The Daily Star

Govt must rein in digital lies before poll

Ongoing trend offers grim glimpse of the future of political disinformation

An investigation by this newspaper reveals that the digital sphere in the run-up to the February 12 election has been overrun by fake content. Between mid-December and mid-January, the volume of AI-generated disinformation aimed at swaying voters more than tripled. For observers of democracy in the digital age, Bangladesh is becoming a distressing test case. The technology to warp reality, once the domain of state actors with hefty budgets, is now available to anyone with a smartphone and a political grudge. Our investigation identified nearly 100 distinct pieces of AI-generated content in a single month, garnering 1.6 million engagements within the first 24 hours of being posted.

These digital lies also offer a map of the country's fractured political landscape. The fiercest digital crossfire is, unsurprisingly, between unofficial pro-BNP and pro-Jamaat-e-Islami forces. Pro-Jamaat actors seem to be the most prolific, while the BNP's digital surrogates often return fire using AI avatars. Meanwhile, remnants of the Awami League have been seen to be using AI often to manufacture sexually compromising images of female politicians and student leaders associated with the interim government.

As separate fact-checking reports illustrate, the appetite for deception does not require high-tech tools. Recently, fact-checkers debunked a widely shared video of President Mohammed Shahabuddin appealing for a fair election. The video was genuine, but it was from 2023. Similarly, fake photocards bearing the logos of news channels are circulating with fabricated reports of violence. This deluge of fake content suggests that the algorithm does not care whether a video was made by a neural network or simply dragged out of a three-year-old archive. It cares only that it is shared, and shared widely. In Bangladesh, where digital literacy has failed to keep pace with digital penetration, the "harm threshold"—the point at which online lies spark real-world violence—is dangerously low.

Against this backdrop, the response from tech giants remains woefully inadequate. While platforms like Facebook possess the tools to detect coordinated inauthentic behaviour, their enforcement in non-Western markets like Bangladesh is lethargic. So the authorities must hold tech giants accountable for their own terms of service. Dhaka should immediately establish a high-level, transparent working group with Meta, TikTok and YouTube to demand robust content moderation, particularly for the election period. It must insist that tech companies apply the same speed and rigour to removing harmful content in Bangladesh—specifically deepfakes that incite violence or suppress voting—as they do elsewhere. This should include requiring companies to publish weekly transparency reports specific to Bangladesh, detailing exactly which political advertisements and networks were removed and why.

The authorities must treat disinformation not merely as a digital nuisance, but as a contagion requiring urgent intervention. To stem the tide, the Election Commission should also direct cyber-security agencies to de-platform serial offenders, while simultaneously enlisting independent fact-checkers to build a rapid-response defence. This proactive stance is vital to dismantling viral falsehoods before they ignite a real crisis at this crucial juncture in Bangladesh.

Curbing leprosy must be a priority

Address funding gaps, strengthen facilities, end stigma

It is very concerning that leprosy continues to affect thousands of people in Bangladesh annually, despite the country having eliminated the disease as a public health concern nearly 30 years ago. With around 3,000 new cases detected every year, our goal of achieving zero leprosy prevalence by 2030 now appears uncertain. The persistence of the disease, coupled with related stigma, funding shortages and institutional neglect, exposes serious gaps in our public health response. According to a recent report by this daily, 13 districts in the country are still heavily affected by leprosy infection. In the first nine months of last year, 2,640 new cases were reported, while 3,519 cases were recorded in 2024 and 3,639 the year before. The National Leprosy Programme under the health directorate has played a crucial role in identifying patients and providing treatment, and a national strategic plan for 2023-2030 is in place, but these efforts are being undermined by structural and financial constraints. Reportedly, after the sectoral programme expired last year, essential activities such as training, surveillance, and capacity-building have stalled, with operations continuing largely on interim support from the World Health Organization. Many sanctioned posts remain vacant, weakening field-level detection and follow-up. The consequences of this neglect are visible in the Sylhet Leprosy Hospital, the country's largest specialised facility to treat the disease, which operates under severe strain, with crumbling infrastructure and acute staff shortages. Only a fraction of its beds are usable and diagnostic services have been suspended due to a lack of personnel. Stigma remains another major barrier. Many patients are reluctant to disclose symptoms or seek care due to fear, superstition, and social exclusion. Tea garden workers and other vulnerable groups are still the hardest hit and need targeted awareness and support. As health experts have emphasised, eliminating leprosy requires more than medical treatment; it demands sustained awareness campaigns involving communities, the media, and local leaders. If the government is serious about meeting its 2030 target, it must treat leprosy elimination as a priority. This means ensuring stable funding for the National Leprosy Programme, filling vacant posts, strengthening surveillance, and urgently upgrading specialised facilities like the Sylhet Leprosy Hospital. At the same time, coordinated efforts between the government and NGOs to end stigma are essential.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

1996 military coup in Niger

On this day in 1996, Colonel Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara led a successful military coup in Niger against the democratically elected government of President Mahamane Ousmane.

Can we afford such a steep public-sector pay hike?

MACRO MIRROR

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Views expressed in this article are the
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The Ninth National Pay Commission formed by the interim government recently recommended a salary increase for government employees in the range of 100-142 percent. While this increase is meant to bring huge relief to the government employees, policymakers must review a few important issues in this connection.

First, there is no denying that government employees have been hit hard by the inflation, persistently high for three years, as much as everyone else in Bangladesh. The last major review that the government pay scale saw was in 2015; since then, the cost of living has risen sharply. A salary adjustment is, therefore, justified, but the scale and timing of the proposed increase require critical consideration. The proposed pay scale will cost the government an additional Tk 1.06 lakh crore every year. It is a major fiscal decision taken at a time when the country's public finances are already heavily strained; the economy is under pressure due to rising debt, weak revenue collection, and growing expenditure obligations. The key question here is whether the government can afford this additional expense.

Second, where will the funds for increased salaries come from? Bangladesh's current fiscal space is extremely limited. The tax-GDP ratio stood at only 6.8 percent in FY2025, one of the lowest in the world. Indeed, this ratio has been declining, indicating a weak domestic resource mobilisation capacity. During the first half of FY2026, the shortfall of revenue collection is Tk 46,000 crore. Given the National Board of Revenue's (NBR) current capacity, it is highly unlikely that this gap can be closed by the end of the ongoing fiscal year.

Meanwhile, public expenditure pressures are increasing. The government continues to take bank loans, which is building its debt burden. As of November 2025, net credit to the government sector is Tk 5,53,910 crore, which is 26.28 percent higher than that in November 2024. External debt stands at $112 billion as of September 2025. State-owned enterprises, especially in the power sector, have accumulated huge unpaid bills. The Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) has to pay about Tk 20,000 crore to private power companies. In addition, the government has to inject Tk 20,000 crore into the newly merged Islami Bank to improve its financial health.

These commitments must be met.

Third, this pay scale increase will impact the composition of the national budget. A large share of Bangladesh's budget already goes towards operational costs, such as salaries, allowances, and pensions of government employees. As this share increases further, the space for development spending shrinks. This has been the trend over the last few years, and it directly affects funding for health, education, social safety nets, skills development, science, technology, and innovation. These sectors are essential for improving productivity, reducing poverty, and preparing the country for future challenges.

Fourth, this salary hike also carries inflationary risks. When there is more cash in people's hands, overall demand in the economy rises. In an economy with existing supply constraints, this can push prices even higher. Such an inflation will hurt people outside the government payroll, particularly private sector workers, informal workers, farmers, and small businesses. It will also undermine the central bank's effort to curtail inflation through tight monetary policy.

Fifth, inequality is another major concern. While the government's main objective should be to reduce inequality through various fiscal measures, such a salary revision will cause more inequality. Government employees will benefit directly from higher salaries, but most private sector workers will not. The private sector is already under pressure due to high borrowing costs, poor infrastructure, corruption, weak governance, and skill shortages. The government has been failing to improve these conditions. As a result, the gap between public and private sector incomes will likely widen further, exacerbating inequality in an already unequal society.
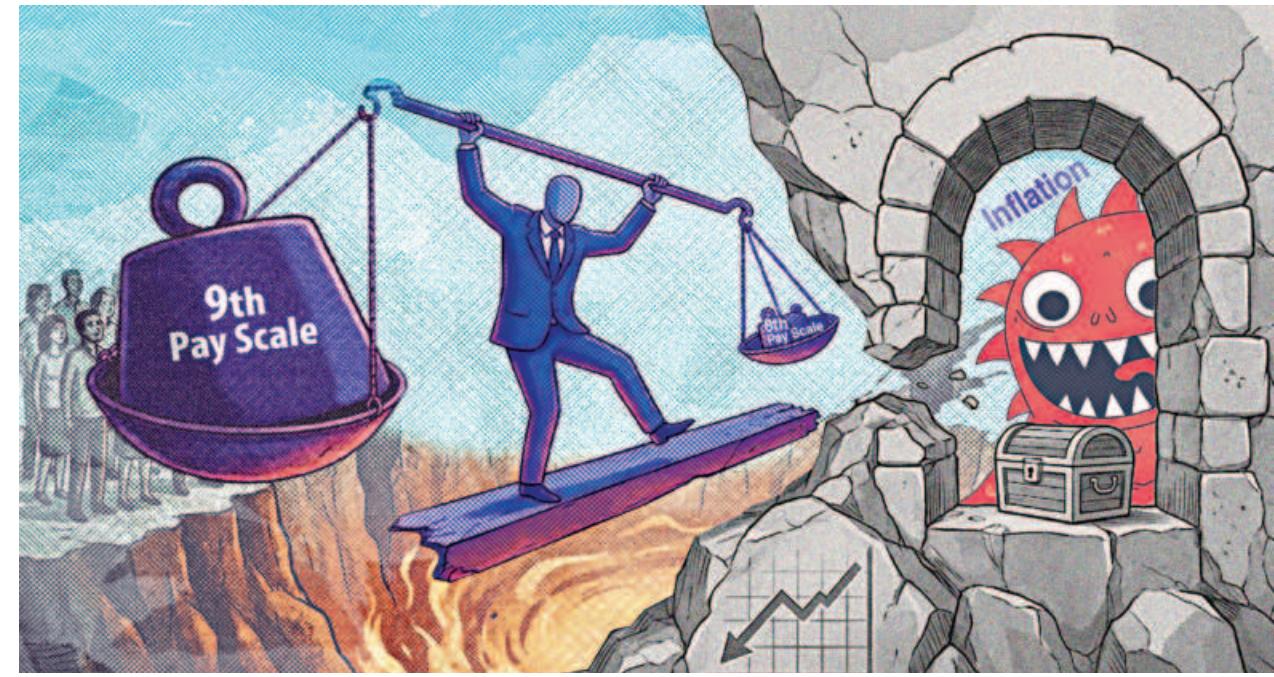
Sixth, whenever government salaries are raised, one familiar argument is repeated: higher pay will reduce corruption. Unfortunately, this argument does not hold up in reality. Corruption is not simply a result of low salaries; it is a structural and institutional problem. Bangladesh has revised government pay scales several times in the past, yet corruption has not declined. Government employees are paid from the taxpayers' money; their duty is to provide services to the citizens of the country. Yet, in many cases, people are forced to pay bribes to receive even basic services. Evidence of corruption regularly emerges from various government departments and ministries.

To uproot corruption, institutions must be strengthened. Governance must improve. Rules must be enforced. Honest officials must be rewarded, and corrupt officials must be punished without political interference. Without accountability, higher salaries risk becoming an additional benefit on top of existing informal income from corruption, rather than a deterrence.

There is also a deeper issue of political economy at play. Successive governments appear reluctant to reform the civil service or hold powerful officials accountable. Politicians often seem wary of the bureaucracy. But government employees are meant to implement government policies, not operate above the policymakers. If the government truly believes in zero tolerance for corruption, that policy must apply to everyone.

The uncomfortable reality is that many political leaders themselves have benefited from weak governance and corrupt systems. This undermines the moral authority needed to enforce reforms. As a result, salary increases are often easier to implement than deeper, more difficult institutional changes.

The newly elected government following the February 12 national election will inherit this difficult situation. It will have to decide how to finance higher salaries while also meeting promises on social welfare, development, and economic stability. Under the current fiscal framework, it is extremely difficult to fully implement these salary increases without causing serious economic strain.

A more realistic approach would

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

be to implement any salary revision gradually, in phases, linked to revenue performance and governance reforms. Lower-level employees may be paid first, given their economic circumstances. At the same time, urgent efforts are needed to strengthen tax administration, widen the tax net, improve public spending efficiency, and reform institutions. Without these steps, a large salary hike risks becoming a populist decision with long-term economic costs.

In the end, the debate is not about denying government employees a fair pay. It is about being fair to the entire population and responsible to the economy. Fiscal sustainability should be a key consideration in undertaking major fiscal decisions. Salary increase should be tied to broader economic conditions.

Why internet access should be recognised as a fundamental right

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In July 2024, Bangladesh experienced one of the most consequential internet shutdowns in its history. What began as a state response to escalating student protests quickly spiralled into a nationwide blackout that lasted for over two weeks, paralysing communication, commerce, education, and emergency services. The all-encompassing effect was a stark reminder that the internet is no longer a luxury, but the backbone of our daily life. The shutdown disrupted livelihoods, endangered lives, and exposed the fragility of rights in a digital-dependent society, resulting in revenue losses amounting to around $1.2 billion.

So, should access to the internet be recognised as a fundamental right? The answer is an unequivocal yes.

The internet has evolved far beyond its origins as a mere communication tool. Today, it is the primary enabler of political, socio-economic, and legal rights. Citizens rely on the internet to engage in democratic processes, for accessing information, participating in public debate, monitoring government actions, and utilising government services. During the July 2024 shutdown, Bangladeshis were cut off from real-time updates, unable to verify information, and deprived of the transparency essential for democratic accountability. When political rights depend on digital infrastructure, denying internet access translates to political disenfranchisement.

From online classes to mobile banking, job applications to telemedicine, the internet is the gateway to opportunities. Bangladesh has built a thriving ecosystem of freelancers, entrepreneurs, and small businesses dependent on connectivity. The shutdown in July 2024 froze mobile financial services (MFS), halted online marketplaces, and left students stranded mid-semester.

Freedom of expression and the right to information are meaningless without access to the platforms where modern discourse takes place. The blackout silenced millions, not through censorship of content but through the elimination of the medium itself. In a digital-first world, the absence of connectivity becomes a direct assault on fundamental freedoms.

Several philosophical and legal frameworks support the argument that internet access must be elevated to the status of a fundamental right. From a utilitarian perspective, universal internet access maximises societal welfare. Studies consistently show that connectivity boosts GDP, enhances labour productivity, and expands access to essential services. The 2024 shutdown demonstrated the effects of being completely cut off: economic losses ran into millions, supply chains were disrupted, and digital services collapsed. With the utilitarian tenet being "the greatest good for the greatest number," ensuring uninterrupted access becomes a moral imperative.

At present, one must be connected digitally to participate in society politically, economically, and culturally. Without internet access, individuals are effectively excluded from national conversation. Legal scholars argue that when the absence of an enabler (such as the internet) prevents the exercise of fundamental freedoms, the enabler itself becomes a right.

The shutdown also exposed the unevenness of Bangladesh's digital landscape. The digitally literate found workarounds, like virtual private networks (VPNs), alternative networks, or travelling to connected zones, while rural and marginalised communities were left completely cut off. This mirrors the digital divide seen in under-developed nations where lack of access entrenches structural disadvantages.

Governments often adopt a "wait and see" approach, treating connectivity as a market-driven service rather than a public good. But the digital divide will not close on its own. States have an obligation to build infrastructure, ensure affordability, and protect access. In Bangladesh, where digital services underpin everything from remittance to education, this obligation is even more pressing.

International bodies, like the United Nations, have affirmed that internet access is essential for the enjoyment of human rights. Yet, these declarations remain "soft laws", normative but unenforceable. Without binding legal frameworks, states can continue to shut down the internet with impunity. If states claim sovereignty over digital spaces, such as via regulating platforms, taxing digital services, and policing online content, they must also guarantee citizens' access to those spaces. Sovereignty without responsibility becomes authoritarianism.

Recognising internet access as a fundamental right is not a symbolic gesture, it is a practical necessity. The consequences of disconnection are too severe to ignore. States need to treat connectivity as essential infrastructure, like water or electricity, protected by law and insulated from political manipulation. A rights-based approach to internet governance is the only way to ensure that every citizen, regardless of geography, class, or political context, can participate fully in the digital age. The future of democracy, development, and dignity depends on it.