Hadi's life, ordinary citizens were analysing CCTV footage on social media and identifying suspects. Footage was collected and examined to determine who carried out the attack and how it was executed. At that time, however, no visible initiative came from the intelligence agencies or government

forces to shed light on the situation.

Instead, it was first claimed that the killer had crossed the border into India. Later, police statements suggested that there was no specific information confirming whether the accused had actually gone to India. Capitalising on this ambiguity and confusion after



PHOTO COLLAGE: STAR

Hadi's death, one act of destruction occurred after another, targeting pre-selected institutions and individuals.

After Hadi's death, intelligence agencies should have anticipated what kind of reaction might follow and who might seek to exploit the situation. On social media, some individuals, including certain leaders of a section of Islami Chhatra Shibir, were openly calling for violence. Other forms of provocation were also underway. None of this should have been unknown to the intelligence agencies. Yet, despite having so much information, such horrific incidents were allowed to unfold.

These attacks did not happen in a vacuum. For months, we have seen a pattern of shocking inaction by the government despite prior intelligence. We have also seen similar provocations leading to assaults on shrines, attacks on Baul singers, violence against minority communities, threats against women, obstruction of cultural activities, pressure on theatre and

music events, and attempts to shut down performances. Those involved have exerted immense pressure on artists and cultural practitioners. The same group has been linked to these acts time and again. They have been able to continue this violence because the government has so far failed to take effective action against the real perpetrators.

As a result, they now feel empowered, convinced that they can say and do whatever they please. We have seen instigators operating from abroad spreading violent hatred for months, openly calling for vandalism, terror, and attacks. What is astonishing is that, in many cases, when attacks are carried out in response to such

incidents, no action has been taken against the main instigators.

This points to a clear continuity in the government's role. That continuity suggests a certain leniency—and covert patronage—towards those who pursue discriminatory politics, spread terror and hatred in the name of religion or patriotism, and seek to obstruct democratic transition. Sometimes they have been benignly described as "pressure groups" in alleged attempts to legitimise them. No effective measures have been taken. As a result, terrorist activities erupted and continued in various parts of the country. In another case, the brutal killing of worker Dipu Chandra Das in Bhaluka—beaten mercilessly, set on fire, and hung from a tree on a false allegation of blasphemy—has been a horrifying experience for us all. In Lakshmipur, a BNP leader's home was locked and set ablaze, killing his seven-year-old daughter. These incidents are happening because the attackers assume that the government is on their side, or that there is no effective government at all.

In this context, it is worth recalling that not long ago, at the ceremony marking the signing of the July Charter, the chief adviser said that Bangladesh was entering a phase of "civilisation." Are these brutal acts examples of that "civilisation?"

In fact, those who are creating this savage, hateful, and violent situation are enemies of Bangladesh's democratic transition, enemies of the Liberation War, and enemies of the 2024 mass uprising. They want to push the dream of a discrimination-free Bangladesh in the opposite direction. They oppose women's independent participation, oppose cultural expression, and seek to suppress free and lively intellectual activities.

They want to create a society where people exist like robots and where violence is inflicted on those who differ in opinion, religion, gender, or identity. This experience delivers a stark message: years of authoritarian rule, plunder, and political opportunism have produced a dangerous, violent force within society. Without confronting this force, a democratic transition is impossible, and progress towards a discrimination-free Bangladesh cannot be achieved. To do so, united action by all democratic forces is essential—resisting discriminatory extremist forces at every level and expanding people-oriented intellectual, cultural, and political engagement.

Tarique Rahman's return and the weight of expectation

Azman Rahman
is a political commentator.

AZMAN RAHMAN

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman's return to Bangladesh marks a new chapter in his political life—a new innings that also reflects a broader transition towards second-generation leadership in national politics. His return matters not because of the size of the crowd that gathered to welcome him on Thursday, but because of the condition he returned to. For one and a half years, the political system operated with a visible absence at its centre. Leadership was often remote, authority fragmented, and accountability blurred. His return does not automatically alter these realities; it alters how people read them. It creates assurance where there had been uncertainty, and expectation where there had been drift.

After landing at Dhaka airport, he walked barefoot on the soil of his country after 17 years in exile, before going on to address a mammoth gathering. His message was brief: "I have a plan," he said. What followed was not explanation but repetition. Again and again, he returned to a single phrase: a secure Bangladesh. This emphasis was likely deliberate. Rather than offering a range of promises, he narrowed the focus to a single, overarching governing concern of the moment.

Political leaders repeat what they want the public to measure them against. In the present context, the security imperative is not an abstract ambition; it reflects a widely felt absence. Lawlessness has spread, mob behaviour has all but normalised, and enforcement has failed to keep pace.

So by repeatedly invoking peace and security, he framed the crisis not as ideological or developmental, but as basic and immediate. The logic implied sequence rather than solution: order must come before reform, and safety must precede stability.

Equally important was what he did not say. There was no language of revenge, no denunciation of rivals, no appeal to grievance. This absence

reduced, if not eliminated. People feel assured that someone is now on the ground and claiming responsibility, even if his claim has yet to be tested.

That assurance also feeds expectations about the upcoming election. For months, we have seen the political momentum stall amid leadership ambiguity. Khaleda Zia's withdrawal from active politics left party supporters uncertain, and

are a crucial part of their intended life trajectory.

Inside the party, however, assurance alone will not be enough. Leadership presence can improve order and discipline, but only if authority is properly and judiciously exercised. The BNP's recent record, marked by allegations of extortion and indiscipline following the July 2024 uprising, remains a source of concern. So, public trust will not be rebuilt through symbolism alone. Any commitment to a secure Bangladesh will be judged first by the internal conduct of party members.

Expectations beyond the party are already elevated. Many now assume that the election will indeed be held on time and return BNP to power with Tarique Rahman at its helm. This assumption raises hope which can help stabilise public mood in a context of insecurity. But it can also magnify disappointment if results do not follow.

Seventeen years of exile appear to have shaped a more measured political tone. The "plan" he refers to was likely developed through years of conversation with party workers, professionals, and citizens, even while he lived abroad. These discussions are reflected in the BNP's 31-point agenda, covering education, governance, and climate policy, among others. We will see how this plays out going forward.

In short, Tarique Rahman's return has not changed conditions on the ground; it has changed how many think about the future. What exists now is hope and assurance. Whether that hope hardens into trust will depend on actions that have yet to be taken. Until that happens, this will remain a new political chapter whose outcome remains very much up in the air.



Tarique Rahman addressing a gathering following his return from exile after 17 years, on December 25, 2025.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

did not change political conditions, but it helped reshape perceptions. In moments of uncertainty, rhetoric functions as reassurance. By avoiding a confrontational tone and returning instead to the measured language of security, he projected restraint. It conveyed a message of focused determination without promising immediate outcomes.

This matters because Bangladesh is passing through a period defined by anxiety and unpredictability. Public frustration is driven less by contested ideas than by a sense of insecurity. In such conditions, clarity of purpose can calm frayed nerves. Tarique Rahman's return has produced a sense of calm because unpredictability has been

doubts over Tarique Rahman's return deepened that uncertainty. His presence resolves the question of party leadership without resolving the question of outcome. It also allows people to imagine a path forward.

Within the BNP, this moment also signals a generational transition. Tarique represents second-generation leadership in a party long shaped by its founding figures. He is often described as a figure of pride for the party's younger supporters. This demographic reality matters. Younger voters generally tend to be less patient with disorder and less tolerant of the powers that be. Their expectations are practical rather than ideological. For them, security and predictability