

Protecting press freedom



MEER AHSAN HABIB

In a historic moment on September 8, 2000 the United Nations (UN) adopted the Millennium Declaration that urged for "efforts to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development." It also supported the "freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information." 16 years after, what we are witnessing around the globe indicate that we are far away from achievement. The fight is still on - thanks to the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are directly related to access to information

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and press freedom. Countries including Bangladesh are expected to achieve these targets by 2030.

Right to information and press freedom are highly critical for achieving Goal 16 of the SDG, particularly the target 10 as it is directly linked with people's right to access information and safety of journalists. This, in turn, is closely linked to a culture of openness. Fortunately, even after facing resistance from several influential members including some Security Council members, this target managed to stay onboard the SDGs. Goal 16 is dedicated to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels. Target 10 rightly reflects some governance challenges - ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. There is no way to deny the fact that one key element of fundamental freedoms is freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press. However, "in accordance with national legislation and international agreements" is somewhat tricky as we can never be certain that every state in the world will adopt laws and policies to ensure fundamental freedoms.

After Trump's triumph, Americans took to the streets to demonstrate their no-confidence in the system. US citizens are the latest to join the wind for change calling for better governance. People all over the world want ethical leadership - from their local authorities to parliamentarians to national governments to the multilateral system. Their

demand remains the same everywhere - guarantee of the universal human rights in the eye of law. They also want their voices to be heard and want the institutions to be accountable, transparent and responsive. But this requires space for people to participate in policy and decision-making that influence their lives. In a democracy, this is only possible if people's right to freedom of speech, association, peaceful protest and access to independent media and information is guaranteed. There is no other way but press freedom that can ensure access to information. But the trend in this regard represents a blurry picture of press freedom - the number of journalists killed increased from 65 in 2010 to 114 in 2015, despite the fact that, by 2013, 90 states had adopted laws on freedom of and/or access to information. So even if there is a law, it cannot ensure press freedom unless press and media are backed by strong and independent institutions and play a supportive role. If state institutions play a supportive role to ensure press freedom, the duo can effectively contribute in monitoring different targets and ultimately achieve these goals. The group of world leaders and development experts that is advising the UN on SDGs has also stressed for independent media and freedom of expression in monitoring and achieving SDGs. The then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, while placing his recommendations to the General Assembly on the post-2015 agenda, described press freedom, access to information and freedom of expression as an enabler for sustainable development, among others.

Then there is the question of monitoring targets. The biggest challenge is that it requires sincere efforts by the

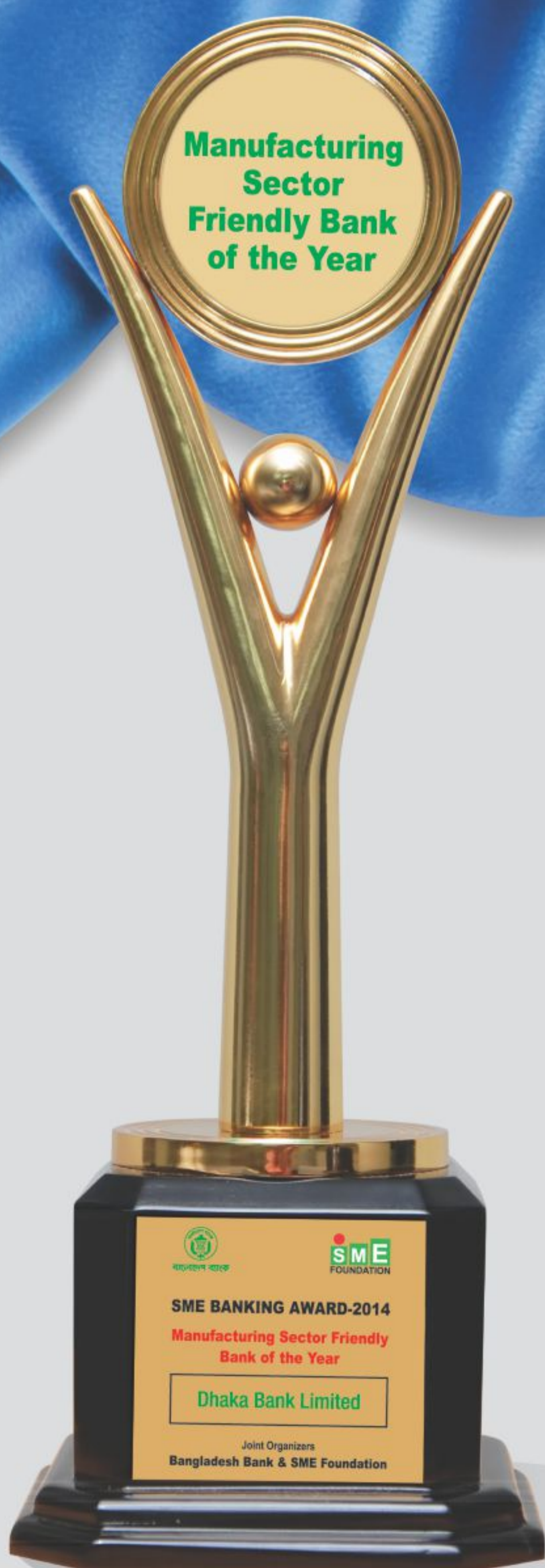
government - an institution that considers press freedom as a foe that is always criticising its noble efforts. To achieve target 10 of SDG 16, a state, first of all has to provide constitutional, statutory and policy guarantee. Secondly, it must have a plan of action in line with the UN plan of action for safety of the journalists and issue of impunity as adopted by the UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions on the protection of journalists and independent media on May 27, 2015. SDGs are for the sake of the people and they must be central to this global partnership effort. They need freedom to express their views and must have a stake in the decision-making process that affects their lives. Apart from an effective governance mechanism, they need access to information and media - not only to the conventional forms but also to the newer forms including the social media and technological innovations that have emerged as an unlimited space to be connected with the global community. They want access to information and technology so that they can participate in their nation's public life, especially charting its path to economic development. They want to be able to hold those in charge to account, to have the right to freedom of speech and association and to monitor where their government's money is going.

Does it imply that press will be beyond monitoring and governance? Of course not, especially when we are witnessing mushrooming growth of online press and spread of fake news that can even influence state policies and adversely affect development initiatives. During the US election, fake news became a huge issue - from election gossip to Pope Francis' endorsement of

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Donald Trump - that might have influenced people to choose sides. Facebook came under heavy fire for not doing enough to stop the spreading of fake news. Credibility of the press came into question at different times. The worst case scenario was perhaps during and

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