

OVERVIEW



Law & Policy Review

- National AI Policy Formulation Involve All Stakeholders, Including Rights Organizations: TIB & Article 19
- Article-19 And TIB Call for Comprehensive Personal Data Protection Act



Policy Stance

- Hasty and Forced Mergers the New Face of Continued Impunity in Banking Sector: TIB Calls for Halting Implementation
- Media Restriction at Bangladesh Bank a Glaring Example of Arbitrary Secrecy; TIB Calls for Immediate Withdrawal

CCC NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

- Empowering Citizens: RTI Awareness Campaign at Faridpur Railway Station Reaches Hundreds
- ULAB Students Raise Their Lens and VOICE against Corruption Through Films Film Contest by ULAB
- Information Fair Inaugurated at Cumilla
- Discussion Meeting with District Family Planning Authority
- Community Action Meeting Held for the Improvement of Upazila Land Office Services
- SIDA Visits CCC Projects: Exploring Transparency and Community Engagement



Newsletter-2024

April Edition

(Law & Policy Review)
National AI Policy Formulation
Involve All Stakeholders, Including Rights Organizations: TIB & Article 19



Dhaka, 03 April 2024: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and Article 19 have welcomed the initiative to formulate a draft of the National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy 2024. However, these two international entities have voiced grave concerns over the complete exclusion of civil society organizations, particularly those working on citizens' rights and the rule of law, from the process of formulating and reviewing this critical policy. Such exclusion undermines the importance of these fundamental rights and the impact this policy will have on every citizen in the country. The government's intention to potentially disregard the human rights aspects of the national AI policy is further underscored by the exclusion of organizations working on human rights and good governance from the April 3rd discussion on the draft policy.

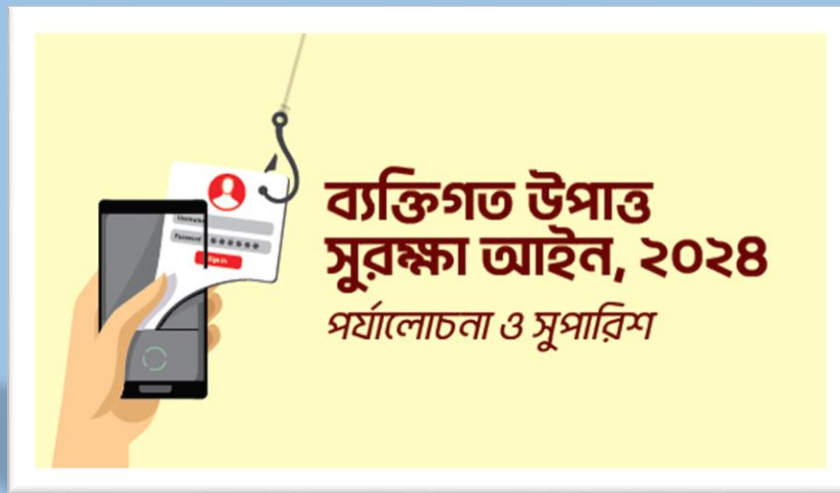
Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and Article 19 Bangladesh have expressed their concern over this omission and have demanded the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, particularly human rights organizations, in every stage of the policy formulation process. In a joint statement, TIB and Article 19 have mentioned that the draft of the AI policy has been chiefly formulated by taking into account the AI-centric experiences of various countries. The draft has emphasised issues like government services, administration, and judicial systems, telecommunications, surveillance, etc, in the context of Bangladesh. But, it lacks a clear discussion on the multifaceted impact of the policy on the country's people. Besides, the issue of involving any person or organization, working on citizens' rights, has been ignored in formulating the draft. While TIB and Article 19 appreciate the potential inclusion of the rule of law and human rights in clause 3.6 of the draft AI policy as a basic principle, they express deep concern about the complete absence of these crucial aspects in other key sections. This omission, particularly in areas of emphasis, implementation strategy, and challenges faced, poses significant risks and is unacceptable.

On the other hand, according to the draft of the National Artificial Intelligence Policy, an independent National AI Centre would be formed, including the departments and agencies concerned, along with the establishment of a National AI Advisory Council. But, almost all the members of the council, including its advisor and chairperson, are the representatives of different government entities. It raises questions regarding the independence of the council, and simultaneously issues like protecting human rights and citizens' data become insignificant. Faced with these shortcomings, TIB and Article 19 have called upon the government to institute a time-bound work plan for revising the draft National AI Policy. Additionally, they emphasise the necessity of including relevant experts and representatives from human rights organizations throughout every step of the policy formulation process. Furthermore, the establishment of an AI Advisory Council that incorporates these stakeholders is crucial to ensure a comprehensive and rights-respecting policy.

These combined threats, coupled with the possibility of state surveillance, create a significant risk of privacy breaches, jeopardising personal data protection and citizens' fundamental right to privacy. Clause 4.2.6 of the draft AI policy raises serious concerns about the potential for an AI-powered surveillance system. While the stated goal of national security is understandable, such a system could lead to the creation of a "police state" through extensive state monitoring and analysis of citizens' data. Furthermore, by formalizing citizen surveillance through policy, the government risks violating fundamental human rights protections. TIB and Article 19, in a joint statement, have demanded a complete redrafting of the policy to remove any surveillance measures and ensure its alignment with the principles of rule of law and human rights.

(Law & Policy Review)

Article-19 and TIB Call for Comprehensive Personal Data Protection Act



Dhaka, 28 April 2024: The two right-based organizations Article 19 and TIB reviewed the Personal Data Protection Act, 2024 (Draft). The draft act aims to control personal data through surveillance rather than protecting it, an extraction from international best practices.

Newsletter-2024

April Edition

The review highlighted seven key areas, including a lack of a rights-based approach, vague definitions of 'personal data,' a lack of expertise and resources for the Bangladesh government, and a lack of independent Data Protection Authority. The draft act also includes provisions for unrestricted access to personal data by government agencies, insufficient judicial oversight, and wide-ranging exceptions for activities in the 'public interest'. The review also found that Section 1(2) of the draft act stipulates immediate enforcement upon publication in the gazette notification, which undermines the practical implementation of data protection laws. The review aims to address these issues and ensure the protection of personal data in the country.

At a press conference on 28 April 2024 at TIB Dhaka office, TIB and ARTICLE 19 presented the observations on the draft act. Speakers at the conference highlighted the need for the formation of an independent data protection authority, as the PDPA proposes a government-appointed board. They feared that a government-controlled board could be biased and unable to hold the government accountable.

On the other hand, government agencies would be granted authority to utilize personal information under the guise of safeguarding national security and public interest, terming it an exception. Both the organizations said granting government agencies unrestricted access to data servers without judicial oversight poses a risk of potential misuse.

Therefore, Article 19 and TIB are urging the government to reform the draft act through discussions with the relevant stakeholders to protect the freedom of expression and privacy as recognized by our constitution.

(Policy Stance)

Hasty and Forced Mergers the New Face of Continued Impunity in Banking Sector: TIB Calls for Halting Implementation



Newsletter-2024

April Edition

Dhaka, 23 April 2024: The central bank has initiated steps to merge underperforming banks with stronger counterparts in order to save weak banks in the sector, which is supposed to be considered as being in line with global practices related to tackling crisis in the financial sector. However, global standards and policies including the Bangladesh Bank's own policies have been ignored to complete this sensitive and complex task hastily. The arbitrary announcement of certain bank mergers, coupled with concerns among well-performing banks involved in the process and unwillingness of some underperforming banks, has worsened anxiety, unrest, and uncertainty within the banking sector. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) believes that such instances have cast doubts over the entire process even before it started. The anti-corruption organization asserts that the lack of transparency in the bank merger process, particularly concerning the management of default loans and issues of accountability within weak banks burdened by default loans, essentially sidesteps the main problem of the crisis and gives impunity to the factions responsible for loan defaults and forgery.

According to the merger policy issued by the Bangladesh Bank, underperforming banks are allowed to express their interest to merge with financially sound banks following the assessment of assets and liabilities by an auditor firm enlisted by the central bank and disclosing the details in the current year. Considering the evaluation of assets, there are provisions for good banks to voluntarily express interest in initiating mergers with weaker banks. Highlighting that the central bank can only resort to forceful mergers if the initial steps fail, TIB Executive Director (ED) Dr. Iftekharuzzaman stated, "Based on media reports, only one weak bank has shown interest in voluntary merger, and conversely, it's not necessarily the case that the financially sound banks mentioned in the process have willingly and consciously engaged in it. This suggests that the entire process has been imposed on them arbitrarily, which is a clear violation of the declared policies. Moreover, how fair and reasonable is it to transfer the burdens of default loans and forgeries to good banks without first assessing the assets and liabilities of the weaker ones? It appears that the ongoing actions are akin to prescribing paracetamol for cancer treatments. On one hand, the culture of loan defaults is exacerbated by shielding factions responsible for them and forgery under the guise of mergers. Contrarily, significant attempts are underway to compel good banks to digest weaker ones as a result of their success. This has fostered an atmosphere of anxiety and restlessness across the entire sector."

Expressing apprehensions that attempts to salvage weak banks might backfire, the TIB ED remarked, "Government-government, private-government, and private-private mergers are all being considered. However, it remains unclear on what basis these banks have been prioritised, or how the decision was made regarding which financially sound banks would merge with which weak ones. Additionally, some banks not yet mentioned in the merger process have been kept afloat through liquidity assistance. However, two government-owned banks, known for their strong performance, are slated to absorb two underperforming banks despite having significant amounts of default loans themselves. Given these circumstances, it is unrealistic to believe that simply merging banks, without ensuring effective accountability-based good governance to address the basic challenges in the banking sector, will resolve the problem or safeguard the interests of clients."

Newsletter-2024

April Edition

Criticizing the provisions of the merger policy, which permit directors of underperforming banks to return to the board of the merged bank after a five-year break as well as the provision for the reappointment of top executives implicated in mismanagement, the TIB Executive Director stated, "This provision rewards the perpetrators behind the banking crisis with impunity rather than holding them accountable. Furthermore, the provision to maintain secrecy of new irregularities or corruption uncovered during audits of underperforming banks will not only hide financial discrepancies but also hinder the process of holding individuals accountable. Essentially, it means protection for wrongdoings. It is disheartening to witness what is happening in the name of mergers as it shows how defaulters control banks."

As per the policy, a state-owned asset management company will acquire the non-performing loans of weak banks, indicating that government funds will be utilized to purchase these bad loans. This essentially means that loan defaulters have once again been exempted by using public funds. Given the precarious state of the banking sector and public concerns, TIB emphasizes the need for essential reforms in the bank merger policy. These changes must be in line with global norms and experiences as well as the opinions of unbiased and renowned experts in the field. Furthermore, until these reforms are implemented, TIB calls for halting the implementation of decisions made under the pretence of mergers.

(Policy Stance)

Media Restriction at Bangladesh Bank a Glaring Example of Arbitrary Secrecy; TIB Calls for Immediate Withdrawal



Dhaka, 26 April 2024: Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has expressed grave concerns as media restrictions have been implemented by the Bangladesh Bank, known as the central financial regulatory authority and ultimate custodian of public money. TIB says this is an unprecedented barrier for public interest-based reporting on banking and financial sectors. The anti-corruption organization calls for an immediate withdrawal from the restrictions.

Media reports state that journalists had been facing entry restrictions at the Bangladesh Bank while trying to collect information on the banking and financial sector for months. Journalists had

desperately sought the central bank governor's assistance in resolving the matter but had no positive outcomes. TIB Executive Director (ED) Dr. Iftekharuzzaman condemns this as an immoral and arbitrary infringement on the public's lawful right to information.

"What is the Bangladesh Bank leadership seeking to accomplish by obstructing the free flow of information, particularly amidst the numerous challenges plaguing the banking sector, including default loans, financial fraud, embezzlement, and governance deficiencies? Is this a desperate attempt to deflect attention from the Central Bank's inability to ensure stability and promote good governance within the sector? Or is it merely another strategy to shield those accountable for the crises stemming from default loans and financial frauds?" asked the TIB ED.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman underscored that the unrestricted access of journalists to the Bangladesh Bank facilitated the exposure of financial irregularities worth billions, benefiting the public interest in recent years. He added, "Should we assume that this disgraceful decision was taken by the central bank to protect the faction of defaulters, fraudsters, and money launderers responsible for the financial crisis and to hide that the policy and leadership of the Bangladesh Bank have been captured by that very faction?"

TIB is concerned that the emphasis on secrecy could exacerbate existing issues, particularly amidst a public confidence crisis within the banking sector and the confusion surrounding bank mergers purportedly aimed at safeguarding client interests. Expressing apprehension, TIB asserts that the Bangladesh Bank shows no indication of reinstating media access, as the governor has avoided addressing the issue directly and instead referenced bureaucratic procedures, including media sensitivity training on banking sector information. TIB's Executive Director characterizes this as an arbitrary decision rooted in a colonial mindset. "The proposal for implementing a pass-based entry system and providing training, instead of addressing the issue directly, constitutes an impenetrable barrier to journalists' professional duty of gathering information, particularly for investigative journalists. Consequently, officials at all levels of the Bangladesh Bank are likely to avoid engaging with reporters to avoid potential harassment through administrative actions. This means that information will be blocked and citizens would be alienated from the right to know what is happening in the banking sector and how certain factions are profiting by plundering public money," mentioned Dr. Iftekharuzzaman.

Considering the overall situation, TIB hopes that the Bangladesh Bank leadership will immediately withdraw all forms of entry restrictions for journalists and facilitate the free flow of information.

CCC News Highlights

Empowering Citizens: RTI Awareness Campaign at Faridpur Railway Station Reaches Hundreds

On 29 April 2024, the bustling Faridpur Railway Station became the epicenter of a dynamic campaign aimed at empowering citizens through the Right to Information Act, 2009. Spearheaded by the Youth Engagement & Support (YES) Group of the Committee of Concerned Citizens

Newsletter-2024

April Edition

(CCC), Faridpur, the Satellite Advice & Information Desk (AI-Desk) campaign provided hands-on orientation to around two hundred citizens. The goal was clear: to educate the public on how to effectively apply the Right to Information Act to obtain necessary information from service delivery institutions.



As the campaign unfolded, the importance of the RTI Act was highlighted to people from various walks of life. TIB-published leaflets detailing the Act's provisions were distributed, ensuring that the knowledge spread far and wide. Citizens eagerly gathered around the AI-Desk, absorbing the valuable information and sharing their own experiences. They underscored the need for the effective implementation of the RTI Act, emphasizing that widespread awareness and campaigns by public and private organizations were crucial for fostering good governance and curbing corruption.

The atmosphere at the station was one of engagement and learning. Beneficiaries of the campaign expressed their gratitude to the CCC-TIB initiative, thanking the YES members and CCC, Faridpur for their efforts. The campaign didn't just stop at the desk; YES and CCC members actively reached out to passengers on the trains, listening to their concerns and experiences. A recurring issue highlighted by many was the insufficient allocation of tickets at Faridpur, which fell short of the high passenger demand. This feedback underscored a pressing need for increased ticket allocations to better serve the community.

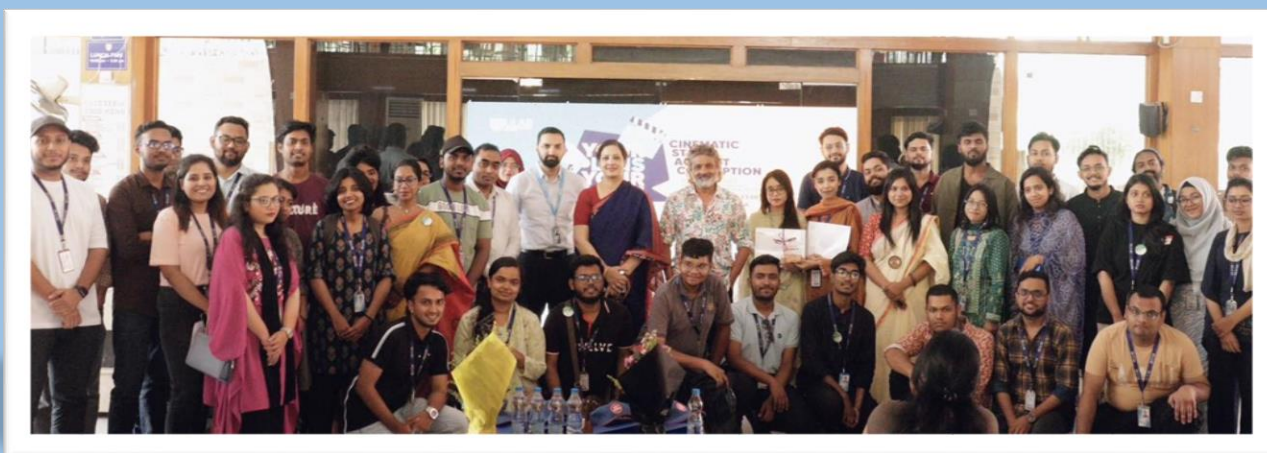
The campaign was managed under the keen oversight of TIB's Area Coordinator Golam Mostafa, with CCC members Gobinda Bagchi and Professor Mahbubur Rahman providing crucial support and guidance to the YES members. Their combined efforts ensured the smooth operation of the AI-Desk. The campaign also received special assistance from Mr. Tariqul Islam, Assistant Station Master of Faridpur Railway Station, whose support was instrumental in the desk's success.

Newsletter-2024

April Edition

In the end, the Satellite Advice & Information Desk campaign at Faridpur Railway Station stood as a testament to the power of community engagement and the pivotal role of the Right to Information Act, 2009, in promoting transparency and accountability in governance

ULAB Students Raise Their Lens and VOICE against Corruption Through Films



In April, the air crackled with a different kind of energy at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The Youth Engagement & Support (YES) Group wasn't hosting a typical campus event. This time, they were launching a cinematic battle cry - "Cinematic Stand Against Corruption - YOUR LENS, YOUR VOICE."

The call went out, and aspiring filmmakers responded. Nine short films landed on the YES Group's desk, each one a visual weapon against the societal monster of corruption. The tension was high on the 20th of April, not just because of the competition, but because of the event's esteemed guests.

Gias Uddin Selim, a renowned film director and screenwriter, graced the occasion as the chief guest. His words echoed through the hall, igniting a fire in young hearts. "Cinema," he declared, "has the power to illuminate the darkness of corruption." He placed the responsibility squarely on young shoulders: "Youth engagement is topmost in standing against corruption. Your youthful strength is the key in driving this change!"



Newsletter-2024

April Edition

Ferhana Ferdous, Director of Civic Engagement at Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), followed suit. Her voice carried a note of urgency as she spoke about the misuse of power and the need for a united front against this societal menace.

The event was more than just an award ceremony. It was a screening, a discussion, and a call to action. Around a hundred students, their eyes glued to the screen, witnessed the various facets of corruption brought to life through the stories on display. The films weren't just entertainment; they were weapons in the fight for a better tomorrow.

The YES Group, with this event, aimed to empower young minds. They wanted them to be storytellers, not bystanders. They wanted them to wield their artistic talents as weapons against corruption, sparking conversations and inspiring action. And as the last film flickered off the screen, a new resolve flickered in the eyes of the young audience - a resolve to fight for a future free from corruption, one frame at a time.

Information Fair Inaugurated at Cumilla



Purpose: To raise awareness about the Right to Information Act, 2009, and its application

Organizers: The fair was organized by the CCC (Cumilla), in collaboration with the Cumilla district administration

Location and Date: The event took place in Cumilla on 24 April 2024

Stall numbers: The fair featured 30 stalls, with 24 stalls from different government departments

Participating people: Around 1,930 people attended, with 1,245 males and 685 females

Newsletter-2024

April Edition

Discussion Meeting with District Family Planning Authority

On 22 April 2024, the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), Natore organized a sharing meeting with the Natore District Family Planning Authority. The meeting was held at the Natore District Family Planning Office with the theme “Together Against Corruption.”

Organizer: CCC, Natore

Date and Location: 22 April 2024 at the Natore District Family Planning Office

Theme: “Together Against Corruption”

Attendees: Officials and employees of the District Family Planning Office, CCC members, YES members, and TIB staff

Community Action Meeting Held for the Improvement of Upazila Land Office Services



Event: A Community Action Meeting on improving the services of Satkhira Sadar Upazila Land Office

Purpose: To discuss problems identified by ACG through community monitoring of the Land Office

Organized by: Active Citizens Group (ACG) with the support of Corruption Concern Center (CCC), Satkhira

Date: April 23, 2024

Location: Satkhira Sadar Upazila Land Office

SIDA Visits CCC Projects: Exploring Transparency and Community Engagement



Newsletter-2024

April Edition



SIDA representatives visited partners of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in Brahmanbaria, Sylhet, and Sreemangal. They joined community events, met with citizens and officials, and observed how technology is used for monitoring public services 28 to 30 April 2024. The visit aimed to understand the challenges and successes of TIB's partners in promoting transparency and accountability



Chief Editor: Mohammad Tauhidul Islam

Editors: Shahreen Haq, Kazi Mahdi Amin, Mathews Chiran

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB)

MIDAS Centre (Level 4 & 5)

House-5, Road-16 (New) 27 (Old)

Dhanmondi, Dhaka -1209

Phone: (+880-2) 41021267-70

Fax: (+880-2) 41021272

E-mail: info@ti-bangladesh.org