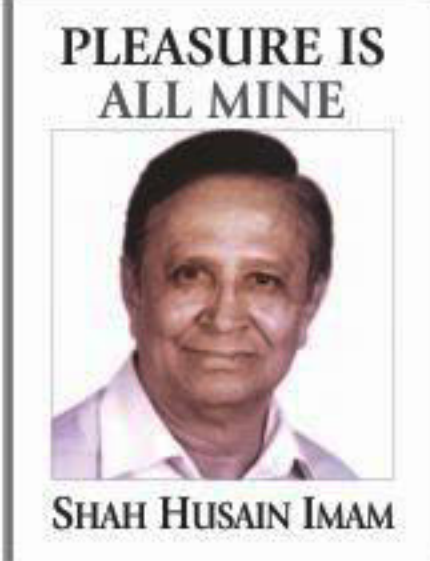


# A world in TURMOIL



Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president.

PHOTO: MAURO PIMENTEL/AFP



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**PLEASURE IS ALL MINE**

**W**E show two traits when caught up in a political impasse before a general election and in responding to the government's offer of a dialogue when it comes to the opposition.

First, we tend to benchmark success stories of rapprochement to 1989-90 remembering a tripartite agreement which had worked well till the election. But going to the post-election sequel, its provisions to strengthen democracy would suffer a slippage.

The second trait has been the oft-repeated revisiting of the electoral issues mainly because of fundamental amendments to the law guiding an election which the opposition couldn't find itself in agreement with.

Since the differences over the interim election-time government keep recurring to create an avoidable disquiet, they need to be resolved once and for all through mutual accommodation. The change in the air palpably is that nobody wants a replay of January 5, 2014-type election. And one can take heart from the fact that the opposition seeking a dialogue with the government received a green signal promptly, and that the opportunity didn't have to be wrested from the ruling party through any movement. The rest, one only hopes, would follow in pursuit of the same spirit.

I can think of three more compulsions for a satisfactory resolution of the contentious issues. In the first place, fair, inclusive, participatory and credible election will give the AL an unquestionable mandate to carry forward its widely acclaimed socioeconomic development programmes. Secondly, there will be a shot in the arm of the FDI inflow which is currently on the decline. In fact, local and foreign investments that were shying away apprehending political unrest would start pouring in.

Significantly, we have to keep our antenna high on the rapidly changing international situation which, overall, is turning from bad to worse. But we have competent foreign policy and security professionals to keep analyses handy on all diplomatic or geostrategic developments. We should not be caught unawares of any important unfolding dynamics indicating a change in equations.

In this context, let me reiterate that the world has turned topsy-turvy, thanks to the Trump presidency in the US and a general fall in global and regional leadership standards perceptible in a confusing, albeit unpredictable, scenario. Unfortunately, the vision of multilateralism today appears to be

only confined to the UN Charter.

The rise of the far-right and the emergence of autocratic and dictatorial regimes across the board have received an impetus from Trumpian chauvinism. Trump abandoning the role of the US as a superpower, riding on his America First hobby-horse, letting China and Russia try and fill the resulting vacuum, and his waging a trade war with China have combined to unsettle the world's politico-economic equilibrium.

The repercussions are going to be far-reaching. Of course, there are some "red lines" for China, US and Russia that the countries will try to not cross. Such checks and balances we may have to identify and do research and keep tabs on, so that we can fine-tune our policy approaches to the inputs garnered.

All over Europe, left libertarian democratic forces are on a retreat in the face of far-right inroads. Also, a surge of green parties in reaction to the agenda of undermining climate change can be seen. The German Chancellor's electoral reverses in Bavaria in particular are a case in point; she might hang the gloves after what remains of her current term in office.

Brexit and a sweeping right-wing tide all over the world have made the Germans feel strategically beleaguered. "We are herbivore power, surrounded by carnivores," the *Guardian* writer Charles Grant was told by a senior German government official.

"In the years after 1989, we assumed that the world was converging towards the liberal, rule-based order we Germans espouse. But now we see reversal—in China, Russia, Turkey, central Europe and the US," the official was quoted as saying.

Luckily for Bangladesh, the political far-right has been on a retreat with Jamaat having lost its registration as a political entity for its role in the Liberation War.

Particular attention may be drawn by Bolsonaro, the newly elected president of Brazil, who is known as the "Trump of the Tropics". He has already made an unprintable chauvinistic remark against Congresswoman Maria do Rosario of the leftist Workers' Party who accused him of "inciting rape". Signifying an aversion to climate change, Bolsonaro has also downgraded the environment ministry.

To end with a Trump update: He has deployed 5,400 American troops along the Mexican border, the same number of soldiers that he had placed in "independent" Afghanistan!

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# Living in the la-la land of rumours



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

**R**UMOUR is the new buzzword in Bangladesh's political lingo after it was thrust back into the limelight in October when students launched a nationwide movement for road safety. Since then, the government has launched a crusade against rumours, going to great lengths to monitor and suppress them.

So far, in line with its commitment to tackling rumours, it has passed at least one law (Digital Security Act), with harsh penalties for the offenders, launched a high-powered cybercrime unit equipped with a hundred police teams and modern surveillance tools such as open-source intelligence (OSINT), and has been reported to be considering a Tk 1.21 billion project for the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to watch social media and messaging apps for four months before and after the upcoming election. Clearly, the spotlight is on social media—with Facebook, YouTube and Google poised to come under further control starting November.

These measures, draconian as they are, have naturally created panic and misgivings in the public mind but whether or not they are effective, or even necessary, requires deeper reflection.

The fact is, the concept of rumour is neither modern nor as straightforward as it is being made out to be. What is rumour? Generally speaking, it is the circulation of false or inaccurate information. It can be harmless, malicious or seditious, depending on your perspective. Historically, rumour has been a pressing public issue worldwide, connected intimately with the politics of governance, the construction of community, and notions of state stability. What's important is to recognise the complexities surrounding the formation and circulation of rumours, especially the kind of rumours that have surfaced in recent months, since a failure to do so risks generalisation—and even monopolisation—of rumours and

information was false but their apprehension was justified. Such apprehension is the lifeline of rumours.

However, instead of addressing people's concerns by encouraging the pursuit of truths to dispel rumour, the government took a regressive step by criminalising it altogether. Another point of concern that remains unaddressed is the blurring of distinctions between "misinformation" and "disinformation"—the first understood to be simply false and the second "deliberately" false. There is a big difference between the two situations: Can a deliberate circulation of false information be equated with an unintentional one? The government seems to think it can.

Equally worryingly, there is a tendency to equate "gossip", "speculation", and "early articulations of news" with rumour, although they differ significantly from each other and deserve to be treated as such.

Interestingly, Awami League seems to be advancing its rumour theory by putting itself in the box. It claims to be a victim of malicious rumour-mongering. Leaders of the party have openly promoted this theory, and accused the opposition BNP of being involved in what they called *gujob santrash* ("rumour terror"). One may argue that the victim card was Awami League's fail-safe in case the blame for spreading propaganda ever came back to it. After all, as David Coast and Jo Fox point out, it's often the governments that are directly or indirectly responsible for the spread of rumours: "Under both dictatorships and liberal democracies, rumour provided a check to state-orchestrated propaganda campaigns,

desire for information" where official confirmation does not or cannot exist and often stitches together a narrative from sometimes unconnected events in an attempt at "collective problem-solving." In such cases, it is simply a means to explain the unexplained and is, thus, a "sense-making" activity for the public.

But the government's rumour detection and prevention strategy, which deems rumour inherently seditious, betrays a lack of understanding of the historical context of rumour, its diversity, and the very reason for its existence. The government has vowed to fight rumour but failed to specify what it means by it. The whole exercise suffers from vagueness and a lack of direction, and the absence of a legal definition/parameter makes it vulnerable to abuse.

Recall the rumours that were circulated during the student movement—attacks on the Awami League office in Jigatola, the death of a student inside the office, or the doctored photo of the body of a girl raped and killed in Tejgaon. The fact that a section of people believed these rumours symbolises a need in them to make sense of the rapidly escalating situation in which they thought anything was possible. The

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serving as an important corrective to official narratives that the people did not consider credible."

However, a case can certainly be made that there should be safeguards against the power of rumours to disturb public order. Awami League may, rightly, say that it is only doing what governments throughout history have often done to monitor and suppress rumours, out of fear for such eventualities. Before the Internet, rumour was primarily transferred orally. But the emergence of modern communication tools, especially social media, has complicated the task of mapping the course of a rumour, posing a greater challenge than before and requiring greater policy attention.

But there is a stronger case to be made for a critical rethink of this argument: first, repressive measures to counter rumours are counterproductive because they arouse concern and suspicion instead of allaying them; second, such measures tend to violate people's right to free expression; third, rumour thrives in a climate of secrecy, in the absence of proper information, but the government is preventing free flow of information by increasing restrictions on



*Equally worryingly, there is a tendency to equate "gossip", "speculation", and "early articulations of news" with rumour, although they differ significantly from each other and deserve to be treated as such.*

precludes an objective study which the public deserve.

Can rumour be really suppressed? Although the government believes it can stem its flow through stringent measures, a study of the history of rumour suggests that it can survive in the most restrictive of environments. In fact, the more restrictive the environment, the greater the chances of a rumour being spread. In an article published in 2015, researchers David Coast and Jo Fox probed the psychology of rumour and showed that it exists because it satisfies a basic need. Rumour "states the

the media; fourth, its inaction against rumours beneficial to its cause—such as that "BNP-Jamaat sponsored the student movement", or that "terrorists infiltrated the protesting students of a certain private university"—suggests the deeply political nature of its rumour prevention strategy; fifth, the vague, open-ended terms and shifting explanations being used to justify the measures are not very reassuring; and finally, such measures set dangerous precedents for the future with potentially far-reaching consequences.

On a similar note, as cultural critic Slavoj Zizek said about the growing control of digital media, "While in some cases (for instance, direct racist excesses) censorship is justified, it's dangerous when it just happens in a non-transparent way. Because the minimal democratic demand that should apply here is that such censorship be done in a transparent way, with public justification."

Bangladesh has yet to achieve a consensus on what constitutes a rumour, and how or to what degree spreading rumours qualifies as a crime—two basic questions that must be addressed before any rumour prevention policy is adopted. History has shown us that you cannot cut the supply of rumours without first eliminating the need for them. And the best way to do that is through the pursuit of truths and dissemination of proper information by a free, empowered media, not through stringent measures such as those adopted by the administration.

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**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**Arthur Balfour**  
**NOVEMBER 2, 1917**  
Balfour Declaration proclaims support for a Jewish state in Palestine

The declaration was contained in a letter dated 2 November 1917 from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

<b>ACROSS</b>	29 Lessen	4 Poetic "always"
1 Bank fixtures	32 Crunch targets	5 Lettering aid
6 Tool handles	33 Hosp. workers	6 Party VIPs
11 Wading bird	34 Scandal subject	7 Gifted
12 Big name in TV talk	35 Set fire to	8 Ice cream alternative
13 On that spot	36 Home of the Trojans	9 Hire
14 Feed the fire	37 Half of hex-	10 Glosses
15 Chestnut	38 Be patient for	17 Agreements
16 DC baseballer	40 Online messages	23 Hoop attachment
18 Last letter	42 Make a cameo	24 Help out
19 PC key	43 Like Loki	26 Fall
20 Includes in a message	44 Cut off	27 Regal digs
21 Long, long time	45 Ocean's motions	28 Luke's mentor
22 Like some cuisine	<b>DOWN</b>	30 Red shade
24 Beattie and Blyth	1 Sofa's cousin	31 Banishes
25 Tuneful	2 Horrified	33 Toned down
27 Sullen look	3 Tangy condiment	39 "-- had it!"
		41 Me, to Michel

**CORRIGENDUM**  
The clues for the crosswords that were published yesterday were from a crossword puzzle from a previous date, and thus incorrect. We regret the error. The correct version of the clues is published today.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

A	P	S	E	S	G	O	A	D	S
C	H	E	R	I	E	X	P	E	L
T	I	M	I	D	T	E	E	N	Y
I	C	E	M	A	N				
A	S	S	B	A	T	S	U	P	
S	A	W	Y	E	R	I	P	S	O
F	L	E	E	T	S	T	R	E	E
O	V	E	N	D	I	E	C	U	T
R	O	T	E	E	K	S	P	Y	
			Z	E	N	I	T	H	
W	A	F	E	R	B	Y	E	A	R
A	D	L	A	I	A	R	E	N	A
D	O	Y	L	E	R	A	T	T	Y

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**