

Repealing NHRC ordinances raises questions

It has put a dent in public trust

Five now-former members of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in an open letter, recently expressed their misgivings about the repeal of three ordinances (or variations) related to the NHRC passed between 2024 and 2025, and the reinstatement of the NHRC Act of 2009. The reinstatement would allow government forces to investigate allegations of their own human rights violations. This is quite disappointing as we had expected that the new ordinance, if passed as law, would give the NHRC the independence and capacity it lacked throughout the Awami League regime.

Under the reinstated 2009 act, the NHRC is not authorised to investigate allegations against security forces. The former commission has so far taken cases on issues such as child marriage, violence against women, protection of the rights of marginalised communities and migrant workers, etc. While these are crucial for any human rights organisation to address, the fact that it does not have the power to investigate allegations against law enforcement agencies leaves it significantly handicapped. The recently resigned commissioners have warned that the repeal of the ordinances means that deaths related to the July uprising would be investigated by forces against whom the allegations have been made.

The law minister has said that the new ordinance contained weaknesses and that a new law was in the offing that would be drafted after consultations with stakeholders and further review. According to the outgoing commissioners, the repealed 2025 ordinances had been drafted after consultations with 600 stakeholders. Why couldn't the ordinances have been kept, with amendments to any weaknesses made later, if necessary, in parliament? Three ordinances related to the Human Rights Commission have also been repealed. Two were on the prevention and remedy of enforced disappearance, with maximum punishment for perpetrators of the crime. These were groundbreaking and gave hope that, finally, victims of enforced disappearances and their families would get justice, no matter how powerful the perpetrators. They were also drafted to put an end to such horrific crimes carried out by government forces.

Under the 2009 law, the commission's chairman and members were appointed by a selection committee dominated by government representatives, including the law minister, home minister, chairman of the Law Commission, cabinet secretary, a ruling party member and one from the opposition. The now-repealed ordinances aimed to change this by stipulating that the selection committee would be chaired by a judge of the Appellate Division (nominated by the chief justice) and members would include the cabinet secretary, one lawmaker from the ruling party and one from the opposition, a university professor, a civil society representative, a journalist and a representative of an ethnic minority. Reinstating the 2009 act may allow for a revival of political appointments, again creating a conflict of interest.

The prime minister has reiterated on many occasions his government's commitment to upholding the rule of law and ensuring justice for all. Repealing ordinances aligned with such goals seems contradictory and does little to gain public trust.

Farmers' card rollout a positive step

Govt must ensure fairness and transparency in the scheme

We welcome the launch of the Farmers' Card programme by the government, which is a timely and encouraging step towards providing the much-needed support to the millions of farmers in the country. In its pre-pilot phase, 22,065 marginal farmers across 11 upazilas have each received Tk 2,500 directly in their mobile wallets. As part of the BNP's election pledges, following the initiative like the Family Card, this programme has the potential to ease farmers' access to essential inputs such as seeds, irrigation, and credit. However, as with any large-scale welfare initiative, its success will depend on how effectively the government can implement it and safeguard the scheme against mismanagement, corruption and political bias.

Reportedly, the programme will cover small, marginal, medium, large, and landless farmers, as well as fish farmers, livestock rearers, and dairy producers. The government plans to expand the coverage to 2.75 crore farmers over the next five years. Achieving this goal will require careful planning. First, its beneficiary selection process must be fair and transparent. Past experiences with agricultural subsidies and support schemes have shown how political favouritism and weak verification systems can lead to serious inclusion and exclusion errors. Selection, therefore, must be based on clear, verifiable criteria, free from political influence or local-level manipulation. As the government has indicated that the programme will cover a wide spectrum of farmers, it must be matched by careful targeting to ensure that the most vulnerable farmers are prioritised.

Another key challenge would be to ensure that financial assistance translates into meaningful benefits. Despite substantial public spending—over Tk 17,000 crore annually in subsidies—our farmers continue to grapple with rising input costs, climate risks, and volatile market conditions. A one-off transfer of Tk 2,500, while helpful, is unlikely to address these challenges. For the programme to be truly transformative, it must evolve into a comprehensive support system, integrating subsidies with access to low-interest credit and real-time agricultural advisory services. Moreover, a unified agricultural database, as often recommended by experts, could help streamline support across ministries, reduce duplication, and enhance efficiency.

Ultimately, the Farmers' Card programme's impact will depend on how it is carried out. The government must ensure that implementation remains efficient, free from partisan bias and corruption so that the programme is not derailed from its goal. Farmers should be able to access their cards and benefits without harassment or unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. If delivered properly and transparently, this initiative could significantly strengthen our national economy. Lastly, the government must ensure that this initiative does not fall prey to the same governance failures that have undermined similar programmes in the past.

The march of the microfascist

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Sushmita S Preetha is a writer, researcher, and organiser.



SUSHMITA S PREETHA

In Shahbagh, a group of friends sat at a tea stall on an otherwise unremarkable evening on April 10, somewhere between the rhythms of the city and the anticipatory hum of Pahela Baishakh. They were not doing anything that could be described as public controversy. They were, by all available accounts, simply there. Visible, perhaps in ways that rendered them legible to others as something else. That, it turns out, was sufficient.

A crowd gathered under the banner of "Azadi Andolon." The slogans, each more incendiary than the other, left little room for ambiguity, and the sequence that followed was equally precise: identification, labelling, escalation, and then, almost predictably, assault. The violence was filmed, amplified, encouraged, and crucially, unimpeded in the immediate sense that matters—within a few yards of the Shahbagh Police Station.

The following day, in Kustia, a Sufi pir was killed within the confines of his own dargah after the circulation of an old video, apparently for hurting religious sentiments. Here, too, there was police presence as well as a prior warning. Here, too, the line between anticipation and prevention proved to be more porous than one might expect from a state that continues to insist upon its authority.

There is something distinctly uncomfortable about how quickly all of this begins to feel familiar. Each new case appears to follow a pattern we have already seen, already debated, and, in some sense, already accommodated.

For years now, accusations of "hurting religious sentiments" have acted as a volatile currency in Bangladesh's public sphere. The legal architecture surrounding such claims—especially the broad and ambiguously worded provisions of laws like the former Digital Security Act—has ensured that offence remains both subjective and actionable. One does not need to prove actual harm so much as simply claim it.

Under the Sheikh Hasina government, this elasticity was repeatedly weaponised. Teachers, students, performers, and ordinary citizens were drawn into legal and extralegal processes on the basis of claims that were often unverifiable, and almost always amplified. As

of early 2024, approximately 528 cases had been filed under the DSA specifically for offenses related to "hurting religious sentiments," according to data from the Centre for Governance Studies. Of course, no one ever quite figured out what hurting religious sentiment actually entailed. But with each case, a certain logic took hold—that the assertion of offence, particularly when aligned with majoritarian sentiment, could justify both state action and public hostility. Those accused were as likely



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

to be "protected" through detention as they were to be prosecuted, while those mobilising outrage operated with far less scrutiny. From Ramu to Nasiragar to Muradnagar, we saw entire communities being attacked on the basis of fabricated claims, their homes burnt or ransacked. Over time, the threshold for injury lowered, while the range of permissible responses expanded without meaningful containment.

Then came the post-uprising interim period, where we saw a disturbing revival of coercive orthodoxy. The interim government allowed, if not actively enabled, ultra-conservative forces to expand their reach and redraw the boundaries of what could be done in public view, often through the convenient alignment of religion and populist sentiment. Those who had previously operated with a degree of caution began to move with increasing

confidence, carrying out their own forms of sovereign justice in broad daylight, at times with announcement of prior intent.

It is hard to forget how Dipu Chandra Das, accused of insulting the Prophet, was framed and later beaten mercilessly through the streets, hauled for over a kilometre, tied to a tree upside down on a busy highway, and set alight before a cheering crowd. Or how, in Rajbari, the grave of Nurul Haque—known locally as "Nurul Pagla"—was dug up, his remains exhumed and burned in public, an act of the violence of which extended beyond the body to the very idea of sanctity. In Cumilla's Homna upazila, multiple shrines—those of Kafil Uddin Shah, Abdu Shah, Kalai Shah, Hawali Shah—were attacked in a single village last September.

Between August 29, 2024, and April 11 this year, more than a hundred mazars and shrines across the country

were attacked, vandalised, or looted, according to findings by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS). Meanwhile, at least 197 people were killed in incidents described as mob violence in 2025, up from 128 the year before. By the interim government's own admission, there were at least 46 incidents of temple-related violence. Dozens of cultural festivals were cancelled under duress, to say nothing of the countless daily acts of harassment that rarely entered official records. Entire communities (the "others") began to anticipate violence as part of ordinary public life. Anytime people protested such acts, they were met with a familiar accusation—disloyalty to the uprising, foreign allegiance, or the charge of being "India's dala"—a discursive move that shifted attention away from violence and onto the supposed impurity of those who objected to it.

Primary school admission tests would be a misguided step

Tamanna Akther Shanta has graduated from the Institute of Education and Research at the University of Dhaka.



TAMANNA AKTHER SHANTA

A recent proposal to base primary school admission on tests has raised concern as critics argue that forcing young children—who are just starting to explore and understand the world around them—into competitive exams ignores the true purpose of education. If children must pass an admission test to enter primary school, then what role is the school supposed to play? Especially at the primary level when children are meant to achieve basic skills in literacy, numeracy, and other life skills. People who support admission tests for entry into primary education believe that such tests can help identify "good students" at an early age. They also argue that admissions based on merit will ensure better academic outcomes and maintain institutional standards. However, this system raises serious concerns as it encourages labelling students as either "meritorious" or "weak" from a very early age and this widely used custom has a considerable psychological cost too. When students enter school with a competitive spirit instead of excitement, they become heavily reliant on coaching centres and private tutors very early on and

learning becomes stressful, instead of being joyous.

This not only affects children's mental well-being but also distorts the purpose of primary education. If they fail to secure a seat in so-called prestigious institutions, they are considered failures and many parents exacerbate this situation by being emotionally and verbally heavy on the children. Sometimes, parents keep pushing the children to attend multiple admission tests into contemporarily considered prestigious institutions, even if it costs their children a full academic year. This is unreasonable and illogical yet, deeply entrenched into Bangladeshi society. But we should remember that an admission test cannot measure a child's true potential. Just as different flowers bloom at different times, children also develop at different paces.

If we were to examine the assessment process through a critical lens, the issue lies in the nature of the assessment system itself. There are various modes of assessment, yet written examinations are only one form that has been traditionally deployed to assess children. Relying

solely on written exams to measure all children is theoretically flawed. A child who does not perform well in a written exam for certain reasons cannot be labelled as "less intelligent" or a "weak student." That same child may excel in creativity, performance, communication, or artistic skills. When we try to assess all children in the same way, we overlook the fact that

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every human is unique. Additionally, these tests often measure privilege, not potential. Research in child development consistently shows that a child's performance is shaped by various factors—for instance—environment, parental support, financial resources, and access to preparation rather than innate intelligence. As a result, admission tests support social inequality instead of promoting merit. Children from privileged backgrounds generally perform better because they have better opportunities, not because

Then came the BNP government which, in its first week, proclaimed it would stop "mob" violence, terming the interim government as "weak" for having failed to do so. The attacks last week were allowed to unfold under the government's watch, raising a question that cannot be deferred indefinitely: does the problem lie only in what was inherited, or also in how it continues to be handled?

These incidents mark the rise of a new politics—one where small men with clubs decide, in full view, who may pray, who may sing, who may sit at a tea stall, and who is allowed to belong. These incidents, in effect, are coordinated interventions into our socio-cultural landscape, revealing a decided shift (long in the making, of course, long before August 2024) from a society of micro-fascist coexistence to one where microfascists patrol the boundaries of belonging.

By calling such incidents "mob" violence, we miss their social and political character. A mob suggests spontaneity, excess, or a temporary breakdown of order. But what we are witnessing is far more durable and insidious: the production and proliferation of the microfascist. He is an intimate executor of a wider moral order now taking shape in plain view.

Microfascism does not necessarily operate through a centralised ideological project, nor does it require formal alignment with any singular doctrine. It takes shape through repeated dispersed acts that gradually realign sentiment, with religion providing both the language of justification and the terrain upon which authority is exercised. The result resembles, in effect, a vernacular form of authoritarianism—less concerned with doctrinal coherence than with regulating behaviour and disciplining difference, narrowing the space within which alternative ways of being can exist.

Ending impunity for the crimes committed against communities remains urgent, of course, and the government must, at long last, take exemplary action against those who incite and carry out such attacks. But the task runs deeper than enforcement alone. We are confronting a broader transformation, in which the pluralistic, improvisational textures of daily life are steadily giving way to something narrower and more punitive: the everyday social instinct to police the other. We need to understand microfascism as a method that is absorbed into ordinary life, enacted in small acts, until it no longer appears exceptional at all. And confronting it requires, above all, a reckoning with the microfascist within.