

More unjustifiable restrictions?

EC must not limit mobile internet services on Election Day

WE are quite disappointed by the fact that the EC is considering either completely or partly blocking mobile internet services or reducing internet speed on Election Day on December 30. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission is set to present to the EC four options which include blocking social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube and communication platforms such as WhatsApp and IMO, and reducing internet speed from 4G and 3G to 2G.

We fail to see the rationale behind such a move, especially given the stated reason of "saving lives" by a commissioner of the telecom regulator. While we all want to see a fair and participatory election that is free from violence and intimidation, the logic that limiting mobile internet services will help save lives is incomprehensible. We would like to ask the EC whether it thinks that mobile internet services have a part to play in the violence targeting opposition candidates during campaigning that we have seen in the last few days.

The EC's plan to go through with one of the options set forth by the BTRC comes on the heels of extraordinary restrictions on journalists who will not be allowed to use motorbikes on Election Day. It is the EC's duty to conduct the election in a free and fair manner but unfortunately, the steps it has taken so far have only served to raise doubts about the possibility of quick, easy and accurate coverage on Election Day. Blocking internet services would be an unprecedented move which will only taint the EC's credibility as an independent body and give way to speculation on Election Day. Mobile internet services are crucial for the dissemination of accurate news reportage and keeping people informed about the goings-on on Election Day which citizens have every right to know about. The EC must not go through with illogical and unjustifiable restrictions that may hamper the free flow of information among citizens on such a crucial day.

A Merry Christmas to all!

A reminder of the teachings of love and humanity

IN a world where hatred and bigotry seem to be ever increasing, where people are being persecuted daily for their beliefs, let this Christmas be a reminder of the teachings of love for humanity. Though a holy day for Christians around the world, the values that define Christmas are universal. The teachings of Jesus Christ are the ones shared by all religions: a love for humanity, compassion for those less fortunate, forgiveness and tolerance. These are values to live by, whatever be one's faith. Islam teaches us the same, as does Hinduism and Buddhism.

Sadly, around the world, we see that the core teachings of all religions are being forgotten or intentionally misrepresented. Wars and conflicts along religious lines continue, and everywhere one looks are people persecuted for their religions. Let us reaffirm today the inter-faith understanding and peace that religions teach. In our country, let this be a reminder of the persecution our minority communities face, and that we have a long way to go in establishing the nation that is for all religions to coexist in with dignity.

We wish all Christians, living here and abroad a merry Christmas. In times of violence and greed, let us hope that values of sacrifice, tolerance and peace will reign supreme.

ELECTION MANIFESTOS OF AI AND BNP

What they say, don't say and should say

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

IN its manifesto for the upcoming elections, the Awami League has pledged to strengthen the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), mass media and the judiciary. Additionally, it has claimed that it will expedite the process of institutionalising democracy—which requires strengthening all the aforementioned institutions.

However, these promises could perhaps be surprising to some (and perhaps not to others), given that they significantly contrast its actions over the last 10 years.

For example, if we look at extrajudicial killings as just one aspect of human rights violations by the state: according to the rights group Odhikar, 1,826 people were killed between 2008 and May 2018 by the country's law enforcing agencies while the AL had been in power. According to another rights group's report on November 20, 437 people were victims of extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies in the first 10 months of 2018 (*The Daily Star*). Since this problem has persisted in our country from before 2008, the NHRC had earlier given the government two specific recommendations, both of which it blatantly ignored.

In regard to the functioning of the ACC, we have all seen how the former Basic Bank chairman Abdul Hye Bacchu, among others, scandalously escaped justice despite being found guilty by the Bangladesh Bank's own internal probe for being involved in serious corruption. Why? Because he has close ties with the ruling party, which is why he was preposterously appointed as chairman of the bank in the first place.

Coming to the media, we have to look no further than a statement released by the Editor's Council earlier this year, expressing serious concern about the AL government granting law enforcement agencies absurd levels of power "to enter premises, search offices, bodily search persons, seize computers, computer networks, servers, and everything related to the digital platforms." And this relates to another pledge by the AL, which is to ensure media freedom and free flow of information, both of which have been seriously hit during its last 10 years of governance. This year alone, according to one report by this newspaper in June—which does not give the full story of how badly the media has been repressed—a total of 90 journalists were victims of torture, assault, harassment and threats while performing their duty. Regrettably, the government, in nearly all cases, has failed completely to do as little as launch an investigation, let alone bring the perpetrators to justice.

What is most laughable about this kind of Orwellian "doublespeak" is that, similar to the vaguely termed anti-freedom of information laws that the AL government has passed, its manifesto obscurely says that it will assist journalism and news media that promote "social responsibility". While that may sound unclear at first, if past actions are anything to go by, one can just as easily translate it into: "sycophancy will continue to be rewarded."

Unfortunately, it is precisely behind the veils created

by sycophants that corruption tends to get hidden. And while the AL has pledged to battle corruption, what corruption has done to the banking sector over the last 10 years is so bad that it couldn't be hidden even by sycophants.

For example, non-performing loans (NPL) have "officially" increased by more than four times to nearly Tk 1 lakh crore in the past decade. According to many analysts, however, if loans that had been written off and rescheduled were considered, that figure would actually be almost double.

Now, if we look at the BNP's manifesto, we see it making similar pledges such as bringing sweeping reforms to strengthen democracy, to protect freedom of expression and scrap black laws that curb free expression. Ironically, it was the BNP, of course, that had enacted the Information Technology Act in 2006 keeping Section 57—in spite of widespread protests—which has ultimately metastasised into its current form under the Digital Security Act.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Moreover, while the BNP claims that it will stop extrajudicial killings, it seems to have forgotten that such killings had initially taken off while the BNP was in power between 2001 and 2006. And as it had also forgotten to keep its earlier promise to make compulsory for the prime minister, ministers, lawmakers and others to publicly reveal their annual wealth statements, it has now repeated that pledge in its current election manifesto—exactly as the AL did, i.e. forgetting to keep its earlier promise and thus promising it anew.

Interestingly, one new and different inclusion in the BNP's manifesto is the promise to withdraw all cases filed against students during the VAT exemption, quota reform and road safety movements. And this could attract a certain section of young voters who may feel aggrieved by the heavy-handed actions of the government and of law enforcing agencies during those movements. However, whether the BNP would keep this promise, given its poor track record of keeping promises, is a question that would surely also be on their minds.

And here is where the general public should, perhaps, reconsider their own manifestos of placing unwarranted trust in the promises of political parties, and to rethink whether having blind faith in political leaders to keep their words is a good idea or not. As regardless of what the election manifestos of political parties say or don't say, what past experiences should definitely say is that, a democracy—if it means "governance by the people"—doesn't only require for the people to cast their votes every five years. It also requires for them to hold the politicians' feet to the fire when it comes to carrying out the promises based on which they were voted to power, and on their performance of serving the public. After all, isn't that why those who work in the government are called "public servants"?

Furthermore, this may also be a good time for people to re-examine whether it is wise for them to base their decision to vote for those seeking to serve the public on political ideologies/rhetoric, party affiliations, etc. Because, as we should have learned from before, these

things tend to change quite easily and frequently for politicians once they are voted to power. That is why, perhaps we should look to see who has the "character" to deliver on their promises, and the courage to take "principled" positions over popular ones, when considering who we should support and vote for.

And having done all that, to remember that when it comes to the question of "Who will govern the governors... There is only one force... that can be depended upon to keep the government pure and the governors honest, and that is the people themselves... [who] alone, if well informed, are capable of preventing the corruption of power, and of restoring the nation to its rightful course if it should go astray", as Thomas Jefferson had said. Keeping in mind also that it is precisely when people fail or refuse to do so that "the last shadow of liberty quits the horizon."

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

India's bid for enhanced regional role

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind's state visit to Myanmar (December 10-13) stood out among his other overseas forays in more ways than one. It brought out the full range of the strategic dimension of the ties between New Delhi and Naypyidaw that have slowly gathered in content over the years.

At a media briefing on the penultimate day of the visit, Ashok Malik, the Press Secretary to the President, succinctly summed up the nature of the visit by describing how it was different from the high-level visits abroad by Indian leaders. "When the President travels abroad for his state visits, there are five broad pillars which are usually covered. Political

highlighted that Kovind's visit resonated across Myanmar's border is the handing over of 50 prefabricated houses in Rakhine province meant for the Rohingya refugees as and when they are repatriated from Bangladesh. India will deliver 200 such houses to Myanmar under a 25-million-dollar socio-economic development programme.

The joint statement issued after Kovind's visit reflected the convergence of views between India and Myanmar that the situation in Rakhine has humanitarian, developmental as well as security dimensions. India expressed its support for the agreements reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh for the repatriation of Rohingyas to Rakhine and underlined its readiness to continue to

sensitivities to the extent possible. In fact, India has kept its ties with its two eastern neighbours in separate compartments, insulating one from the other. This has, of course, caused problems in Bangladesh especially because of India's refusal to go public with outright condemnation of the atrocities on Rohingyas.

India is fairly well invested in infrastructure development and human resources capacity-building including training for Myanmar judicial officers, military personnel and the police. India hopes to complete the ambitious Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project in Rakhine and both sides are preparing to appoint an operator for the Sittoung port in that province which would enable the port and the Paletwa Inland Water

the motor vehicles agreement will only give value addition to the slew of various infrastructure connectivity projects being executed by India. The two sides also expressed their willingness to operate a coordinated bus service between Mandalay in Myanmar and Imphal in Manipur (India) in order to enhance cross-border passenger link. India has also prepared a Detailed Project Report for the redevelopment of the Kalay airport in Myanmar.

The most crucial part of Kovind's visit was the focus on his discussion on defence and security relations with Myanmar's top leaders. Not much on this has come out in the public domain from either side, except just one sentence from Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale at his media briefing which said, "We flagged some of the issues that we had and the State Counsellor (Aung San Suu Kyi) did mention to the (Indian) President that Myanmar takes our concerns in this regard as seriously as it takes its own concerns." This, according to international affairs analysts, is India's concerns over the Kyaukpyu port China is building in Myanmar. This is a port that will give China access to the Bay of Bengal to complement the Gwadar port Beijing has built in Pakistan that opens to the Arabian Sea. Besides, China is running the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. The Indian establishment considers all these as China's efforts to throw the so-called "Ring of Pearls" around India. Interestingly, leading Indian newspaper *The Times of India* quoted unnamed Indian officials as saying that "they detected activities and construction in the (Kyaukpyu) port area that were not consistent with the stated intent of the project."

The question that is being asked is that with India having built the Sittoung port, Japan helping the construction of a special economic zone at the Thilawa port in Myanmar and a Japan-Thailand-Myanmar SEZ coming up in Dawei in south-eastern Myanmar, how much additional importance does the Kyaukpyu port hold for Myanmar's economic development? Myanmar, of course, has the right to leverage its strategic locations as far as its ties with India and China are concerned. The issue for New Delhi is to what extent Naypyidaw will address the former's sensitivities especially on the strategic front. One thing is clear: India is slowly but steadily building up its profile in Myanmar.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at *The Daily Star*.



The border crossing between northeastern India and Myanmar, which is part of a trilateral highway project to connect India with ASEAN.

PHOTO: REUTERS/RUPAK DE CHOWDHURI

relations, security and defence relations, trade and connectivity, development and knowledge sharing, and of course, people-to-people and cultural ties... It is very rare that all five gets covered in one visit," but "the Myanmar visit... has covered all the aspects, from connectivity to political relations to of course the cultural aspect." Malik clearly indicated the most important objective of the Indian President's visit—to enhance New Delhi's role in a region where China is advancing slowly.

The visit has not only further consolidated India's relations with a country that acts as a key bridge to South East Asia but also New Delhi's outreach to the BIMSTEC region encompassing South and South East Asia. The one event that

assist in addressing this complex issue. For its part, Myanmar welcomed the assistance being provided by India for infrastructure development under the aegis of the Rakhine State Development Programme, particularly in executing a pilot housing project, and the assistance extended by India for agricultural development and IT education in the province. More importantly, India expressed its willingness to consider scaling up its assistance for the Rakhine development programme once the current allocation of USD 25 million is fully committed.

The Rohingya issue is one on which New Delhi has treated very carefully keeping in mind its robust relations with Bangladesh and Myanmar and their

Transport infrastructure to be used commercially for the development of the surrounding areas. The two countries are hoping to complete by next year the trilateral highway in connecting India with Myanmar and Thailand—all members of the ASEAN and the BIMSTEC.

Another significant outcome of Kovind's visit was the agreement reached between India and Myanmar to start negotiations for concluding expeditiously a bilateral motor vehicles agreement that would enable passenger and cargo traffic to cross the border. This is aimed at complementing last year's landmark agreement to facilitate smooth cross-border movement of people between the two countries.

This agreement is already in force and

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Anarchy in the public bus services

Although bus is the leading mode of public transport in Dhaka city, the condition in which the buses ply the city's roads is appalling. It has become difficult for the commuters to commute by bus as there are very few designated bus stoppages in the city. The drivers often stop in the middle of the road to pick up or drop off passengers, which is a leading cause of road accidents. Moreover, many of the buses are unlicensed and unfit, and are also run by underage drivers with fake driving licenses. But the authorities concerned seem to be totally oblivious to the situation as they do not take any step to control the mismanagement of the bus services.

Because of the insufficient number of BRTC buses, the private sector has created a monopoly, taking control over the public transport. They raise the bus fare at their own will, without caring for public interest. Many of the bus services charge an extra amount for providing seating service, but pick up passengers from the middle of the road to make an extra profit. If electronic punch tickets could be introduced, it would have saved the passengers a lot of hassle.

The authorities should look into all these problems and do the needful to ensure a better bus service and safety of the passengers.

Zubair Khaled Huq, On e-mail