

Freedom of speech and West's flawed perception of it

MUHAMMAD AZIZUL HAQUE

FREEDOM of speech or expression predates modern international human rights instruments. Like freedom of association and free media, freedom of speech is considered an indispensable pillar of democracy. Without this marble column, the great edifice of democracy is bound to rapidly collapse.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts everyone's right to freedom of opinion and expression. Freedom of expression is also recognised in international human rights law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, freedom entails responsibility and that 'responsibility' signifies 'limits.' This view is unambiguously corroborated by Article 19 of the ICCPR. It inter alia states that the exercise of these rights carries with it "special duties and responsibilities" and it may "therefore be subject to certain restrictions."

I am not aware if the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press were absolute in the initial eras of democratic governance in the Western countries, but these seem to be currently absolute in the developed democracies of the West, like Britain, France and Germany and in the Nordic countries, like Denmark, Sweden, etc. They fail to appreciate that while you have freedom to drive your car on the streets, you have to abide by a set of traffic rules too.

In those Western countries, absolute freedom of speech or expression does not appear to be restrained even by Christianity, which is the religion of the majority of the believers in those countries. Of course, the number of people who profess to have no religious faith is huge, and is rising. So, practically, the mainstream populations of those basically Christian countries appear apathetic to any sacrilege or prophet-bashing. However, Muslims by and large, irrespective of their place or country of residence, have not grown indifferent to their religion and the Prophet (pbuh) or to their religious customs, values and culture.

It seems those Western countries which played key roles in mobilising world opinion of the post-World War II era to conclude the aforementioned international human rights instruments are now themselves flouting those noble instruments of human rights.

In the light of the above, let us consider the heinous attack on the office of the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, in central Paris on January 7 by two jihadists/extremists. No right-minded Muslim with proper knowledge of Islam and its magnanimous spirit could perpetrate the barbaric and despicable crime that resulted in the death of 12 people and injury of many more. Along with the entire world, we too have condemned the attack and offered our sincere condolences to all those who were affected by it.

Islam denounces any violence. However, having said

that, one can recall that when (in September 2005) the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published some very contemptible and humiliating cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), it triggered widespread and violent protests in the Muslim world. Denmark had to shut down its embassies in some Muslim countries and its products were boycotted by those. Let alone learning a lesson from it, in February 2006, the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine reprinted those cartoons of the Danish newspaper; and when it was sued for inciting racism by some Islamic groups, a Paris court absolved it from the charges. Again, in 2011, the satirical magazine printed cartoons 'inviting the Prophet (pbuh) to be its guest editor.' Yet again, in 2012, the weekly published more caricatures of the Prophet (pbuh).

Obviously, the magazine was relentless in its provocative acts that repeatedly hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims around the globe. While Muslims in general now seem to have grown more accustomed and resistant to such provocations, the same is not true of the extremists/jihadists. The *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine had long invited controversy with scathing assaults on Islam, on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as well as on other religions and political leaders. One of the gunmen in the January 7 attack on the magazine's office was reportedly heard to shout: "We have killed Charlie Hebdo! We have avenged the Prophet!"

The January 7 tragedy at the *Charlie Hebdo* office and the violent demonstrations of the past years in the Muslim world surrounding the publication of disgraceful cartoons, caricatures and lampoons on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and

Islam in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and French *Charlie Hebdo* and other newspapers in the West European countries could be possibly averted if those newspapers and the governments of those countries were mindful of and abided by the stipulations of the international human rights instruments that are in force, and particularly the content of Article 19 of the ICCPR.

As citizens of today's knowledge-based and enlightened global society, let's enjoy the various rights and freedoms at national and international levels. However, we must exercise these rights and freedoms with responsibility so that in doing so we do not encroach on those of others. Unless the freedom of speech and freedom of the press/media are exercised with responsibility or within certain parameters, they will be abused by racially biased, prejudiced or irresponsible writers, cartoonists, artists and others; and jihadists/extremists could again retaliate in as despicable a manner as we saw in the case of the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* office, despite our condemnation of their horrendous crimes.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

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Shooting of Khaleda's adviser

We condemn such odious behaviour

WE are shocked at the murderous assault on Reaz Rahman, an adviser to BNP chairperson, in the capital on Tuesday night, and strongly condemn the shooting of the adviser and torching of his vehicle. What gives us cause for even more consternation is that the attack, which seems to be premeditated, took place as he was coming out of his meeting with Khaleda Zia in her Gulshan office, signalling that attempts are being made from vested quarters to intimidate the opposition, by any means possible.

Previously, BNP Vice-Chairman Shamser Mobin Chowdhury was arrested soon after his meeting with Khaleda. On Monday, we witnessed the torching of Sabihuddin Ahmed's vehicle right in front of the Gulshan office, reportedly in clear view of the police. In this instance, too, reports suggest that policemen were present on both sides of the 50 yards-long lane near where the shooting took place.

We urge the government to immediately investigate the incident and bring to book the perpetrators and mastermind, if any, of this violence. However, our sad history of political violence shows that most of these cases get stuck in a cesspool, as investigations are derailed and delayed indefinitely, two cases in point being the murder cases of Shah S.M. Kibria and Ahsanullah Master during BNP's tenure. We strongly believe that truth can't be a matter of recriminatory conjectures, nor eye-watching; it has to be one of substantiation.

What began as denial of democratic space and suppression of the opposition is now turning into political vendetta, which can only signal a dark future not just for the opposition, but for the country at large.

So much for security

Are they above the law?

IT is astonishing to learn that four individuals found with arms on them were let off by police although they were apprehended at the prime minister's rally where carrying arms was prohibited. We wonder whether the police agreed to release them on account of their being ruling party men. Even if that is true, what a mockery it makes of the massive security measures that were built up in and around Suhrawardy Uddyan where the prime minister delivered her speech on January 12. According to what has been published in a leading Bangla daily, strict security measures were put in place within a 1km radius of the podium. Hence the question arises as to the selective stringency applied in a situation that should have been dealt with professionally.

The police have come up with an explanation that the arms found were all licensed firearms and so the individuals in question were released from custody. Apparently these people had no idea about security measures and we are assured that an enquiry has been launched and so be it. We wonder whether the police would have been so lenient had those apprehended were otherwise politically affiliated and still had license for the firearms. Why such double standards when it comes to law enforcement? And what guarantee is there that gun carrying individuals, even if they belong to the ruling party, would not attend such a meeting with some risk involved?

Handling of radioactive materials at Ctg Port

ABDUL MATIN

IT is reported that a 36-member joint team comprising US, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan experts are working for the recovery of radioactive materials of a cargo container at the Chittagong port. A panel of nine experts of the US Department of Energy arrived in Bangladesh at the request of the Chittagong Customs House, after a container with the radioactive material was detected last April.

One steel company of Chittagong exported a consignment of five containers carrying scrapped stainless steel which were off-loaded at Sitakunda and shipped through Chittagong port for India via Colombo Port. On April 29, Colombo port authorities identified one of the containers with radiation and later the Sri Lanka Atomic Energy Authority found that one or more items of a container had been radioactive.

It may be mentioned here that the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) set up the Radioactivity Testing and Monitoring Laboratory at Chittagong in 1987, after the Chernobyl accident, to monitor all imported and exportable food and other materials including scrap metals for detection of radioactivity. It is supposed to take appropriate measures to isolate radioactive materials for protection of the public. The Bangladesh Atomic Energy Regulatory Authority (BAERA) was established in 2012 to protect the health of the public from harmful effects of ionizing radiation.

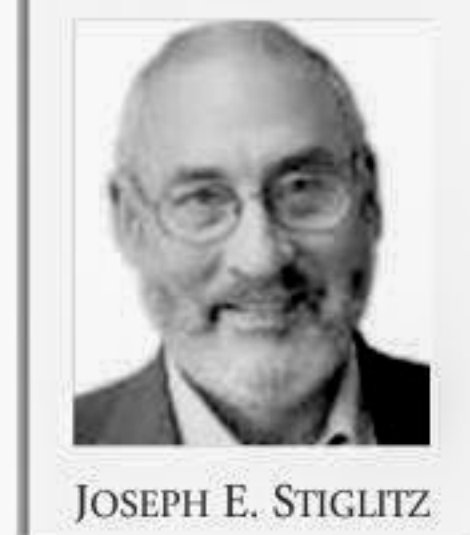
The report raises several serious questions on handling of radioactive materials at the Chittagong port. (i) How could the radioactive material enter the Chittagong Port without being detected? (ii) What action was taken for its recovery and protection of the public immediately after detection last April? (iii) Was the radioactive material first detected at the Chittagong Port or the Colombo Port? (iv) If it was detected at Chittagong, why was it allowed to be exported to India? (v) If it was detected at Colombo, why was it not detected first at Chittagong? (vi) Was any worker exposed to ionizing radiation at the Chittagong Port? (vii) What action was taken against the company which imported the radioactive material? (viii) Is the radioactivity of the material so high that the BAEC and BAERA are unable to handle, store or dispose of without assistance from any foreign country? (ix) Lastly, if this is the level of preparedness of the BAEC and BAERA, how can they handle and regulate large amounts of highly radioactive materials and protect the public from harmful radiation at the proposed nuclear power plant at Rooppur?

It is hoped that the concerned authorities would provide answers to the above mentioned questions and assure the public that they are and will be safe from any ionizing radiation.

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Europe's lapse of reason

BUSINESS & FINANCE



JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ

the damage wrought by the crisis appears to be long term.

Then again, it could be worse. Across the Atlantic, there are few signs of even a modest US-style recovery: The gap between where Europe is and where it would have been in the absence of the crisis continues to grow. In most European Union countries, per capita GDP is less than it was before the crisis. A lost half-decade is quickly turning into a whole one. Behind the cold statistics, lives are being ruined, dreams are being dashed, and families are falling apart (or not being formed) as stagnation -- depression in some places -- runs on year after year.

The EU has highly talented, highly educated people. Its member countries have strong legal frameworks and well-functioning societies. Before the crisis, most even had well-functioning economies. In some places, productivity per hour -- or the rate of its growth -- was among the highest in the world.

But Europe is not a victim. Yes, America mismanaged its economy; but, no, the US did not somehow manage to impose the brunt of the global fallout on Europe. The EU's malaise is self-inflicted, owing to an unprecedented succession of bad economic decisions, beginning with the creation of the euro. Though intended to unite Europe, in the end the euro has divided it; and, in the absence of the political will to create the institutions that would enable a single currency to work, the damage is not being undone.

The current mess stems partly from adherence to a long-discredited belief in well-functioning markets without imperfections of information and competition. Hubris has also played a role. How else to explain the fact that, year after year, European officials' forecasts of their policies' consequences have been consistently wrong?

These forecasts have been wrong not because EU countries failed to implement the prescribed policies, but because the models upon which those policies relied were so badly flawed. In Greece, for example, measures intended to lower the debt burden have in fact left the country more burdened than it was in 2010: the debt-to-GDP ratio has increased, owing to the bruising impact of fiscal austerity on output. At least the

International Monetary Fund has owned up to these intellectual and policy failures.

Europe's leaders remain convinced that structural reform must be their top priority. But the problems they point to were apparent in the years before the crisis, and they were not stopping growth then. What Europe needs more than structural reform within member countries is reform of the structure of the eurozone itself, and a reversal of austerity policies, which have failed time and again to reignite economic growth.

Those who thought that the euro could not survive have been repeatedly proven wrong. But the critics have been right about one thing: unless the structure of the eurozone is reformed, and austerity reversed, Europe will not recover.

The drama in Europe is far from over. One of the EU's strengths is the vitality of its democracies. But the euro took away from citizens -- especially in the crisis countries -- any say over their economic destiny. Repeatedly, voters have thrown out incumbents, dissatisfied with the direction of the economy -- only to have the new government continue on the same course dictated from Brussels, Frankfurt, and Berlin.

But for how long can this continue? And how will voters react? Throughout Europe, we have seen the alarming growth of extreme nationalist parties, running counter to the Enlightenment values that have made Europe so successful. In some places, large separatist movements are rising.

Now Greece is posing yet another test for Europe. The decline in Greek GDP since 2010 is far worse than that which confronted America during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Youth unemployment is over 50%. Prime Minister Antonis Samaras's government has failed, and now, owing to the parliament's inability to choose a new Greek president, an early general election will be held on January 25.

The left opposition Syriza party, which is committed to renegotiating the terms of Greece's EU bailout, is ahead in opinion polls. If Syriza wins but does not take power, a principal reason will be fear of how the EU will respond. Fear is not the noblest of emotions, and it will not give rise to the kind of national consensus that Greece needs in order to move forward.

The issue is not Greece. It is Europe. If Europe does not change its ways -- if it does not reform the eurozone and repeal austerity -- a popular backlash will become inevitable. Greece may stay the course this time. But this economic madness cannot continue forever. Democracy will not permit it. But how much more pain will Europe have to endure before reason is restored?

The writer is a Nobel laureate in economics, is University Professor at Columbia University. His most recent book, co-authored with Bruce Greenwald, is *Creating a Learning Society: A New Approach to Growth, Development, and Social Progress*.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What is happening in Bangladesh?

Every day nearly a dozen people get killed in road accidents, launch or boat capsizes. Besides, some are getting killed by relatives, friends, or extortionists. A good number of people are killed by law enforcers while some others become victims of forced disappearances. Some are getting killed in the name of crossfire. Harassment and torture by the law enforcers have become common in our life. We consider the rise of such violence the outcome of January 5 controversial election, which was contrary to our national expectation and the spirit of our Liberation War.

We need a way out of this situation. Politics in Bangladesh is totally discouraging. We achieved independence by uniting and fighting against the massive Pakistan military machine in 1971; why can't we do anything now to break the deadlock? We need to rise from the dark before it is too late.

Md. Shahjahan Mia
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Remembering Justice Habibur Rahman

I came across Prof. Shelley of Rajshahi University in the early part of 1962. I along with my two friends was working in the Rajshahi Medical College as demonstrator (now called lecturer) of Pathology and Pharmacology. We went to see off Prof. M.R. Chowdhury, who came to Rajshahi Medical College as an external examiner of Physiology.

We went to Ishwardi Airport taking a jeep from Col. Burhanuddin, Superintendent of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital. We took Prof. Chowdhury to Ishwardi, which was a journey of about two hours but we sat tight-lipped sitting behind him. On our way back, we found a gentleman looking for a transport to go to Rajshahi. We took pity on him and offered him a lift. He became very frank with us. He told us that he taught in Rajshahi University and was popularly known as Shelley. He was very open-minded and so we discussed many things with him. He told us many jokes on our return journey to Rajshahi. Today, I came to know after reading the article by Mr. Harun ur Rashid in your editorial page that Justice Habibur Rahman, the first Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government, was our co-passenger in the jeep, Prof. Shelley of the then Rajshahi University. I became very nostalgic while reading the article. May his soul rest in peace.

Prof. Dr. K.A.R. Sayeed
 Gulshan North
 Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Election pledges left ignored," published on January 12, 2015

Md Shohidur Rahman

Nice article, however, still some people will justify their right to be in power. A government that represents less than 5% of the population of the country cannot deliver better than this.

"Is Bangladesh again in a cul de sac?" (January 11, 2015)

Shelly

Do people really have other plans? I am not convinced. The politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, the govt. officials and citizens at large are corrupt.

Nds

No, they are not interested to learn from history. Their sole interest is to make others learn what is what. For instance, right now they are teaching us what democracy is.

"This is not political programme" (January 12, 2015)

New Generation

There are some people whose opinions show that this is the first time the country is facing hartals and blockades.

Salim Ullah

What's the harm in allowing BNP a political space? It seems the more the government is suppressing the BNP, the more the situation is getting out of control.

Shamir Shakir

Sorry, Mr Editor, your comment is neither impartial nor fair. You should have dug deep into why the opposition alliance is observing these programmes and how it could have been avoided.

"Why this embarrassing gimmick?" (January 12, 2015)

Shejad

As embarrassing perhaps as Sheikh Hasina's claim to have her "election" approved by David Cameron!