

# Of huddled masses and government shutdowns

ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

A signboard in front of the Statue of Liberty read: "Government Shutdown." This was almost poetic, because the bold idea of openness that the lady upholds is at the centre of the whole US federal government shutdown shenanigan.

This has happened because the Senate Democrats and Republicans failed to pass a spending bill even on the last day of the deadline to fund federal agencies because they could not reach a compromise on the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) debate. In early September, the Trump administration officially announced its plan to phase out DACA, an Obama-era programme that provides a level of amnesty to certain undocumented immigrants who came to the US as children.

The Senate Democrats had since been determined to not let the Trump administration pull the rug under the feet of 70,000 undocumented immigrant children. These individuals were encouraged to come out of hiding by the Obama administration. But now, they face the risk of deportation by the Trump administration simply because they trusted in the promise that the US government had made to them. This is as treacherous as it sounds. Many in the Republican Party were also opposed to this proposal and were willing to negotiate on it before its term expired in March. But the Democrats insisted on immediate action and voted against the spending bill to force the Republicans into negotiation.

However, DACA is not the only stubbornness of the Republicans. They also want funds for Trump's border wall and to end chain migration (the process under which immigrants can bring their family members into the US). They are doing so to tap into the anger of many Americans who see undocumented immigrants and chain migrants as threats to the republic because they get access to the welfare system without having to pay taxes for it beforehand. They also think that these immigrants steal their jobs and get involved in criminal or terrorist activities. As Republicans take advantage of these misdirected feelings and speak at length about closing down the borders and cracking down on illegal immigration, the immigrants and their children often support Democrats instead. The Democrats take advantage of this situation and speak of giving citizenship



Supporters of the Dream Act rallied to urge Congress to pass a bill that will allow Dreamers to permanently stay in the country on the Senate steps in Washington on December 6 last year.

PHOTO: REUTERS

and welfare benefits to the undocumented individuals, causing further polarisation in the civil society.

But the Democrats are as much against openness as the Republicans. President Barack Obama deported more individuals in presidential history and Bill Clinton before him deported more individuals than both Bush presidents. Securing legal entry and work permit in the US has become increasingly complex under both Democratic and Republican administrations over the past decade.

I, an international student holding a F-1 visa, had to wait for a whole year before I could even do an internship related to my field of education. I am now only limited to work jobs that the college approves of up to 20 hours during the semester. But if I had entered the US by nontraditional means, especially with my parents at a young age, I would now be protected under DACA, and be able to pay in-state tuition in Virginia. If my undocumented parents were to give birth to me on American soil, I would be a US citizen already. This creates an incentive for prospective immigrants to follow extra-legal channels rather than figuring out the overly complex legal means.

So what is the solution? "Build a wall, stop the bad hombres from coming in

and taking our jobs and blowing up our cities," says Trump. But the data suggests that the premise of Trump's argument is false. The Cato Institute finds that immigrants are less crime-prone than native-born Americans and they work in jobs that Americans don't typically want to work in. America needs immigrants (documented or not) as much as immigrants need America.

Pew Research Center finds that undocumented immigrants are so integral to the American economy that many sectors (e.g. agriculture) would collapse if they were deported. That is why many think tanks and research institutes have been arguing for a simpler legal immigration policy that allows free entry and exit. That way, high-skilled people could come to the US more easily and the working people could seasonally travel from their home beyond the southern border (without laying claim on the American welfare net). This used to be the norm before the Republicans and Democrats began their protectionist mania. That is when America was the greatest. But since promises to make America great again surfaced on the horizon, Donald Trump decided to amplify the mania. Instead of opening the doors to Mexico, he said that he

would build a wall. The gaping hole of debt in the American budget would only get bigger if this plan was to get through and that is why some Republicans (like Sen. Rand Paul) voted against the spending bill along with the Democrats.

The Statue of Liberty opened on Monday under the New York State's sponsorship. The state governments are keeping the police, the fire service and other emergency services open. The FBI, the TSA and the Coast Guard are still operational. But the Children's Health Insurance Program, military death benefits and the Republican Party are under threat because of the federal government shutdown. Even though the Democrats share much of the blame, the people will only remember that the Republicans failed to keep the government open even when it controlled the House, the Senate and the White House. Therefore, if the Republicans do not get out of their protectionist mania right now, they may be the ones to take the heat in the upcoming midterms.

For their party's sake and for their country's sake, the Republicans must embrace the bold idea of openness.

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## Rohingya repatriation must be sustainable

The onus is on Myanmar

We are not particularly surprised that the return of Rohingyas to their homeland in Myanmar is not going to start today as scheduled in the repatriation agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar in January. Apart from the huge logistical task of finalising the list of families eligible for repatriation, there are other conditions that have not changed to facilitate the repatriation process.

First of all, Myanmar has not given any guarantees regarding a safe, dignified and sustainable environment in Rakhine, where the refugees will return to voluntarily. This has been one of the basic preconditions demanded by Bangladesh and many other nations and human rights groups who are genuinely concerned about the fate of the Rohingya refugees. The idea of repatriation camps near Bangladesh's border inside Myanmar, where refugees will wait until they are allowed back into Myanmar, is not very reassuring since we do not know under what conditions they will be kept and for how long.

So far Bangladesh has been trying its best to fulfil all the conditions required to start the process of repatriation. This includes bringing over a million Rohingya refugees under biometric registration. Once the list is finalised, it is up to the Myanmar government to use the list to repatriate the refugees and resettle them exactly in their own homes from where they were evicted. As expected, we are concerned about how the eligibility will be ascertained by Myanmar—as far as we are concerned all Rohingya refugees are eligible for safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation. We also expect them to be given full citizenship rights which they are entitled to.

For the repatriation process to be humane and sustainable it is crucial that the international community continues to maintain pressure on Myanmar to create a conducive environment so that the Rohingya refugees can return to their homeland without fear and as equal citizens in that country.

## Haor sluice gates still to be repaired!

The inordinate delay is inexcusable

We are concerned about the state of the farmers in Sunamganj where Boro cultivation has been delayed again this season due to waterlogging. Following damage of 56 sluice gates in 28 haors during the last floods, the area is still waterlogged, hampering preparation of seedbeds.

Heavy rain and hill water have damaged crops of around 1.66 lakh hectares, affecting around 3.26 lakh farmers. This is distressing enough, but the farmers anticipate the damage to be twice the government's estimates. A similar situation happened last year when crops were largely destroyed. The farmers face uncertainty again this year.

The area affected is a one-crop area where only Boro rice is cultivated. As of now, the farmers are preparing seedbeds on highlands, and cultivating alternative crops. The loss severely affects a large number of farmers whose livelihoods depend on crop cultivation. According to a recent report in *The Daily Star*, the water resources ministry has already allotted Tk 30 lakh for measures to drain out water quickly. We wonder what has happened to the the District Water Development Board's (WDB) demand of Tk. 1 crore to the ministry to repair the damaged sluice gates. The floods occurred a long time ago. Given the importance of the area to the local farmers the delay is inexplicable.

We urge the government to prioritise ecological imbalance and climate change fallouts in its agro-economic policy. Corruption related to embankments should be severely punished and farmers should be equipped to fight flash floods and stagnant waters on croplands. We hope that the government takes serious measures to ensure that farmers do not have to suffer this way repeatedly.

# PROJECT SYNDICATE Can fake news be outlawed?



RAPHAËL HADAS-LEBEL

almost everywhere?

That question has bedeviled defenders of democracy at least since the 2016 US presidential election. And at a New Year's press conference outside the Élysée Palace this month, French President Emmanuel Macron offered his own answer.

HOW can societies combat the stream of false, often fabricated information that surges across the Internet and through social media, polluting political debates

part of the electoral code, provides for punishment of one year in prison and a fine of 15,000 euros for anyone who uses false information "or other fraudulent manoeuvres" to steal votes. But this provision applies primarily to cases of electoral fraud.

Macron's challenge, then, is to craft legislation for the digital age. Although he didn't explicitly say so in his recent speech, he is clearly targeting the kind of Russian interference that played a prominent role in the 2016 US presidential election, and also threatened his own presidential campaign last spring.

But Macron is also looking beyond Russia. His larger goal is to protect democratic institutions against any

France is not the first country to legislate against fake news. On the eve of the German federal election last September, Germany's parliament passed a law known as "NetzDG," which came into force on January 1, 2018. The law requires social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to remove all illegal content posted by users—which includes hate speech, in addition to disinformation—within 24 hours, or face a fine of up to 50 million euros (USD 61.3 million). Italy's government, ahead of a general election in March, has also proposed a bill to police fake news.

Not surprisingly, Macron's proposed legislation has provoked criticism, not

examined carefully once it has been fleshed out. Should a judge have the power to decide on the spot what is true and what is false, and then issue fines? After all, "fake news" can take many forms, and sometimes it is disseminated without any malign intention to manipulate voters or sway an election.

A second complication is the controversial issue of net neutrality. Presumably, the law will have to police disinformation while also ensuring that Internet service providers treat all online content equally.

Moreover, it remains to be seen how Macron will address social networks and online actors that are based abroad, and over whom French authorities have no jurisdiction.

No reasonable person suspects Macron of wanting to introduce censorship. But his proposed law will need to include safeguards. For now, it is promising to learn that the proposed law would pertain only to the period preceding elections—a delicate moment in the public life of a democracy.

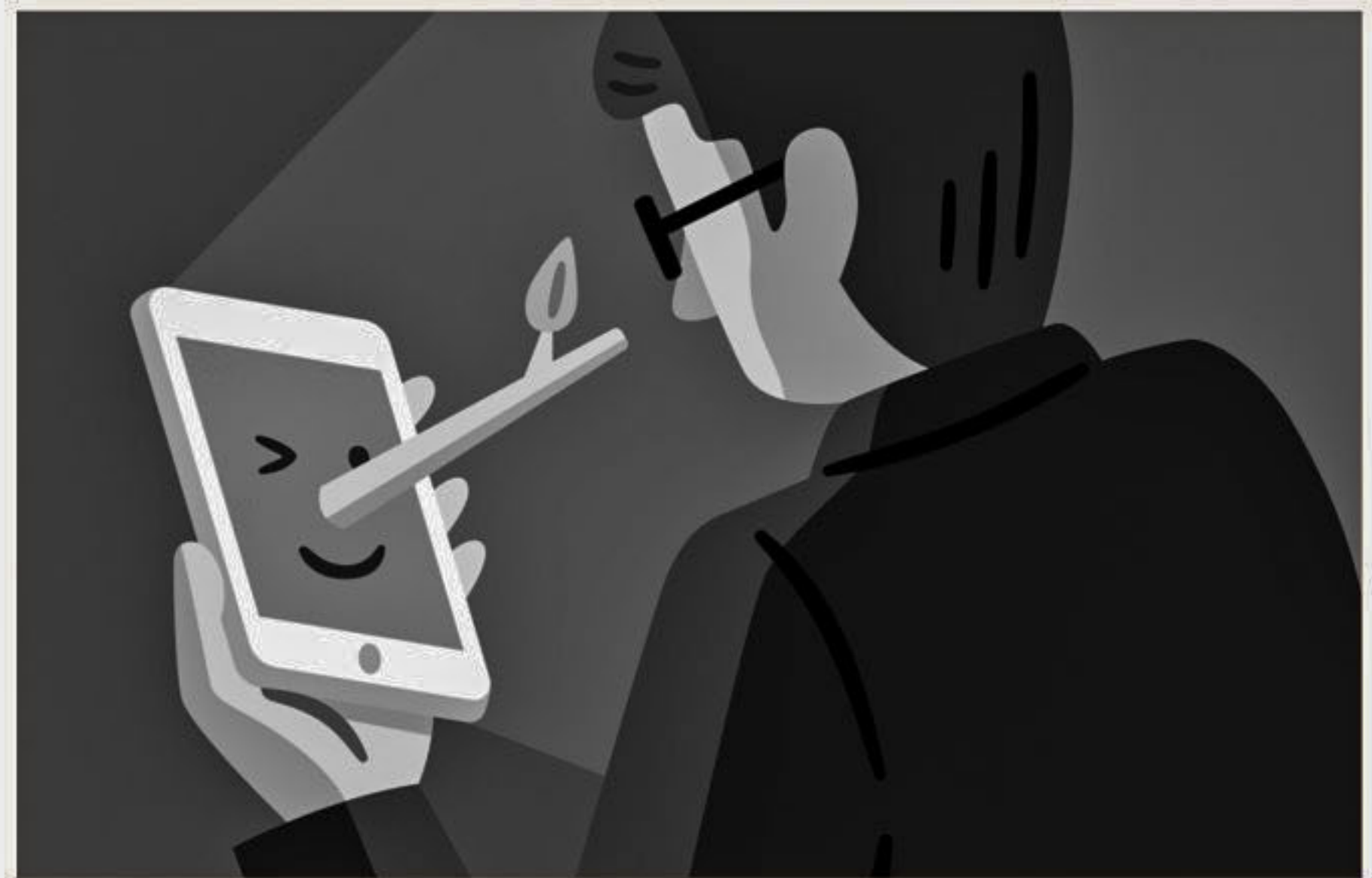
In any case, Macron's proposed legislation will be but one tool in the fight against disinformation. Public education to improve media literacy, and new classifications to treat social-media platforms as publishers with editorial accountability, can also undermine disinformation campaigns.

Ultimately, stanching the flow of fake news is a global challenge that will require a global solution. In this regard, the European Commission's decision to convene a group of experts to lead a public consultation on the issue is to be welcomed. One hopes that the process results in a set of recommendations on the best way forward.

But, until then, Macron's controversial proposals—which, to be sure, some 79 percent of French people favour, according to a recent poll—will at least prompt citizens to start thinking in stark terms about an issue that touches the very foundation of Western democracy. As we have seen in one country after another, a disinformed voter is a democrat's nemesis.

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Macron's goal, it seems, is to curtail "fake news" by law. He is promising that, by the end of the year, he will introduce a bill to crack down on those spreading misinformation during any election period.

But France already has a repressive law banning the publication or broadcasting of disinformation in bad faith. Under Article 27 of the famous Press Law of 1881, disseminating false information "by whatever means" is punishable by a fine of up to 45,000 euros (USD 55,000) in today's currency.

The Press Law, however, applies only to information that has "disturbed the public peace," which can be very difficult to define, let alone prove. Another law,

regime advocating what he calls "political illiberalism," such as the governments led by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, or Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party.

The first track Macron is exploring concerns transparency. Digital platforms will likely be subjected to higher transparency standards for all "sponsored content," not just to disclose the identity of advertisers, but also to limit the amounts spent on these messages. Second, Macron will try to establish summary proceedings in which judges can order that content be deleted, or that websites be delisted from search engines or blocked altogether.

just from Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front, but also from the extreme left. Macron's critics have enlisted the help of legal experts who argue that the laws already on the books are sufficient to contain fake news.

Yet these experts have failed to grasp the extent to which new technologies, particularly social media, enable wrongdoing. Those seeking to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories now have more opportunities than ever to do so. If anything, the need for new measures ensuring transparent and accurate online content should be obvious.

Still, the new judicial procedure that Macron envisions will need to be

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Attack on Ivy shameful

The incident that occurred in Narayanjanj on January 16 was shameful to say the least. According to a report by this newspaper, the attack against Mayor Selina Hayat Ivy was instigated and carried out by the henchmen of local MP Shamim Osman. Some of these men were seen brandishing guns.

We demand that appropriate action be taken by the authorities against those who carried out the attacks on Ivy and her followers. We hope that Mayor Ivy will recover at the earliest and is able to continue serving the city with vigour and courage.

Nuzhat Rifa Ehsan, Dhaka

### Tigers set to win tri-nation series

Chandika Hathurusingha's first experience as the head coach of the Sri Lanka cricket team might not have been an eventful one, as his side lost to Zimbabwe. On the other hand, the Bangladesh cricket team managed to kick-start the new year with back-to-back wins—that too when the side was without the guidance of a head coach. And Chandika Hathurusingha had to digest yet another defeat of his team at the hands of the Tigers, his former disciples.

With the charismatic leader Mashrafe in charge, backed by Tamim and Mushfiqur's ever reliable batting performance and Shakib's all-round performance, the hungry Tigers are well-positioned to win the tri-nation series and secure the trophy.

Muhtashim Uddin Ahmed, Dhaka