

Bias allegations risk eroding public trust

EC must enforce the rules decisively and impartially

The allegations of administrative bias and the absence of a level playing field, as raised by three major political parties, are deeply concerning as these cast a shadow over the neutrality of the Election Commission. Such claims risk eroding public confidence in the electoral process as a whole and may discourage voters from turning up at polling centres on February 12. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these allegations could also be part of the strategies of competing parties, aimed at pre-empting what they fear could be a lenient approach by the commission towards their opponents.

These allegations first surfaced on social media, where videos showed postal ballots being handled in bulk by groups of people in some Middle Eastern countries, despite the ballots being intended for delivery to individual voters. The postal ballots themselves have also sparked controversy for displaying only electoral symbols, without the names of candidates or parties. The Election Commission's decision to take these complaints into cognisance and seek resolution through dialogue with all political parties is a welcome step, though it should have been taken earlier.

Other allegations are even more troubling. Reports of campaign workers collecting voters' personal information, including mobile financial transaction identifiers such as bKash numbers, raise serious concerns. In addition, the conduct of some superintendents of police (SPs) and deputy commissioners (DCs) at the field level has been questioned, with accusations of bias towards certain candidates or parties. Notably, all three major parties—BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and NCP—have been trading accusations and counter-accusations, in some cases against the same election officials. Some observers view this as a positive sign, suggesting that when every party claims to be aggrieved, none is receiving undue favour from the officiating “umpire.” Nevertheless, the EC and its functionaries are expected to uphold the highest standards of neutrality and fairness.

It must be said that the recent appointment of a senior election official to the board of directors of Biman Bangladesh Airlines—interpreted by critics as the government rewarding loyalists—did not help EC's image or credibility. It is therefore imperative that the EC doubles down on enforcing the electoral code of conduct strictly and evenly. There have been numerous reports of violations by political parties and individual candidates even before the start of the official campaign period, including the display of posters and festoons, the use of digital boards to convey thinly veiled campaign messages, the holding of rallies and public meetings under the guise of socio-cultural events, the exploitation of religious gatherings to promote individual candidates by seeking prayers and blessings, etc. Many of these actions constitute clear breaches of the commission's guidelines. However, its failure to address them promptly has been notable.

According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, 73 incidents across 27 districts have resulted in show-cause notices, cautions, and in some cases, financial penalties for violations of the code of conduct. It is incumbent upon the political parties to cooperate fully with the EC and refrain from both rule-breaking and unfounded allegations of bias. The EC, too, must act decisively and transparently to demonstrate that it remains a credible guarantor of electoral fairness.

Data do not provide safety assurance

Meaningful actions needed to improve law and order situation

Outlining the current state of law and order in the country, the interim government recently assured that the situation is “improving steadily,” pointing to policy engagement, police action, and official data. However, events unfolding across the country suggest a more troubling reality on the ground—criminals appear increasingly emboldened, and people still do not trust the police or security forces to protect them. The recent killing of a Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) officer in Sitakunda is another indicator of this breakdown. When even law enforcement officers are targeted so brazenly, how are citizens supposed to feel safe? Criminals do not act this way unless they believe the state's response will be weak or delayed.

The government's own figures acknowledge that an estimated 3,000 to 3,500 people lose their lives to violent crime each year. In January, there have been several killings cutting across geography, profession, and political affiliation. The statement from the interim has tried to contextualise violence against minorities, demonstrating that most incidents are criminal rather than communal—out of 645 incidents involving members of minority communities from 2025, “only” 71 of those were communal in nature. While this data matters, the distinction offers little comfort to victims. Whether driven by communal hatred, political rivalry, land disputes, or personal enmity, the outcome is the same. Where lives are lost, communities live in fear, which makes it difficult to maintain faith in the justice delivery system.

Besides, many people these days rely less on law enforcement and instead resort to mob “justice.” Meanwhile, several violent crimes have been committed by criminals with little fear of retaliation. Against such a backdrop, selective case numbers or statistics alone cannot assure people that the law and order situation is improving. Rather, they need the assurance to feel safe while walking home at night, running a business, reporting a crime, or resolving disputes without violence. That basic sense of safety feels increasingly out of reach now.

We urge the government to stop minimising the current crisis and to acknowledge that law and order has deteriorated and public confidence has been badly shaken. Restoring law and order must be an emergency priority, rather than a communications challenge to be managed. This requires visible, sustained, and proactive policing; swift and impartial investigations; public accountability for failures; and clear consequences for perpetrators, regardless of who they are or whom they are connected to. Just as importantly, the state must seek partnership with communities by listening to their fears, encouraging reporting, and rebuilding trust. This is particularly crucial ahead of the national election.

Without real acknowledgment and decisive action, the gap between official optimism and reality will continue to widen, leaving space for further violence, vigilantism, and fear. Restoring safety begins with telling the truth, and acting on it.

GLOBAL RISKS IN 2026

What Bangladesh and the Global South face



MACRO MIRROR

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The Global Risks Report 2026, published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), presents some of the stark realities of the world today. The report, published ahead of the WEF's Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland, assesses the threats countries will face in the immediate, short- and long-term. Based on a Perception Survey of more than 1,300 experts and leaders from government, business, academia, and civil society, and the Executive Opinion Survey of 11,000 business leaders from 116 countries, this report provides multi-stakeholder insights into the likelihood of various global risks and their impacts.

The report suggests the world is facing an “age of competition.” Multilateral frameworks for cooperation are weakening as major powers increasingly prioritise national strategies and leverage economic tools as instruments of power, thereby reducing mutual trust. Experts mentioned uncertainty as a greater threat than any single threat. Half of the respondents feel the outlook over the next two years is turbulent, and 57 percent expect it to remain so over the next decade. In fact, geo-economic confrontation has emerged as the top global risk, most likely to trigger a major crisis in 2026, replacing armed conflict and climate shocks at the top of the risk rankings. Created through the strategic use of economic tools—trade restrictions, tariff impositions, investment controls, currency policies, and supply chain limits—to gain a competitive advantage over other countries, geo-economic confrontation is now being used as a “weapon” in geopolitical rivalry.

This reordering of global priorities reflects a structural shift in which economic policy is no longer driven solely by efficiency and mutual benefits, but by a strategic power equation. Competition for supply chains, critical technologies, access to resources, and industrial leadership is intensifying. Economic statecraft is rapidly replacing traditional security confrontation as a key area for global competition.

In the short-term risk rankings, geoeconomic confrontation is followed by state-based armed conflict, extreme weather events, and then by societal

polarisation and misinformation and disinformation. Rising inequality, erosion of human rights, cyber insecurity and adverse outcomes of artificial intelligence (AI) are other important risks the report mentions.

Over the long term, in the next decade, environmental risks, including extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, and critical shifts in Earth systems, top the ranking. This



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

indicates that while geopolitical and economic confrontation dominate the immediate horizon, the existential threats of climate change and ecological collapse remain unresolved and severe.

The implications of the Global Risks Report 2026 are particularly crucial for Bangladesh and the Global South, because they have typically limited financial, institutional and strategic strengths to absorb systemic shocks. They are disproportionately exposed to climate impacts, more dependent on external trade and investment, and often lack diplomatic leverage to navigate geoeconomic rivalries.

In an era where economic policy is itself a battlefield, countries that are deeply integrated into global trade and investment but lack the scale to influence the rules face heightened

vulnerability. Trade fragmentation, supply chain disruptions, shifting standards, and barriers to investment can all significantly affect growth trajectories.

Climate vulnerability compounds this picture in most Global South regions, experiencing intensifying floods, droughts, cyclones, heatwaves, and sea-level rise. Adaptation costs are high, and access to climate finance remains limited. Failure to address these risks could lock many developing countries into cycles of disaster recovery rather than development.

Among social risks, inequality is one of the most interconnected with implications for social cohesion, political stability and trust in institutions. Misinformation and cyber insecurity can exacerbate divisions and erode governance capacity at a time

chronic exposure to flooding, sea-level rise, heatwaves, and salinity intrusion. Extreme weather events, identified as the top long-term risk in the WEF report, are the lived reality in Bangladesh and will continue to stress infrastructure, agriculture, water systems, and the urban environment.

Bangladesh is also highly sensitive to social and technological risk factors. The rising prominence of misinformation, cyber insecurity, and inequality in global risk rankings mirrors challenges in Bangladesh, where rapid digital adoption, urbanisation, and demographic change coexist with persistent inequity and governance gaps.

Among the top five risks identified by the Executive Opinion Survey, “crime and illicit economic activity” is ranked as the most serious risk for Bangladesh, followed by geoeconomic confrontation, inflation, economic downturn and rising debt. These five risks highlight the growing pressure on the country's economic and institutional foundations. Illicit financial flows, smuggling, cybercrime, and money laundering weaken governance and reduce public revenue. Intensifying global trade and technology rivalries expose Bangladesh to supply chain disruptions and market uncertainty. Persistent inflation erodes purchasing power. Slower growth threatens employment and poverty reduction. Rising public debt further constrains fiscal space and limits the government's ability to respond to future shocks.

To curb illicit economic activity, Bangladesh must strengthen law enforcement, financial intelligence, and regulatory oversight. A credible anti-inflation strategy should be pursued through close coordination between fiscal and monetary policy, so that government spending, borrowing and taxation do not undermine price stability. Prudent budget management, disciplined deficit financing, and effective interest rate policy must work together to anchor inflation expectations, stabilise the exchange rate and protect household purchasing power.

Export diversification, investment-friendly reforms, and proactive trade diplomacy can reduce geoeconomic vulnerabilities by lowering dependence on a few markets and products. A broader export base, easier business regulations, and stronger trade partnerships can help Bangladesh withstand global shocks, maintain market access, and attract stable long-term investment. Prudent debt management, better revenue mobilisation, and stronger institutions are critical to achieve macroeconomic stability and sustain long-term development.

US visa suspension: Green card pending, hope expired



MIND THE GAP

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The United States has announced that it is suspending immigrant visa processing for Bangladeshis. Not forever, it insists. Just for now. A pause. A reassessment. A temporary inconvenience. Much like when your phone freezes mid-update and politely informs you not to turn it off, even though your entire life is currently stuck behind a spinning wheel. This pause applies only to immigrant visas—the permanent kind—involving families, futures, and the radical idea of living in the same country as your spouse. Non-immigrant visas remain unaffected. Students are still welcome. Tourists can still queue for selfies. Temporary workers can still fill labour shortages, provided they remember to leave quietly afterwards. Permanence, however, has been flagged for further thought. This distinctive policy reflects a global shift.

The justification offered—a concern about misuse and welfare dependency—is familiar and carefully vague. These phrases float around immigration policy like incense, creating the impression of seriousness without the burden of evidence. Bangladeshis, it turns out, are suddenly a welfare risk. What is being paused here is not a process. It is a set of assumptions people were encouraged to build their lives around. Immigrant

visas are not impulse purchases. They involve years of paperwork, background checks, interviews, and waiting that require both patience and money. Many of the people affected are not applicants at the beginning of the queue—they have already been approved, and their lives are already halfway packed. Their children already know which country they are moving to, just not when.

This is where the pause stops being administrative and starts being borderline cruel. Legally, the United States can do this. Immigration law gives the executive sweeping discretion. Courts have repeatedly affirmed that no foreign national has a right to a visa, no matter how many conditions they satisfy. Approval does not equal issuance. Expectation does not equal entitlement. The law is clear. And that clarity is precisely the issue here. Because in almost every other area of public administration, inducing reliance matters. If a state sets criteria, approves compliance, and leads individuals to believe an outcome will follow, abruptly withdrawing that outcome demands justification in line with doctrines on legitimate expectation, procedural fairness, and proportionality. Immigration law, however, is the exception that swallows

the rule. It exists in a moral vacuum, and so families are told to wait. Again.

The most revealing aspect of the pause is who it does not affect. Temporary mobility remains welcome. You may come for a few years and study, work, spend, contribute and be useful. What raises concern is permanence, which means roots leading to rights or political presence. And political presence means people who stop being grateful and start being equal.

America, it seems, is comfortable with Bangladeshi labour but not with Bangladeshi families. There is also an uncomfortable racial logic that nobody wants to say out loud. Pauses are rarely framed as discrimination. They are framed as neutral administrative action. But neutrality does not mean evenly distributed harm. When entire categories of people are restricted while others move freely, policy becomes a mirror of fear rather than fact. Bangladeshis are not assessed as individuals in this process. They are assessed as probabilities. Overstayers. Dependants. Risks. Never mind that the same countries eagerly recruit Bangladeshi doctors during health crises and celebrate diversity at conferences. The enthusiasm cools when diversity asks for permanence.

Timing makes this worse. Children risk ageing out of eligibility. Spouses remain separated indefinitely. Parents wait through illnesses and birthdays, and funerals are attended over video calls. A pause with no end date is not neutral when life continues to move forward.

Back in Bangladesh, the American Dream is still being sold aggressively.

Coaching centres advertise pathways. Consultants promise a strategy. Families repeat advice to do things properly, follow the rules, and trust the process. Nobody mentions that immigration systems are not queues. They are gates. And gates open and close based on domestic politics that migrants have no influence over.

This pause also exposes a deeper hypocrisy. Bangladesh is routinely advised to improve governance, reduce migration pressure, and build opportunities at home. At the same time, when Bangladeshis attempt to migrate legally, through formal channels, following every rule, the system reminds them that legality does not guarantee welcome. It only guarantees compliance.

So, where does this leave Bangladeshi families, whose loved ones in the US completed all the immigration procedures? They are floating in a space where plans exist, but timelines do not. The pause may lift. Or it may quietly extend. Or it may be replaced by another review with a new name and the same effect. Until then, families will adapt, because adaptation is what we do best. Expectations will be lowered. Timelines will be redrawn. Children will be taught resilience instead of hope.

As America reassesses the application, like it always does, Bangladeshi families will survive. We always have. But let us stop pretending this is a neutral policy or harmless administration. This is power, exercised politely, legally, and without accountability, over people who did exactly what they were told. The real lesson here is not about visas. It is about trust.