

If I may (be allowed to) say so



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THAT it is easy to ignore violations of freedom of expression when it doesn't directly affect us is no profound statement. It might seem equally banal to point out that if we don't speak out when they come for the bloggers, the BNP-wallahs or media persons, to paraphrase the oft-quoted poem of Martin Niemöller, there would be a time when they'd come for us but there'd be no one left to speak on our behalves. Despite the obvious, however, over the years, we (those in the so-called 'middle') seem to have been surprisingly nonplussed by the rapidly shrinking space for democratic participation and freedom of expression in the country. We've ignored the telling signs, thinking it's not our battle. So when they arrested the bloggers for their 'offensive' posts, we thought: why write such things, *bhai*? When they amended the Information Communications and Technology (ICT) Act 2006, only some of us raised an eyebrow. Just a few days ago, they raided the New Age premises on mysterious grounds, and not even other media outlets seemed too outraged. Now they have arrested the chairperson of ETV essentially for airing Tarique Rahman's speech, and we find ourselves shrugging: Well obviously, what else were they expecting?

On the political front, freedoms of expression and assembly, guaranteed as they might be in our constitution, have become 'dumurer phul.' Despite AL's consistent claims that the BNP has no political clout left, the ruling party has been surprisingly keen on quelling public rallies of BNP through any possible means, using state institutions and elaborate tales to justify the sanctions. On January 5 this year, we saw a drama of such simultaneously comic and tragic proportions that even Shakespeare himself would have been baffled; but in many ways, was it not only a continuation of AL's unswerving strategy to stifle dissent while showcasing its overwhelming strength? What began as selective clamping on BNP rallies last year has now turned into an indefinite ban on all political rallies in the city, a move that, introduced to "prove" how democratic we are, reeks of autocratic rule.

Meanwhile, BNP, which clearly lacks organisational capability as well as mass participation to launch a full-fledged, strong movement to oust the ruling party (its threats now being reminiscent of the boy who cried wolf), has chosen to "express" itself through indiscriminate violence and a ludicrous, undefined blockade. While the argument that 'if you deny legitimate space to the opposition, you cannot expect anything better than violence' does have some hold, one can provide the counter-point that an opposition whose only defence is violence (that too, targeted towards civilians) is nothing if not morally and politically weak. And with an increasingly undemocratic government and incompetent opposition, the looming threat of militancy and extremism cannot be brushed aside easily, as has been pointed out by political analysts. It wasn't just BNP activists who were harassed by state institu-

tions last year, but also non-partisan protestors, including students. We saw lurid images of police violence against peaceful demonstration by students in Barisal, with the police coming down heavily on female students, as well as against aspiring candidates demanding to sit for entrance exams a second time at Dhaka University. The protestors were mercilessly beaten, allegedly at the encouragement of the university authorities, either by the police or by ruling party men in front of the police, signalling just how undemocratic even our academic institutions have become. Meanwhile, the requirement for police permission for demonstrations has become a novel way to harass and restraint protestors.

The space for dissent is shrinking not just on the streets, but also on the digital and communications front, with the introduction of the National Broadcasting Policy and amendment to the ICT Act. The broadcasting policy, severely criticised by the media as well as human rights activists, if instituted as it stands, will give unprecedented power to the government to control the media. For instance (to name just a few in a long list of problematic sections), things that CANNOT be aired include: news that is considered "anti-state and anti-public interest" (3.2.1); anything demeaning to the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and government officials who can punish people for criminal offences (5.1.5); anything that may hamper friendly relations with foreign countries (5.1.7) and incidents of "mutiny, chaos, and violent incidents" (5.1.9).

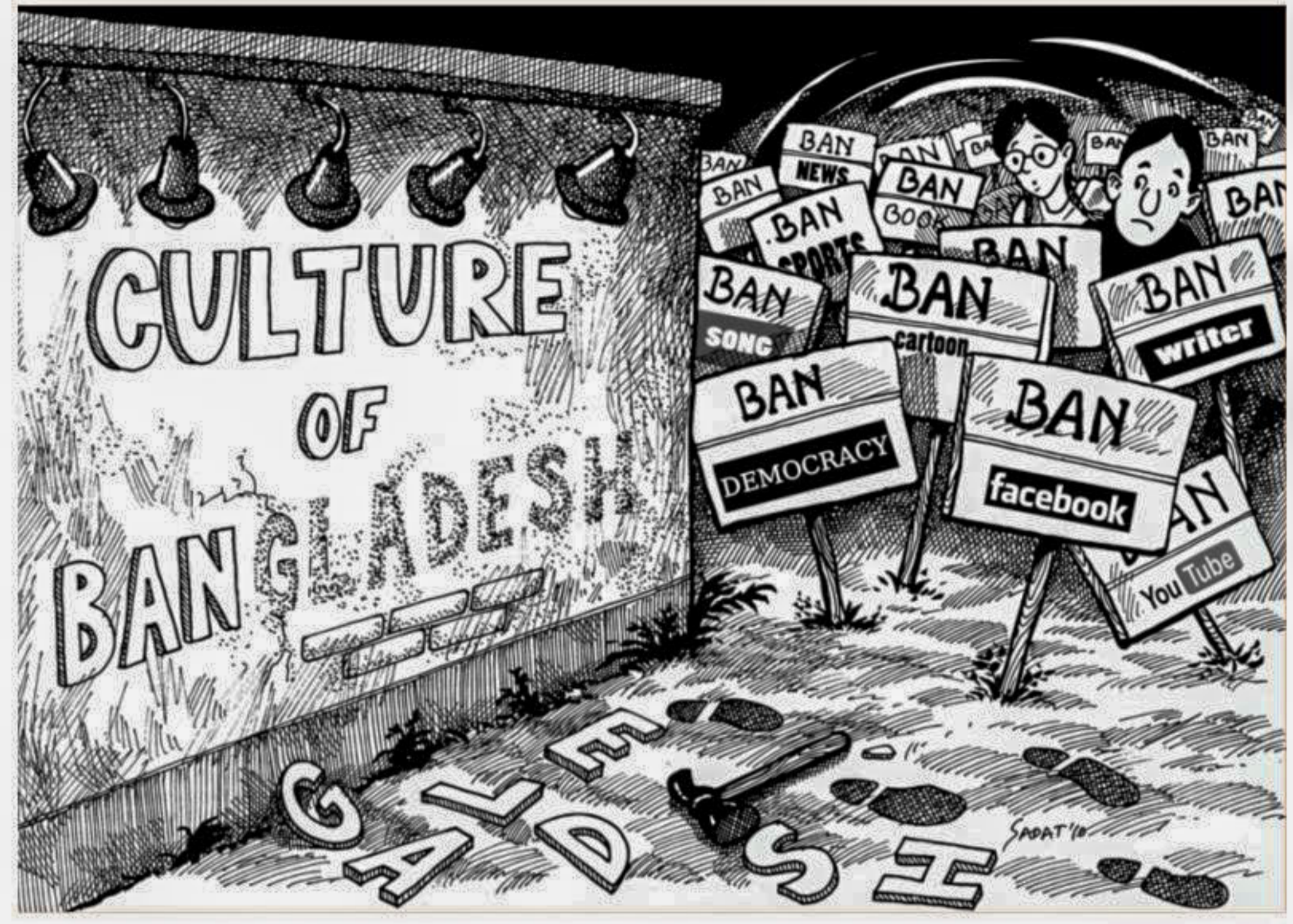
In the world envisioned by our policy-makers, can we report on disappearances and extra-judicial killings in police and Rab custody, military operation in the CHT, Tuba workers being beaten by the police for demanding their arrears, migrant workers being exploited and harassed by foreign employers, BSF killing Bangladeshi civilians at the border? Who gets to decide, and on whose terms, what constitutes "anti-state," "demeaning" or "hampering" (of friendly relations)? At a time when ministers would have us believe that everything, from the Sundarbans oil spill to the death of Jihad, is media propaganda, one need only look at BTV to imagine the bleak future of news if the government gets to decide on the content.

Meanwhile, an already regressive ICT Act 2006 was amended in 2013 to further curtail freedom of expression by, among other things, empowering law enforcers to arrest any person without warrant, and keep him/her in custody without any option of bail, for such things as "prejudicing the image of the State or person or causing or hurting religious belief." If convicted, s/he will be imprisoned for 7 to 14 years, a punishment which is far more severe than if the offence was conducted in print. Such is the beauty of Digital Bangladesh! Even criticisms or satire of prominent political personalities online can land one in jail, as illustrated by the imprisonment of a youth from Khulna for 7 years for a satiric song on Bangabandhu and Sheikh Hasina. And again, the dangers of what constitutes "harm," who gets to decide that and under what circumstances cannot be ignored all too readily, especially when it comes to the sensitive topic of religious sentiment. Would the fiery articles of Begum Rokeya that harshly critique the

oppressive customs of purdah be punishable under the current law for "hurting" religious belief? It's anybody's guess!

We've also been setting a rather dangerous precedent by limiting the space for debates and discussions on our history, as the national ruckus surrounding A.K. Khandakar's book shows. That in a democracy we will have conflicting viewpoints, on any issue at hand, is a given, and how we'll address the resulting disagreements determines how strong the foundation of our democratic principles are. If any deviation from orthodox history is treated as blasphemy, instead of being refuted with evidence and logic, then a disservice is done to history itself.

I am not one to claim that freedoms of speech and expression are absolute rights. Most countries of the world have some limits --



and understandably so -- on what can be said, by whom and against whom, e.g. restrictions on hate speech that are needed to ensure that freedom of expression is not exploited by the powerful to oppress already subjugated populations. As a nation, we can and should engage in discussions about what that limit should be. However, it becomes a problem whenever a party in power arbitrarily and single-handedly determines these parameters, giving little space for diverse voices to contest the matter in a constructive manner.

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Education in the 7th Plan

MANZOOR AHMED

THE Planning Commission is preparing the Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020). The Sixth Plan, completed this year, and the Seventh Plan are seen as the instruments for realising Vision 2021 and the goals of the Perspective Plan 2010-2021 for Bangladesh. Attaining the status of medium income country is also targeted for 2021.

A concept note prepared by the General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission indicates that the Plan would review progress during the Sixth Plan and suggest a strategy for strengthening education and training during the Seventh Plan, and emphasises ways to ensure quality in education at all levels. It would also promote vocational training and skill development to accelerate growth, reduce poverty, create opportunities for greater female labour force participation; and improve equity in public education spending.

A relevant question at this point is the role of the Planning Commission and the planning exercise in achieving the goals of development. GED explains that in the market economy of Bangladesh "the focus of Five Year Plan has also shifted ... from investment to strategic and indicative planning process. The objectives of the Plan is to ensure that the public investments are private sector responsive and are used for removing infrastructural bottlenecks for attracting private investment in the economy." (Terms of Reference for background on Education and Training Strategy for the 7th Plan.)

GED also asserts that "the plans are now more focussed on eradicating poverty and hunger in quickest possible time by adopting pro-poor economic policies and to ensure justice to the marginalised/disadvantage group of people" (ibid.).

How the Plan's objectives of making public investments responsive to private sector, on the one hand, and promoting pro-poor economic policies and justice to marginalised groups, on the other, can be reconciled is clearly an issue. This is an especially pertinent question for the education sector with its public good character and the dominant public sector responsibility in the sector.

Priorities emphasised in the strategic directions for the Sixth Plan included: extending compulsory primary education to grade 8, eliminating adult illiteracy, removing education gap between the rich and the poor, creating a

new generation equipped with skills and scientific knowledge, and overall improvement in quality of education. (Sixth Five Year Plan Part 1, p. 117) Little progress during the plan period has been made in respect of the first two clearly specified priorities on compulsory education up to grade 8 and elimination of illiteracy. The other priorities of general nature, with no specific targets, were also not areas of stellar success.

Another strategic priority was to empower local government "as the engine of delivering services and carrying out



development activities" (ibid.). No qualitative change in development budgets and activities reflecting this strategy can be noted in the development budgets and activities in the Sixth Plan period.

The new Plan can be an opportunity to articulate goals and objectives for education and skills development in the light of Education Policy, National Skills Development Policy, aspirations for a middle income country and the global development and EFA agenda (SDG 2030 and EFA 2030).

The Plan needs to identify structural and operational

constraints for education and skills development and indicate what should be done to overcome these obstacles. The structural weaknesses will require a sustained and longer term effort, yet must be pursued with a sense of urgency. More immediate steps need to be taken on operational issues, but still designed within a framework of structural reforms.

Major structural issues which, on the basis of recent studies and policy advocacy of education researchers and stakeholders, have come to the fore include:

- Very low level of public resources for education by international comparison, lack of criteria and benchmarks for resource allocation (and proportional reduction of education allocations as share of GDP and total government budget in recent years);
- Extremely centralised governance and management structures for the large educational system of the country;
- Insufficient numbers of teachers of required quality standards and inability of system to attract and retain capable people in the teaching profession;
- Supply-driven skills development with low quality and

relevance, and minimal attention to apprenticeship and needs of the informal economy (though it accounts for over 80% of employment);

- Unacceptably low quality of degree colleges (with three quarters of tertiary enrolment in these colleges, which also are the suppliers of primary and secondary teachers -- creating a vicious cycle in education);
- School education divided under two ministries (unlike anywhere else in the world), creating problems of curriculum continuity, student assessment and teacher preparation and supervision.

- Operational issues include:
 - Dysfunctional learning assessment with too many public examinations which do not measure competency and distort teaching-learning;
 - Criminalisation of student bodies in tertiary education vitiating academic atmosphere;
 - Curriculum burden and weak continuity and articulation through grades;
 - Geographical, ethnic, and language-based access deficits;
 - Seriously inadequate opportunities for children with disabilities;
 - Proliferation of private universities without essential quality control; and
 - Slow and fragmented approach to Education Policy 2010 implementation.
- The role and responsibility of the public sector and the state in education as a crucial public service cannot be underestimated. While private and non-government providers will have to make their contribution, it must be within a policy and regulatory framework of the state. Can the Planning Commission do its job by engaging only in "indicative planning," whatever that means?
- If the government recognises the need to prioritise and guide educational development to serve national development aspirations, the planning function has to be strengthened in appropriate ways. A panel of education experts with insight and interest in the interface of education and national development should be brought into the process of crafting the Plan. The Plan has to be used as the basis for budgets in the two education ministries.
- The Seventh Plan comes at a critical juncture for shaping development priorities and strategies to move into the rank of middle-income countries and adapt SDG2030 and EFA2030 agenda for Bangladesh. Education and skills part of the Plan has a key role in this effort.

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QUOTABLE Quote

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

Mahatma Gandhi

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Speculative question
- Dress
- "Satiates" poet
- Words of understanding
- Roused
- Brewery sights
- Gets up
- Deserve
- Yard divisions
- Prof protector
- Continually
- Went ahead
- It has a cover above the covers
- Crone
- Mosaic piece
- Bore
- Luke's teacher
- Airport areas
- Bar mixer
- Small mass
- Suggest
- Jared of "Dallas Buyers Club"
- Mysterious

DOWN

- Harrow rival
- Oozed
- Docking spot
- Football's Long
- "-- by any other name"
- Break
- Frozen desserts
- Swamp
- Specified
- Generally
- No longer working
- Outwitted
- Strep of "Into the Woods"
- Luke-warm
- Campaign goal
- Nightclub
- Restlessly, in music
- "Crazy in Love" singer
- Negotiate a price
- Evil spirit
- Available
- TV's Sawyer
- Took steps
- Fatigue
- Holds

Yesterday's answer

HOWLS MIDAS
URIAH ADULT
BILBO SASHA
COD CPO TIK
ALI KEN IRK
PESTER ANTS
TARTEST
LAHR ALPHAS
ACE DIE EVE
PAW INK WEE
EDICT THING
LINES RANGE
SADLY ADDER

CRYPTOQUOTE

EHHPK XIC ZBC GVFCZCKX JXW AHKZ UHJKZJXZ HQ QIFCJWK; ZBCO XIC ZBC AHKZ XUUCKKFERC JXW MFKCKZ HQ UHVJKRHKH, JXW ZBC AHKZ DXZFCJZ HQ ZCXUBCK.

-- UBXIRKM. C. CRFHZ

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: **TO GO WRONG IN ONE'S OWN WAY IS BETTER THAN TO GO RIGHT IN SOMEONE ELSE'S.**

-- FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

COSMO'S ADVICE CORNER: I'VE GIVEN YOUR PROBLEM A LOT OF THOUGHT. AND HERE'S MY ADVICE... ...GET RID OF SARGE. THAT'LL BE \$10.

HENRY by Don Trachte

IT IS TIME TO GET UP, HENRY! I WANT YOU TO WATER MY FLOWER, BEP!