

BCL SCHOOL COMMITTEE Leave the kids alone

Section 57 by another name Problematic provision still intact in Digital Security Act

It has been reported that within the first seven months of this year, around 300 cases were filed under the controversial Section 57 of the ICT Act. And yet, now when the government has decided to scrap the provision from the law, it does not bring any relief. For a while now, we have been speaking out about a provision bearing striking resemblance to Section 57 which has been included in the draft Digital Security Act. Now there is talk of the draft law being placed in the parliament the coming session, intact with the provision.

The issues with Section 57 and the similar provision in the Digital Security Act have been much discussed. The fear that the vague terms of the provisions can be used to curb people's freedom of expression and free speech is not unfounded. Journalists and newsmen have been harassed and arrested using the section as have others for expressing their opinion on social media platforms. We have also pointed out how the punishments stipulated are disproportionate to the crimes. So while we would have loved to praise the government's decision to scrap Section 57 from the ICT Act, it baffles us why another similar provision needs to be introduced in the new law.

Critics of Section 57 and the provision in the new draft law are right when they say that these provisions are not in line with the nature of laws in a democratic society where freedom of expression and opinion are not criminalised. Using excuses of national security and interest, these provisions punish and restrict the right of a citizen to critique. And while we understand the need for a law to address cyber crimes, a provision which threatens to undermine basic rights and the press cannot be part of it. We urge that as Section 57 is scrapped from one law, it not be introduced by a new name in another.

Now a NBFIs in trouble!

Default culture taking deep root

We have both reported and editorialised how the Farmers' Bank went down under and now we are seeing a similar situation emerging with the non-bank financial institutions (NBFIs). The Bangladesh Industrial Finance Company (BIFC) has failed to pay back Tk 31.73 crore it owes to state-owned Rupali Bank because it is facing a liquidity crunch.

Reportedly, the BIFC management has been in trouble for some time now and has simply ignored repeated prods from Rupali Bank to pay back what is owed. When we delve deeper into the issue we find that this institution owes hundreds of crores of taka to multiple banks and has asked Bangladesh Bank to help bail it out. This culture of borrowing well beyond one's means, giving out ill-informed loans and then managing to not recover a large percentage of loaned-out amounts and finally asking for a bailout from the central bank, seems to have become the modus operandi of our financial institutions these days!

When we look at BIFC's books of accounts, it owed Tk 780 crore at the end of the last fiscal year. Our question is, where was the central bank when it had become apparent to the naked eye that things were not working out in this financial institution? The options BIFC had given the central bank for recovery, all of which were ludicrous to begin with, should have prompted the central bank to appoint an administrator to check the rot that had set in. We repeat what we have reiterated in the past and that is, the central bank must start acting as a responsible regulator to stop these malpractices in the financial sector before they become the norm.

Solving Dhaka's sewage problem

JASON BELANGER, Bangladesh Country Director, SNV

In October of this year, the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) issued a request for expressions of interest for a "Technical Assistance Project for the Preparatory Activities of the proposed Dhaka Sanitation Improvement Project (DSIP) (Phase-I)." Regarding the current status of the sewer system in Dhaka, the document says that the northern part of the city has no sewer network, whereas the southern part's sewerage facilities have deteriorated severely. As a result, it concludes, most of the city's sewage and/or wastewater is directly discharged into stormwater drainage canals without treatment, ultimately flowing to the nearby open canals or surrounding rivers, contaminating all the surface water bodies in and around the city and creating health hazards, offensive odour and unhygienic environment.

Bangladesh prides itself, as it should, on having reduced open defecation to only one percent. This is a significant accomplishment. However, in light of the above situation, without a proper functioning sewage system to ensure proper containment and treatment of faecal sludge, the end result is the same as if there was 100 percent open defecation.

It is imperative that Bangladesh gives priority to on-site sanitation solutions. On-site sanitation solutions can be implemented in much less time and at a cost far less than sewerage systems. For example, with an investment of USD 180 million Khulna will have sewer access for just 60 percent of the population by 2030, whereas an investment of USD 5 million in on-site sanitation will ensure universal access within the next five years.



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

JUST when we thought we've seen enough of Bangladesh Chhatra League, an organisation that has been the subject of one shocking headline after another over the last eight years, the student wing of the ruling Awami League has found a way to send us into collective shock again. The organisation has recently announced that it is moving ahead with a plan to form committees at high schools across the country, after having occupied every available space in the public colleges and universities, both general and specialised.

In a press note dated November 21, the BCL central committee said the objective behind the move is to "spread the ideology of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman" among the schoolchildren and "give further impetus" to the organisation. Asked whether it would cause in schools the kind of violence witnessed in higher public institutions, BCL president Saifur Rahman Sohag waxed lyrical about how his organisation, contrary to popular belief, is changing the landscape of our education sector for good. "It is because of Chhatra League that universities have healthy student politics, and classes and exams are held properly," he said (*The Daily Star*, November 23, 2017).

His opinion, clearly, is not borne out by the facts on the ground or the views held by the general students. The truth is, the country's higher education is crumbling—in large part because of the brand of politics now in practice by an organisation whose legitimacy lies solely in its association with the ruling party and a legacy from the pre-independence period. BCL continues to be relevant not because of its pro-student activism, but because, like its rivals in the not-so-distant past, it wouldn't allow student politics to be "healthy" for anyone but its own leaders and members.

If this sounds like a platitude, it is because bad things keep happening around student politics. Every time it is in the news, you know something bad has happened. Someone has been beaten because he wouldn't follow an instruction; someone has died—a political rival, a general student, or a random guy who has had the misfortune of being in the crosshairs of a leader; a teacher assaulted because he or she took a position against the university administration; a classroom vandalised because an exam wouldn't be postponed.

Or somewhere, in the back alley of some university, a question paper has been leaked—just to mention a few reported incidents.

That being said, apart from BCL, there are also many other players trying to grab a piece of the pie that is student politics.

According to an estimate, in the last eight years, incidents of violence and conflicts in different universities and colleges have caused at least 125 deaths, of which at least 60 were due to internal

Maksud, other political parties will also soon form their own school committees. Since each neighbourhood has several schools, there will be a war for territory control, not only among the rival groups but also within different factions of each committee. Political connection, for the children, will be viewed as a springboard for successful careers in the future. The whole school system will be in a mess.

This may be an exaggerated version of what the future holds for our schools if

parties, and help them solidify their control over the future generation of leaders. But given the sensitivity of this issue, Awami League will be expected to send a clear message that it will not stand for anything that embroils the children—in schools or colleges—in political activities.

Personally, I have nothing against student politics. In many countries today, there are student unions campaigning on behalf of students to impact policy



Children should be allowed to grow naturally, without undue interferences. PHOTO: STAR

feuds in BCL (*The Daily Star*, November 23). If this violent and exploitative politics is now transported to the corridors of schools, what will happen to our secondary—and primary, by extension—education system is anybody's guess.

As for the fate of the children, the columnist Syed Abul Maksud, in a satirical piece published by *Prothom Alo*, offered his thought on how school politics might shape our future generation. The president, general secretary and other office-bearers of each school committee, he said, would be selected from the most "unbrilliant" of students. They will have their first lesson in "raising funds" even before the committee's inauguration ceremony, and in fist fights during a battle over who will preside over that ceremony. The battle will also spill over into classrooms. Teachers will be under threat.

Inspired by the BCL, continues

the students are exposed to violent politics at such an early age, but the possibilities are endless, and decidedly less inspiring.

The BCL logic behind the move also raises some moral questions: is it right to subject children to political indoctrination? Is it the responsibility of a student body to spread a particular ideology? How ethical is it to use children to extend one's party influence? The Awami League leadership has previously denied having any patience for organisations using children for political purposes, especially after news surfaced that a new organisation by the name "Shishu League" has emerged. Can they take the same moral stand now?

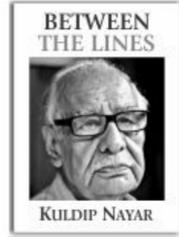
Clearly, BCL is too valuable for Awami League to disaffiliate from, whatever the crime, nor will it ban student politics in general despite its harmful effects on our education sector. In the political equation, student bodies are extensions of their mother

decisions affecting their life and career. Bangladesh also has a rich history of student bodies waging important socio-political movements and serving the general students. But since the reinstatement of parliamentary democracy in the 1990s, with the political parties targeting students to advance their own interests, the reality has changed, and what we have now are the remnants of a system that has left its best days decades ago.

Whether Bangladesh will be able to revive the lost glory of its student politics and have unions that will truly represent the students and fight for their rights across the board is for the scholars to work out. Right now, the priority is to allow children to grow naturally, without undue interferences, and involve themselves in healthy life activities so they can serve their country better.

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Mandir and masjid can coexist



KULDIP NAYAR

ON December 6, the demolition of the Babri Masjid would be 25 years old. Instead of making amends for what the Congress government did in 1992 with the connivance of then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government is bent upon building a temple at the site where the masjid once stood.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has made a statement that only a "grand temple" would be built in Ayodhya and nothing else. This is unfair to the Muslims or the liberals who support the country's diversity and had come to agree that both the mosque and the temple could stand side by side at the site. However, the demolition remains a blot on India's secularism. To

took place. The proclamation to impose President's Rule was ready a fortnight earlier. It was awaiting the cabinet approval. The prime minister did not convene its meeting. When the demolition began, there were frantic calls to the Prime Minister's Office.

Even if the Congress were to deny the allegation against Rao, the party has not yet explained how a small temple had come up overnight at the site where the masjid stood earlier. The centre was then in full control because UP had been put under President's Rule after dismissal of the state government. In any case, the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute had transcended the state borders and the centre was following the developments every day. Justice Manmohan Singh Liberhan Commission's silence on Rao's behaviour was meant to cover up his complicity and that of the Congress party.

"Let the temple come up." This was the remark by Atal Bihari Vajpayee when I asked for his reaction to the

The indictment has exposed our polity because all the three came to occupy top positions in the country. Vajpayee became the prime minister, Advani the home minister and Joshi the human resources development minister. If all the three were collaborators in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, they were dishonest in taking the oath of office which demanded that the oath-taker would work for the country's unity and uphold the constitution that mentions secularism in the preamble. The Liberhan Commission has said that they were among the 68 who were "culpable" in taking the country to the brink of "communal discord."

Not only that. The three leaders acted against the Supreme Court's order "not to disturb the status quo." In other words, they made a mockery of the country's judiciary and the constitution to which they swore before assuming power. And they ruled for six years without a tug of conscience.

The question is not only legal but also moral. How can the planned demolition be squared up with the holding of office by Vajpayee, Advani and Joshi? This is a matter that the nation should have debated to find an answer. Those who have no clean hands should not be allowed to defile the temple of parliament.

Meanwhile, Art of Living founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has been making efforts for mediation among the stakeholders. During his recent visit to Ayodhya, the spiritual guru has said that the problem could be solved through dialogue and mutual respect rather than "conceit and accusation." Even UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, whom the guru had met, agreed to provide all necessary support.

The spiritual guru's meeting with the UP chief minister came in the backdrop of the BJP launching its civil poll campaign from Ayodhya with promises of redevelopment. However, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an arm of the RSS, and the Muslims Personal Law Board has rejected Sri Sri's offer to mediate on the issue. The feeling within the BJP leadership is that the decision is best left to the Supreme Court, which is slated to hear the case on December 5.

"Ram temple matter is in the Supreme Court and I think we should let the legal process be complete. Other discussions can be held after that," said Ram Madhav, BJP's National General Secretary. Similarly, the VHP also voiced its concerns over the Art of Living founder trying to resolve the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

"This is not the first time that Sri Sri has taken this initiative. In 2001, he made attempts but failed. The reaction to his efforts was the same as today," VHP Joint General Secretary Surendra Jain had said. The real hitch is the statement by Bhagwat that only the temple would come up in Ayodhya and nothing else. When Muslims have, by and large, come to accept that the temple could be built by the side of the mosque, the RSS chief's lament is unwarranted.



A mob of Hindu zealots surround the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya which was demolished on December 6, 1992.

build "only" the temple would tantamount to rubbing salt on the wound that was inflicted.

I recall that after the demolition, which initiated countrywide Hindu-Muslim clashes, Prime Minister Rao convened a meeting of senior journalists to explain what had happened. He sought media cooperation in quenching the fire. He said that the central government was helpless because of the determination of hundreds of *kar sevaks* to demolish the masjid. But Madhu Limaye, the late socialist leader, later told me the *puja* that Rao performed was meant to camouflage the demolition. When an aide whispered into his ears that the masjid had been demolished, he opened his eyes.

Rao could have easily acted before the demolition destruction of the masjid one day after the incident. I was surprised by his comment because I considered him a liberal force in the BJP. In fact, the Liberhan Commission had named Vajpayee as one of the collaborators in pulling down the mosque. How could he have reacted differently when he was a party to the "meticulously planned" scheme to demolish the mosque?

That LK Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, the other two BJP leaders, were co-conspirators was known on December 6, 1992, itself. The surprising name for me was that of Vajpayee. Vajpayee, when he was prime minister, was a changed person. He had led a bus of intellectuals and journalists to Lahore to give the message of peace and conciliation to the neighbours.

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