

SEARCHING WAYS FORWARD FOR BANGLADESH IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC



Covid-19 and Governance in Bangladesh

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While a serious public health crisis warrants substantive response from the government in terms of providing healthcare and social safety, increasing its capacity to deliver to those who are in need, practicing transparency to gain trust of the citizens and combating corruption to ensure the optimum utilization of precious resources, it also provides regime, unfortunately, with the scope to move away from democratic principles and human rights norms, squander precious resources through corruption, engage in partisan practices and to disregard those who are powerless. The latter results in a chasm between the citizens and the government, creating or enhancing a trust deficiency between those who oversee governance and those who are governed. But most



importantly, it brings suffering to the citizens at large. This is why the impacts of any public health crisis, particularly a catastrophe like Covid-19, neither remains within the realm of the health sector nor in the economic arena but becomes a political crisis of a great magnitude. The issues that pandemic brings to the fore are intrinsically tied to politics in general, particularly governance – the actions of the government ranging from resource allocation to service delivery to ensuring inclusivity. For almost nine months since Bangladesh was exposed to the global pandemic, the country appears to be witnessing a growing trust deficit continued, demonstration of the severe weaknesses of governance and absence of transparency.

Bangladesh government's responses to Covid-19 need to be assessed in the light against the fundamental attributes of governance—transparency, accountability, control of corruption, efficiency, inclusiveness, and rule of law. Since the first case of infection was detected in March 2020, the government was not forthcoming in providing an accurate picture. In July, for example, experts insisted that the death toll was far greater than the official count.¹ Independent public health experts insisted that the number of deaths could well be 'four times' than the government figure.² From the outset of the pandemic, there were conflicting reports about the hospitals and ICU beds available for Covid-19 patients: the government continued to claim higher numbers while press reports showed that these claims were exaggerated. This pattern has remained even as late as December.³ The lack of transparency has not been limited to the projection of cases or providing an accurate picture of the preparedness, but also the government's strategy of dealing with the public health crisis and the economic fallout.

The absence of accountability has become starkly visible in the composition and functioning of the task force appointed in July to coordinate the responses.⁴ The delay in appointing a coordinating body speaks volume constituting a task force with no public health experts or members from the NGOs who have long worked in the field of public health clearly hints at government's lack of seriousness to combat the crisis.

In a similar vein, in April the Prime Minister appointed 64 secretaries to monitor the relief operations.⁵ The Secretaries, after all, are subjected to the government's own bureaucratic rules and having no compulsion to inform the public at large, let alone be held accountable.

The appointment of the secretaries was made after the widely reported incidents of corruption in the distribution of food for low-income households provided under the social safety net programs. Local leaders of the ruling party and local

¹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/real-death-rate-higher-official-1922145>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31819-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31819-5/fulltext)

³ <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%B6%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%93-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%89-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%96%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F-%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B2>

⁴ <https://www.newagebd.net/article/112208/task-force-formed-for-covid-19>

⁵ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2020/04/20/pm-64-secretaries-to-monitor-relief-operations-in-64-districts>



level elected council members were engaged in repeatedly misappropriation and mismanagement relief materials, depriving those who were in need. The cash-transfer program launched in May 2020⁶ to help the poorest sections of the society⁷ became a cash-bonanza for ruling party leaders. They have used the opportunity to make personal gains in an unprecedented manner and these resources have been used by the ruling party as the fountain of patronage. The widespread corruption in various sectors ranging from procuring medical supplies,⁸ conducting fake Covid-19 tests⁹ by a politically connected company, buying of sub-standard masks in hospitals,¹⁰ inflated pricing of donor-funded emergency projects etc. are a few examples of the government's inability or unwillingness to control corruption a fundamental element of governance. Those who are connected to the incumbent have enjoyed impunity, not by accident, but by design.

Some steps have, indeed, been taken against a few individuals for corrupt practices, but most of them are small fries while the large entities and influential individuals perpetrating corruption have remained beyond the reach of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). This reveals one aspect of the weakness, if not absence, of the rule of law, another key element of governance. However, there is another equally, if not more important, aspect of the rule of law that deserves attention. Like many other countries where the incumbents have taken advantage of the emergency situation to grab power, limit the democratic space and silence the critics, Bangladeshi government has used a draconian law called the Digital Security Act 2018 to muzzle the independent as well as contrarian voices who have tried to expose the mismanagement of government responses and the lack of inclusivity in the decision-making process. The heightened surveillance of social media,¹¹ attempts to 'monitor' television,¹² instructing public officials not to talk to media¹³ sent chilling messages to the dissidents and intensified the climate of fear. On top of this was arrests of journalists, activists, teachers and others and denying them bail was the markers of the authoritarian bent of the government. According to the Center for Governance Studies' records, at least 155 individuals have been charged under the DSA between March and the second week of December 2020.¹⁴

Nowhere is the lack of inclusivity so glaring than in the formulation and distribution of support to various sections of the society under the government's stimulus packages. The 21 stimulus packages declared by the government, an estimated US\$11 billion, have not been managed well as only 38 percent has been distributed by late November.¹⁵ But most importantly the funds allocated

⁶ <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/pm-hasina-launches-disbursement-taka-1200cr-cash-aid-50-lakh-poor-people-1902514>

⁷ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/13/corruption-complicates-bangladeshs-fight-against-covid-19/>

⁸ <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/corruption/acc-probe-alleged-corruption-n95-mask-ppe-purchases-91534>

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/16/bangladesh-arrests-hospital-owner-over-fake-coronavirus-results>

¹⁰ <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/n95-masks-bsmmu-telltale-signs-they-are-fake-1933121>

¹¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/bangladesh-is-suppressing-free-speech-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹² <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/03/26/information-ministry-cancels-order-on-media-monitoring-over-covid-19-rumours>

¹³ <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/05/07/bangladesh-shields-vips-from-criticisms-by-public-servants-on-social-media>

¹⁴ <https://freedominfo.net/>

¹⁵ <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/half-the-stimulus-funds-not-disbursed-yet-1989673>



for the business sector have been skewed towards the large business entities rather than the small and medium enterprises. According to press reports, 25 percent of all funds so far has been gobbled up by 15 corporate entities.¹⁶ The government has not established an oversight mechanism to ensure that the most vulnerable and those who are meant to be the beneficiaries are receiving the funds. For example, the RMG sector, which was the first to receive support, has failed to protect its workers. A report by Transparency International Bangladesh, published in mid-November, informs that around 42 percent, or 1.4 million workers did not receive any support.¹⁷

These failures of the incumbents in Covid-19 governance are far from an aberration or inadequacy due to an emergency situation, rather a reflection of the overall poor governance structure of the country. As the incumbent's in recent years have veered away from the democratic path, and shunned an inclusionary accountable system of governance, it was not unexpected that severe weaknesses in governance would become evident. Covid-19 has made it obvious.

Recommendations

The government should create an oversight mechanism comprising of experts, non-government organizations of the public health sector and members of the civil society to monitor various steps taken and resources available to address the current situation and preparedness for the second wave.

Implementation of fund disbursement of stimulus packages and monitoring their effectiveness and necessary recalibration should be prioritized and progress should be reported on a regular basis to an independent supervisory body appointed with the task.

The government must end the use of legal and extralegal measures, including the wanton use of the DSA 2018, to silence critical voices.

The government must unequivocally express the political will to address corruption by the party loyalists and provide the ACC with the authority and power to act independently.

A comprehensive strategy to address the present crisis and the way forward for the next two years should be devised through an inclusive and participatory process.

¹⁶ <https://www.prothomalo.com/business/bank/%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A3%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A6%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%8B%E0%A6%A3%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A7%A8%E0%A7%AB-%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%9B%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%9C-%E0%A7%A7%E0%A7%AB-%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9B%E0%A7%87>

¹⁷ <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-news/42-garment-workers-in-bangladesh-yet-to-receive-stimulus-271504-newsdetails.htm>