

# When a cartoon becomes a crime, again



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In August 2024, shortly after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime, BNP's then Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman made a statement that earned him rare political capital, particularly in progressive and liberal circles. He shared a satirical cartoon of himself by Mehedi Haque on Facebook, saying, "I am deeply gratified that the freedom to draw political cartoons has been restored in Bangladesh." He recalled how, before 2006, cartoonists like Shishir Bhattacharjee had freely caricatured him and his mother. He contrasted this openness with the repression under the Awami League, where artists such as Ahmed Kabir Kishore faced enforced disappearance, torture, and imprisonment for their work. By publicly embracing satire directed at political figures, including himself, Tarique projected a sense of democratic ease: that under a BNP-led dispensation, even sharp political criticism and caricature would be tolerated rather than punished.

But less than two years later, and just over two months into BNP's tenure in government following the 13th parliamentary election, that projection is becoming harder to reconcile with the unfolding events.

On April 18, as the BNP government marked its first 60 days in office and released a list of "60 notable initiatives," it prominently highlighted the assurance of freedom of expression, with senior leaders speaking confidently of an environment of "maximum freedom of speech," where dissenting voices could circulate without fear. However, even before that claim was formally made, reality was already moving in the opposite direction. On the night of April 17, the Detective Branch of police arrested content creator AM Hasan Nasim from his rented home in Dhaka's Agargaon area. His offence? Sharing an AI-generated satirical cartoon that depicted Chief Whip

Nurul Islam Moni serving whales and sharks to three political figures: Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, Opposition Leader Shafiqur Rahman, and NCP lawmaker Nahid Islam. The image was a direct, humorous reference to Moni's own joking remark in parliament on April 10 about serving such items at lunch. The cartoon contained no private information, threats or sexual content. Nevertheless, it was labelled as content used for "blackmail" and "spreading misleading information."

A BNP activist named Nazrul Islam, a self-described supporter of Moni, filed a case with Gulshan police station on April 18, under sections 25 and 27 of the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025. Section 25 addresses sexual harassment or blackmail, while Section 27 concerns threats to state security or sovereignty. Legal observers noted that the cartoon matched neither description. The complaint also violated Section 40(l) of the ordinance, which restricts filing such cases to the aggrieved person, someone with written authorisation from them, or a law enforcement officer. Nazrul Islam had no such authorisation. Despite this, police detained Nasim before the FIR was fully formalised, and he was sent to jail. Although Section 25 is bailable, he was initially denied bail. It was only yesterday that a Dhaka court granted him bail on a bond of Tk 1,000, while the case itself remains in place.

In parliament, NCP MP Hasnat Abdullah criticised the arrest on Sunday as an attack on free speech, while Chief Whip Moni stated that if the matter was solely about criticising him or the government through a cartoon, the person should be released, though he also called for investigation into other alleged activities.

This pattern is not limited to cartoonists alone. Between March 26 and April 18, at least five ordinary social media users,

including Nasim, have been shown arrested under similar provisions for expressing dissent through satire, criticism, or political commentary, according to a *Manab Zamin* report. This development invites a sober assessment of continuity rather than change.

The trajectory began with the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006, and was dramatically expanded under the Awami League through the Digital Security

and coercion remained largely intact. The power to arrest, search, and detain on broadly defined grounds continued to raise serious concerns about abuse.

The July uprising was, in large part, a collective rejection of that system of fear and arbitrary detention.

Under Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, the interim government had a historic opportunity to break the pattern. It repealed

bypassed. Courts showed limited inclination to intervene quickly.

Overall, the institutional culture, where the sensitivities of those in power take precedence, appears unchanged from previous regimes. In fact, just about two months after the formation of the government, at least two people have been sent to prison over just drawing, publishing, or sharing satirical cartoons on Facebook, according to a BBC report. This reveals a deeper systemic failure that spans governments.

But cartoons are not blackmail or threats to sovereignty; they are a legitimate, often healthy way for citizens to hold power accountable and highlight absurdity. When even a drawing based on a public official's own words leads to arrest and detention, it tells us that the regime is not confident—it is brittle.

Of course, this is still early days. It is not realistic to expect deeply entrenched political habits and power structures to be undone within just 60 days. But if the government is serious about course correction, the first priority must be to avoid complacency and to resist the temptation of treating early public optimism as unconditional endorsement. The public mood may still be hopeful, but it is not uncritical. In Bangladesh's political history, that distinction has never been trivial.

What is required now is restraint rather than triumphalism, and reflection rather than rhetorical confidence. And if Prime Minister Tarique Rahman truly meant what he said about welcoming criticism and satire, that commitment must now be demonstrated through practice, not weakened by the actions of those governing under his party's leadership or by the excesses of their overenthusiastic supporters at the grassroots level.

To that end, releasing Nasim without delay, withdrawing the flawed case, and issuing firm instructions against misuse of the Cyber Security ordinance would be essential first steps towards restoring credibility. Genuine progress will also require more: a substantive overhaul or repeal of the problematic sections of the ordinance to prevent its repeated weaponisation against dissent and humour. Until then, the aspiration for restored freedom of expression remains more declarative than real.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

Act, 2018. In practice, it became a sweeping instrument for policing online expression. Journalists, activists, students, and ordinary users were routinely charged for "offensive" or "false" content, often through complaints initiated by political actors aligned with those in power. Arrests frequently preceded investigation, and detention often followed before legal scrutiny could catch up.

The law's vague provisions, particularly around defamation, "hurting religious sentiments," and "misleading information," enabled systematic abuse. The cases of cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore and writer Mushtaq Ahmed became defining symbols of this era; Mushtaq's death in custody further intensified scrutiny of the law itself.

In response to sustained criticism, the statute was later rebranded as the Cyber Security Act, 2023. While some penalties were reduced and certain provisions adjusted, its core architecture of discretion

the Cyber Security Act, but introduced the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025, which retained many of the same broad and elastic provisions. Sections 25 and 27 kept language flexible enough to encompass satire and criticism. Limited tweaks were made, but there was no deep structural reform—no narrowing of definitions, no removal of criminal penalties for protected speech, and no robust safeguards against misuse. By opting for rebranding over overhaul, the interim period left the repressive tools largely available for future use.

And now those tools are being employed in defence of BNP's own leaders. The party that condemned the Awami League's practices is invoking the unreformed ordinance against a cartoon that echoes the very creative freedom the prime minister once publicly embraced. Police responded to a partisan complaint without proper legal standing. Procedural safeguards were

## Saving ourselves through Earth Day



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Imagine a summer day in Dhaka: the temperature is soaring but running water is scarce. There is infrastructure in place but the groundwater has dropped so far that the system cannot keep up with demand. This is a reality many Dhaka dwellers have to grapple with on a regular basis.

Dhaka's groundwater levels have been steadily depleting for years. In a city where almost 70 percent of the water supply comes from groundwater, that is a terrifying reality. Some 2,000 million litres of water are extracted in Dhaka every day and by 2050, Dhaka's groundwater levels are expected to fall to 100 metres. The situation is equally dire across the country. For example, in Chapainawabganj, water drawn from ultra-deep wells are often too saline for drinking while deep aquifers are contaminated by arsenic. For many households, this means choosing between unsafe or unusable water. Some cannot even rinse their faces with tap water while others walk long distances every day to collect drinking water.

According to a study by the Rivers and Delta Research Centre (RDRC), at least 79 rivers in the country—out of 1,156 rivers—have dried up or are in the process of drying up. All of this points to a system that has been put under immense strain for decades. We often talk about the environment as if it is separate from our daily lives, something that we need to protect, something to care about on days like Earth Day. But in reality, the environment is not "out there." It is the foundation of everything we depend on: things like water, food, and energy. Yet, we often take them for granted.

Scientists have defined a set of planetary boundaries that help keep Earth's systems stable—covering areas like climate, freshwater use, land use, and biodiversity. Today, several of these limits have already been exceeded. Global temperatures have increased considerably compared to pre-industrial levels. Almost half the world's countries now have degraded freshwater systems due to pollution, encroachment,

etc. Meanwhile, human consumption of freshwater has risen dramatically, placing many regions under serious stress. This is not something we can dismiss by taking a "not in our backyard" approach. In fact, we are seeing the same pattern locally. For instance, in Khulna, many of the waterways that once defined the city have been encroached upon to make space for roads, buildings, and commercial areas. This unplanned growth often makes even the lightest rainfall result in waterlogged roads. And during the dry season, half the city faces water shortage. What looks like urban development shows up later as unbearable heat, chronic water scarcity, persistent pollution, and instability.

And every major global conflict reminds us of the same underlying fragility. During the pandemic, supply chains slowed down across the world, affecting everything from food to manufacturing. When the Russia-Ukraine war began, fertiliser and energy markets were thrown into shocks. More recently, the US-Israel war in Iran has disrupted global energy flows and trade routes, sending ripple effects across economies worldwide. Countries like Bangladesh feel these shocks almost immediately—through higher prices, tighter supplies, and growing pressure across sectors. While these are not environmental crises in themselves, they reveal something important: systems that appear stable can unravel quickly when they rely on limited and tightly connected resources. Environmental stress, however, does not arrive as a sudden shock. It shows up in the rising price of rice, in the

cost of electricity, in the irregular transition between seasons, and in the growing unpredictability of everyday life. And here is the twist: it does not affect everyone equally. These shocks hit hardest where resilience is lower, for example, low-income households, people employed in the informal sector, or those who have to rely on the land for their livelihood. What begins as a resource stress eventually turns into an economic and social stress. Saving the environment isn't only about the environment; it's about securing the livelihoods of people who are less resilient to these shocks and this is why the conversation around development needs to shift.

Bangladesh's growth story is real. Over the past decades, the country has achieved steady economic expansion, built a globally competitive apparel industry, and lifted millions out of poverty. But growth built on the extraction of huge amounts of natural resources is not without consequence. The rivers that absorb industrial waste keep absorbing it till they can't. Consider the Sundarbans. It has absorbed every major cyclone in recent history including Sidr, Aila, Amphan, Mocha, by reducing wind speed, weakening storm surges, and by protecting millions of lives inland. Today, the Sundarbans covers over 6,000 square kilometres, having already lost significant area over the past decades. Bangladesh's total forest cover also remains far below what is considered necessary for ecological stability.

To absorb systems shock, there is now an opportunity to govern resources as interconnected systems. That means treating rivers as shared systems, not dumping grounds. It means implementing long-term plans not just on paper, but in practice. It also means pricing resource use and pollution in ways that reflect real costs. It means designing industries to use less water, reuse more, and pollute less. Most importantly, it means paying attention before strains turn into crises.

My father often gets upset when we throw away leftover rice. To him, it is one of the most disrespectful things you can do to the people who grow it and to the resources that go into producing it. My mother saves every plastic bag and cup so that we can reuse them later. Throwing away clothes is not a concept we are familiar with in our household; they always go to someone in need or serve another purpose. The concept of resources being thrown away or wasted is next to impossible to my parents. They come from a generation where resource strain was real on a personal level. The resources we consume are complex, intertwined in ways that we sometimes can't even conceptualise. That is why it is important to understand how to mitigate the shocks before they reach us. And the shock on environmental resources is something that we must reconcile with, and the sooner we do it, the better. However, the question remains whether we will reframe this as something to save the earth, or ourselves.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Went fast
- 6 Violinist Stern
- 11 Overhead
- 12 Island south of Sicily
- 13 Thin porridge
- 14 Acts sullen
- 15 Sinks, as a short putt
- 17 Cambridge sch.
- 18 Commotion
- 19 Marching beat
- 22 Sgt.'s superior
- 23 Portugal's place
- 24 Puts on ice
- 25 Stylized Japanese drama
- 27 Driving aid
- 30 Charles III's house
- 31 Maximum amount
- 32 Director Lee
- 33 Manly
- 35 Cold house
- 38 Lubricated
- 39 Lipstick slip
- 40 Taking advantage of
- 41 Lab work

DOWN

- 1 Motley
- 2 Wear roughly
- 3 Clipped item
- 4 December 24 and 31
- 5 Yummy
- 6 Little terror
- 7 --- Paulo
- 8 Reunion group
- 9 New York prison
- 10 Social class
- 16 "Lolita" author
- 20 Walking on air
- 21 Stammering sounds
- 24 Oil ingredient derived from marijuana
- 25 Checkers demand
- 26 Viewpoints
- 27 Like some rebates
- 28 Fred, Steve, and Ethan
- 29 Promise
- 30 Jeans measure
- 34 Ascend
- 36 Stable bit
- 37 Hosp. parts

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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