

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY JUNE 24, 2020, ASHAR 10, 1427 BS

Time to get rid of the DSA for good

Govt should address allegations rather than suppress public opinion

THE illusion is long gone—or perhaps, as media observers remind us, it was never there—the illusion created by the proponents of the Digital Security Act (DSA) that it could be used to address actual threats facing users on digital platforms. It never happened. Far from being an improvement on its infamous predecessor (Section 57 of the ICT Act), this law, if anything, has turned out to be a more frightening version, an instrument of intimidation used ever more zealously to punish opponents and suppress any hint of critical opinion directed at the powers that be. Even during the Covid-19 crisis, we have witnessed how its wielders have frequently sought to disrupt the free flow of information and views, which is vital to save lives. According to data gleaned from the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO), a project by Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies, at least 142 people, including journalists, were arrested or detained since March for reporting, spreading so-called "misinformed" news, or their social media activity. These are only reported cases, and a picture of the full extent of harassment endured by critics in various forms is yet to emerge.

Against this backdrop, a group of teachers on Monday joined the growing chorus of voices calling for the abolition of the Digital Security Act. Members of the University Teachers' Network, a platform for private and public university teachers, staged a sit-in to express their demand, saying, rightly, that the government is applying the law against those who have been outspoken about corruption, abduction, killings and other irregularities. Instead of addressing those allegations and saving people's lives, which should be a priority amidst a raging pandemic, it is being used to protect corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, they alleged. They also called for the immediate release of all those arrested under the DSA. Their demand comes on the heels of a police arrest of a 14-year-old student of class nine in Mymensingh on Saturday, allegedly for putting up a Facebook post "defaming" the prime minister. The incident, which followed after he was framed in a case under the Digital Security Act, caused widespread public outrage.

Under the circumstances, we think the demands raised by the university teachers merit serious consideration. The public has a right to know about, and speak out against, the mismanagement, corruption and irregularities that are endangering their lives and livelihoods. Equally, the government has a responsibility to listen to the legitimate concerns of the people and take adequate measures to address them. Using repressive measures and laws such as the DSA to suppress their voices only serves to create an impression that people's safety and security are secondary to the interests of their representatives. This is not the image that Bangladesh can afford to have of itself at a time when its ability to handle the crisis is being questioned globally. It is time to make the DSA obsolete, or better still, repeal it for good.

Take heed of the concerns of Chinese medical experts

Awareness, preparedness still far from adequate

THE Chinese medical team, which wrapped up its short visit to Bangladesh on Monday, has made some very important observations on Bangladesh's efforts to combat the virus. They concluded that while the policies adopted by the administration were not inappropriate, there were shortcomings in the measures taken to enforce those policies, largely because of confusion and mismanagement.

The awareness campaigns on coronavirus can have no meaning if their impacts are not reflected in the behaviour of people. And if the guidelines are not being followed, they should be enforced. We saw that being done in the very early stages of the pandemic, but law enforcers seem to have given that up as a bad job when the lockdown order was revoked.

The medical team's full report should be in the hands of the health ministry in a week. But it is not as if our health administration is unaware of the shortcomings and the loopholes that have to be plugged. There is no excuse for people to not wear face masks, or wear them improperly. However, this lack of awareness is not the only reason behind the huge spread of coronavirus in Bangladesh, as mentioned by the medical team. Need our health administration be told why the frontline fighters, the doctors and the law enforcers, have suffered the most casualties? Is it only lack of awareness or because the PPE given to the doctors and healthcare staff were faulty? Why hasn't the health ministry recruited more doctors yet? To hear the minister say that we would recruit more doctors "if needed" is frustrating. Why still the "if"? Are we not short of doctors already? And do we need experts to keep telling us that more testing facilities are required? And why should non-corona patients be asked by hospitals to produce Covid negative reports before they can be admitted for treatment?

While one would be remiss to equate our capabilities with that of China's, we can learn from the Chinese experience, and should draw all the relevant lessons to suit our context. To extrapolate their actions and replicate those in our country entirely may perhaps not be possible or practicable. What the administration can do is take corrective actions immediately regarding the pressing issues, which it is very well aware of, but is doing little about.

Climate change budget must be used efficiently

Other vulnerable countries can learn from Bangladesh's innovations



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

EARLIER this month, the Finance Minister of Bangladesh presented a special Climate Change Budget as part of the national budget for the fiscal year 2020-21, which accounts for approximately 7.5

percent of the national budget. This is the fourth year in succession that the Climate Change Budget has been included to cover 25 different ministries across the government. The total amount of the Climate Change Budget is almost USD three billion.

At the same time, ActionAid Bangladesh, together with the International Budget Partnership and the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), carried out an evaluation of the Climate Change Budget from the perspective of civil society and academia for the second year, which was also presented at a press conference last week.

In this regard, my first thought is to commend the Government of Bangladesh for being a pioneer in preparing such a Climate Change Budget for four years in a row, enhancing the coverage of the ministries over the years and allocating as much as 7.5 percent of the national budget, which is a significant amount.

However, as we have now been making these budget allocations over several

years, we need to also gather information on actual expenditures, and more importantly, evaluate the effectiveness of the expenditures. This should involve the government's own Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Department (IMED) under the Planning Commission, as well as evaluations by independent researchers, civil society and media.

This can be done by setting up a multi-stakeholder task force where the different groups can be involved in monitoring and

solutions to tackle the adverse impacts of climate change.

An opportunity for doing this may be to use the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), which is being developed by the Department of Environment (DOE) with support from UNDP. The NAP should focus on ensuring long term training for all the different sectors and stakeholders on tackling climate change, which goes well beyond simply raising awareness about the problem. If this can be done,

opportunities for synergies across both of them.

Finally, it is worth thinking about sharing Bangladesh's experience in preparing such a Climate Change Budget with the other countries in the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which Bangladesh has now become the leader of for next two years. The Finance Ministers of the nearly fifty countries in the CVF have their own group (called V20) which the Bangladesh Finance Minister will



PHOTO: AFP/MUNIR UZ ZAMAN

One way for us to take this forward might be to look at the Gender Budget as well as the Climate Change Budget and seek out opportunities for synergies across both of them.

evaluation of expenditures.

At the same time, it is important that all 25 ministries must be enabled to understand what they need to be doing to tackle climate change in their regular activities, and also be able to report back on what they have done. This calls for a major investment in raising capacities of all the relevant ministries and their relevant technical agencies, which needs to go well beyond simply understanding the problems of climate change impacts, but rather learning and practicing

then Bangladesh will be well placed to make these budget allocations more effective going forward.

Another aspect that has come up from the civil society analysis is the need to link the budget to assisting the most vulnerable communities in the country, with a focus on the most vulnerable locations as well as special populations, particularly women. One way for us to take this forward might be to look at the Gender Budget as well as the Climate Change Budget and seek out

chair for the next two years. This could be a potential South-South knowledge sharing and capacity building exercise under Bangladesh's leadership of the CVF and V20. As climate change impacts become reality around the world, every vulnerable country in the CVF will have to allocate part of their national budget to tackle climate change and they can learn from Bangladesh.

Saleemul Huq is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

DfID's demise redefines aid

KAMAL AHMED

THE United Kingdom has once again returned to the old conservative principle that development aid must be tied to political and foreign policy objectives of the donor government, instead of targets set by various global organisations through consensus. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced the merger of the Department for International Development (DfID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) under the control of the Secretary of State. Unveiling his merger plan in the parliament on June 16, PM Johnson said the objective was "to unite our aid with our diplomacy and bring them together in our international effort". This merger move has shocked international development organisations (INGOs) who have been voicing their concerns since the possibility emerged with Johnson's

civil society organisation, Global Justice, said that it would take "the UK back two decades when UK aid was subservient to the interests of British businesses." Others are fearful of the fact that due to trade and security priorities, the UK will now be more likely to support foreign governments "regardless of their human rights record."

Reactions from the opposition parties and some liberal centre-right MPs in the Treasury Bench are also similar to those of the charities sector. Three former Prime Ministers, David Cameron of the Conservative Party, and Gordon Brown and Tony Blair of the Labour Party, have criticised the move. Cameron said it would mean "less expertise, less voice for development at the top table and ultimately less respect for the UK overseas." DfID was first set up by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1964, and has gone through several mergers and

for pursuing an integrated policy and strategy. During the House of Commons debate, he said that in many capitals, UK diplomats have been saying one thing, only to find that the message from DfID was different. Elaborating the point further, he said "it was no use a British diplomat one day going in to see the leader of a country and urging him not to cut the head off his opponent and to do something for democracy in his country, if the next day another emanation of the British Government is going to arrive with a cheque for 250 million pounds. We have to speak with one voice; we must project the UK overseas in a consistent and powerful way, and that is what we are going to do."

Explaining his government's priorities in its development assistance programmes, PM Johnson said, "We give as much aid to Zambia as we do to Ukraine, although the latter is vital for European security, and we

The shock is even greater and deeper as it comes amidst a global pandemic which, undoubtedly, has created the worst humanitarian crisis in many decades at an unprecedented level. Aid charities have reacted to the scrapping of the separate and independent aid department angrily.



PHOTO: STEFAN WERMUTH/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

ascension to the leadership.

The shock is even greater and deeper as it comes amidst a global pandemic which, undoubtedly, has created the worst humanitarian crisis in many decades at an unprecedented level. Aid charities have reacted to the scrapping of the separate and independent aid department angrily. The largest UK charity, Oxfam, said "the merger would harm the fight to reduce global poverty." Terming the merger a "terrible" decision, another leading global

splits with the changes in power between the Conservatives and Labour. Last time, the split was carried out by Tony Blair, and his Conservative successors David Cameron and Theresa May maintained the separation and independence of the aid arm of the government.

Responding to the criticism that this merger may see more aid money focused on UK national interests and less on poverty reduction, PM Johnson told MPs that the merger will create opportunities

give 10 times as much aid to Tanzania as we do to the six countries of the western Balkans, which are acutely vulnerable to Russian meddling. Regardless of the merits of those decisions, no single department is currently empowered to judge whether they make sense or not, so we tolerate an inherent risk of our left and right hands working independently." Following the merger, it will be the Foreign Secretary who will decide which countries receive or cease to receive British aid, while delivering

a single UK strategy for each country, overseen by the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. This statement indicates further who will be the winners and losers of the reorganisation.

The UK government is one of the richest countries that fulfilled the commitment of spending 0.7 percent of its national income in aid to poorer countries, which was agreed prior to setting the Millennium development Goals (MDG). Johnson, however, pledged to maintain the level of spending of around GBP 15 billion following the merger. It is four times more than the Foreign Office budget. Critics allege this merger may see more of the aid money focusing on UK national interests instead of fighting global poverty, and investing in global health and education. Prime Minister Johnson, in his parliamentary deliberations, has indicated at least three upcoming changes—greater strategic importance of its European neighbours like Ukraine and Balkan countries over needier nations in Africa and elsewhere, democracy becomes a precondition for getting humanitarian assistance; and UK's national interests may include the interests of British business.

How this merger might affect Bangladesh, one of the recipients of British aid amounting to well over GBP 190 million a year, is to be seen. But, it should worry our non-government and civil society organisations, as such a major shift in priorities of the British government is bound to have some impact in the not so distant future.

Kamal Ahmed is a freelance journalist based in London.