

Freedom of the press and Lord Denning

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Various efforts were made by the successive governments since 1991 to whip and control the media to suppress criticism when they were unable to govern the country properly. However, they were not successful in their bid, rather they had to face debacle when they contested elections after their tenures.

THE signs are ominous. The Bangladesh Press Council, which was set up to preserve the freedom of the press, now wants to control it by having the powers to punish journalists for "false reports," and to issue certificates to intending journalists. To gain this authority, it has already consulted with the information ministry and drafted proposals for changes in the Press Council Act, 1973. The Cyber Tribunal recently awarded seven years imprisonment to a person accused of disseminating "a derogatory song" on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Awarding of the punishment appears to be a clear threat to freedom of speech.

The government has already formulated the national broadcast policy, imposing a set of stringent conditions on airing of news reports and programmes by television channels. All the signs suggest that a tough time is ahead for freedom of speech and of the press. Controlling people's freedom of speech and freedom of the press will make any move to have a functional democracy a futile exercise, and the country can in no way claim itself as a democracy. History testifies that any government that has minimal level of confidence in democracy cannot gag the media.

The original Constitution of the USA had not recognised freedom of the press. The framers of the constitution allegedly had no confidence in the press. This had generated huge uproar. The people had fought against the British rule and gained independence hoping to enjoy freedom and liberty. The British rulers had denied people the freedom of expression and of the press. In the wake of the people's demand, most states of the USA, however, guaranteed the freedom of expression in their state constitutions. Virginia had come up with a strong provision in its constitution in 1776. It declared that "the freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained except by despotic government." Some other states did not waste time to follow Virginia. This led the

USA to bring the first amendment to the constitution in 1791 to ensure freedom of expression and the press. The amendment said that the Congress shall make no law regarding establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to assemble peaceably and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

There was little freedom of the press in the days of the British Crown. The British government had gagged the media in various ways for long periods. For example, the infamous Court of the Star Chamber was set up by the monarch in 1588. High ranking government officials used to sit behind closed doors in the Star Chamber at Westminster. The Star Chamber acted to gag the freedom of expression and of the press by imposing fines, seizing presses, cutting off ears, splitting noses and awarding imprisonment. After a long period, parliamentarians won the battle defeating the King, and they enacted the Bill of Rights in 1689 ushering in new hope for freedom of the speech and of the press by curtailing the powers of the monarch. Since then, freedom of expression, speech and press have flourished.

Over the years, the press has become the most powerful body in the UK and is able to form public opinion. An insult to freedom of the press is not tolerated. Take the example of Lord Denning, the most celebrated English Judge of the 20th century. In the British Steel Corporation versus Granada Television case in 1981, Lord Denning, who was the president of the Civil Division of the Court of Appeal, commented that "in order to be deserving of freedom, the press must show itself worthy of it. A free press must be a responsible press. The power of the press is great. It must not abuse its power."

Denning's remarks triggered an uproar as they were considered as an insult to the freedom of the press. Denning tried to defend his remarks. He argued that he made a sensible statement of principle. But the media were infuriated by it and by the decision given by

the Court of Appeal. They waged a united protest against the judges. Some senior politicians joined them. Labour Party MP Michael Foot, one of the most principled British politicians in his era and leader of the opposition in the House of Commons at that time, had blasted Lord Denning for his remarks. He even commended: "Denning is an ass." The Observer ran a report under the headline: "Why Denning is an ass?"

The British government, in its around two hundred years rule in the Indian sub-continent, had made numerous efforts to gag the free press. Thus, the history of the press in our sub-continent has been the history of its struggle for freedom. After partition in 1947, ill-motivated efforts were made by the successive regimes in Pakistan to rein in the press. This trend continued even in independent Bangladesh for around two decades when political and military rulers ruled the country. The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 by ousting of the military dictator through vigorous street agitation finally paved the way for the press to enjoy freedom. Yet various efforts were made by the successive governments since 1991 to whip and control the media to suppress criticism when they were unable to govern the country properly.

However, they were not successful in their bid, rather they had to face debacle when they contested elections after their tenures.

The present Awami League-led government that returned to power through the one-sided and voter less January 5 elections has opted for a stronger strategy to control the media. It has targeted the media because it has become the main opposition to the government in absence of a genuine opposition in parliament. But history shows that any effort to gag people's voice and the freedom of the press finally faces defeat. The eminent English judge Lord Denning had to face severe criticism for making insulting remarks about the freedom of the press. So, one may recall the words of Labour leader Michael Foot when opposing any move to gag the freedom of the press.

The writer is Senior Reporter, *The Daily Star*.

Is South Asia becoming a breeding ground for IS?

AMAMAH AHMAD

IT seemed that after the death of Osama bin Laden, militant Islamist/Wahabist groups had shrunk in size. The arrival of the IS (also known as ISIL or ISIS) in this context and its unprecedented rise is hence a cause for concern from many angles.

The IS differs largely in its modus operandi from what had previously been known of such jihadist groups; members of the group operate in a military manner where they occupy and gain control over territories and govern them like states; they conduct simultaneous operations in different countries; they have become financially self-sufficient (mainly from their captured oil assets, extortions and kidnappings) and well armed; they have adopted a dramatic and highly publicised approach through the use of social media, conducting propaganda campaigns -- unusual for such groups -- and directing them straight to western heads of States.

Geographically, the appeal of the IS, whose actions have prompted military reactions from the West, has spread in many countries of Southeast Asia where radicalised Muslims have been inspired by the group's declarations of an Islamic caliphate. The notoriety of the IS has drawn large numbers of adherents, which has contributed to increasing the terrorist threats in South Asia, which has become an involuntary "transit" region between the East and the West.

The major threats here reside in the fact that the South Asian nations already face risks of growing security issues; geographic proximity (increasing risks of spillover and linkage), fragile states, porous borders (leading to illegal activities and the creation of terrorist hubs), poverty and existing ethno-religious conflicts make the region an ideal ground to recruit more supporters and intensify their network. Additionally, the proliferation of madrassas, funded by the Middle East in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and policies persecuting Muslim minorities (such as the Rohingyas) in the sub-region, provide the IS with a pool of pre-existing potential members and followers and a breeding ground for extremist groups.

The most alarming factor for the authorities in these countries are the prospects of home-grown or internal militancy and their co-option with the IS. In Bangladesh, a video recently surfaced, claiming a that group of Bangladeshis have declared themselves as followers of Baghdadi. Arrests have been made in India amid reports that four youngsters were allegedly planning to meet an IS contact in Bangladesh and join the terror outfit. This was followed by arrest of Bangladesh JMB leader Abdullah Al Tasnim and six others, claiming the group had established links with the IS. Earlier this month, dozens of IS militants entered Pakistan through Afghanistan distributing hundreds of pamphlets urging the locals to join the jihadist group. However isolated these occurrences may be, what is clear is that the IS has the capacity to create a greater network across South Asia.

If we look at the medium of communication, social media outlets have become one of the main methods of recruitment. The novel element here is the "sophisticated" use of social media, which is propelling the popularity of the group in a largely Muslim-populated region.

In the days to come, the rise of the IS will inevitably increase military involvement of the US, its allies and regional forces, which will define the security landscape over the use of soft power approaches in the Middle East. For the regional context of South Asia, it is however essential that, as a preventative measure, the nations equip themselves with soft power counter-radicalisation/terrorism policies. Governments should focus on incorporating creative citizen engagement and critical thinking training in their counter/de-radicalisation programmes to integrate newly released prisoners, minimise recidivism and disincentive impressionable youths.

As the IS has adopted a highly media-centered tactic, the role of the media in countering extremism needs to be examined comprehensively. In that regard, the media can circulate counter-narratives to the ones of the extremist groups, delegitimise and deconstruct false justifications of acts in the name of religion, and avoid sensationalising the group and its goals.

It is evident that there is no one-size-fits-all formula to counter the penetration of extremist ideologies and thoughts that are becoming more and more popularised in our societies. In-depth sociological analysis need to be led on the links of marginalised Muslim minorities and their propensity to adhere to radical groups. The role of the media and the civil society in countering radicalisation needs to be highlighted. And holistic counter-terrorism strategies featuring soft power approaches that integrate idiosyncrasies of the South Asian context, such as their particular social, cultural, economic and religious dynamics, need to be incorporated in the government programmes.

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Regulate-cigarettes to protect health

POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

We have made remarkable progress in terms of tobacco control, but the increasing popularity of e-cigarettes threatens to undermine years of hard work. There is urgent need therefore to act now, to protect public health.

In recent years the electronic cigarette (e-cigarette) industry has been rapidly expanding, evolving from just one manufacturer in 2005 to a \$3 billion global business with 466 brands. Electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), of which e-cigarettes are the most common prototype, are battery-powered devices that use electricity to aerosolise a nicotine containing fluid for inhalation. We know that nicotine is addictive and is not harmless. But as ENDS are not made from tobacco leaves, they have largely escaped any regulation. The rapid global growth of ENDS represents an evolving frontier filled with both promise and threat for tobacco control. There is an urgent need to regulate the use of ENDS to maximise their potential and minimise health threats.

ENDS are frequently marketed by the industry as an aid to quit smoking or a healthier alternative to tobacco. The argument for ENDS is that they don't contain the toxic byproducts found in cigarettes, such as tar, and don't produce smoke. But the fact is that there is very little research on ENDS and no convincing evidence that they are effective as a "quit smoking device." In fact, with almost 8,000 different flavours added, including fruit and candy-like flavours, there is legitimate concern that instead of reducing the number of smokers, they will actually serve as a gateway to nicotine addiction, and ultimately, smoking, particularly for young people. The evidence supports this -- experimentation with e-cigarettes is increasing rapidly among adolescents, doubling from 2008 to 2012.

Existing evidence shows ENDS aerosol is not merely "water vapour." It contains cancer-causing agents, such as formaldehyde, which in some brands reach concentrations close to that of some conventional cigarettes. They deliver nicotine, which we know is a potent vasoconstrictor that may contribute to cardio-



vascular disease. There is sufficient evidence to show that nicotine itself, and not just the smoke from cigarettes, can affect brain development in fetuses and adolescents just from passive inhalation. ENDS contain varying levels of nicotine. Frequently, these levels are similar to that in cigarettes, and without regulation there is no way to control this amount. There is also evidence that ENDS use indoors increases second-hand exposure of non-smokers and bystanders to nicotine and a number of toxicants. While some evidence does show that ENDS are likely to be less toxic than conventional cigarettes, it is not known how much less toxic they are. Until we have sufficient evidence to determine the extent of their health impacts, the industry must be regulated. If we wait to implement regulations until the research is available, it may be too late.

While some steps have been taken to regulate ENDS, there are huge variations in country policies. Singapore and Brazil have completely banned e-cigarettes. In the WHO South-East Asia Region, many countries are considering implementing regulations. In India, a govern-

mental round table discussion in July decided to consider banning ENDS. While these are steps in the right direction, several countries in the developing world have no regulations or measures to regulate e-cigarettes.

It is for this reason that WHO recently released a Report on the Regulation of ENDS, which will be the primary topic of discussion at the Sixth Session of the Conference of the Parties to Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), to be held on October 13-18 in Moscow. In the report, WHO calls for regulations to prohibit addition of flavours which may make ENDS more attractive to youth, ban the use of ENDS indoors and in public and workplaces and restrict its advertising, promotion, and sponsorship to ensure that adolescents and non-smokers are not targeted. The regulations should impede ENDS promotion to non-smokers and young people, minimise potential health risks to both users and non-users, prohibit the dissemination of unproven health claims, and protect existing tobacco control efforts.

WHO is urging countries to choose the best regulatory framework available to implement the suggested regulatory objectives. In some cases, this might be the existing tobacco control legislation, or the existing medicines and medical devices regulations, while in other cases it may be in other government sectors. Regardless, the regulations must be implemented in a timely manner to protect the public from any potential ill-harm while more tests regards the health impacts of ENDS are carried out. The regulations should be adaptable to be able to respond to new data as it is gathered on the health impacts of ENDS.

We have made remarkable progress in terms of tobacco control, but the increasing popularity of e-cigarettes threatens to undermine years of hard work. There is urgent need therefore to act now, to protect public health.

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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Red-ink amount

5 Necklace parts

11 Car bar

12 Revolted

13 Pride member

14 Word on a peseta

15 Listening abbr.

16 Fido and Tabby

17 Uniform material

19 Misbehaving

22 Bygone auto

24 Add up

26 Portal

27 Green stone

28 Blue hue

30 Folded foods

31 Got together

32 Subatomic particle

34 Warbled

35 Rick's pianist

38 Far from ruddy

41 Corn Belt state

42 Broadway's Stritch

43 Game round

44 Mill contents

45 River of Hades

DOWN

1 Secluded spot

2 Way out

3 Plans stage movements

4 Decimal base

5 River feeder

6 Went ballistic

7 African serpents

8 Neptune's domain

9 Groan inducer

10 Hotel amenity

16 Chum

18 Munich mister

19 Loses consciousness

20 Ray of films

21 Salon jobs

22 Dutch cheese

23 Take a nap

25 Cracked

29 Horse-related

30 Playground game

33 Below

34 Marina spot

36 Wrong

37 Tailless cat

38 Energy

39 Pub product

40 Track trip

41 -- your loss!

Yesterday's answer

M	A	T	T	F	L	O	P	S
O	M	E	N	S	I	N	O	A
R	U	N	T	H	E	B	A	S
A	S	A	E	R	S	A	C	H
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S	T	E	N	O	L	E	S	S
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S	C	A	M	F	R	A	I	L
I	R	E	T	N	E	C	O	R
R	U	N	T	H	E	G	A	M
A	S	T	R	O	E	R	A	S
L	O	S	E	R	A	S	T	N
A	Y	D	L	B	A	A	R	X

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