

A Jubo Mohila League leader's trail of scams

Identify and bring her enablers to justice, too

QUESTIONS raised after the crackdown by Rab against Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Nur Papia have a familiar ring because versions of these same questions have been asked after similar crackdowns in the recent past: what enabled these leaders—who abused their connections to run criminal enterprises—to dodge scrutiny for so long, and why is no action being taken against their enablers? Addressing these questions is as important as taking down the criminals because, otherwise, we would just be seeing a replay of the familiar scene as new players replace the fallen and the crime wheel just spins nonstop. Papia is the latest subject of such crackdowns that are being tied to the government's ongoing anti-corruption drive. Before her, a host of leaders affiliated with the ruling party got busted for various crimes, all now in various stages of their trials.

The list of charges brought against Papia and her husband Mofizur Rahman Sumon, a former Chhatra League leader, is staggering. They reportedly ran a prostitution ring out of a presidential suite at a five-star hotel. They lobbied for recruitments in government offices in exchange for money, supplied illegal gas connections, and issued licences of CNG pump stations. They were also involved in arms and drugs trades. In the process, they have accumulated vast fortunes to the tune of crores. The duo has also been accused of having their own gang in their hometown in Narsingdi and running a torture cell there. Such an empire of crimes couldn't be built unaided or overnight, which again raises the question: how could they escape detection for so long? Who had protected them? Who aided them in their ventures? Who benefited from their illegal services?

Photos showing Papia with ruling party high-ups and other influencers surfaced on social media after her arrest. Rab also confirmed the involvement of a ruling party MP, who allegedly "blessed" Papia and Sumon after their relocation to Dhaka. Sumon is also said to have served as a bodyguard of a former mayor. Clearly, their rapport with the who's who in the political circles has not been one without benefits for the latter. Detaining them without detaining their enablers will be a travesty of justice. Which is why, the home minister's assurance—that no one involved with "controversial" activities will be spared—leaves us unconvinced. It fails to put to rest suspicions that the anti-corruption drive is being used to target only small fries, leaving out the big players behind them. Otherwise, why is no action being taken against the said MP involved in the rise of the criminal couple, or all the others before them? Unless their enablers are also brought to justice, as part of a genuine effort to curb crimes, there is little chance of the ongoing drive ever reaching its stated goal.

Battle of the buses

BRTC's row with private enterprises unfortunate

A report published in this daily on Monday reveals that despite the government taking various steps and investing crores to improve the services provided by Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), private transport owners and workers have systematically managed to obstruct many of its initiatives. The latest BRTC initiative to have hit a roadblock is a move to launch new buses, namely double-deckers, on different inter-district routes which would have provided affordable alternatives for the commuters.

While BRTC has the jurisdiction to launch buses across the country, a deal signed in 2003 between the then communications minister and Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation states that BRTC would not run double-decker buses on inter-district routes. That and a few other directives are now being used against the latest initiative by the state-run corporation. Local owners and workers have alleged that BRTC is violating the deal by not following it properly. However, the BRTC chairman wrote to the road transport and bridges ministry on December last year, requesting the minister's intervention to resolve the crisis. He also informed that they had suggested omitting sections of the directives that are in contravention of the BRTC Ordinance and the BRTC Act. The Act says that the corporation can operate vehicles for transporting passengers and goods on any routes of the country. Though discussions are underway as regards the changes being sought, the prospect of an immediate solution seems far-fetched.

The regrettable aspect is, the government last year purchased 600 buses and 500 trucks worth around Tk 732 crore. Many of these buses were not allowed to operate on the designated routes following protests by the transport owners and workers. BRTC faced backlash from them for trying to run both single and double-decker buses on various routes on multiple occasions. This comes as a shock as there is a huge public demand for such services due to the economically viable rates that the state charges. It is also clear that there is a lack of affordable public transportation within the city as well as between cities. It makes no sense, therefore, to allow commuters to suffer when there is a solution that is deliberately being barred from taking effect. We urge the government to intervene in the issue and resolve the impasse for the greater benefit of the public.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's overpopulation problem

According to a recent study, about 57 percent of Dhaka dwellers would have gone to villages had there been employment opportunities and basic civic facilities. The study also showed the top five problems identified by city dwellers are traffic congestion, air pollution, waterlogging, lack of safe drinking water and poor road conditions.

When a city is as densely populated as Dhaka, these problems are bound to surface, particularly because of the intense pressure that overpopulation exerts on the city. We have now reached a point where no amount of infrastructure can support a population this big. Which is why, other regions of our country should be developed more in order to not only discourage further migration to Dhaka, but to also encourage the people who would rather live in their home towns, if given the opportunity.

Vanulal Debnath, Dhaka

Is self employment really a way out of poverty?



MD AL-HASAN

individuals working for their own household farm or non-farm enterprises. They subsist on their earnings and do not receive any (formal) wages or salary for the work performed.

Self-employment has attracted considerable attention because of the argument that earnings from self-employment are too small to escape from poverty, so the self-employed are "working hard but working poor". This contrasts with an earlier view of self-employment as untapped entrepreneurial energy. The policy implications of the old and new views are sharply different. If self-employment is mainly repressed entrepreneurial energy, then by reducing entry regulations and improving property rights, self-employment can fuel economic growth and development; if, on the other hand, self-employment means hard, poor labour, then structural changes and intervention may be called for.

Moreover, there should be maximum focus on the self-employed, since the Seventh Five Year Plan undertook strategies to make rural people self-dependent through generating non-farm self-employment. The targeted groups are socially excluded backward groups and marginalised people, and the goal

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is to alleviate poverty and strengthen the rural economy. Currently, under the headings of social empowerment and social protection, about 30 employment generation programmes

such as "Micro-credit for Women Self-employment", "Rehabilitation and Creation of Alternative Employment for Beggars Profession", and "Women's Skill-Based Training for Livelihood" are operational, aiming to eradicate poverty, establish social justice, and provide a fair income stream. Furthermore, a World Bank Report in 2019 found a positive correlation between GDP growth and self-employment growth in Bangladesh. In other words, self-employment in the Bangladesh economy is not only higher than other economies, but it will also

percent, and 19 percent for the self-employed respectively. Thus, the wage gap between the most skilled and least skilled workers of the two groups is widening, while the wage gap between moderately skilled workers is narrowing.

The scant earnings from self-employment, combined with sluggish and disproportional real wage growth, poses a fundamental threat to the future reduction of poverty and vulnerability. Overall, we find a mixed pattern of real wage growth, both for the paid employees and the self-employed, that

the ninety-fifth percentile self-employed. Moreover, the wage differentials between the least skilled paid employees and self-employed are rising, while average wage differentials are falling. This data demonstrates that the poor self-employed are getting poorer.

Given the shrinking of manufacturing employment, the stagnation of private sector employment and the vastness of the unemployed population, the demand for self-employment is currently very high. The Government of Bangladesh is also using self-



The working hard but working poor—rural women are especially vulnerable to being trapped in low-wage self-employment.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

become more so as Bangladesh achieves higher GDP growth.

Whether or not self-employment generation programmes will work depends on the earnings of the self-employed; do they earn enough to pull themselves out of poverty?

Labour force survey data for Bangladesh shows that between 2005 and 2017, the average weekly real wage for paid employees increased by 43.7 percent and for the self-employed, it increased by 105 percent. However, this increase in real wages is not distributed evenly across different skills groups. As we move from the least skilled to the most skilled, it has a U-shape for employees but an inverted U, or hump shape, for the self-employed. Measured by the 5th, the 50th, and the 95th percentiles of wage distribution, the increases are 109 percent, 27 percent and 36 percent respectively for paid employees, and by 84 percent, 124

disfavour the least skilled self-employed.

In 2005, the average weekly wage earned by paid employees was BDT 1241, whereas the self-employed earned only BDT 431 per week. In 2017, the average weekly real wage rose to BDT 1778 and BDT 884 for the paid employees and the self-employed respectively. Paid employees earned about 101 percent more real wages in 2017 and about 187 percent more real wages in 2005 than the self-employed. However, the averages cannot describe the tail of the wage distribution.

Focusing on the percentile distribution of the weekly wages, we found that for a good range, the self-employed wage is below the minimum wage of paid employees—about 33 percent of the self-employed earn less than BDT 647. This level of earning is lower than the wage of the paid employees at the first percentile. Similarly, about 11 percent of paid employees earn a higher wage than

employment as an instrument to generate employment opportunities for women and excluded individuals. By contrast, most women's and excluded individuals' human capital is below the moderately skilled threshold level, which means that although they will work, they will be "working hard but working poor". Unfortunately, this means that the strong assumption that providing self-employment opportunities will pull the poor out of poverty is not supported by the data. Generating self-employment without a sufficient minimum income will have an insignificant impact on reducing poverty and inequality. A guaranteed income scheme and the improvement of human capital are necessary for the least skilled workers to be equipped with a fighting chance to battle the curse of poverty.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

What's at stake in Libya?



BERNARD HAYKEL

THE ongoing war in Libya is a microcosm of the tragedy that has gripped many Middle Eastern countries. If it is not resolved soon, the fighting in Libya could sow instability in neighbouring countries like Tunisia and Egypt, and trigger more waves of refugees fleeing to Europe.

At root, the Libyan crisis is a civil war among various groups that are divided by tribal and regional loyalties, as well as by ideological beliefs. All are vying to control the country's oil revenues. Yet, at the moment, there are principally two sides to the conflict—the Islamist-dominated, internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), which still controls the capital, Tripoli; and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives and the Libyan National Army (LNA), which are under the command of the anti-Islamist field marshal Khalifa Haftar. While most of the country is now under the authoritarian nationalist Haftar's control, Tripoli has yet to fall.

Behind each of these warring camps are outside powers pursuing their own interests. While Turkey and Qatar have backed the GNA, Egypt, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates have been lending support to Haftar. International media coverage of the war has attributed this outside interference to competition—mainly between Turkey and Egypt—for oil and gas resources.

The Egyptians have a gas project that could potentially link up with facilities in Israel, Cyprus, and Greece to supply Europe. But that objective directly conflicts with Turkey's goal of creating an exclusive maritime zone with Libya, and of securing sole control over Libya's energy resources.

But the contest over energy is not the whole story. To understand the Libya conflict fully, one also must consider the complex links between geopolitics and ideology. A victory for the Islamists in Tripoli would allow Turkey and Qatar not only to extend their influence into a major oil-producing state on the Mediterranean; it would also offer them strategic depth, strengthening their influence over other countries such as Tunisia and Egypt (a longtime rival).

Hence, for most of the war, Qatar has sponsored the Islamists, mainly by providing financial support to a single person: the religious activist and scholar Ali Muhammad al-Salabi. With the help of Qatar's resources, al-Salabi has emerged as the GNA's de facto leader. But late last year, the GNA appeared to be on the verge of defeat, leading to Turkey's intervention on its behalf. Turkey has since committed weapons, drones, soldiers, and even Syrian fighters to the battle for Tripoli.

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On the other side of the divide, Egypt and the UAE do not want to see a petro-state capable of producing 2.5 million barrels per day fall into the hands of Islamists who are beholden to their regional rivals. A victory for the GNA would turn Libya into an Islamist stronghold and a beachhead for undermining Egypt and the UAE's authoritarian vision for the region. Haftar—a uniformed and heavily ornamented military dictator straight out of central casting—would establish an order much more to their liking. If he is victorious, Libya's oil resources could then be leveraged in the broader fight against the Islamist bogeyman across the region.

Russia's motive for siding with Haftar is more intriguing, but can be summed up in one word: revanchism. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin

has sent mercenaries (mainly those associated with the paramilitary Wagner Group) to join the fight, Haftar himself is not the Kremlin's top candidate to rule Libya. Putin wants to install Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, the son of the late Libyan dictator, Muammar el-Qaddafi, who ruled the country from 1969 to 2011.

With the support of former regime loyalists, Qaddafi has joined forces with Haftar. But the Russians do not trust Haftar, because they regard him as a US intelligence asset, owing to his previous life as an American citizen who lived in Langley, Virginia (incidentally, the site of CIA headquarters) for two decades. By making Qaddafi Libya's next ruler, the Kremlin hopes to prove a point to the Americans and Europeans who helped to topple his father. Following his success in keeping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power despite overwhelming odds, Putin wants to show that it is he who will dictate Libya's future and call the shots in the region. If the clock really is set back to Moscow time, it will be interesting to see what happens to Haftar.

The complex situation in Libya is verging on the surreal. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the very real suffering of the Libyan people, who are caught between the competing factions. For its part, the United States has been negligent in its approach to the crisis, which it has largely ignored in the hope that other regional powers will restore order. In fact, those powers are the ones sowing chaos, and only the US has the diplomatic leverage to end the conflict.

Should Libya's civil war continue, its effects will undoubtedly spill over to other parts of the region. More refugees will flee to Europe, especially if the conflict turns out to be a harbinger of civil wars to come. Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, or Lebanon could become the next theatre for regional and international powers to fight proxy wars while fantasising about becoming the Arab world's next hegemon. As the rubble that is now Syria makes clear, to the victor will go spoils that no longer justify the effort.

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