

From right to information to right to data

The two pillars of the 'Open Government' movement

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

In late 1840s, London was hit by a vicious cholera epidemic. Health officials struggled to curb the spread until Dr John Snow painstakingly collected data on the location and history of each case and traced the source to specific water supplies in the city.

Data of all types are constantly created and stored by public and private entities all over the world. The use of data was limited in the past to specialists of different fields, but this has changed with modern technology. The value of data for citizens is becoming more pronounced every day.

The frequent ding of incoming text messages on our smartphones and the flurry of apps flooding the markets remind us constantly not only of the use but also the abuse of datasets. It is widely accepted that there is a need to regulate the dataflow to minimise abuse and facilitate beneficial use of data, as Dr Snow exemplified.

Which brings us to the concept of "Open Government Data" (OGD). OGD and Right to Information (RTI) are two sides of the same coin. In fact, the foundation of OGD lies in peoples' right to information. RTI and OGD are thus the two main pillars of the "Open Government" doctrine that has drastically changed our thinking about the importance of citizen-state relationship. An open government is "one with high levels of transparency and mechanisms for public scrutiny and oversight in place, with an emphasis on government accountability."

Not so long ago, many would question if economic growth and democratic regimes went hand in hand. Others would argue that democracy retarded growth and growth under autocracy induced democracy. Happily, those days are over. Instead, people's participation in state affairs is considered sacrosanct for good governance and sustainable development.

This is most apparent in legislation drawn up in most countries that give citizens the right to access information held by their governments. More than 115 countries have operationalised laws enshrining "Access to Information" (ATI), "Freedom of Information" (FOI) or "Right to Information" (RTI), most of them in the last two decades.

RTI/FOI Acts are based on the concept that giving citizens access to documents and proceedings of the government allows

effective public oversight over public work. It promotes transparency and accountability in the work of public bodies by dismantling the age-old practice of state secrecy, based on "reason of the state", and replacing it with "public interest".

The OGD concept, on the other hand, seeks to provide citizens with access, on a legal basis, to the rich reservoir of data available with governments. These are data produced or commissioned by government or government-controlled entities. OGD seeks to make them available online, open for downloading and manipulation so that they may be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone.

Such data include those on cultural works and artefacts collected and held by galleries, libraries, archives and museums; scientific data, from weather patterns to genotypes of fish; financial data ranging from government accounts, expenditure and revenue, to information on financial

taxpayers' money is used for what purpose. An "info-intermediary" would be able to analyse the data for ordinary citizens. In Denmark a woman set up a website with government data which showed all Danish public toilets. People with bladder problems use it before going out. In New York people use data to find out which parks are most favourable to walk their dogs. People with a business knack thus use data to create a service.

The close kinship between RTI and OGD is obvious. Both seek to empower citizens, one to access information and the other to access data, both held by the government. The key objective of both is the same: to make government transparent, accountable and responsive to its citizens. However, RTI is largely reactive and adversarial, while OGD is proactive and collaborative. While citizens could obtain government data by using the RTI process, OGD makes such data

The task has been entrusted to a project under the Prime Minister's Office, known as Access to Information (a2i), which is the torch-bearer of the government's digitisation programme. We wish them well. An Open Government Data Portal has been created and is awaiting inauguration. Our immediate neighbour, India, adopted a National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy (NDSAP) in 2012.

Readers may also be interested to know that another "open government" initiative, known as "Open Government Partnership" (OGP) was launched in 2011 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly by eight heads of state from all over the world. It is a global, multilateral enterprise which aims at developing international cooperation to secure concrete commitments from governments, on a voluntary basis, to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness modern technologies to strengthen governance.

There are around 85 participating countries and hundreds of civil society organisations which work in tandem to promote the objectives of OGP. In South Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have joined as participating members. Nepal appears to be serious about joining. We are not sure about Bangladesh's position.

Civil society attention to "open government" initiatives is crucial to advance their basic objective of empowering citizens vis-à-vis the state and improving citizen-state relationship. However, as a nation, we do not seem to have fully comprehended their value yet. Our attention even to the only legal instrument we have in this regard, the RTI Act 2009, is woefully poor. We are as nonchalant about changing our age-old mindset in regards to transparency and accountability as our public officials are. The question is: how long can we face away from what is to our own benefit?

There is a glimmer of hope, however, in the small progress observed recently in the implementation of the RTI Act. Let us hope this will extend to other open government mechanisms. Our newspapers are full of reports every day on citizen's gripes against public authorities. It is time we learn to use these mechanisms to alleviate them.

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markets; or statistical data such as census and socioeconomic indicators.

The value of data, both for the public and for specialised users, such as, commercial users, researchers, journalists, activists, civil servants and the government itself, is obvious. In the digital age, data is a key resource for social and commercial activities. Everything from finding the local post office to building a search engine requires access to data, much of which is created or held by government. By opening up data, government can help drive the creation of innovative businesses and services that deliver social and commercial value.

Data law is needed to, among other things, fix the cost, where applicable, for access; protect proprietary and intellectual rights; safeguard personal data, state security and the like. A good OGD law would help citizens find out how much of

proactively available online.

Another difference between the two is that while prospective RTI users include all citizens, OGD users are mostly technical experts who make data useful for others. It is extremely important, therefore, that OGD specialists and RTI activists work closely together to develop supportive mechanisms for the success of both the instruments. Only then can we move from the default of secrecy to transparency in governance.

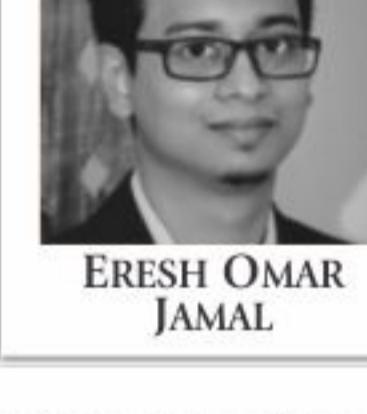
In Bangladesh, OGD is yet to make its mark. Although government-based data is available online, it is highly fragmented and sometimes inaccessible by the public. And, unlike RTI, for which we have a law, there is no clear policy yet on the subject, let alone legislation. The latter may follow only if there is a public demand.

Fortunately, the government has initiated action to develop an OGD policy.

Madness in the Middle East

Is Lebanon in the firing line?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



JUST as news started to come out that the Syrian Arab Army was on the verge of liberating the city of Abu Kamal, destroying the last Islamic State stronghold in Syria, rekindling hope that the region may yet see some semblance of stability, another piece of news from the Middle East had started to make the headlines, doing the exact opposite. This was the sudden resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri only a week after his routine visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), followed by the detention of 11 House of Saud princes, four current ministers and dozens of former princes/cabinet secretaries—all charged with corruption.

Prior to his resignation and after his return from KSA on November 1, Hariri had held meetings with many regional diplomats including Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. In an unexpected move, Hariri had interestingly announced the official appointment of Saad Zakhia as ambassador to Damascus (Syria) afterwards.

About 24 hours later, Hariri was summoned back to KSA, leaving in a hurry with only two security personnel. On November 4, news came out that the PM of Lebanon had resigned in a video recorded from KSA on the official channel of Al-Saud—Al-Arabiya. According to Lebanese political commentator Marwa Osman, Lebanese people were shocked by the resignation because "there was no evidence that something was wrong with the government...whether from him or his rivals for that matter that there was something going on politically speaking inside of Lebanon that would hint to a resignation, not at all."

Two hours later, reports emerged that 11 very important princes and many others were arrested in KSA at the orders of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Ironically, the arrestees were being detained at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in KSA, where they had gathered only a few days ago, when MBS had hosted his convention to introduce the robot Sophia. This has led many commentators to opine that MBS held that convention to bring all those he was planning to have arrested to KSA, so that he could have them arrested all at once.

That still does not explain why the Lebanese PM was summoned to KSA on November 12. However, according to historian and writer Sami Moubayed, one "story



Lebanese people watch an interview of Lebanon's ex-PM Saad al-Hariri at a coffee shop in Beirut on November 12. PHOTO: AFP

presently making the rounds in Lebanon is that Hariri is being asked to testify against Prince Mutib Bin Abdullah, who is the son of former Saudi King Abdullah and heads the Royal Guard." Given his gravitas, Prince Mutib Bin Abdullah is not easily removable. Thus, as Sami Moubayed explains, "only Hariri has enough information to bring him down."

Moreover, it is an open secret that KSA has some serious financial struggles at hand, as with the decline of oil prices (and no indication that it will rise significantly in the near future) which it so heavily depends on, it has even had to flirt with floating its national petroleum and natural gas company, Saudi Aramco. This, after it had borrowed USD 10 billion from the IMF for the first time in 10 years.

Therefore, some analysts believe that MBS, having realised the true severity of KSA's financial problems, is indeed looking to clamp down on corruption, while trying to modernise (and bring moderation to) the kingdom which is essential to overcoming its financial struggles. The fact that the arrests of all these princes have led to the confiscation of USD 800 billion by KSA lends credence to this school of thought.

That still does not explain why Hariri has not yet returned to Lebanon and the true purpose behind what CNN described

as a "tense and tearful" interview of Hariri by Paula Yacobian in KSA on November 12. However, according to historian and writer Sami Moubayed, one "story

presently making the rounds in Lebanon is that Hariri is being asked to testify against Prince Mutib Bin Abdullah, who is the son of former Saudi King Abdullah and heads the Royal Guard." Given his gravitas, Prince Mutib Bin Abdullah is not easily removable. Thus, as Sami Moubayed explains, "only Hariri has enough information to bring him down."

Either way, given the nature of the events that are unfolding, then there is definitely a lot to be concerned about, as this would, no doubt, again draw in regional powers (and possibly world powers if it drags on) that are becoming increasingly distrustful of each other, this time, possibly into Lebanon. Having gone through decades of civil war, followed by two failed invasions by Israel (which cost many Lebanese lives), this is the last thing that the Lebanese, who have finally managed to establish some form of stability in their own country, need.

If recent history has taught us anything, it is that smaller countries are often the victims of the power politics that is played out between bigger countries. Lebanon may just be the latest victim.

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

Another fresh Rohingya exodus?

International inaction breeding impunity

THE fact that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to pass a resolution and handed out merely a statement condemning atrocities committed against the Rohingya people has apparently emboldened the Myanmar security forces. If what the International Red Cross (IRC) fears comes true, Bangladesh may be facing a fresh exodus of Rohingyas, numbering as many as 200,000 people, pouring over the border in the coming weeks! If another 200,000 are pushed out it would virtually fulfil Myanmar's long-term goal to depopulate the Rakhine State of the Rohingya minority group.

It would appear that the world community has turned its back on the continued violence and persecution of the Rohingyas. While Bangladesh reels from the pressures of looking after nearly a million people on its soil, we have neither received the necessary foreign financial commitments from the developed nations, nor have any meaningful steps been taken by the UNSC that could check the violence against an unarmed people. The children and the old are the worst hit by the violence in Rakhine State and malnutrition is running rampant amongst those lucky enough to have escaped the violence and ended on our side of the border.

We have done our best to provide shelter and humanitarian assistance to these displaced people. A public health crisis is looming on the horizon, and it is ludicrous to think that Bangladesh should go on bearing the responsibility of keeping Rohingyas safe indefinitely while the UNSC debates on and on about whether it should or should not pass a resolution condemning the actions of the Myanmar government. The time for proactive action has arrived and the manner in which the Rohingyas have been treated should be subject of inquiry by the international war crimes tribunal at The Hague.

Revision of DAP

Conserve wetlands at any cost

IT is good news that the government is drawing up a 20-year plan from 2016 to 2035 for a "planned Dhaka city" after it failed to implement the current detailed area plan (DAP) in the face of opposition from realtors and influential people. At a consultation meeting organised by Rajuk for the revision of DAP, the officials of Rajuk, Water Development Board (WDB) and urban planners have raised their concerns over the destruction of water retention areas in and around the city.

Dhaka's waterlogging problem has worsened over the years due to the destruction of conservative flood plains, retention areas, rivers, canals, farmlands and rural homesteads in and around the city. According to an estimate by experts, over 100 realtors have illegally developed projects in these areas. What is shocking is that Rajuk itself has filled up a part of the low-lying area in the city's Goranchatbari to develop the third phase of Uttara Model Town. In addition, the higher authorities have taken away a major part of the water retention areas of Goranchatbari for the construction of Dhaka Elevated Expressway in order to rehabilitate the people who were displaced.

If the government is really serious about implementing the revised DAP, all concerned agencies ought to work in coordination. When reclaiming Dhaka's lost wetlands, opposition from the powerful realtors should be resisted strongly. Also, it must not forget to reclaim the water bodies that have been grabbed by various government departments. In order to make Dhaka liveable again, the capital's wetlands must be recovered and conserved at all cost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Milia Ali's insightful article

Milia Ali's article titled "Crossing cultures through fashion" published in The Daily Star on November 12 was very insightful. In my opinion, by saying "It took me a long time to reject the idea that wearing traditional clothes is the only way of highlighting one's heritage. I have finally come to terms with the fact that one has to dress keeping in mind the occasion and season while retaining one's individuality and ethnicity," she has properly highlighted the fact that it is not a "violation" of one's own culture and heritage if a woman from a particular background opts for a different style of clothing in changing circumstances, for example, when one migrates to another country that has a different culture.

Moreover, she has discussed many important points, which I found very convincing and relevant to the contemporary world.

ASM Wasequzzaman, *By email*

Make public hospitals clean

A few days ago, I went to a cardiac ward at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) to visit an 83-year-old patient. He is accustomed to using a commode at his home but there was none in the hospital. When I went to find one for him, all the toilets looked so dirty that I almost threw up. If the situation in a major hospital like the RMCH is such, what is it like in other smaller hospitals?

There was also a shortage of beds and many patients had to lie on the floor. All the wards are overcrowded with patients. I urge the authorities concerned to make public hospitals clean and set up more beds to accommodate the growing number of patients.

Mawdua Hasnin, *By email*