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Teenage gangs getting involved in dangerous crimes

Politicians must stop patronising them, society must take responsibility

We are alarmed at the rise of a gang culture among teenagers in the capital and elsewhere in the country. According to a report in *The Daily Star*, around 40 teenage gangs are active in the capital while in the port city of Chattogram, there are around a hundred such gangs. These gangs are involved in all kinds of criminal activities—from petty crimes to murder, stalking to rape, and mugging to drug abuse, and mostly operate under the patronage of local ruling party leaders who act as influential “elder brothers”. In the last four months, over a dozen people have reportedly been killed by juvenile suspects.

Last September, Nila Roy, a 10th grader, was murdered in Savar by Mizan, a 12th grader and a teenage member of the infamous “Shakil and Sakib” gang. Shakil and Sakib are sons of a local influential Awami League leader who used their father’s influence and power to cover up their crimes. Locals alleged that members of this gang were involved in the drug trade, used to stalk and assault girls and were also notorious for extorting people and businesses in Savar. The notorious Nayan Bond’s gang “007” in Barguna, which killed Rifat Sharif in broad daylight last year, is a glaring example of the teenage gang culture that is flourishing across the country. The gang was reportedly backed by the son of a top local Awami League leader. A Barguna court recently sentenced 11 juveniles to prison for the murder. The recent gang-rape in Noakhali’s Begumganj that outraged the entire nation was also committed by a youth gang named “Delwar Bahini”. Reportedly, at least two dozen such gangs operate with blessings from some ruling party leaders in Begumganj alone.

These are just three of the most talked about crimes in recent times. Many such crimes are being carried out by teenage gang members in the capital and all across the country. Clearly, none of the gangs could exist without the patronage of their political “big brothers”.

While the law enforcers must identify the gangs and remain vigilant against their activities in order to rid our society of this gang culture, we should emphasise more on establishing social control than reactive actions from law enforcers. The state and society should work together to engage boys in productive activities through youth clubs for instance, so they are not attracted to delinquent or criminal behaviour, which is seen as a sign of power among their circles. More importantly, we will not be able to see a change in the situation if political patronisation is not stopped, since teenagers are engaging in gang culture to feel important and get connected to power. Political leaders, who are using children to control communities or areas, must be held accountable for either creating or encouraging gang culture.

26 Bangladeshi researchers among top two percent most cited

Universities should prioritise research for the benefit of society

We take great pleasure in congratulating our researchers whose works, 26 of them, have been cited most often in the world, ranking among the top two percent of those quoted. The 17 universities/institutions to which these researchers belong, that include both public and private, deserve our commendations too. Our researchers also fared very well in so far as impact made by researchers in a single year. The statistics were revealed in research on metascience by Stanford University. The list includes 1,59,683 scientists of various disciplines.

That being said, we would like to suggest that the underlying pointers in the report be assessed in the light of funding for research and the number of scholars who devote themselves to research work annually, and evaluate the present state of research in educational and other institutions in the country.

Currently, the percentage of the budget that public universities spend on research and research related work is worth little mention. What we would like to know is what percentage of the annual budget, for example of Dhaka University, is allocated for research, and what percentage of that has been spent over the last few years? Our understanding, which is even more startling, is that the universities can seldom spend half or even less of whatever little that is set aside for research. Why is this so? We would like to know too how much of the University Grants Commission tranche set aside for research has been spent in the last few years.

We believe that research work should spread over a larger field, which is now confined to scientific studies mainly, as the Stanford findings reveal, to sectors like social sciences and humanities also. We understand too that most of the research are not primary research but done mainly for the purpose of promotions or seminars.

Research work should ultimately benefit people. It needs little reiteration that research and research-driven higher education, which all universities should provide, contribute positively to society at large. It is undisputed that a knowledge based society is one that is strong, dynamic and better equipped to adapt to the challenges of the times. In our context, the absence of research in many areas leave us blindsided and results in short term interventions or temporary fixes that are not long lasting. Apart from university resources, research can also be funded through grants from private institutions, as is the case in other countries.

Knowledge generated by research, as has been acknowledged by UNESCO, “is the basis of sustainable development, which requires that knowledge be placed at the service of development, be converted into applications, and be shared to ensure widespread benefits.” Thus not only more funds should be allotted, more students and scholars must be drawn towards research, which should become a culture rather than routine work.

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

In Bangladesh too, there are many predictions. Needless to say, expecting any Bangladesh specific measure is a bit far-fetched. Bangladesh is unlikely to be on the radar of the new US administration as it has already a crowded agenda to fulfil. However, a number of global policies, which may be dealt with differently by the Biden administration, will have implications for Bangladesh.

The first one is the decision on the Generalised System of Preference (GSP), under which countries are granted duty free access to the exporting country. GSP is the largest and oldest US trade preference programme that promotes economic development of countries through elimination of duties on various products. This also aims to provide opportunities for many of the world’s poorest countries to use trade to grow their economies and come out of poverty.

From this perspective, Bangladesh has been a well-deserved candidate for the US GSP facility. Bangladesh is currently a lower middle-income country by the World Bank’s category and a least developed country (LDC) according to the United Nation’s classification. It will graduate from the LDC category by 2024 with a grace period of three more years. After 2027, Bangladesh will cease to enjoy the privileges provided to the LDCs. So, trade preferences will be extremely useful for Bangladesh to prepare itself for a smooth graduation. Since the US is the largest export destination of Bangladesh, such facilities would be quite useful for Bangladesh. At present, the European Union provides GSP facility to Bangladesh’s export under its “Everything But Arms” initiative.

Unfortunately, the US suspended GSP for Bangladesh on June 27, 2013, effective from September 1, 2013. The decision was based on labour rights and safety issues following the collapse of the Rana Plaza building on April 24, 2013 where several readymade garments (RMG) factories were located. Since the Rana Plaza tragedy, Bangladesh has made significant improvements towards meeting several compliance related issues in the RMG sector. However, Bangladesh could not make it to the list of GSP beneficiary countries when President Barack Obama signed the Trade Preferences Extension Act

of 2015. The Act, signed on June 29, 2015, authorised the GSP through December 31, 2017 and made GSP retroactive from July 31, 2013. Bangladesh’s South Asian neighbours Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were among the GSP beneficiaries. In June 2019, India’s GSP benefits were terminated by the US.

Of course, the US granted GSP to Bangladesh for only less than one percent of its total exports. RMG, which is Bangladesh’s major export to the US,

Meanwhile, between 2015 and 2020, Bangladesh has further strengthened its compliances in the RMG sector. Buyers have been working with RMG manufacturers to improve compliance. A number of measures have been undertaken through collaboration with Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, for example, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, the Alliance of Bangladesh Worker Safety and the Partnership for Cleaner Textile. Major compliance measures have been undertaken to ensure the safety of factories

of GDP growth. Production and export of electrical equipment, textiles, construction and machinery in Vietnam and Malaysia and transport equipment in Japan would have been increased due to this deal.

Bangladesh will be worried of prospective trade diversion due to the TPP. Through extensive tariff elimination amongst themselves, the TPP countries will have an advantage over non-TPP countries. RMG exports are feared to be the direct victims of this. With TPP in place, Vietnam will have greater preference in the US market compared to Bangladesh. This is also true for other export items of Bangladesh, such as frozen food and agricultural products.

Another area of loss is foreign investment. For investors, it will be profitable to invest in TPP member countries, since they can have preferential access to export products to these countries. For example, if investors wanted to invest in pharmaceuticals in Bangladesh to export to the global market, they will not find it attractive to invest.

Two other areas where Bangladesh expects US leadership and commitment is investment in vaccine innovation and its availability for overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic, and a return to the Paris Climate Agreement. To control the outbreak of the pandemic effectively, Bangladeshi people need access to vaccines free of cost. Incoming President Biden has announced his plan for dealing with the pandemic. Hopefully, something good will



Although the US is the largest export destination for Bangladesh, we have to pay approximately 15.6 percent as duty for exporting RMG to the US.

is not covered under GSP. Therefore, Bangladesh has to pay approximately 15.6 percent as duty for exporting RMG to the US. In 2005, at the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Hong Kong, the US agreed to provide duty-free, quota-free access (DFQF) to 97 percent tariff lines. However, RMG was on the “three percent exclusion list” of the US. Then in 2013, at the ninth WTO ministerial conference in Bali, the development package stipulated that developed countries, which were yet to provide DFQF to the LDCs, would do so for more than 97 percent tariff lines before the tenth WTO ministerial conference. Sadly, the Doha Round discussion has gradually lost its momentum, with major players such as the US withdrawing itself from multilateral trade negotiations under the Trump administration.

In order to improve bilateral trade relations, Bangladesh signed the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (TICFA) with the US, hoping that the TICFA could be a vehicle for GSP retention. Bangladesh and the US were to engage in discussion on trade and labour related issues including the GSP plan. However, not much progress has been made in this case also.

and workers. The labour laws of the country have been amended and the right to form trade unions in factories, including in the special economic zones, has been approved. The minimum wage of RMG workers has been raised in an attempt to make it comparable to other competing countries. Since compliance is not a one-off measure, this work still continues.

The other policy that will have impacts on Bangladesh is the revival of the US-led mega trade deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was signed on October 5, 2015. This trade deal was abandoned by the Trump administration in January 2017. Twelve members of the deal—the US, Canada, Japan, Chile, Peru, New Zealand, Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore—cover about 40 percent of global trade and one-third of the global economy. TPP was the largest ever trade agreement among countries after the Uruguay Round of the WTO.

By integrating trade among themselves, TPP signatory countries expected to enhance their economic growth and create jobs in their respective countries. It was estimated that the TPP could expand the economies of TPP members by USD 285 billion by 2025. Among them Vietnam, Malaysia and New Zealand would have benefitted the most in terms

RMG, which is Bangladesh's major export to the US, is not covered under GSP. Bangladesh has to pay approximately 15.6 percent as duty for exporting RMG to the US.


come out of his commitments. In the same tune, US commitment towards the Paris Agreement is crucial for climate vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh.

On the whole, expectations from the Biden government are high, but only time can tell how far they will be materialised. Clearly, Bangladesh has no reason to expect too much since policies are not taken in isolation—they are taken keeping in mind the global geo-political balance.

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Declining trust in democratic institutions



MEER AHSAN HABIB

THE Chief Election Commissioner of the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC) has made it clear that we have an electoral system that is in many ways performing better than that of the United States. He said that there is no such commission in the US and that it can count votes within minutes, while the US takes weeks. In fact, President Donald Trump could take lessons on how to win an election from us. Indeed, we have a unique EC that is performing quite differently than that of other democratic countries in the world.

In a democracy, institutions play a critically important role in upholding the constitution, safeguarding its people and protecting their rights. Although there is no universally accepted definition of democracy, equality before the law, rule of law and political freedom can be characterised as its most important features. Famed political scientist Larry Diamond defined democracy as consisting of four key elements—a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; protection of the human rights of all citizens; and a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

This definition makes it clear that democracy must hold free and fair elections, that the rights and liberties of its people are protected by the constitution and laws, and last but not least, every citizen is equal before the law and has equal access to the legislative process. Well, these are just theories. If we take a close look at democracies around the world, the government does not always stand by its people. Of course, exceptions are there, but governments generally tend to remain in power either through a constitutional process or by treachery. This is where democratic institutions come in, to play the “check and balance” role and stop government from abusing their power.

Do we have such institutions in Bangladesh? We have institutions like the EC, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), among others, which are critical for a meaningful and functioning democracy. But are they performing in line with their constitutional and legal mandate?

For years, the weakness of these institutions has been widely documented by the media, academics and policymakers. It has become a significant issue primarily because they are failing to serve the people. This has happened not because they are underdeveloped, but because they have not been able to act independently.

as well. Even after being convicted of corruption, the Dhaka lawmaker managed to evade justice, thanks to years of inaction from the ACC, which failed to move the case in the Appellate Division. The mammoth corruption cases in Covid-19 related procurement is also another example of the ACC’s failures. In fact, there are very few examples in which the ACC acted on its own. In almost all cases, it acted only after the press reported it.

The NHRC also does little beyond basic fact-finding and submitting annual reports to the President. It has a limited mandate in investigating human rights violations, particularly those committed by law enforcing agencies. The members



In recent months, the EC presented the country with several by-elections that witnessed the lowest voter turnout in living memory. In almost all cases, the candidate from the ruling party secured a sweeping victory amid low voter turnout—as low as 5.28 percent in some places. Commenting on this, one key government official said that even if one voter casts a vote, it would be participatory. The EC has thus chosen to disregard one of the very basic principles of democracy—peoples’ participation in elections.

The cases of two lawmakers, one from old Dhaka and another from Lakshmipur, have recently created strong debates on whether an institution like the ACC is performing in line with its mandate

of the selection committee are largely composed of government appointees, and high officials of the commission are either retired bureaucrats or work on deputation. The Global Alliance on National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) assessed the NHRC twice, in 2011 and 2015, on how compliant it is with the Paris Principle—the international benchmarks against which national human rights institutions (NHRIs) can be accredited by the GANHRI. The NHRC was accorded a “B” status as it did not fulfil the six main criteria NHRIs should have. It will not be unjust to say that the NHRC’s limited mandate to investigate human rights violations by law enforcing agencies has made extrajudicial killings a regular practice in the name of

maintaining law and order in Bangladesh.

Apart from these public institutions, civil society as an independent institution plays an important role in shaping democracy. The effectiveness of public institutions also largely depends on the existence of a strong civil society. It is pertinent to mention that the birth of Bangladesh was first theorised by civil society in the 1960s. They played an important role in shaping governance policies until the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. Civil society was then sidelined until the fall of the military regime in 1990. From 1990 to 2006, civil society more or less had the scope to participate in the institutionalisation of democracy. Sadly, civil society thereafter was sidelined by the military-backed caretaker government, which created mistrust between the political parties and civil society. While the mistrust still exists, a section of civil society has taken the political stand of blindly supporting the government.

It is undeniable that these institutions are closely linked to the proper functioning of a democracy. If these institutions could work independently and if leadership could be developed within civil society, creating the conditions for a reemergence of trust between government and the governed, it would go a long way towards sustaining democracy in Bangladesh. The success of these institutions would depend on the increased participation of citizens in the political process—letting them share their views and concerns, thus making them a partner in governance. Under international law, the UN human rights covenants and the Constitution of Bangladesh, the government is obliged not only to create institutions dedicated to the advancement of democratic principles and human rights but also to allow them to work without any kind of interference and influence.

National commissions that have a clear mandate of upholding the constitution and democratic principles must work in line with their mandate so that they do not serve anyone but the citizens, and so that no government can bend the constitution to suit its own interests.

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