

Clampdown on the opposition

Will hamper free election

WE are quite flabbergasted by the volley of cases filed against senior leaders and activists of BNP right after the party staged a rally at Suhrawardy Udyan on Monday. According to the case statement, some party supporters had blasted crude bombs, vandalised vehicles, obstructed police activities and even attempted to kill police—at the instigation of the BNP-Jamaat leaders who encouraged them to carry out subversive acts. Strangely enough, two BNP stalwarts who did not even attend the rally had cases filed against them, one of them being abroad!

The absurdity of such actions is not lost on anyone. Reportedly, nobody heard any bombs blast or saw any kind of trouble at the rallies. Eyewitnesses have said that what they did see were some individuals being picked up by plainclothes men. The BNP leaders have been accused of delivering “provocative and anti-government” speeches. As far as we know, isn't that what opposition party leaders have always done? Is it not illogical to expect the opposition parties that want to win in the elections to sing praises of the incumbent party at a political rally?

Regrettably, such arbitrary arrests have become the order of the day. Innumerable arrests and similar cases have been filed against members of the opposition parties in the recent past. These include cases filed against individuals who were abroad at the time of the incident they have been accused of being involved in, as well as people who have passed away before the time of the “incident”. Such actions make it obvious that these are politically motivated arrests and cases intended to harass and intimidate opposition parties.

It is disappointing that after all the promises of ensuring a level playing field for parties to compete against each other at the parliamentary elections, what we see are continued attempts to clamp down on the opposition on flimsy or non-existent grounds. Unrestrained participation and politicking are the only way to ensure a participatory election. And that is what the government should ensure.

Unending disorder on Dhaka roads

Awareness campaign should continue

THE police have just wrapped up a month-long traffic campaign in the capital city and nothing much has changed when it comes to the mentality of both drivers and pedestrians with regards to obeying rules of the road. Pedestrians continue to jaywalk ignoring both zebra crossings and foot over-bridges/underpasses. Drivers wilfully break the law at every junction and traffic light whenever the opportunity arises. Then there is the new menace of motorcycles which continually change lanes without giving proper signals.

The traffic campaign was aided by members of the Rover Scouts, Girl Guides, Red Crescent and other organisations which made people obey traffic rules. Now that the traffic campaign has ended, it's back to business as usual. This paper highlighted specific instances of wilful disregard of the law on October 1 and it seems that most drivers, of either two-wheeled or four-wheeled vehicles, have little idea about road signs! And why would they? The bulk of drivers have never had to go to driving school or study traffic rules and regulations to take a driving test that is mandatory in most countries.

The police filed a record number of cases—170,000—for traffic violations during the awareness-raising campaign and realised about Tk 14 crore in fines. And just when vehicle drivers and owners were beginning to feel the pinch, the campaign was ended. As we have stated before, bringing about a change in the mindset of people who have grown used to not obeying laws has to be a continuous campaign by law enforcers. Our experience over the last two days is that people have reverted back to their old ways and merely blaming the police is not going to change anything on our roads.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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'Shootouts' need to stop

Almost every day we find reports of “crossfire” or “shootouts” in newspapers. This newspaper reported on Monday that six alleged “drug dealers” and “robbers” were killed on the previous day. In total, according to data provided by Ain O Salish Kendra, as many as 413 people were killed from January to September this year.

We are deeply concerned by these developments. It simply cannot be acceptable that so many people were killed just because they were suspected to having been involved in criminal activities.

While security forces contend that they had to act because they were “attacked” by the people in question, countless testimonies, documentations and reports paint a different picture.

In a normal society, law enforcement agencies must not be given carte blanche—especially when it comes to actions that involve people's lives for such power can easily be misused.

Previous precedents suggest such a strategy solves nothing but complicates things to an extent that the situation can be exploited by some to settle scores.

Minhazul Abedin, *Khulna*



KNOT SO TRUE

IN a world where Martin Luther King was declared as “the most dangerous hero” by the FBI two days after his “I Have a Dream” speech, in a world where Muslims are often viewed as perpetually guilty, in a world where journalists are jailed for doing their job, in a world where the US government can spy on journalists using foreign intelligence surveillance, in a world where stories of women are dealt with a double dose of suspicion and disbelief, one must also still remember that freedom is to be sought and that it is not above and beyond a patient, negotiated discourse.

Last month, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism won a case against the UK government when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that mass surveillance by the GCHQ and other intelligence agencies without putting enough safeguards to protect the freedom of press is unlawful. This victory will enable journalists to protect their sources. Snowden reacted to the verdict by tweeting: “Today, we won. Don't thank me: thank all of those who never stopped fighting.” *Good news.*

In Pakistan, where the fresh wind of change was expected to blow, quite unexpectedly, the powerful military quietly, but effectively, is restricting media and is encouraging self-censorship. While the number of killings is decreasing, free speech has fallen prey to an organised control mechanism and more and more people are speaking up less. *Bad news.*

In the States, when there were immediate protests following the news of Brett M Kavanaugh being the Supreme Court nominee, Trump in an interview had said that protests should be deemed illegal. He said: “I think it's embarrassing for the country to allow protesters...In the old days, we used to throw them out.” *Worst news ever.*

Now despots like Trump may dampen

our spirit or we may opt for the choice of taking a hard look at countries around us and the world we live in and decide that we must responsibly lobby hard to have the best standards in place, set in a perfectly ethical landscape. In the absence of which, one could be victimised by self-censorship and end up with a murmur instead of a shout. After all, one can't be free and reckless; one can't be bold without the burden of accountability; one can't be critical when saddled with favours from the side that one critiques. Being free is not easy.

True, there are norms and rules that

around us to say the most blatantly false statements and yet we silence ourselves just to keep the peace.

Dr Christine Blasey Ford, Research Psychologist at Stanford University, testifying live the other night was a real-time example of freedom that set many of us free. Her testimony against Kavanaugh included details of the sexual assault that happened years ago and while Kavanaugh has continued to deny her claims and confirm his love for beer, Ford has steadily maintained her position of remembering her trauma from the past. And while defending her

While we celebrate the news of the first ever woman in Bangladesh in the last 47 years being appointed as major general and congratulate Susane Giti, while we share the news of Gita Gopinath being appointed as the chief economist of IMF, we must also share the anxiety of Sandhya Ravishankar, the Indian investigative journalist, facing threats and intimidation in Chennai for her four-part exposé on the sand mining mafia in Tamil Nadu.

In the process, let us remember that all oppression is trauma. All surveillance is an insult. While surveillance is mostly used for security and safety, let that not be about controlling who we want to be, as limiting self-expression is deadly. Therefore, if one negotiates for freedom not by force or protest, but rather with empathy appealing to the better senses of the system that we live by, we are most likely to succeed. But then, let not our silence be so deep and insidious that it eats us up alive. Let's try being open. Let's talk about race, class, religious oppression or gender issues. Let's remember that being blissfully segregated or institutionalising silence is not where the triumph lies. Victory lies in being able to create a safe space for voice and memory to last till the end of time.

Writer and photographer Elizabeth Rush best expressed the issue of perspective when she said that an innocuous creative act in one country could also be considered as a threat to national security in another. As for artists, defiance is best expressed through art. That too may be of a unique mode. The best example that Rush gives refers to the “performance” in Burma and concludes, “The most tenacious and telling art in Burma isn't painted, printed or hewn. It simply takes place.”

In art, life and politics, reality is what “simply takes place.” Imagination is the *only* element that runs beyond censorship. Rest are to be negotiated for. With responsibility of an accurate expression and with the pledge of accurate reportage. Period.

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do not allow all of us to sound as free as we would want to when we participate in society as humans. There are also times when we minimise our own voices, curb our own rights, and restrict our own needs. There are multitudes of ways we oppress ourselves by our own systems and institutions. According to Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, it's through powerlessness that we oppress ourselves leading to the creation of a culture of silence. Silence eventually kills our ideas, energy, communities, relationships. There are times when we don't rock our boats. Many a time we allow people

memory, she referred to brain chemistry and shared that the neurotransmitter epinephrine “codes memories into the hippocampus” and the trauma stays locked there, while the other details drift away. These traumas are for sharing. They are not for being stashed away... After Ford, Padma Lakshmi, the celebrity chef, revealed her #MeToo experience as a 16-year-old in an MIT event right after Ford's testimony. The culture of sharing has begun; the culture of celebrating the disadvantaged has started; and thus, the stories of pain and shame must also surface and be shared.

CEPA: A game-changer for Indo-Bangla ties?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

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BANGLADESH and India decided during a meeting between their Commerce Ministers Tofail Ahmed and Suresh Prabhu in Dhaka recently to explore a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which is an important stage in the countries' burgeoning ties. If taken to its logical conclusion, CEPA will mark a major expansion of bilateral economic cooperation. CEPA goes far beyond a free trade agreement in goods, which the two countries have been tentatively talking about for quite some years, by taking a holistic view of covering goods, services, investment and infrastructure projects like power and physical connectivity.

However, CEPA is easier said than done and its finalisation is going to be a long haul. It took several years for India to sign its Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with South Korea, Singapore and Japan and they are reviewed and amended from time to time following India's concerns over some aspects like greater market access to Indian goods and Indian professionals in services sectors of those countries. India and the 10-nation Asean signed an FTA in goods in 2009 and the two sides have been busy negotiating the CEPA between them for the last few years.

For the last six years, India has also been in talks with the 16 member countries of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), including China, for a trade pact that aims to cover goods, services, investments, economic and technical cooperation, competition and intellectual property rights. The pace of negotiations for the pact has not been encouraging because each country has its own interests to protect and concerns to address. The RCEP bloc comprises 10 Asean countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Laos and Vietnam) and their six FTA partners India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

India has flagged its concerns over the RCEP on sectors like textiles, steel and food processing in the event of a sharp cut or removal of customs duties on these items because it fears that this would lead to cheaper Chinese goods swamping the Indian market. In 2017-18 India's trade deficit with China increased to USD 63.12 billion and thus India

wants more liberalised norms to promote the services sector. However, India has not shied away from RCEP which offers a huge opportunity to its services sector.

Similar concerns are likely to come into play when Bangladesh and India negotiate the CEPA. The biggest challenge for the countries will be the stark asymmetry in their economies and size of their manufacturing bases.

One way of navigating the tricky path is for the private sectors of both the countries to go for joint ventures with buyback arrangements and exports to

so for some years. Therefore, a joint venture between Bangladeshi and Indian investors could be mutually beneficial, more so as US President Donald Trump threatens to hike import duties on Indian goods.

Bangladesh enjoys competitive labour costs and Indian investors can capitalise on this to manufacture in Bangladesh for the north-eastern Indian states which are making rapid strides and offer an attractive market. A number of leading Indian companies like Hero MotoCorp, Tata Group and CEAT have already set up such projects in Bangladesh. But a strong

private investors of the two countries for projects in Bangladesh. But MoUs are mere statements of intent and both sides have to follow them through in order to enhance the visibility of such projects and credibility of their cooperation.

There are lessons to be learnt from India's CEPA and CECA with Japan, South Korea and Singapore. One of the biggest gains for India from these agreements is that all the three countries have turned out to be key sources of foreign direct investment in infrastructure and manufacturing sectors. Almost all South Korean and Japanese electronic goods



Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed and his Indian counterpart Suresh Prabhu at a bilateral meeting in Dhaka on September 26, 2018.

other countries. This acquires more importance because Bangladesh will graduate from the Least Developing Country status by 2021 and lose duty-free and quota-free facilities for its goods in the Indian market.

Agro-processing, automobiles, ceramics, chemicals, gems and jewellery, light engineering, ICT, hospital and medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, plastics, professional services, tourism and textiles could be among the sectors for joint projects by entrepreneurs of India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh enjoys preferential market access in the US and Western Europe and will continue to do

political push and much bigger investments are required.

The natural resources of the north-eastern Indian states can be taken to Bangladesh for value addition there and re-exported to India or beyond. In fact, this is already taking place but on a small scale. The setting up of India-Bangladesh joint ventures or Indian investments in Exclusive Economic Zones in Bangladesh will go a long way in addressing the latter's persistent concerns over the big trade gap with India. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Delhi in April 2017, a dozen MoUs were signed by mostly

manufacturers have set up their assembling and manufacturing plants in India to cater to the huge domestic market and also to export them to other countries. Though not of the same stature as Japan and South Korea as yet, India is emerging as a technology powerhouse from which South Asia can benefit.

Bangladesh and India have in recent years recorded high growth. They must explore how CEPA can promote their economic integration by aligning some of their policies.

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