

Draft ICT (Amendment) Ordinance-2013

A black law further blackened

ALREADY a repressive law, the existing ICT Act-2006 is being further blackened by the government through approving the proposed draft of its amendment styled ICT (Amendment) Ordinance-2013. Worse still, the proposed draft Act has made non-cognisable offences in the existing law cognisable, abolished the provision of bail and increased the extent of punishment to 14 years in prison.

On the flipside, it also provides the police with unrestricted power to arrest any person suspected of breaking the law without issuing warrant. It will constrict freedom of thought and thereby democracy.

In line with our consistent position against vesting arbitrary power in the law-enforcers' hand, we express our strong reservation against the proposed amendment to the ICT Act.

This is not to say that there should be no law to contain crimes committed through abusing the cyberspace. That is more so against the backdrop of the recent rise in cyber crime including hacking of websites, propagating information with malicious intent, storing and transferring of vulgar and obscene materials over the internet and so on. These also include the use of mobile telephony for criminal purpose.

To address this emerging world of crime, the government needs to adopt a modernistic legal framework rather than resorting to ad hocism. And to that end, it should have consulted all the stakeholders in the sector including business, research bodies, media and the various users of cyberspace.

It is hoped that the government will have rethink of the whole issue, initiate a public debate, adopt the best practice approach and change the content.

The ghost of Hall-Mark lives on

Bad loans decimate state-owned banks

IT would appear that policymakers have taken no lessons from the Hall-Mark scam, which until recently had been touted as the single largest scandal in the banking sector. Yet, what we are witnessing to our utmost dismay is that far from taking steps to plug loopholes that allowed for the scam, all manner of checks and balances pertaining to sanctioning of loans in state-owned commercial banks are willfully being bypassed opening the door for even bigger scams.

Going by newspaper reports, BASIC bank has suffered a scam worth Tk3,493 crore. It is interesting to note that whereas the Board of Directors of Sonali Bank claimed they had no knowledge of what was going on with loans to Hall-Mark, it is BASIC bank's board that has enabled the siphoning off of funds. The level of political influence in the state-owned banks has reached phenomenal proportions, which open up the possibilities of improper sanctioning of loans. Such 'appointees' inevitably find allies in a coterie of corrupt bank officials who play a key role in facilitating corrupt practices. A similar situation exists in Agrani Bank that is suffering from bad loans amounting to approximately Tk.2885 crore.

In the midst of all this, the government is in the process of injecting an additional Tk5,000crore into four state-owned commercial banks. Is it any wonder that banks like Sonali and Agrani are suffering capital shortfall, especially in light of the massive cases of irregularities witnessed. Precisely what will new infusion of capital achieve when remedial measures to rectify systemic faults and punitive actions against those involved in scam making are missing, is a question that has largely been left unanswered.

Uneasy calm in Rakhine

EDITORIAL DESK

CALM seems to elude the troubled northwest Rakhine state of Myanmar with the eruption of sporadic unrest and police firing every now and then despite its leaders' assurances to curb the communal clashes that claimed the lives of nearly 200 minority Rohingya Muslims and uprooted over 140,000 last year.

According to reports, a custodial death of a Rohingya sparked clashes recently near Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state. And in the resultant police firing two persons were killed and over a dozen injured, according to witnesses accounts. The main reason for the simmering communal tensions in Myanmar is the deep social divide and the ostracisation of Rohingya Muslims, who are considered aliens and stateless, despite their existence in the country since decades.

It's sad that the aggressive postures being adopted by Buddhist leaders have been stoking communal passions and prejudicing the majority Buddhist community against the Rohingyas, who are treated as pariahs. This apart, there have been disturbing reports about the Rakhine state government announcing the enforcement of a two-child norm on the poor Rohingyas and the blocking of human rights groups and medical teams from visiting the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

The world is well aware of the plight of the minority Muslims who have been languishing in the relief camps in miserable conditions. While hailing its reforms drive, the US too had recently urged the Myanmar leaders to do more to improve its human rights record.

It's time for Myanmar to realise that recurring sectarian strife would not augur well for the nation; especially after having taken various democratic and reformative steps in the recent past. Hence, it becomes imperative for it to take radical moves to set things right by curbing hostilities and animosities between the people and work for an inclusive growth involving all sections of society.

When truth is under siege

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ist in trying to denigrate the memory of a man whose leadership caused this country to emerge into freedom?

Values, as you will notice, have taken leave of some very large sections of society. But some of us yet uphold some of the principles instilled in us in our childhood. We do not laugh when a neighbour dies. We do not play music when a friend or relative passes away. We speak in soft tones when someone is busy in prayer. We detest those who raise controversies about the remains or otherwise of a dictator, however unsavoury his exercise of power might have been, in the grave. Because we hold fast to these values, we do not appreciate public birthday celebrations on August 15. To those couples who tied the marital knot on August 15 after 1975, we ask: Why? When a whole nation mourns, it can only be Lucifer who will sing and dance in the dark land of conceit.

The morality question assails us in other areas as well. Almost everybody you know is horrified at the manner in which the secretary of Odhikar has lately been treated. The sense of horror is understandable given the manner of the man's arrest. But where were these concerns when Odhikar began informing the world of what it called a huge number of casualties arising out of the flushing of the Hefajatis in May? Neither Odhikar nor those who have seen 'genocide' in the government's action in May thought it necessary to condemn the mayhem and violence perpetrated by the Hefajatis. On top of that, they have sought to undermine the country abroad with falsehood and figures that do not match the reality on the ground.

Odhikar refused to provide the government with details of the sixty one people it said had died in the security forces' action in May. But it did hand over the list to certain human rights organisations in the country and abroad. That only complicates things. You choose your friends abroad and make them happy but you defy your own government for reasons you cannot logically or

MORALITY has been on a nosedive in this country and elsewhere as well. And you see that through the very public celebrations of the birthday of former prime minister Khaleda Zia. Of course she has all the right in the world to observe the day. Of course her fans and followers will commemorate the event. But why must they do it in such gleeful fashion given that the day also happens to be one when we remember the darkest moment in our history? When an entire nation is in mourning, why must a politician or her followers persist in trying to denigrate the memory of a man whose leadership caused this country to emerge into freedom?

Human rights are fine. But when this whole issue of rights comes wrapped in layers of untruth, in sordid instances of photo-shopping and manipulation of figures, there is very real cause for worry.

legally explain. You raise the spurious argument that the security of the families of the 'victims' could be in jeopardy if the government gets your list of the 'dead.' That is not good enough.

If Odhikar has a case, if it has supporting evidence for the allegations it has come up with, it should have kept the government informed and it should have taken the media into confidence. It has not done that. Neither has it informed its friends of the terror the Hefajatis resorted to in the days before the government cracked down on them in May. Bias is bad policy. Being one-eyed is a mark of danger.

When your own fellow citizens and their foreign friends begin breathing down your neck, you tend to feel there should have been a Lee Kwan Yew in this country. The Singaporean elder statesman has perfectly good notions of how Asian democracy should be working, of how nonsense cannot and must not be tolerated. Observe: you have Human Rights Watch making a sweeping statement of the Ghulam Azam trial having been flawed. Fine, but when HRW shows this concern for the Jamaat leader, it should also demonstrate its readiness to uphold its moral responsibility, which is to inform its friends and the international community of the crimes committed by the Jamaat and its leadership forty two years ago in occupied Bangladesh. A concern for the human rights of war criminals is all right as long as it comes with a serious, detailed expression of concern for the families of those murdered by these criminals. If HRW does not know of 1971 or has forgotten all about it, it can do the simple thing of checking newspaper reports published worldwide forty two years ago. The evidence is out there.

There are bigger, more substantive questions that are not raised in Bangladesh these days. It is all right for people to be worried about Mahmudur Rahman or Adilur Rahman Khan, to be critical of the way the powers that be have been treating them. But why must they look away from other and similar incidents that happened not many years ago? Bangladesh's Hindus, always a vulnerable lot, went through a fresh spate of terror when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat rode to power in 2001. Did those who defend the Hefajatis today draw global attention to the plight of the Hindus back then? How many civil rights organisations in the country have gone hunting down the bands of Muslim fanatics who torched Buddhist temples and homes in Ramu last year?

Human rights are fine. But when this whole issue of rights comes wrapped in layers of untruth, in sordid instances of photo-shopping and manipulation of figures, there is very real cause for worry. You do not have to, you must not, take it lying down.

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Egypt: End of political Islam

MAHMOOD HASAN

Egypt has reached a point of no-return, since the ouster of elected Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi. Politically, the nation is bitterly divided -- between Islamists and secularists -- with portents of a civil war. The army is in control of the government, but not the people of Egypt.

The situation drifted towards a bloody showdown as the Brotherhood refused to speak to the interim government and demanded reinstatement of Morsi. On August 15, Egyptian security forces cracked down on the six-week long sit-in of pro-Morsi demonstrators in Nasr city. Next day, the Brotherhood called for a "day of rage" against the military. Result -- more than 1,000 killed. Though nationwide emergency and night-time curfew in Cairo and other cities have been declared, Brotherhood plans more demonstrations. Vice President Mohammed El Baradei has resigned protesting the military crackdown.

There are reports that Brotherhood activists have used firearms on the security forces and pro-military supporters. Coptic Christian churches across Egypt also came under attack. Thousands have been injured and thousands arrested. Most of the Brotherhood leaders are under detention, including deposed President Morsi.

During the year-long presidency of Morsi, the trust gap between the army and the Brotherhood kept widening. Instead of being inclusive, Morsi created sharp divisions in the Egyptian polity with his Islamist agenda, completely ignoring the major segments of the secular society. The army generals moved against him when they felt that Morsi was attempting to infiltrate and indoctrinate the army.

The army refrained from taking any action against the protestors because of the month of Ramadan. Meanwhile, the US, European Union and several Arab ministers tried to mediate a solution between the Muslim Brotherhood and the army-backed government of President Adly Mansour. These efforts failed to bridge the gap between the Brotherhood and General Sissi. After the Eid festival the army repeatedly warned and asked the pro-Morsi demonstrators to disperse, before descending on them with brutal force.

The army crackdown came under condemnation from world leaders and Human Rights groups. One wonders why the West has been unconvincing in reacting to the events in Egypt. One explanation could be that, while the West wanted 'democracy' in Egypt, they were wary of an Islamist government in Egypt. Besides, the events in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria made the West distrustful of Islamist regimes.

The American government has condemned the killings and has asked for restoration of democracy and human rights. For Washington, the US-Egypt military partnership is crucial to the security of Israel, and has served as the bedrock of Middle East peace for the last four decades. The Egyptian army receives \$1.5 billion each year from America.

President Obama is in an awkward situation and under pressure to declare the dismissal of Morsi a "military coup." According to US law, America cannot give any financial assistance to a government accused of "coup." President Obama has stopped short of calling it a "coup," but has cancelled the annual joint military exercise in Sinai, scheduled for September. Obama is unwilling to suspend the financial assistance, as it is the only leverage Washington has over Egypt.

Even if Washington cancels the military assistance, the Egyptian army will not face difficulties, as it has received \$13 billion from the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia -- strong opponents of the Muslim



Brotherhood. The European countries have little leverage over Egypt as they give little or no economic assistance to it.

However, Western countries and the Gulf States seem relieved that the Islamist Brotherhood is no longer in charge of Egypt, a strategic country in the Middle East.

The main reason why Egypt has drifted towards such a dangerous path is simple. Over the past 60 years the country has been under successive military dictators, who did not allow political parties to grow and flourish. The only party that was allowed was, "National Democratic Party" (NDP), established by President Anwar Sadaat and nurtured by Hosni Mubarak.

Political party culture was totally absent when Hosni Mubarak fell in February 2011. The vacuum was quickly filled in by more than 40 political parties, which were registered to contest the elections in 2011. None of these party leaders had any experience in state management. The Brotherhood, which survived as a charity organisation during the military era, however, had strong organisational abilities. That capability gave it strength to win the presidential election in May 2012.

On August 18, interim government Prime Minister Hazem Al Beblawi called for banning the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation. If it is outlawed it will most likely go underground and may even become an insurgent outfit, with links to al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas. Islamic militants, already active in Sinai, killed 25 Egyptian soldiers on August 18. Clearly, the Brotherhood is showing its muscle to stave off the threat of ban. It wants to remain a mainstream party and contest the next elections.

Here, one would recall the decade long Algerian insurgency, which began when the "Islamic Salvation Front" won the first round of election in December 1991. The military cancelled the election, deposed President Chadli Bendjedid, and took over to eliminate the Salvation Front. The civil war lasted until 2002 and cost more than two hundred thousand lives. A similar scenario is too chilling to contemplate in Egypt. The repercussions of such an eventuality will be enormous, both within Egypt and in the region as a whole.

Egypt's preeminent position in the Middle East has waned over the past two years because of internal disensions. It is crippled by violence and a stagnant economy. The nation is faced with an identity crisis -- will it be a secular or an Islamist nation. In the current bitter struggle the army will prevail, but at the cost enormous of human lives. The events of the past several weeks suggest that the Brotherhood may be outlawed. That will be the end of political Islam in Egypt, at least for the time being. Democracy and Islam in the Arab world do not seem to go together.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
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Tragic and unfortunate!

The news of the gruesome murder of special branch police inspector Mahfuzur Rahman and his wife Swapna Rahman in their house, in which the involvement of their only daughter Oishee Rahman has been found, has made us numb with horror and disbelief.

The decomposed bodies of the couple were found in the afternoon of August 16, 2013 in the bathroom along with blood stained knives. It has been disclosed that the couple had been given sedatives with tea or coffee.

When the girl was born, the parents surely were very delighted; they nurtured her, not knowing that one day she will become an instrument in their unnatural and violent death. What an unfortunate and heart wrenching incident!

I think nothing is more painful than to be killed by one's own child. We pray to the Almighty Allah to spare all the parents from this horrible fate.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Floating power plant

A very interesting write-up published in a local daily on 6th August could be a viable solution for purchasing power plants with short lead time. It could be a better solution than rental power plants and a quick solution for putting it up from ground up to power on the grid. As we know, a new power plant usually takes minimum 4 to 6 years at least. In this case, it is a total seagoing power ship and it would take only one year to complete the project! The price given was Euro 1.2 million per MW capacity. These innovative powerships can be liquid-or-gas-fueled, and the floating liquid fuel can be pumped directly to the powerships' rental power tanks. These could be easily stationed in the vicinity of Chittagong or Chalna ports. The write-up further informs that such power plants are available in capacities ranging between 135 and around 200MW.

The biggest advantage is that no land is needed and the lead time from order to delivery can be less than 9 months. Our officials concerned should seriously study this option.

Engr. S.A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Shareholders' cash dividends

I like to suggest SEC that it should instruct the companies to deposit declared cash dividend to their shareholders within 15 days of the record date. The companies have been keeping and using the cash dividend without paying any interest of the monies that are being used for years. I hope, SEC will act soon to make sure that cash dividends are deposited to share holders' account. It will bring these major benefits: lessen shareholders' hassle, increase the liquidity, and improve the reinvestment condition.

Dr. Jamir Chowdhury
Director and Professor, Qatar University

Comments on news report, "PM on Star, media," published on August 19, 2013

deep purple blue
Daily Star and Prothom Alo are PM's favourite target! Does she not know that people don't like arrogance?

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

TDS does what it is supposed to do. Problem is PMO and their associated wings including Inu's information ministry are not very comfortable with the way TDS does its job. It is the country's no.1 English daily. Our PM has a unique quality: the more she opens her mouth, the more damage she does to AL.

Shahjahan

PM is very arrogant. She thinks it is her birthright to rule Bangladesh as she is the daughter of the father of the nation.

Ash C.

You are right, Madam Prime Minister. 'Light rolls into darkness,' but while lighting the other side of this planet. And, yet, the stars never stop shining, no matter where the sun is positioned. Your statement with regard to your granting licences to 15 TV channels clearly indicates that you wanted these channels to 'sing' only your praise.

Nds

PM's belief in freedom of speech appears to be genuine as exemplified by her statements on different issues particularly the media. She gave free play to the expression of her grievances against everyone and everything that she felt appropriate. Is it not the example of real and unrestrained freedom of speech?

"Some points to ponder" (August 19, 2013)

Ahmed Zakaria

Poor child. It is clear that drugs had altered her state of mind in such a way that she could not function as a rational individual. Once the fog of drugs leaves her mind, she will come to realise what she has done and will have to live with that for the rest of her life.

Nds

This sort of bookish criticism deserves to be ignored lock, stock and barrel. Over sensitivity towards individual rights irrespective of their obligations is one of the prime causes of such tragic erosion of moral values in modern times. A girl having been reared up in a well-off as well as educated family who can conceive of and chalk out such a deliberate plan to kill her parents can never be treated as a child whatever her age might be.