

Bangladesh dips in press freedom index

A local symptom of a global trend

REPORTERS Without Borders (RWB), in its 2017 World Press Freedom Index report, ranked Bangladesh 146th among 180 countries in terms of freedom of press. This is a two step drop from the country's ranking in 2016. RWB, an international organisation that promotes and defends press freedom, cited the growing hostility towards criticism and punitive measures against those who resist "censorship or self-censorship" in the report.

The report further reads: "There is real pluralism, but media self-censorship is growing as a result of the endemic violence against journalists and media outlets, and the systematic impunity enjoyed by those responsible." The blocking of websites, government criticism of the media, and lawsuits against journalists all contributed to the further decline of Bangladesh's ranking in the index.

In a country which is globally lauded for its progress in terms of economic, social and international goals, this is a sad state of affairs. We cannot expect to build a country based on democratic principles, no matter how great our other successes, when a fundamental right such as freedom of expression is not strongly upheld. A healthy democracy is one which tolerates dissent, allows for plurality of views, and is open to criticism – the traditional role of the media. We believe it is the media's job to speak the truth to whoever might be in power.

It is prescient that the RWB has noted that journalism worldwide is at a "tipping point" in an "age of post-truth, propaganda, and suppression of freedoms -- especially in democracies." We repeat, there can be no true democracy without a free press, and if we do not want a world where we have to rethink everything we say, we must stand up for this freedom. It is the core of democracy that is at stake.

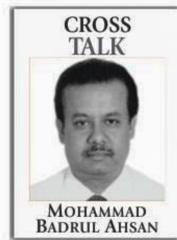
Fallout of a North Korea attack

No one needs regional instability

A MIDST all the show of force and sabre-rattling by North Korea and the United States, has anyone bothered to ask what would happen if push comes to shove? No matter how tyrannical the leadership in North Korea may seem to the outside world, we are not dealing merely with a country that has operational nuclear arms, but fields significant conventional firepower in the field and will, in all probability (if attacked) launch all of its weapons, nuclear or otherwise at neighbouring South Korea and beyond. Those are the ground realities. It is not without reason that Beijing is sufficiently worried about the potential consequences of any attack on North Korea, which will be both immediate and long-term. Even if the nuclear weapons programme is neutralised on Korean soil, the radiation fallout will be significant and it has everyone worried.

The only country which has any influence over the North Korean leadership is China and Beijing must be entrusted by Washington to deal with the situation. Already, it is reported that China has stopped buying North Korean coal, which happens to be one of the few commodities that the country exports legally and this squeeze can be broadened to curb trade across the border if Pyongyang continues to act irresponsibly with its nuclear arsenal. The last time the world came this close to a potential atomic war was during the Cuban missile crisis and even there cooler heads prevailed. We are sure there are a lot of behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations going on over the tense issue prevailing in the Korean peninsula today, and we hope, for the sake of humanity, pragmatism will win over belligerence.

How can India win if Bangladesh does not?



CROSS TALK

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHICH between the two countries has gained more from Bangladesh prime minister's visit to India this month? The question appears no less intriguing than the long-standing

debate over which came first between chicken and egg. If we think in terms of the MoU on defense, which got signed, it's supposed to be the upper band of India's cheer. If we think of the Teesta water sharing treaty, which got shelved, it surely marks the lower band of Bangladesh's despair. Most other agreements, MoUs and bilateral documents signed between the two countries perhaps carry the weighted average of these two extremes, depending on which side is asked.

That Bangladesh isn't beside itself with joy is reflected in the indicators. There was no characteristic grand reception for the Prime Minister at the airport on her return from India. Billboards and banners haven't gone up anywhere in the country trumpeting the visit as something spectacular. The ruling party leaders aren't gung-ho about leveraging its outcomes. Even the Prime Minister herself couldn't hold back her disappointment with the West Bengal chief minister's intransigence over sharing Teesta water with Bangladesh.

Analysts argue that the Indian interest in the visit was driven by its anxiety over the fear of Chinese influence in Bangladesh. The Chinese companies growing their footprints in this country followed by the Chinese President's visit last October and the huge sums he pledged to Bangladesh have irked India. It got exacerbated after Bangladesh bought two submarines from China.

Pundits believe India was looking for some kind of collateral to fortify its interests in Bangladesh. They're convinced that the proof of that devil is in the details of the MoUs or



Reciprocity is the only answer.

PHOTO: AFP

agreements signed, which are yet to become public knowledge.

If India is thinking it has won, it may have won the night and lost the morning. Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina is a chastening glimpse of how it could be for India without her. If it has been all quiet at the borders, and the Indian insurgents are no longer hiding in Bangladesh, it's because India has a government in this country sincerely committed to improving Bangladesh-India relations. India may like to perpetuate this ideal relationship with Bangladesh, but it can't do so without responding to our genuine and urgent needs despite however "friendly" our government is.

The only way to have a lasting victory is to have a victory that lasts. And that can happen if India wins the hearts of people in Bangladesh. If it's fair, just and respectful to Bangladesh, the Bangladeshis are going to reciprocate the gesture. If India does otherwise, it

must expect them to reciprocate otherwise.

Thus, the fear that India must have got a stranglehold on Bangladesh with a slew of secret deals shoved down its throat is more red herring than red alert. Bangladesh has come a long way in several areas, including geopolitics. To consider our bilateral relations purely from a "India vs. China" mindset, disregarding Bangladesh's aspirations for economic growth, is to ignore the reality – something that may prove expensive.

History is rife with examples of one wrong move or decision leading a country or an entire continent to disaster. My favourite is how the Catholic Church is blamed for creating the Black Death. In 1232, Pope Gregory IX told people that domestic cats were diabolical, and large numbers of cats and their owners were executed in Europe. Rats took over Europe, providing homes for the fleas that carried the Black Death.

The devastating plague killed nearly 100 million people in the continent between 1347 and 1352.

A similar risk exists between Bangladesh and India. If either side culls the "cat" population, the "rat" population will take over. The cat being trust and confidence between the two countries, the rats are numerous: fundamentalism, terrorism and intolerance. Both countries will win in the long run only if both countries are committed to win together.

An unstable Bangladesh will always remain a threat to India's stability for the same abiding reason injury in one part of the body causes pain in another. Both countries need to appreciate that between them they have got interconnecting sensory nerves. Neither can do either any harm without each of them smarting from its referred effect.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Who is Marine Le Pen?



CHRISTINE OCKRENT

I vividly remember French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen's first appearance on television. It was just before the 2002 presidential campaign, and I had to moderate a debate on French public television. For political balance, we

needed a representative of the far-right National Front (FN), then led by Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Bruno Gollnisch, the manager of Jean-Marie's campaign and his heir apparent, turned us down, offering to send Marine instead.

It was obviously a trick played not just on a media viewed as hostile, but also on Le Pen herself – a rival whom Gollnisch resented for having been, in his view, unduly promoted by her father in the FN apparatus. Le Pen was a largely unknown 33-year-old lawyer with little practice, though she had an obvious instinct for the punch line. In the end, Gollnisch's plan may have backfired: a few days after Le Pen's appearance, the headline in a weekly magazine read, "What is new with the FN? Marine!"

On April 21, 2002 – a date that still resonates in French political memory – the 73-year-old Jean-Marie received 17 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election, thus knocking the former socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, out of the second-round runoff. But citizens of all persuasions then rallied against Le Pen in a so-called "Republican front," giving the conservative candidate Jacques Chirac a massive 82 percent of the vote.

Fifteen years later, Marine Le Pen has outshone her father, convincing 21.3 percent of French voters to choose her to succeed François Hollande at the Elysée Palace. But, to win the second round, she will need to defeat Emmanuel Macron, the 39-year-old centrist who finished ahead of her in the first round, with 24 percent of the vote.

That will be no easier for her than it was for her father. With both the Republican François Fillon and the Socialist Benoît Hamon quickly endorsing Macron after the first round – Hamon called Le Pen an "enemy of the Republic" – another "Republican front," albeit a much smaller one, could well be emerging.

But Le Pen is tough, and a great believer in her own destiny. Already, her efforts to revamp the FN's image have transformed it from a fringe movement into a major political force. Although she abandoned a push to rebrand the FN "Bleu Marine," owing to the original brand's enduring appeal to its older voters, that approach reflects the personality cult that she has fostered, characterised by the suppression of dissent and even of her own niece, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, a rising political star.

Le Pen's success reflects a kind of ideological laundering, which she has conducted with her

closest adviser, Florian Philippot, a polished, media-savvy "énarque," who swears he decided to join Le Pen for her talent, not her ideology. Indeed, the pair has coated the FN with several layers of fresh paint – all blue, white, and red, of course.

Early on, Le Pen would campaign like her father: using her heavy frame and heavy frown to intimidate opponents, forcing her smoker's voice to make her point, never playing the "woman card." But she eventually found out she could play another part. Thinner, better dressed, and more soft-spoken, she developed a kind of charisma that enabled her to appeal to a wider variety of supporters, from unemployed young people to the disenchanted middle class, from policemen wary of losing control to second- or third-generation immigrants who wanted to close

or that Le Pen herself is under a judicial investigation for misappropriating her MEP's subsidies. For many French, status anxiety, economic anger, and fear of terrorism are far more salient.

Le Pen has also worked hard to build up her international status. In January, she waited in vain in New York, hoping to be embraced by Donald Trump – a man who, she said, had copied some of her own political formula to win the US presidency. In Moscow, she met with Russian President Vladimir Putin – not to ask for money, party officials were quick to point out, but to discuss the state of the world.

Leading in opinion polls week after week, Le Pen and her new FN seemed to have things figured out. But, two weeks ago, the varnish began to crack. Her meetings became more electric, her discourse more brutal. Channeling



France's doors to foreigners.

The process of "de-demonising" the FN required Le Pen to drop not just the putrid rhetoric bequeathed by her father, but also her father himself. In the summer of 2015, Marine expelled Jean-Marie from the party he founded in 1972. The old man sued her in court, only to surrender a few months later.

Of course, even as Le Pen has dropped the anti-Semitic blurbs, vocal nostalgia for Vichy France, proud reminiscences of the Algerian war, and even her own father, she has continued to fuel the populist bonfire. She has railed against immigration, Islam, globalisation, multiculturalism, NATO, the elites, the "system," the markets, the media, and, above all, the European Union – the monster supposedly responsible for all of France's ills.

Never mind that all 23 FN members of the European Parliament are paid with EU money,

her Holocaust-denying father, she claimed that France was not responsible for deporting Jews to Nazi concentration camps. Was it a Freudian slip, campaign fatigue, or a deliberate attempt to reassure old FN troopers that the chief had not gone astray?

Whatever the case, some 7.6 million voters have now acknowledged Le Pen as the right person to lead France (a total probably boosted by a terrorist attack on the Champs Elysées three days before the vote). And while her combination of rebranding and rabble-rousing probably will not be enough to win her the presidency, she has already succeeded in transforming the face and the psyche of France for a long time to come.

The writer is former Chief Operating Officer of France 24 and RFI.

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(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rampal power plant is becoming a horrible reality

I was shocked and dismayed to read that the state-owned Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) has secured the export order for the 1,320 MW powerplant in Rampal. How can the government ignore the pleas and rightful demands of seventeen crore Bangladeshis to abandon the plan and save the ecological system? Can we still hope that good sense will prevail and the government will pay heed to our objections?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Develop the livestock sector

There are seven universities in our country which are providing formal education in veterinary medicine. Developing this sector can help the majority of the population living in villages to get engaged with poultry farming for a living. Given that poultry disease is a major hurdle faced by most livestock farmers, these people can take help from registered veterinary doctors to run economically strong farms.

Registered veterinary doctors working at upazila and Non-Government Organisations as veterinary surgeons are already providing training for poultry farming. The government should invest in developing this sector in order to boost employment opportunities for farmers and others living in poverty in the rural areas.

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