

# Freedom of expression is vital during Covid-19



**T**HE world is passing through a cataclysmic phase. Fear, anxiety and uncertainty have gripped the nations. The ways of life that were taken for granted have suddenly become tenuous. Covid-19 has put governments under

stress in charting out their responses: some appear to have succeeded in containing the contagion, at least for the time being—others, including in some of the most powerful states in the world, are still struggling to “flatten the curve”.

The national authorities have adopted different kinds of strategies to combat the pandemic. Some have been quick and upfront and have been largely successful in limiting the spread of the virus. Farsightedness, efficiency, transparency, accountability, and engagement of the citizenry have been the cornerstone of their success. Others have seen massive spread with a sharp spike in the proverbial “curve” that refuses to even out. The people of these states pay the price as their leaders remain complacent, inefficient, non-transparent and unaccountable, and refuse to recognise the value of people’s participation.

Along with international solidarity, the situation calls for firm national unity. There is an urgent need for reinforcement of the social contract between the state and the people. This necessitates an acknowledgement by those in state power that the pandemic can only be confronted through an effective participation of the citizens and harnessing their collective strength. A precondition for forging such unity is upholding the rights of citizens including that of freedom of expression. Unfortunately, during this crisis, the right to freedom of expression has suffered a major setback in several countries.

It has been alleged that the Chinese government initially withheld basic information about the disease from the public, underreported the cases of infection downplaying its severity, and dismissed the likelihood of transmission between humans.

On charges of “rumour-mongering”, the authorities detained those who reported in social media. It also intimidated the doctor who warned about the deadly nature of the virus. In Hungary, its far-right nationalist prime minister has assumed near-dictatorial powers that allow him to substantially curtail freedom of expression.

The Thai government came down heavily on the whistleblowers in the public health sector as well as online journalists by bringing against retaliatory lawsuits and intimidation. In Niger, Cambodia and Venezuela, journalists have faced arrest, detention threats and assault after reporting on the pandemic.

Instead of upholding the right to freedom of expression, authorities in these countries and others have taken action against journalists, healthcare workers and whistleblowers. In short, the Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a propensity “to unleash formidable executive power”.

It appears that the ruling elite in Bangladesh have also taken an approach of suppressing opinions and narratives that reflect lived experiences of ordinary citizens affected by the pandemic. Those include non-availability and restricted supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), corruption in procurement of medical supplies, misappropriation of humanitarian assistance and the like. Lack of coordination and inefficiency, coupled with non-transparency in the official response to the crisis, has made people nervous. Citizens feel insulted by the insensitive and preposterous claims by some of those in positions of authority.

The following examples of threat, intimidation and detention provide an idea about the highhanded nature of state response to the active citizens who are merely exercising their constitutional right to freedom of expression. They are doing so by disseminating their thoughts or sharing experiences in social platforms.

Shahin Mondol, a garments worker of Ashulia, posted a video in Facebook criticising laying off of workers in many garment factories in this critical time. He also made comments about the role of the BGMEA leadership and the labour minister. The video was shared instantly by many.

Mondol was subsequently arrested by RAB 11 on April 18 on charges of “fomenting instability and threatening public order”.

On April 18, Dr Abu Taher of Noakhali Hospital was served with a show cause notice following his post in Facebook in which he criticised the health secretary’s statement on the availability of PPE. The doctor was accused of “generating and inciting to generate dissatisfaction, misunderstanding and malice” amounting to misconduct, a punishable offence. Rejecting the charges, the doctor stood by his word that neither he nor any of his colleagues in the department received a single N95 mask.

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In a notification on April 15, the nursing and midwifery directorate reminded its employees that they should refrain from sharing their views in public or with the media without authorisation from the higher authorities.

Media workers have been particularly hard hit. From March 1 to April 10, at least six journalists were prosecuted under the Digital Security Act including editors of daily Manab Zamin and news portals bdnews24.com and jagonews24.com. Actions against them were taken following the lodging of complaints by ruling party stalwarts including a member of parliament. Journalists have

also been subjected to beating and torture for reporting cases of irregularities in distribution of humanitarian assistance including misappropriation by locally influential individuals mostly belonging to the ruling party. In other instances, journalists were implicated in false cases.

On March 24, the ministry of information issued a circular assigning officials to “monitor” 30 private television channels to see if those were putting out “rumours and misinformation on Covid-19 outbreak” with the purported aim of “shutting those down” if need be. A revised circular was issued subsequently, informing about the setting up of a cell at the ministry to monitor all media including social media platforms to check whether “rumours and misinformation” about Covid-19 are circulated.

On March 31, the Media and Public Relations department of Bangladesh Police, through a text message, noted that “on the ground of spreading rumours on coronavirus, police have asked Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission to shut down fifty social media accounts.” On April 10, the BBC reported that targeting social media platforms, 50 persons were arrested by the police and RAB. Human Rights Watch noted that it is the dissenters who became the major target. The law minister binned such assertions and explained that some of those detained “were engaged in sabotage and were trying to take advantage of the situation.”

The threat of intimidation has also taken a toll on academic and intellectual freedom in which self-censorship is becoming the order of the day. Three lecturers of different government colleges have been suspended for writing about Covid-19 on social media. A lecturer of BRAC University is under investigation for engaging in epidemiological research on Covid-19 in Bangladesh.

Human health does not depend only on the availability of healthcare facilities. It also entails access to accurate information about the nature of threats and the means to protect oneself. The right to freedom of expression “includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, through any media” and it “applies to everyone, everywhere, and may

only be subject to narrow restrictions.”

It is, therefore, incumbent on the government to provide reliable information in accessible formats for all including access to the internet. In an emergency condition, access to information is of prime importance. Therefore, any form of broad restriction on the use of internet, such as slowing down of speed or blockage, cannot be justified on the grounds of public order or national security.

The media serves a crucial function in times of public health emergency by informing the public and monitoring government actions. It is incumbent on any government committed to people’s wellbeing to make “exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists”.

No one can underestimate the harm that fake information can mete out in such trying times. In order to address disinformation, the government should set up a credible and accountable public messaging system. The innovative proposal of *Shorbojonkatha*, a civil society platform, for the government to set up an open website in which citizens will be able to report their concerns about health and safety issues, distribution of humanitarian assistance, quality of services of government and civil society actors and the like, merits serious consideration. Such a platform will allow the state authorities to check the veracity of the complaints/reports and take remedial action. It will also bring the state closer to the people.

The off-resorted measures of taking down contents and imposing censorship may limit access to important information. Attempts to criminalise information relating to the pandemic may “create distrust in institutional information, delay access to reliable information and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.”

In facing the Covid-19 scourge, Bangladesh like the rest of the world faces an uncharted route. Time has come for those at the helm of the state to acknowledge the importance of people’s engagement in facing the challenge. An effective participation demands strengthening of the social contract, and that entails unreserved respect for the right to freedom of expression of the citizenry.

C R ABRAR is an academic with interest in human rights. He acknowledges the support of Rezaur Rahman Lenin.

## Covid-19 Is No Leveller



**BLOWN' IN THE WIND**

**T**HE horrific images of white plastic body bags in which the final journeys are set during this great pandemic add to the myth of coronavirus as the great leveller. Death, of course, is inevitable. Indeed, there is no escape from

fat and the icy hand of Death that lays claim to the rich and the poor alike. However, is death at the hands of coronavirus inevitable? All the victims of Covid-19 parcelled to the afterworld in white bags may give you a very plain impression of death that has nothing to do with class, gender, race, age or profession of individuals. The reality is much more nuanced than that.

The moon shines on Prince Charles, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, actor Tom Hanks, journalist Chris Cuomo, Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta and other high-profile patients who have bounced back to normal life because of the support service they could afford or have recourse to. On the other side of the moon, we hear of the Black Americans in the US with a mortality rate of 23 per 100,000. This is 2.9 times higher than the rate for Asians, 2.7 times higher than the rate for Whites, and 2.5 times higher than the rate for Latinos. Death then can be colour-coded which we often do not realise living in a relatively homogenous country like Bangladesh. We can feel its hints when bodies of suspected virus victims are left out in the open or thrown off the truck, but its full spectrum remains beyond our comprehension.

To understand its range and scope, we need to look beyond our national boundary perhaps to fathom the inequalities that have been laid bare by the current crisis. Last Wednesday, Singapore hit the news for its second round of Covid-19 ordeal. Of the 10,000 new reported cases, most of the new victims are migrant workers, and a majority of whom are from Bangladesh. In the first phase, Singapore drew global praise for its

gold standard implementation of testing and tracing through which it protected its citizens; the return of the disease throws spotlight on its marginalised community. The sheer number of infections has exposed the appalling living conditions of the migrant workers mainly from South and South East Asia.

The Guardian reports that “despite the pandemic, [they] continued to live in close quarters, and spent hours a day travelling on the back of crowded lorries to get to and from construction sites.” The report quotes a worker as saying, “The way the workers were stacked in [on the back of lorries], it was like the way goats are stacked in when they are taken to a slaughter house.”

Earlier in March, CNN reported on the living condition of Bangladeshi workers. It quoted Tommy Koh, a Singapore lawyer and former diplomat who posted on Facebook: “The dormitories were like a time bomb waiting to explode. The way Singapore treats its foreign workers is not First World but Third World. The government has allowed their employers to transport them in flat-bed trucks with no seats. They stay in overcrowded dormitories and are packed like sardines with 12 persons to a room.”

The inhuman (read non-human) condition of our migrant workers is compared with goat herds and canned sardines. These are the men who work to keep the city of Singapore squeaky clean, and now the dirt is out. The picture is not as rosy in which the workers secretly celebrate the national pride of finding Crown (ironically, the literal meaning of Corona) Cement as the adhesive behind the building blocks of Singapore. Sure enough, there are repercussions.

The bad press has triggered off anti-foreigner sentiment. One running theme on social media in Singapore is that the living and food habits of these foreign workers are responsible for the disease and they are “driving our numbers up and it makes us look bad on the world stage, and they should go home.” Such xenophobia is becoming very common all over the world. Many Chinese nationals or descendants are facing racial slurs and being subjected to hate crimes in the US,

Canada, Australia and Europe. The discourse of identifying a particular race responsible for the worldwide disease is dangerously promoted by one noteworthy leader who does not want to miss out on the opportunity of gaining political mileage from the crisis. On the other hand, China, the factory of the world, is being accused of gaining financially from the crisis and withholding information about it. The disease, far from being a leveller, has therefore created new categories of opposition.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

**Race, class, health, profession and economic status matter when dealing with a crisis.**

Response to the disease has also necessitated novel categories of essential and non-essential professionals. The consequences of the disease are mostly felt by those who are working in the frontline.

Dhaka Tribune reports that around 251 doctors were infected by the coronavirus till Thursday 11am. The second largely affected group is the Police. A total of 218 police personnel were infected by the virus while performing their duties in the field. My guess is, the civil servants who are in charge of dispensing food relief would come third on

the list. These are professionals on duty who are being exposed to the severity of the disease, and the government has declared special incentives to keep their morale high. Any government official dying in the line of duty while fighting Covid-19 would receive Tk 50 lakh in compensation. A laudable initiative. But what about the private sector—people who are working in agriculture, banks, media, power sector, internet service, transport, education and the like? What about the people

by the disease. These conditions include malnutrition, obesity, hypertension, diabetes, heart or kidney diseases. Again, age becomes a factor as people over 60 are highly susceptible to these health conditions. Gender becomes a factor as the fatality rate is higher among the male population. The neighbourhoods in which people live also become a factor. The chances of having a weak immune system are higher in low-income neighbourhoods. They may not have the right and balanced food they need; they may not have the pure water to drink or fresh air to breathe. The sound pollution may add to their worries and hypertension. The adulterated food may add to their kidney disease or carcinogenic conditions. And when we categorise them as the most vulnerable groups, when we put a barrier in front of their slums or localities, and ask them not to come to our houses to do our household chores—we actually create one more area to confirm that Covid-19 is not a leveller. Deep down, we know that these groups live in worse condition than the dormitories of migrant workers in Singapore.

The non-discriminatory nature of coronavirus has made us stay home for over a month now. But the more isolated we become in our thoughts, the more divided we become in our conditions. If one has to live in a small apartment with 5/6 people inside, the walls of social distancing are fragile. The slightest of intrusion can burst them open. With physical, financial and psychological insecurities and uncertainties looming large, people will eventually come out of these bubbles and become a danger for both themselves and others. The urgency to come out will depend on the conditions in which they are cushioned. With millions of people now fearing layoffs, job cuts, salary reduction, food shortage, financial nosedives—we do realise that some people are worse off than others. The spectrum of race, class, health, profession, and economy does matter when you are dealing with a crisis. Covid-19 surely is not a leveller.

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**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE SENT INTO ORBIT**

April 25, 1990

The Hubble Space Telescope, a sophisticated optical observatory built in the United States under the supervision of NASA, was placed into operation this day in 1990 by the crew of the space shuttle *Discovery*.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 With 5-Across, city on San Francisco Bay
- 5 See 1-Across
- 9 The fifth element
- 10 Microwave sounds
- 12 Murphy of movies
- 13 Parts of hearts
- 14 Gets into something
- 16 Print units
- 17 Collins base
- 18 Long locks
- 20 Menu choice
- 22 Effortless
- 23 Eye-boggling designs
- 25 Dupes
- 28 Motif

**DOWN**

- 1 Enter en masse
- 2 Passionate
- 3 Clark’s co-worker
- 4 Easy dance
- 5 Degrade
- 6 Rent out
- 7 Opera’s Stratas
- 8 Supposes
- 9 Sheriff’s star

**11 Impudent**

**15 Book lover’s device**

**19 Hardens**

**21 Noted seamstress**

**24 Closes, as a freezer bag**

**25 Overindulge**

**26 Like our numerals**

**27 Small**

**29 Confidential**

**30 Overdid the techie lingo, with “out”**

**31 Plane parts**

**33 Alarm**

**37 Tart fruit**

**39 Last letter, in London**

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**TUESDAY’S ANSWERS**

A	P	P	T	U	M	P	S		
M	I	R	E	D	S	I	R	E	D
A	T	O	N	E	I	N	O	N	E
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**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT