

When are we going to finally combat corruption?

Global index shows decline

IT is always the hope that a report such as the recently released Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2018, by Transparency International (TI), would be welcomed by our national institutions. Reports like the CPI provide a good reflection of what people think. Thus, for an institution like the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), it can be of great assistance if taken as feedback. The remarks of the ACC after the publication of the CPI 2018 are surprising.

Bangladesh has slipped six notches in the rankings among 180 countries according to the CPI—it now ranks at 149, the second lowest among South Asian countries, only above Afghanistan. The TI identified lack of commitment, little or no steps to stop high-profile corruption, uncontrolled scams and corruption in banking and financial sector, and the ineffective role of the ACC as reasons for this decline. We do not need the TI to tell us that corruption is indeed rampant in the country. The Bangladesh chapter of the TI in its annual household survey has consistently pointed out sector-specific people's perceptions in this matter. So, questioning the methodology or asking about specific sectors comes to us as a surprise. An index based on surveys by eight globally reputable sources cannot be called sweeping, despite what the ACC claims.

Since Bangladesh was included in the CPI in 2001, it has come some way from being the lowest-ranked. However, a ranking of 149 is hardly anything to be happy about—that too when, last year, we were ranked 143. The prime minister recognises the prevalence of corruption as reflected by her recent commitment to zero tolerance. In this situation, state institutions, if they really mean business, can take cues from such reports. The ACC needs to identify the institutional problems that it suffers from, and must be empowered to be able to work independently against corruption at all levels. Global watchdogs can do little but give us a guide to the experiences of the people in this country. It is the job of the ACC to identify specific cases. We hope that, given the PM's strong commitment, state institutions would employ all efforts to curb the menace.

Make road safety a priority issue

More stringent laws needed

ACCORDING to a report by the road safety campaigning group Nirapad Sarak Chai, some 4,439 people were killed in road accidents last year. This differs from the report published earlier in the week by Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, where figures of casualties were higher. The report was based on news published in six national dailies, online news portals and TV channels since no consolidated official data exists. The findings, however, point to a similar situation. Trucks and covered vans were responsible for more than a third of the casualties (35 percent); bus accidents took third and motorcycles a little over a fifth. The rest 10 percent involved microbuses and other vehicles.

What is sad here is that although organisations like Nirapad Sarak Chai have been involved for decades in awareness-raising campaigns and giving training to drivers, their efforts have had little impact on road safety on a national scale. We would have expected that with so many thousands of avoidable deaths taking place on our roads every year, it would be the administration that would be more proactive in addressing the systemic problems.

Unfortunately, the issue of addressing road safety remains on the backburner when it comes to the authorities taking concrete steps to address some of the major problems. Not even the spontaneous outburst of emotions caused by the death of two of their fellow classmates that prompted thousands of schoolchildren to take to the streets of Dhaka to protest against unsafe roads has had any impact on the authorities. When people's lives are worth less than transport owners' demands that leniency be shown to killers on the roads, how can we expect any positive results?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Land grabbing should be prevented before it happens

The Daily Star has recently published a news item along with a photo regarding the demolition of illegal structures in Aminbazar, Dhaka. We frequently read about such incidents. I wonder why a costly affair such as demolition is required when the authorities could have easily blocked the illegal construction in the first place.

Why have they waited till the grabbers completed the construction and enjoyed its benefits for years? The government should be serious about this kind of activity. In addition, there should be a monitoring mechanism in place comprised of the relevant agencies which will monitor illegal land grabbing.

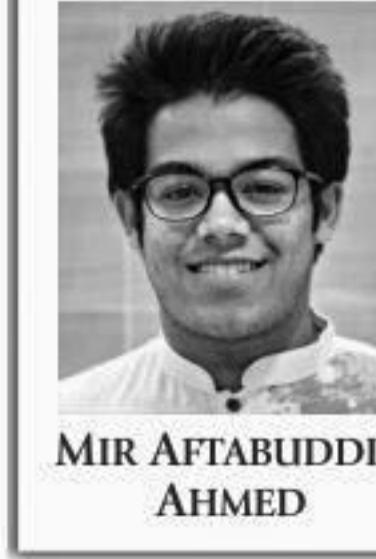
Mohammed Alauddin, Green Road, Dhaka

Poor show from local players in BPL

We have so far watched several exciting matches in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). But that was because of the excellent performances by foreign players such as AB de Villiers, Chris Gayle or Alex Hales. With the exception of a few Bangladeshi players who performed well, our local players mostly put up a poor show. It is time they identified and worked on their weaknesses which would be beneficial for us ahead of the upcoming World Cup.

Shafkat Rahman, By e-mail

Why criminal justice reform is a must



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

PRIIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has recently directed prison authorities to engage inmates in commercial production as a means of rehabilitation; her words were

echoed by Iqbal Hasan, an additional Inspector General of prisons, who suggested that innovative policies would be used to turn conventional prison structures in Bangladesh into ones operating like correctional facilities. This vision falls in line with the mandate of the UN Sustainable Development Goals agenda, of which Bangladesh has become a key proponent.

SDG 16 posits working towards a system of "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions". Whilst the statements by government officials give us hope about criminal justice reforms, Bangladesh faces innumerable hurdles in its quest to ensure that state functionaries operate in line with the law of the land. It goes without saying that ensuring equal access to justice and reforms in the colonial-era penal codes are fundamental to ensuring several aspects of the SDGs. In addition to Goal 16, criminal justice reform is crucial in ensuring a sustainable path towards socioeconomic development, namely in the vicinities of Goal 1 ("Poverty Reduction"), Goal 4 ("Gender Equality") and Goal 10 ("Inequality and Discrimination") of the SDGs.

There are several disconcerting statistics regarding the criminal justice system in Bangladesh. Official data from 2018, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies, indicates that there are 88,424 inmates in 68 establishments controlled by the Department of Prisons. Of this number, a significant 78.2 percent are pre-trial detainees, or what is more commonly known as remand prisoners. Interestingly, the official capacity of our prisons is a mere 36,614—resulting in an occupancy level of 241.5 percent. As the country has marched on an impressive path of nominal economic progress, the figures on prison inmates have increased over the past two decades—from 62,669 in 2000 to over 88,000 in 2018. Now, these are official figures. If these trends are to be understood, then the increasing number of inmates should not be seen solely as a success of the law enforcement agencies, but also as a failure of the state to rein in crimes or rehabilitate the criminals and change perceptions of criminal philosophies. Some also argue that it showcases a

hardline approach towards criminal justice by the state, which in cases of terrorism or corruption can be justified. However, the use of colonial-era laws and stringent law enforcement measures against citizens who may have committed minor crimes begs the question as to whether we as a society are more interested in curbing dissent, or whether we want to work towards rehabilitating our very own people.

In January 2018, Law Minister Anisul Huq stated that more than 3.3 million cases are still pending with the higher and lower courts across the country. The ratio of judges to inmates in the country is appalling, resulting in deadlocks over case completion. This has resulted in a cycle of delays, especially for convicts in

existence of Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code (which allows the police to arrest an individual without a warrant) and certain aspects of the Digital Security Act 2018 is reminiscent of the legal practices promoted by imperialist and undemocratic forces prior to 1971. One hopes that colonial-era laws and those systems which are against the very spirit of our Constitution will be re-examined by an independent body, such as the Law Commission, and phased out. This is essential for addressing key challenges for the reforms of our criminal justice system.

Secondly, one hopes that a realistic long-term policy plan is set in motion to achieve these reforms. The cost of subsidising law enforcement schemes in

be more on completing unfinished cases and reducing judicial deadlocks. Therefore, there is the argument of increasing the number of judicial establishments and human resources in this sector over a period of time.

In hindsight, the criminal justice reform is but a component of larger changes needed in the reorganisation of the judicial system, which is a prerequisite to achieving good governance. But on a broader scale, Bangladesh has too many inmates for the prison system to sustain. Rehabilitating citizens requires the politicians to refrain from using law enforcement as a political weapon. There is a reason why Bangladesh scores so low in rule of law indicators. As



PHOTO: STAR

the lower strata of society. It goes without saying that a large fraction of undisposed cases is a burden mostly falling on low-income convicts—and if we abide by the jurisprudential principle of "innocent until proven guilty", then delayed justice for some does result in "no justice". There have been several cases of convicts later proven to be innocent, who have suffered decades of incarceration in prisons due to delays in the completion of their respective cases. As a society, this is shameful for us, and it needs the attention of the government.

To address these challenges, there are indeed several steps that the government can take. For one, the state is expected to assess existing laws and evaluate them in light of the needs of the time. The

Bangladesh is expensive. The Public Security Division was promised a whopping Tk 21,406 crore allotment in the 2018-2019 fiscal year. Public order and safety represent 5.71 percent of the national budget—a proportion significantly higher than what is given to more credible human development issues such as education, healthcare and environmental protection. For one, the allocations given to public safety, and more specifically towards jails, need to be realigned towards rehabilitating inmates—through training, education and inmate developmental schemes. Rather than focusing exclusively on enhancing the manpower of law enforcement agencies, the focus needs to

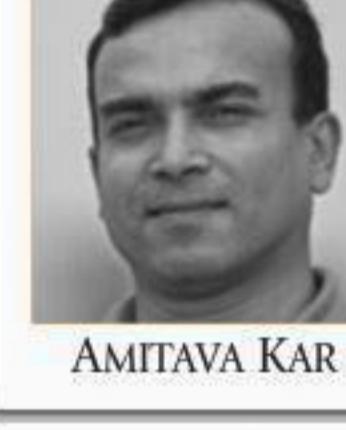
a country, we have avoided rehabilitating our citizens and used the prison system as a tool of oppression, rather than as an institution for civic reform.

We want a society free from the perils of crimes. And without reforming the system, there is very little that can be done to curb crimes or reduce the number of inmates in our prisons. Therefore, we urge the government to evaluate its policies regarding the criminal justice system and put in place progressive agendas in this regard, whilst promoting the establishment of the rule of law in Bangladesh.

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a graduate of economics and international relations, University of Toronto. Email: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca

A better life for women

IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

THE book "Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism" (2018)—as provocative as it sounds—has nothing to do with women's carnal pleasures. In it, Professor Kristen Ghodsee of the University of Pennsylvania argues that implementing socialist concepts would make women's lives more independent and fulfilling.

That such an idea is put forth by an Ivy League academic from the United States of America, and not by a bleeding-heart leftist from Cuba, is striking. But not

the case that it would benefit women especially.

Professor Ghodsee insists that the free market is failing most women in many ways. Women are paid less. They are financially dependent on better compensated men. They are seen as less valuable or less productive employees because they are consistently having to take time off in order to work around the house. Most of the housework including child care and elder care and care for the infirm generally falls on the shoulders of women, a job that does not pay.

On the other hand, states that notoriously coerced political conformity and a planned economy also enforced policies to emancipate women. Socialist regimes that we usually vilify, like the

without problems. Many people died under planned economies that led to famines, purges and labour camps. But Professor Ghodsee asks, why not learn from the mistakes and try socialist policies that actually work, like empowering women, a la Scandinavia? Why not try to build a society where profits would be invested back into social services, and human relationships would be ultimately more genuine and satisfying, because people will not look at each other in a transactional way?

Ghodsee opines that the problem with capitalism is that it commodifies everything, including romance. She cites the example of seeking.com, a website that matches young women with wealthy older men, the so-called sugar daddies. The site boasts more than 10 million

people are showing interest in an alternative political system that would lead to a more egalitarian and sustainable future.



PHOTO: REUTERS

surprising.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the word "socialism" may have landed in the wastebasket of history but is still available for recycling. Socialism is becoming increasingly appealing to young people around the world who value universal health care, strong unions, affordable college, banking regulation and living wages. Some make

former East Germany, supported gender equality in all aspects of life. In the socialist countries of the twentieth-century Eastern Europe, they were fully integrating women into the workforce, which allowed them to achieve economic freedom. Government-funded kindergartens and paid maternity leave were introduced to reduce the economic burden on women.

Life behind the Iron Curtain was not

active users in more than 139 countries. One of the pages on this site suggests being somebody's sugar baby can reduce your debt, send you to shopping sprees, expensive dinners and exotic vacations. You can get paid for your "time".

And the free market has not lifted everyone, as promised. We see wage stagnation; we see growing inequality. The contemporary market that we are in has created a lot of risks for young

people. Social safety nets have all but disappeared. The top 1 percent now own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. Which may help explain why about 51 percent Americans between 18 and 29 hold a positive view of socialism.

People are showing interest in an alternative political system that would lead to a more egalitarian and sustainable future. The imbalances of the existing order have fuelled the rise of leftist politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Jean-Luc Melenchon in France, Yanis Varoufakis in Greece and Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is the New York Congresswoman who ran on an ultra-progressive platform which includes Medicare for all, guaranteed family leave, abolishing US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, free public college and a 70 percent marginal tax rate for incomes higher than USD 10 million.

In sum, Professor Ghodsee is saying that we can learn from the experiences of Eastern Europe and that we can actually see them functioning in countries like Denmark and Sweden. And so, why not have a conversation about how socialist policies not only impact our economies but also our personal lives? It may come as a surprise to the younger reader that one of the founding principles of Bangladesh was socialism meaning economic and social justice.

Amitava Kar is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.