

Censorship: Who should it worry?

THE OVERTON WINDOW
 ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE 21st century has broadly been characterised as the Information Age. The rapid shift of centring the world and its economy around information technology in this Digital Age, rather than the traditional industries of the past, has led to an evolution in all societies—how humans organise themselves and their institutions—even though its effects are not yet fully understood because of the “time lag” factor.

What is understood is that the rate at which information can flow has never been faster. And that the amount of information that can travel across distances at this fast pace has never been greater. But what implications does this have on individual human beings?

As Elon Musk explained recently in an interview with Joe Rogan, an individual with a cell-phone connected to the internet today has far more information available to them than one without. And if that individual can transform that information into knowledge, more power—as knowledge equals power.

At a time when we have a chance to provide ever greater information to nearly all individuals on this planet and give them an opportunity to transform it into knowledge to become more powerful and independent, censorship, or attempts of censorship, are also increasing at an alarming rate. Though the forms of censorship, or attempts to censor, may vary, they all seem to have one common underlying ring to it: “We are doing this for your own good.”

That is, with censors claiming to have the “moral high ground” for censoring information—claiming that their attempts to suppress information are based on “morality”. Interestingly, just the other day, I was reading a book by Ayn Rand where she pointed out how immoral people (who have no moral code whatsoever) always use the moral code of good people against the latter—instead of facts or logic—to get their way, or to win arguments.

Returning to censorship... one of my favourite attempts to censor information was one that was actually attempted by a media outlet—namely CNN—where one of its anchors effectively said that because official US government documents



published by Wikileaks—the only media outlet with 100 percent record for accuracy in reporting and to have won every court case since its inception—were classified, people should not read them. Instead, they should settle for CNN’s explanation of what those documents contain.

Although it may be hard to believe that a media outlet, whose commodity of trade is information, would want to censor information, this is the same method that governments around the world often resort to. Think about it. What do governments do, exactly? They say that “we cannot provide any evidence for our claims (as it is classified for this or that reason), so people just need to take our word for it.”

Anyone who refuses to simply accept the official narrative is then “named and shamed” and most often characterised as someone who is unpatriotic. And to do that the government needs no evidence or logic. No facts or critical thinking are required. All that is needed is for the government to claim to have the moral high ground, and to have an unthinking public to go along with it in a mad rush towards the imaginary high ground, lest

they, too, be shamed.

Yet, as perhaps one of the greatest champions of freedom anywhere in the world in the last few decades, Dr Ron Paul, said, “Real patriotism is a willingness to challenge the government when it’s wrong.” Unfortunately, when you get stuck in a mud-slinging competition instead of engaging in critical thinking and factual arguments, it doesn’t matter who is right and who is wrong. All that matters is who, in the loudest voice, claims to have the moral high ground.

And, naturally, the loudest voice in such circumstances will not be the ones who have the courage to stand on their own firmly beside their own principles. It will always be those who have none, and are simply willing to go along with the mob, which itself will dance to the tune of those who can best manipulate it.

Amidst such conditions, what those who support the free flow of information need to remember is that, “Censorship is always cause for celebration. It is always an opportunity because it reveals fear of reform. It means that the power position is so weak that you have got to care what people think,” as Julian Assange

explained. So, the only people who should be concerned about censorship are the censors themselves. As it is their weak positions of power that, in reality, are in danger, no matter how desperately they try to hide it. Which is why the only way they can maintain their power is to ensure everyone else remains weak—lack information that can give them power and independence.

But in the Digital Age that we live in today, it is nearly impossible to censor information fully, as long as there are those courageous enough to speak it. Does that mean that people who believe in the free flow of information should not fight censorship? Not at all.

However, what that also means is that they should remember to continue to speak their truths, instead of worrying all the time about censorship and whether their truths are being heard or believed. Because true to what St Augustine had said, “The truth is like a lion. You don’t have to defend it. Let it loose. It will defend itself.”

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. His Twitter handle is @EreshOmarJamal.

Growing worries on external debt

Economic reforms needed

THE World Bank (WB) invited two economists, Ahsan H Mansur and Hossain Zillur Rahman who head the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, and Power and Participation Research Centre respectively, at the unveiling of the quarterly report titled “Bangladesh Development Update”. The views shared by these economists call for the country’s international development partners and the WB to engage with the government on a reform agenda in the aftermath of the general elections due at the end of the year to contain problems brewing on various economic fronts.

The areas of concern are the declining foreign exchange (forex) reserves and low revenue collection. The government has embarked on ambitious infrastructure growth, much of which is going to be financed with foreign credit which is causing problems with the balance of payments. Rising debt is of major concern as it is depleting forex reserves and in the absence of stable foreign remittances, there is cause for worry.

While our forex reserves stand at USD 32.93 billion (as of August), our remittances appear to be stuck in the region of USD 14-15 billion per annum. There is concern whether the government has done the right analysis on cost of projects undertaken by it. The project highlighted was Padma Bridge road link that is estimated to cost the national exchequer Tk 40,000 crore, but given our rate of implementation there is the possibility of this cost going up by as much as 25 to 50 percent.

What all this boils down to is whether the nation is headed towards a debt-trap, as has happened in the case of a few countries in the region. Hence, the call for re-examining the viability for these multi-billion-dollar projects is a just one and should be considered seriously.

Bring those responsible for violence to justice

We welcome Asean's stance on Rohingya issue

IT is good to learn that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), for the first time, has expressed their concern over the violence that was committed against the Rohingyas in Rakhine that has “led to loss of life, injuries, destruction of homes, and displacement of a large number of people.” They have urged the Myanmar government to start the process of voluntary repatriation and give the independent inquiry commission, established by the Myanmar government, a full mandate to probe and hold the people responsible fully accountable for the crimes committed against the Rohingyas. We welcome the Asean leaders’ stance on this issue, a departure from their policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states. They have considered this issue grave enough to have done so.

Unfortunately, we are yet to see any positive steps taken by Myanmar to start the repatriation process. They must create a congenial environment for the voluntary return of the Rohingyas. The measures proposed by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by late UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, such as reducing poverty among the Rohingyas, improving their basic rights and promoting trust, harmony and reconciliation between the Rohingyas and the broader Myanmar society, etc., must be implemented by Myanmar and the repatriation process must start immediately.

As the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission released its report of violence in Rakhine last month, we hope this would help in investigating the acts of violence and torture against the Rohingyas. Also, we hope the inquiry commission, which is supposed to probe the allegations of human rights abuses in Rakhine, will not be barred in any way from carrying out their investigations, as also stressed by the Asean leaders. Those responsible for the brutal military crackdown on Rohingyas must be brought to task. The responsibility to resolve the crisis lies with Myanmar, plain and simple.

Theresa May in trouble over Brexit

FROM A BYSTANDER
 MAHMOOD HASAN

BRITAIN’S PM Theresa May is in deep trouble with the Brexit plan. She may not only be forced to agree to a second referendum over Brexit but may also lose her prime ministership.

To understand how British politics entered this phase of political turmoil, one has to go back to 2016. On June 23, 2016 Britain went for a referendum on whether to quit the European Union or

deal. At the crux of Brexit is Britain regaining its sovereignty from the EU.

Theresa May seems to be in a dilemma. She wants full sovereignty for Britain but at the same time retain almost all the benefits Britain had enjoyed as a member of EU’s single market and customs union. With full sovereignty, Britain can have independent trade deals with any non-EU country but will no longer enjoy all the “four freedoms” (free movement of goods; services; capital; and people) of a single market. It will give Britain the right to cherry-pick from the four freedoms as it chooses. Trouble is May wants to have the cake and eat it too.

Negotiations over the past 18 months have shown that European leaders’

Brexit means Britain maintaining a close relationship with the EU having access to its single market and customs union. However, it will not have members in the European Parliament and thus no British Commissioners in Brussels. No Deal Brexit means Britain crashing out of the EU without any deal which can lead to disastrous consequences. There may be chaos both within the EU and Britain affecting exports, imports, businesses, employment, food prices, wrangling at border crossings, cancellation of flights to and from Britain, etc.

After months of acrimonious infighting within the Conservative Party, Theresa May presented a divorce plan to her Cabinet colleagues at Chequers, her

There are differing opinions about the Chequers Plan among Tory parliamentarians. Disagreements over the plan cost Theresa May two senior colleagues from the Cabinet. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Britain’s Chief Brexit negotiator David Davis resigned early July soon after the Chequers Plan was revealed. Both felt that the divorce plan was not strong enough to regain Britain’s sovereignty. “British economy would remain locked in the EU, with no control over that system. We are truly headed for the status of colony,” said Boris Johnson. He wanted a clean break from the EU.

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, a supposed eurosceptic, has hardened his position on Brexit. During the Labour Party’s annual conference that ended in Liverpool on September 26, 2018, Corbyn said that Labour would vote against the Chequers Plan in the House of Commons. Corbyn apparently supports a customs union deal between UK and EU but has not given any concrete exit plan so far. He also announced that if Tories fail to get through the Chequers Plan in the parliament, he will press for snap polls, although the next election is not due before 2022. Corbyn also indicated if general elections cannot be held then a second referendum should be held.

The call for a second referendum is growing louder with London Mayor Sadiq Khan, high-profile politicians, celebrities and non-Brexiters pushing for it. To add to Theresa May’s woes, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not in sync with the Chequers Plan.

At the informal EU summit at Salzburg (September 19-20), Theresa May was only allowed to attend lunches and dinner but not the formal deliberations. EU Council President Donald Tusk after the summit told the press that the 27 leaders unanimously decided to reject the Chequers Plan. It was humiliating for May when Tusk asked her to redraft the plan. To keep EU’s unity, Brussels wants a deal that could be costly for the British economy which in turn will dissuade other restive members from trying to exit the Union. Naturally, Britain’s position is becoming weaker as the deadline approaches.

Theresa May is clearly under a lot of pressure from her party MPs, the Labour Party, Brussels and non-Brexiters. Whether or not she can get a deal passed by the parliament by the end of October 2018 and have it accepted by EU will determine her political future.

Mahmood Hasan is former ambassador and secretary of the Bangladesh government.



President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May in Salzburg.

continue to stay. It ended with 51.9 percent voting to exit the EU. That led PM David Cameron to quit and Theresa May succeeded him on July 13, 2016. In March 2017, Theresa May invoked article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon beginning the process of leaving the Union. This article provides two years to complete the exit negotiations, which officially ends on March 29, 2019 unless it is extended by all EU members unanimously.

Over the past 18 months Theresa May has been negotiating the conditions of divorce with Brussels. It is now crunch time for Theresa May as only six months are left to leave the EU with or without a

attitude has hardened over Brexit. The British negotiating team in Brussels is seen as unreasonable wanting all the advantages without taking on the responsibilities. Besides there are serious divisions both within Theresa May’s Conservative Party and the Labour Party. There are now three options for Theresa May: Hard Brexit, Soft Brexit, or No Deal Brexit.

Hard Brexit means Britain giving up all access to the single market and the customs union; gaining full control over its borders; having the right to make trade deals with other countries; and applying its own laws within its territory. Soft

official country residence, on July 6, 2018. The Chequers Plan as it is now known has 12 points. It is actually a mix of hard and soft Brexit deal provisions. For instance, ending free movement of people from within the EU and taking control of borders (hard); UK-EU free-trade area with a “common rulebook” (related to standardised goods and services) (soft); leaving Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy (hard); restoring supremacy of British courts by ending jurisdiction of European Court of Justice (hard); no border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (soft).

PHOTO: BARBARA GINDL/AFP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Biased umpiring against Bangladesh

During the Asia Cup 2018 final, the third umpire’s decision that Liton Das was out after being stumped was unfair. I have seen several matches where in the exact same situation the benefit of doubt went in favour of the batsman. But whenever India plays against Bangladesh, the benefit of doubt always goes against Bangladesh—it has happened many times in the past.

Bangladesh has experienced many instances of bad umpiring decisions and this is an area where umpires must improve their attitude and eliminate their bias towards Bangladesh. As a cricket fanatic, I would like to make an appeal to all umpires to treat the Bangladesh team as they would any other team.

Aminur Rahim, New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

