

Corruption in Bangladesh: Perceptions vs. reality

Chinese contractors held at gunpoint

How can this happen at Rail HQ?

THAT two officials of a Chinese can be held at gunpoint, and that too inside the Rail Bhaban (head office) is quite unthinkable. These two individuals had gone to submit tender documents and they were literally hijacked by a gang who brandished firearms and took them to the 8th floor of the building which is apparently more secluded than the rest. They cried out for help and rail officials came out of their rooms and the gang members panicked and took the lift down. Later on, they were escorted down to the submissions office where documents were submitted and as it turned out, Power China Ltd. won that bid. The whole incident raises some very important questions.

How did armed assailants enter the building in the first place and where was the security guarding such an important government institution? The fact that this company turned out to be the lowest bidder for the project in question begs the question whether a rival company had gotten hold of this information somehow and wanted to cower a foreign investor company into submission. Whatever may be the case, it sends absolutely the wrong signal to foreign companies wishing to invest in the country.

This incident will not boost foreign investors' confidence in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it begs the question on another level. Precisely how safe are we when there is obviously serious security lapse in important places such as the Railway headquarters. Tender-related violence is not a new phenomenon but this latest occurrence under the very noses of law enforcers must be dealt with expeditiously to restore our national image.

Unfit vehicles threaten road safety

Why aren't the authorities taking action?

A photograph published on the front page of this newspaper on Wednesday, showing a bent and dented battery run three-wheeler plying the roads of the capital, speaks volume about the chaotic condition of our road sector. With a duct-taped plastic sheet as replacement for a proper windscreen, how the three-wheeler in question was allowed to traverse the roads without the authorities taking notice is indeed a mystery.

In fact, the more likely story is that the authorities did notice the decrepit vehicle as it would be near impossible not to detect the damage on it. The reality is, however, that they just did not care enough to do anything about it. And it is mainly because of such apathy on part of the authorities that we see thousands of other equally unfit vehicles plying the roads and endangering the lives of our citizens.

Some may not seem as damaged, but the amount of smog they release quite clearly shows how harmful they are to public health. Meanwhile, many more lack all the necessary parts a vehicle should have to safely run on roads such as headlights, tail-lights, side-view mirrors, etc. And although all vehicles using public roads are required, on paper, to face periodic fitness tests, that it is not the case in reality is clearly evident.

Are the authorities completely unconcerned about public road safety? What other explanation can there be for all of this? We hope to see the authorities take the matter seriously and remove all unfit vehicles from the roads.

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

CORRUPTION became so integral to Bangladesh that consecutively for five years (2001-2005) it remained the most corrupt country in the world. However, we hear things have changed for the better. On the one hand, the country has become self-sufficient in food; on the other, it's no longer the most corrupt nation on earth, officially!

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's human development index has also risen – it's higher than India's and some other countries' in the Third World. The country has already become a lower middle-income country. So far so good! However, these indexes don't always tell us the whole truth about the states of governance, corruption, poverty, inequality, and most importantly, frequent violations of human rights across the country.

Officially, as per Transparency International's (TI's) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Bangladesh in 2016 was the 15th most corrupt country in the world, 2nd most corrupt in South Asia. In view of the unprecedented level of corruption in Bangladesh, and the alarming rise in the number of organized violations of human rights of ordinary people, politicians, intellectuals, journalists, women, and members of minority communities, it's time to assert that: a) there's a wide gap between perceptions and ground reality of corruption in the country; b) the bulk of the population – due to popular belief and pragmatic reasons – believe in the efficacy of corruption; and c) corruption and human rights violations are positively correlated to each other.

Now, to support my main hypothesis that Bangladesh is still among the top corrupt countries in the world, I cite an interesting story ("Snapshot of reality") that came out in this daily on Friday, January 27, 2017. This helps us understand two things: first, the average Bangladeshi no longer believes in the age-old maxim, "Honesty is the best policy"; and second, corruption and violence go hand in hand.

The story is about physical attacks on an honest Assistant Commissioner of the Customs Department

Does one incident establish rampant corruption in Bangladesh? "No" could be the answer had the Revenue Department and law-enforcers taken stern actions against the corrupt, rowdy brokers instead of punishing the victim by transferring him to a training academy! Recently, a senior Cabinet Minister justified government officials' taking "speed money" from people, in exchange of giving them service. As if public servants aren't paid to do their job with taxpayers' money!

As the story goes, the Customs Officer, who never indulged in corruption, told the writer a story about his own people's acceptance of corruption as

well-connected and powerful to name!

Recently, I met a cross section of people in Bangladesh, newspaper editors, journalists, a prestigious Western news agency's bureau chief in Bangladesh, retired government servants, including diplomats, NBR members, generals, police officers, judges, university teachers, prominent human rights activists, bankers, businessmen and industrialists, and last but not least, private car drivers, rickshaw pullers, and CNG drivers. They all seem to agree on one point: "corruption and violations of human rights in the country have gone up". I think underestimating the extent of corruption, human rights violation, and



something normative: "When I visit my village, people want me to donate money for various purposes like construction or renovation of mosques As I don't have any other source of income, I cannot contribute much and sometimes become a laughingstock. People, including my relatives, get very annoyed. They say, 'Come on! You are in the administration. You can make a lot of money.' Learning that I despise bribes, some even say, 'What are you? A fool!'" According to one C&F union leader, the officer who never takes bribe, "had to face this situation because of the reality of our society is different".

Lack of transparent and accountable governance, and the prevalence of impunity for well-connected people shroud the real extent of corruption in Bangladesh. Corruption is not all about taking or giving bribe, it's about what individuals, organizations, and governments often ignore or condone by turning a blind eye to the corrupt practices by their cronies, friends, and political supporters. Politically well-connected criminals just get mild slaps on the wrist for mega scandals. They get away with plundering billions of taka through the share market, government's development projects (bridges, flyovers, roads and railway tracks), nationalized and private banks, and even by grabbing thousands of acres of land to build mega shopping malls and residential areas. They are too many, and too

poverty in Bangladesh – where drivers, rickshaw pullers, garment factory workers, and domestic servants, among others, live well below the poverty line (at \$2 per capita per day) – also amounts to resorting to corruption.

Three of my interviewees – a retired Additional IG of Police, a retired district judge, and a Western news agency's bureau chief – gave a horrific picture of the institutionalization of corruption – which they insisted prevailed with the full knowledge of ministers, lawmakers, high civil and military officers, intellectuals, and the ordinary people.

The moment one draws a parallel between corruption and organized violations of human rights by law-enforcers, criminals, and political goons, one has no reason to believe corruption has really gone down in the country. All sections of the society – especially the rich and powerful – simultaneously resort to corruption and play the hideous hide-and-seek game to deny their crime. Lastly, people's adherence to religious rituals only, with almost no respect for the morals or ethical teachings of the religion, and their drawing a line between sin and crime are problematic. In sum, corruption of public morals is at the roots of all corruption in Bangladesh.

The writer teaches security studies at Austin Peay State University. He is the author of several books, including his latest, *Global Jihad and America: The Hundred-Year War Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sage, 2014). Email: tajhashmi@gmail.com

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by some rowdy dishonest people, in his office at Chittagong. Recently, some corrupt clearing and forwarding (C&F) agents (brokers) attacked the Officer, confined him to his office for hours, pelted stones at him, ransacked his office, and removed his nameplate off the door. They attacked the Officer because of his honesty; he refused to accept any bribe or "speed money" in exchange of giving them any undue benefits.

How Trump can truly stop terrorism

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

ON January 27, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order temporarily (at least 90 days) banning the entry of citizens hailing from seven Muslim majority countries – Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. In a statement on January 29, he said that the order was "about terror and keeping" America "safe". And although he has "tremendous feeling for the people involved" in the "horrific humanitarian crisis in Syria", his "first priority" is to "protect and serve" America.

Though there can be no denying that President Trump's first priority should be the American people, simply banning the entry of people from these seven countries cannot guarantee the safety of Americans in my opinion and will fail to bring an end to, or even minimise, terrorism.

So what can President Trump do? Well, as a former US Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Economic Policy Dr. Paul Craig Roberts wrote, "The simplest way to end the refugee problem is to stop producing refugees" (The Left Is Self-Destructing, January 30). Following his logic, 'the simplest way to end terrorism' then, would be 'to stop producing terrorists' in the first place.

Sadly, that is exactly what the US and its allies have been doing in Syria and elsewhere, prompting independent journalists en masse, various governments and others, to emphasise the need for the US to stop supporting terrorists who are destabilising the Middle East especially, but other regions too. And in the process, worsening the refugee crisis and increasing terrorism across the world.

The latest amongst those brave individuals is a member of the US Democratic Party and the United States Representative for Hawaii's 2nd congressional district, Ms. Tulsi Gabbard. Having met ordinary Syrians and their president during her visit to Syria, Ms. Gabbard told CNN's Jake Tapper in an interview that the most common question she received from ordinary Syrians was: "why the US and its allies are providing support and arms to terrorist groups like al-Nusra, al-Qaeda or al-Sham, ISIS who are on the ground there, raping, kidnapping, torturing and killing the Syrian people."

According to Ms. Gabbard, every person that she spoke to said the same thing, without hesitation, that there are no moderate rebels. That "The Syrian people recognise and they know that if President Assad is overthrown, then al Qaeda – or a group like al Qaeda...will take charge of all of Syria" (Just Back From Syria, Rep. Gabbard Brings Message: 'There Are No Moderate Rebels', cnsnews.com, January 26). And that is why "they are pleading with the United States to stop supporting these terrorist groups" and let Syrians decide their own fate.

To honour their request, Ms. Gabbard recently put forth a bill in Congress called the "Stop Arming

pressure from both the Democrats and Republicans for her stance against the US' longstanding policy of instigating regime change in foreign countries. Should Trump decide to follow her advice, there can be no doubt that the same will happen to him.

However, if President Trump is truly sincere about taking a stand against the 'establishment', like he said he would during his campaign and in fighting terrorism, this is exactly what he must do. But this alone will not be enough. He must also convince the US' allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others to stop their support to these extremists groups as well and to stop directly intervening in countries like Yemen. And if dialogue fails, President Trump must reverse Obama's policy of providing record breaking quantities of armaments to the likes of Saudi Arabia and others, as without US weaponry, these countries will not be able to wage their wars of aggression.

During his presidential campaign and after, President Trump also expressed his desire to work with Russia to bring an end to the violence in Syria. All the while the US worked towards bringing about regime change in Syria, Russia valiantly provided support to the Syrian government, aid to the Syrian people and tried its best to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis despite being constantly demonised for doing so. Now that he is in office, President Trump should immediately look to work with Russia, rather than against her, as his predecessor's administration did.

Given the possibilities, the good news is that President Trump can do a lot to end the threat of terrorism, ensure security for Americans, all the while saving the US a lot of money that would otherwise be wasted on foreign incursions. The bad news, he will have to take on the entire US government-industrial-complex in order to succeed and even if he can muster the courage to challenge it, there is no guarantee of success given the power that it wields. But putting that aside, the most important question for now is, is Mr. Trump going to follow through with his promise of taking on the establishment, and stop waging more "stupid wars"?

Whatever the answer is, will be the most important determinant on how successful President Trump is in saving American lives and, also very importantly, the lives of many others.

The best way that President Trump can really fight terrorism is by ending US support to terrorist organisations in an attempt to overthrow foreign governments and, instead, back the Stop Arming Terrorists Act.

Terrorists Act" that would stop the US government from using its taxpayer dollars "to directly or indirectly support groups allied with terrorist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda in their war to overthrow the Syrian government". To gain support for her bill, Ms. Gabbard also met with President Trump, who, according to her, responded well to her message.

Now, the best way that President Trump can really fight terrorism is by ending US support to terrorist organisations in an attempt to overthrow foreign governments and, instead, back the Stop Arming Terrorists Act. This, however, will not be easy. According to Ms. Gabbard, she is facing immense bipartisan

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

When children resort to crime

"When children resort to crime" by Aasha Mehreen Amin recently published in your newspaper shed light on a very crucial matter spreading poison across the residents of Dhaka, especially in areas like Uttara. The writer's ideas that our house is the school where our daughters and sons are brought up, and that only guardians can correctly mould their future generations by resorting to fair means, in contrast to the grim realities of how children are actually being brought up, have stayed with me.

Guardians should realise that their actions can make their future generations active, fit and honest, and can bring well-being for the people of this country. We are in urgent need of many more of such articles.

Shadhan Kumar Adhikary

Jessore

Dangerous rail-crossing at Khilkhet point

While travelling last Friday, my car was blocked by vehicles, vendors and pedestrians halfway across the Khilkhet railway track on the airport road. We could hear the whistling of a speeding train. Somehow pushing through the cluster of traffic in front of us, we escaped mere seconds before we being crushed by the oncoming train.

I urge the local authorities to ensure that at least 100 feet on either side of railway crossing points are kept clear for safety.

Sirajul Islam

Paribagh, Dhaka