

## Drivers on payroll

### Positive step by bus owners

WE welcome the move by the Dhaka Road Transport Owners Association which declared on August 7 that contractual driving of city buses would end and that drivers will receive monthly salaries. This move, if implemented, should check to a large extent the mindless and reckless driving where buses race against one another to maximise profit. Had the decision come much earlier, a lot of unnecessary deaths and injuries could have been avoided.

This is a good beginning, but we would like to suggest a few more measures that the transport owners should employ to affect a marked improvement in ensuring safe roads. Although drivers are now going to be put on a payroll, we believe that bus companies have a responsibility in carrying out yearly medical check up for drivers to determine whether a driver is fit to be on the road or not. We endorse the prime minister's suggestion that no driver should be on the road for more than five hours at a stretch and this can be done if bus companies hire more drivers so that there is rotation of duty. This must be made mandatory, particularly for night-time driving where driver fatigue invariably ends in disaster. Another issue is that of ensuring the vehicle is fit for the road. There should not be any short cuts allowed here because a fully functional bus is an essential prerequisite for safety on roads and whilst it may entail more maintenance cost for transport companies, there can be no compromise here.

## Grant UN agencies access to Rakhine State

### Myanmar continues to soft pedal on Rohingyas

IT is very disappointing to learn from a joint statement by UNHCR, UN Refugee Agency, and UN Development Programme that Myanmar has not granted their staff independent and effective access to the Rakhine State. Although it signed a tripartite MoU with UNHCR and UNDP on Rohingya repatriation last June, according to which the UN should start their work in the northern part of Rakhine State to help the country create conducive conditions for Rohingya repatriation, the Myanmar government has not yet responded to the travel authorisation requests of the UN's international staff.

According to the UN, the freedom of movement of the remaining Rohingya communities in the Rakhine is being strictly restricted, preventing them from being able to work, go to school, and access healthcare. They are also being prevented from interacting with friends and family. It is clear from the situation there that Rohingya repatriation is not possible without creating favourable conditions. In order to create that environment, the UN agencies must be given free access to the state so that they can start their work by consulting with the communities in Rakhine about their needs.

Since a Joint Working Group (JWG) team, led by the foreign minister of Bangladesh, is visiting the Myanmar at present to observe the situation on the ground, we hope that the Myanmar government would be able to tell us precisely what tangible progress has been made by them to improve the conditions in Rakhine for the safe and sustainable return of the displaced Rohingya communities. At the same time, the UN and the international community should mount pressure on Myanmar government so that they honour the deals signed for Rohingya repatriation.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### More zebra crossings needed in Dhaka

Dhaka city needs more zebra crossings than footbridges. While it may be difficult for the elderly people to cross a road through a foot bridge, zebra crossings can help them cross the road without much difficulty. Most cities in the world have zebra crossings for crossing roads. Zebra crossings are the cheapest and best way to manage pedestrian movement on busy roads during peak hours. Therefore, the authorities concerned should consider having more zebra crossings in Dhaka.

Ziauddin Ahmed, Gulshan-1, Dhaka

### Bravo, Bangladesh Cricket Team!

Recently, our cricket team has won both the ODI and T20 series against the West Indies team. Among others, Tamim, Sakib, Mushfique and Mahmudullah have played superbly and were quite consistent in their performance. Our bowlers also did well. The players adjusted with the environment on the foreign soil within a short time and eventually presented us with some big wins. I would like to congratulate Bangladesh Cricket Team for their outstanding performance. Consistency is something that the team had been lacking for quite some time. But it seems they have overcome that problem now. Bravo Tigers!

Mohammad Zonaeed Emran, Mutual Trust Bank Limited, Dhaka



# How an unrestricted press could help assuage violence

MORE THAN JUST FACTS

NAZMUL AHASAN

THERE'S an increasing inclination, both globally and domestically, among those in power to impede the media. How such restriction could be counterproductive was apparent in the recent student protests for safer roads and the subsequent clashes. Over the period, those with press badges or cameras were obvious targets. In the process, unbridled rumours spread like

wildfire, exacerbating the already turbulent situations. Journalists do not make or create news. What they do is observe and report what they see or know. They are reporters of events. Then, why were they made targets if there was nothing to hide and the government, as it claimed, was above board?

It is only normal that in a time of turmoil rumours would be created either out of emotional pressure or deliberately. But the inability of journalists to report facts and verify claims was what gave rise to speculations and made things worse.

My own experience covering the incident was hardly pleasant. One of my female colleagues was molested and assaulted while documenting violence unleashed by those allegedly belonging to the ruling party. As we arrived at a clash-point, Jighatala, we were strictly advised by another colleague of mine to take off our press badges because they might invite more risks rather than protection. But we got into trouble, as suddenly police descended upon protesting students. I barely escaped because I saw it coming and took refuge inside a house, where the guard was generous enough to let many of us in.

We were keeping our heads down, lest we were seen. Through a small hole in the door, I saw how protesters and photographers were mercilessly beaten as the police watched silently.

Once everything calmed down, I thought it appropriate to get out of the house and meet my other colleagues. Then we were told that one of my colleagues, who had been with me at the front line of the crowd, was detained by police and taken into custody. The news was deeply disturbing. Then I met a journalist from Channel 24 who was badly beaten and his camera taken by the same group of activists during a live broadcast. There were others who suffered similar treatment.

When I opened the newspaper the next day, the feeling of sadness deepened even further as reports described how badly four of my colleagues were beaten by police and their plainclothes associates. The paper also published a photo showing injury marks on the colleague who had been with me. Knowing that I was inside a house, while he was being tortured, was depressing.

The next day saw more violence towards journalists.



Armed youths swoop on a freelance photographer who was covering protests for safer roads.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Half a dozen newsmen—especially those carrying cameras—including an Associated Press photographer were targeted mostly by those allegedly opposed to the movement. Also on the same day, while heading to another clash-point, Shahbag, we were stopped at the Science Laboratory intersection. A stick-wielding man screamed at us, “put your mobile phone back in your pocket or risk being beaten.” We spoke to many witnesses and found a common consensus that a man with a mobile phone in his hand was the most obvious target.

None of these incidents contributed to assuaging the situation.

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At the height of the protest, the prime minister rightly pointed out that rumours were rampant on social media. Many people were either inadvertently falling for these rumours or wilfully seeking to exploit them. Importantly, the antidote to rumours is precisely what the mainstream media is supposed to be. However, the fact that journalists were afraid of wearing their press badges, let alone actively do their duties, certainly did not help prevent the rumour mill from going into overdrive.

Over the last few days, one question that almost all journalists asked themselves was, “Could we have done a better job in reporting the events especially concerning the rumours that were being circulated at one stage?” Unfortunately, despite their willingness to do so, they

couldn't fully debunk the rumours that were being circulated on various platforms, nor alleviate the concerns arising because of them, due to a number of restrictions.

If, for example, instead of the press being obstructed, newsmen were given full access to the specific places of occurrence, they could have removed the confusion. Indeed, a number of media organisations tried to debunk the allegations but due to lack of access they could not do so in time. Moreover, reports of journalists being beaten simply reinforced the notion that the press was intimidated and, hence, not to be believed. The fact that the media's operational freedom was curtailed simply created a void of information which was filled with speculation, misinformation and half-truths.

The press is an integral part of any democracy. One of its fundamental duties is to inform and educate the citizenry, preventing them from being misinformed. The recent movement and the subsequent violence served to underpin the fundamental fact that a free press is not just a matter of principle, but is also a matter of great necessity. A free press might annoy those in power at times, but it also helps them avert a disaster at times of upheavals, and by doing so, do a great service to the public.

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## Where do we stand in democratic governance?

SULTAN MOHAMMED ZAKARIA

THIS is a very interesting year for democratic governance in Bangladesh. The national parliamentary elections will be held at the end of 2018. The last national elections, in 2014, was mired in violence and was controversial in many sense.

Since then, bitter politics have continued to dominate the political landscape having wider ramifications on the country's democratic governance. The situation remains tense and volatile as major political parties are yet to come to any consensus as to the mechanism under which free, fair, and credible elections could be arranged.

transparent and equitable (effective and efficient bureaucracy). Instead, many of the earlier democratic gains made in the first decade (1990s)—an evolving two-party system, somewhat competitive elections, moderate space for civic and political activism, emerging civil society—was squandered in the following decades (2000s and onwards). As a result, substantial gains the country achieved in the socio-economic frontier did not positively impact the country's political landscape or arrest it from drifting towards the impending democratic reversal.

Democracy's minimal conditions: In



Debates surrounding free and fair elections, however, indicate only part of the crisis. Bangladesh is now in its 28th year since its second democratic journey began in 1990—following the ouster of the then military regime. The democratic transition has stretched unusually longer than anyone anticipated as the country struggled to consolidate its democratic gains, if any, or to move forward from the procedural form of democracy (holding free elections) to its more substantive nature i.e., developing a well-functioning parliamentary culture, building impersonal political institutions (constitutional and statutory institutions of accountability), establishing solid rule of law regime, promoting stronger and vibrant media and civil society, and developing a service delivery mechanism that is fair,

quest of free and fair elections

Since the start of the second-phase of democracy in 1991, Bangladesh's quest for a credible electoral mechanism has been never-ending. Political parties fought tooth and nail to tilt the electoral system to their benefits, at the cost of undermining existing institutions. Rather than giving democracy a chance, building solid institutions that can oversee the integrity of elections, the two major parties have prioritised every attempt to prolong their hold on power. Serious trust-deficits among political actors, a winner-takes-all approach, and violent repression of opposition parties are key contributing factors leading up to this development.

In this context, Bangladesh has had five

parliamentary elections since 1991, experimenting with at least two models of electoral system: one, the Caretaker Government (CTG) system; and the other, more conventional. The CTG system (1996-2007) was a non-party caretaker government formed specially to hold general elections based on a loose social contract between key political actors. The contract was partly broken when the system was allegedly compromised in 2007.

But the 2008 election was just a precursor to the larger crisis looming. The appointment of the chief advisor to the government, who happened to be the last retiring Supreme Court Chief Justice, was a loose arrangement, hence, was vulnerable to political manipulation. That crack in the design was enough to destroy the whole CTG architecture. However, the return to the conventional electoral system—holding elections under the outgoing regime—in 2014 general elections was also contentious. The ruling party's heavy-handed treatment of opposition parties made things very uneven. The boycott of the elections by the major opposition party made the whole exercise incomplete.

In this landscape, Bangladesh certainly needs a stock-taking of what really worked that can be sustained and what did not work that could reasonably be fixed. One fundamental way to do that is to revisit key assumptions of the two electoral models tried by Bangladesh.

### From minimalism to substance: The question of democratic consolidation

Over the last four decades of democratic transition, Bangladesh has had five general elections followed by five elected governments. Leaving the election of 2014 aside, all general elections since 1991 were arguably free, fair, and credible. The governments following those elections made promises, among others, to consolidate democracy by strengthening institutions, upholding rule of law and government integrity, providing civic and public spaces for a vibrant democratic culture, and offering better public service delivery to citizens. How much did they deliver in terms of building or rebuilding democratic institutions, delivering rule of law, and ensuring government integrity? In order to do some soul searching, we need to understand, by regimes, how much progress each regime had made to fulfil those promises. A solid and better reflection could pave the way for a sustained solution.

The path towards democratic consolidation is often constrained by its theoretical limits and evolving structural factors. Trust of citizens on politicians and political organisations that mobilise them is ebbing. How pro-people politics have

been undermined by special interests has been a topic of interest among academia for some time. Even in our domain, the role of *partyarchy*, an overarching grip of partisan interests on every aspect of public life, has been studied by the BIGD, BRAC University (Hassan, Zakaria, and Islam 2014). As, in a democracy or any political system thereof, the ultimate focus of all institutional interactions lies in producing better public good, the role of special and vested interests in twisting policy choices and shaping policy outcome must be examined thoroughly, from all perspectives.

### Democracy vs development: Old wine in new bottles?

Since the 2014 general elections, an old theoretical debate has resurfaced in Bangladeshi media and policy-circles: do we weigh development more than democracy? Does development interfere with democratic progress? Which one precedes, or has to precede, the other? With the breath-taking pace of economic development and poverty reduction in unique political dispensations like that in China and some East Asian nations, the question of inefficiency in democratic decision-making process (lack of consensus, legislative deadlocks, populism etc.) and its impact on public service delivery mechanism has been under immense scrutiny across democracies.

However, among new and transitional democracies, the question is even rudimentary: what happens to a new democracy when political settlements are fragile and more interests and actors are competing for fewer resources when cultural barriers are embedded in society? What happens when the notion of citizenship and democratic education are not deeply rooted while the top down approach to change that dynamics is absent or lacklustre? The debate on the relationship between democracy and development is nothing new.

Modernisation theorists (Lipset 1959, Przeworski 1991, Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, 2007) have long been arguing that the progression of a society towards a consolidated democracy has to meet certain conditions, which include, *inter alia*, crossing a certain income threshold (USD 6,000), universal education, and a culture of democracy in the larger society. With a few exceptions, there are not many countries that defied this orthodoxy. This begs the all-important question for us: are we simply following the pattern? Or can we make a subtle difference and join among the exceptional few? In the coming years, Bangladesh has to find its own path when searching answers to these delicate questions.

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