

## Increase capacity to implement mega projects

*It is holding up faster economic growth*

THE head of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has stated that Bangladesh is improving its capacity to handle mega projects but slowly. Given that the economy is growing at more than seven percent per annum, it is going to be a magnet for foreign direct investment. Investments are not going to be a problem in a growing economy but the primary stumbling block is to expedite our capacity to finish mega projects on time. This is not the first time this issue has been highlighted. Recent reports that the Bridge Authority has sought less funds in the upcoming financial year for the Padma Bridge highlights the problem of not being able to stay on track to complete the project.

Economists, both local and foreign, have repeatedly pointed out that unless we do something to raise our capacity to complete projects on time, the cost of projects will keep going up. This needs to be addressed. The country has multiple multi-billion-dollar projects running simultaneously and that is testament to Bangladesh becoming a success story in the region. This is reflected in the USD 2.2 billion loaned by ADB in 2018, which was above its usual allocation of USD 1.5 billion.

Heavy investments are being made to improve infrastructure and connectivity where Bangladesh may emerge as a regional trade hub. If projects are completed within specified timelines it will promote greater economic opportunities. The economy needs to grow at eight percent for the next two decades to meet its economic goals and that will only happen when we have better management capacity to efficiently handle our various projects.

## Bracing for ‘Fani’

*A stitch in time will save nine*

CLONE “Fani” is likely to hit our coastlines today and by this evening, it is likely to reach southwestern districts. According to the Met Office, “Fani” might arrive with a wind speed of between 150 and 180 km per hour while crossing Bangladesh, and all the coastal districts are likely to be inundated by surges of up to five-feet high.

We are relieved to note that the administration has put everything into gear to deal with “Fani”. In fact, good preparation is half the battle won. We are informed by the state minister that more than 50 thousand volunteers have been alerted. These are all very good. However, as past experiences show, in spite of the good preparatory work by the administration, a large number of people do not leave their home till the last moment, and only when it is too late. More often they are unwilling to leave their personal possessions behind, but more so because they are loathed to leave their domesticated animals at Nature’s mercy.

We feel that the government should make it mandatory for all to evacuate to storm shelters immediately on the orders being issued. It is also necessary to make arrangements for the farm animals in the storm shelters as well, which not all the shelters have currently. We also believe that the administration should have all the necessary relief materials close at hand so that the affected people could have these available after the storm has passed, like drinking water, water purification facility since most of the sources of safe drinking water are likely to be affected by the storm surge, and ready to eat meals. Rebuilding damaged houses must be a priority also. Given our record in dealing with such eventualities successfully, we hope that we would be able to emerge from “Fani” relatively unscathed.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Stop plastic pollution

Continued use of polythene and other plastic products is affecting the environment all over the world. Marine life is one of the most severely affected, with people randomly throwing plastic waste into the water. Besides, as per Earth Day Network (2018), plastic contributes eight percent of the country’s waste which is equivalent to 800,000 tonnes. Of them, around 200,000 tonnes go into the ocean and rivers. In the rainy days, plastic waste also causes great difficulty for the citizens as it blocks most of the drains of the cities, which in turn render the roads unusable.

The government had banned polythene bags in 2002 and amended the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995 in 2010. The goal was to discourage people from using plastic products. But alas! The use of polythene and other such products is increasing alarmingly; nothing can prevent the use and careless disposal of this harmful material. So the government must renew its drive against plastic and implement the related laws for the sake of public health as well as the environment.

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PHOTO: STAR



SAAD HAMMADI

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has set out an extremely ambitious vision to make Bangladesh a middle-income country by 2021, a higher middle-income one by 2030 and a “developed” one by 2041.

Her vision has a greater economic opportunity if Bangladesh can improve human rights situation as a positive reinforcement for investment. The once impoverished Bangladesh now has, according to the World Bank, one of the top five fastest growing economies in the world, in spite of poor foreign and private investment. Although regulations for businesses have loosened, the restrictions imposed on the right to freedom of expression have become tighter. The two are not at odds with each other: human rights do not stand in the way of Bangladesh’s economic ambitions.

The notorious Information and Communication Technology Act—which the government itself acknowledged as flawed—was used to carry out thousands of arrests over a period of six years until last year. It was memorably invoked by the authorities last August when they arrested and detained the famed photographer and activist Shahidul Alam for more than 100 days. Instead of repealing the ICT Act, as the international community had long urged Bangladesh to do, the government introduced an even more draconian piece of legislation known as the Digital Security Act (DSA) in October 2018.

There has been widespread international criticism of the DSA, under which no fewer than 14 offences are non-bailable and punishment can be as high as life imprisonment if there’s a repeat offence. Where people are punished for their peaceful views, and power can be exercised arbitrarily, some investors can become very wary.

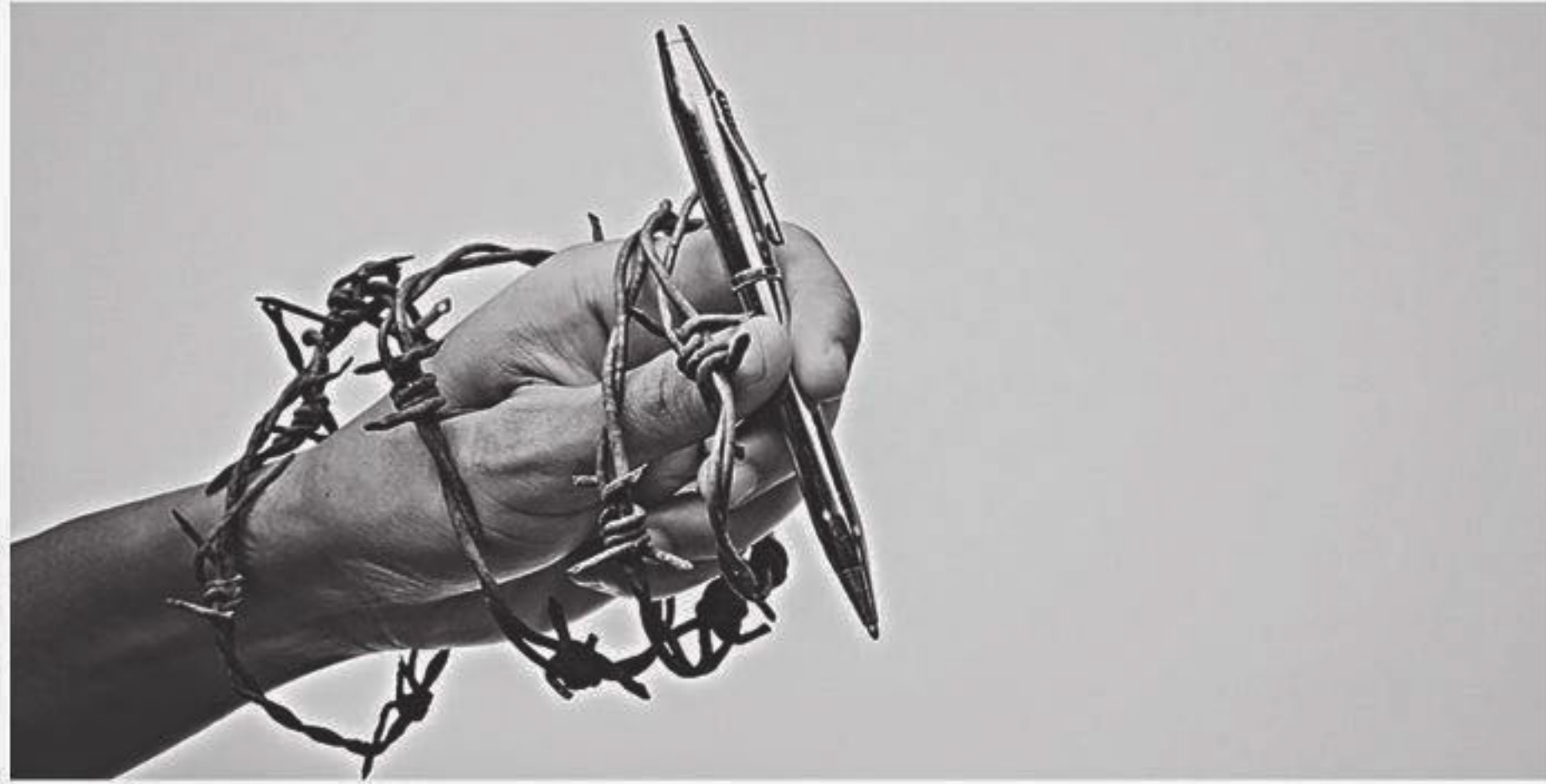
Since the DSA came into force, the authorities arrested more than 60 people, mostly for exercising their right to freedom of expression on the internet, according to local newspapers. Last October, a human rights defender was arrested on charges of “defamation” and “undermining law and order” for merely posting a satirical image on Facebook. On New Year’s Day this year,

two journalists who reported on alleged election irregularities were charged with “spreading untrue information”, “obtaining information illegally” and other offences.

The DSA hasn’t even spared supporters of the ruling party, with a 21-year-old Awami League student activist arrested for posting a Facebook comment where he disavowed his religious beliefs. He faces seven years behind bars for supposedly “deteriorating law and order” and another five years for “hurting religious values and sentiments.”

Under international human rights law, there can be legitimate reasons for restricting freedom of expression. But this should never lead to the punishment of people for their beliefs or the peaceful expression of their views.

This is what we are seeing in the latest phase of the crackdown, where online media spaces have been shut



down for reasons that have nothing to do with combating discrimination or violence or serving other legitimate concerns. In February, Bangladesh’s first and largest Bangla-language blogsite, “somewhereinblog”, was shut down by the authorities during a crackdown on 20,000 pornography and gambling websites. In March, access to Al-Jazeera’s website was temporarily blocked after the international news channel published an investigative report on enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. Joban, a Bangladeshi website that published an account of Al-Jazeera’s report, remains blocked.

People are guaranteed the right to freedom of expression by the country’s Constitution and by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a signatory. It is a right that was integral to the

country’s struggle for independence, where speaking out against human rights violations carried out by Pakistani authorities became a moral imperative. It is a right that political parties knew the importance of when they were faced by repression under military rule.

At a time when Bangladesh is looking to attract greater foreign direct investment, the crackdown on freedom of expression and other human rights has not enhanced the country’s international image. Some investors feel that lack of opportunity of the private sector to comment on proposed regulations and the government’s sensitivities to public inputs on social media about developing regulations as impediments to investment, said the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs of the State Department in July 2018.

The state of civil and political liberties are key insights that business intelligence

providing advertisements to prominent newspapers in Bangladesh have been reported in 2015. The curbs remain in effect till date. This not only limits press freedom but also dwindles the opportunity of media institutions and the private sector to grow in the country.

The government would argue that media outlets—print, electronic and online—have exponentially increased in number since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power for a second time in 2009. The numbers have increased with more than 1,500 online news outlets, nearly 1,200 daily newspapers, 31 private television channels, 24 FM radio stations and 32 community radio, as put out by the Washington-based BGR public relations on behalf of the Awami League-led government.

The rise in the number of media outlets however, does not fill the gap in the diversity of opinion and the freedom to say or write whatever people want, without fear of reprisals. When the more prominent media institutions feel that their voices are being muzzled with fear of reprisals with repressive laws and increasing media surveillance, investors cannot reach out to people or the economy beyond a particular politically-subscribed audience.

Although the government has not fully shut down the critical press, restriction on advertisements to prominent newspapers, criminal cases against journalists and surveillance have limited the scope of its function. Most such press institutions survive primarily on subsidies from publishers and patrons, but they remain at the risk of being shut down if they are made to feel financially vulnerable. This also means that some media institutions, particularly those critical of the government, are not able to grow or reach their audience because of State agencies allegedly trying to exhaust their capacity by cutting revenue.

Bangladesh will be in a better position to attract foreign and private investment if it discourages security agencies from meddling into the functions of the press, amends or repeals the repressive provisions in the Digital Security Act, decriminalises defamation and releases all people arrested for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression, the government will find, is actually good for business.

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# Martyrdom of Assange or death blow for journalism?



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE OVERTON WINDOW

ASIDE from being nominated multiple times for the Nobel Peace Prize, including in 2019 by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mairead Maguire, Julian Assange has won countless awards for journalism—the 2019 GUE/NGL Award for Journalists, Whistleblowers and Defenders of the Right to Information sponsored by European parliamentarians the most recent one.

And prior to being dragged out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London—in violation of international law and the Ecuadorian Constitution—on April 11 and charged by the UK for skipping bail when he sought political asylum in the embassy in 2012, the WikiLeaks founder had never been charged with having committing a crime. Including for rape in Sweden, as is sometimes mistakenly believed.

Yet since then, the conversation over Assange being extradited and prosecuted in the US has centred around whether he is a “journalist”, or whether he “deserves” to be prosecuted for revealing US government secrets, particularly in the western mainstream media. The same media that for years have reprinted documents published by WikiLeaks. And has profited massively from its revelations, especially through the publications of the Afghan War Diaries, Iraq War Logs and Cabledgate.

Ever since the Russiagate scandal began, Assange seems to have wholly been abandoned by journalists in the western media with some even calling him a “Kremlin agent”—although WikiLeaks has published more than 650,000 documents about Russia that mostly were critical of its government. But as journalist John Pilger said during a Sydney rally earlier this year, these attacks go way back.

In a plan conceived as far back as 2008, the Cyber Counter-intelligence Assessment Branch of the US Defence Department talked about “destroying the feeling of trust that is WikiLeaks’ centre of gravity”—a huge deal for an organisation whose publications’ authenticity has never been successfully challenged. Having read the numerous leaks showing how centres

of power planned to destroy Assange and see it play out over the years, Pilger said: “It was as if they planned a war on a single human being, and on the very principle of freedom of speech. Their main weapon would be personal smear. Their shock troops would be enlisted in the media.”

WikiLeaks, of course, has always been aware of this. Its philosophy, as explained by its Section Editor Sarah Harrison, has been to accept and understand that: “When you speak truth to power and speak loudly, it will bite back. That is when you know you have exposed the secrets they want to keep hidden.”

Such determination in the face of persecution prompted Amnesty

right to know what the powerful are doing—especially when it is done in their name or affects them directly.

James Goodale, lawyer and former general counsel of the *New York Times* said that “the prosecution of Julian Assange, if it succeeds, would be a ‘near death blow’ to ‘investigative reporting based on classified information’”. Whistleblower of the Pentagon Papers, Daniel Ellsberg, said that, “The pursuit of Julian Assange would...chill all the whistleblowing and leaking”. Many investigative journalists have also opined that prosecuting Assange will, in essence, “criminalise journalism” itself. And open the door for others who have reprinted or covered



Julian Assange pumps his fist at photographers as he arrives at Southwark Crown Court in London ahead of his bail breach hearing.

PHOTO: AFP

International’s Global Award winning journalist Chris Hedges to write an article titled, *The Martyrdom of Julian Assange*. And in it: “If Assange is extradited and tried, it will create a legal precedent that will terminate the ability of the press, which Trump repeatedly has called ‘the enemy of the people,’ to hold power accountable... First Assange. Then us.” And this is what the persecution of Assange is really about. And what the media should have focused on, and should right now be extremely concerned about.

Because this case is not only about Assange. It is much more than that.

It is the most important case in the history of press freedom. And on people’s

WikiLeaks’ publications—or any classified information for that matter—to be indicted as well.

This is what the Obama administration described as its “*New York Times* problem” when seeking to prosecute Assange and WikiLeaks—that it would also have to indict the *New York Times* for publishing the same material. Which is why the US is yet to bring espionage charges against Assange (as many believed it would), although that is by no means off the table.

Concerning the US computer intrusion charges that have been made public, journalist Glenn Greenwald writes, “even if one accepts all of the indictment’s claims as true, Assange was not trying

to hack into document files to which Manning had no access [Manning already had authorised access and tried unsuccessfully to give the information to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* first, before WikiLeaks], but rather trying to help Manning avoid detection as a source.” That is something all journalists do—protect their sources. Therefore, even though the US charge tries to make it appear that other journalists don’t have anything to worry about, as they’ve found a way around their “*New York Times* problem”, the truth is that they haven’t.

So by smearing Assange with publicly known lies at the bidding of intelligence agencies that WikiLeaks, through its publications, has made transparent, what the media is doing is wrapping a noose around its own neck. As it fails to see that the prosecution of Assange is really designed to set a legal precedent that will enable the US government to imprison journalists for trying to hold it to account using journalism.

According to Jonathon Cook, winner of Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism, those who accept what the US government is attempting to do to Assange have “signed off on the right of the US authorities to seize any foreign journalist, anywhere in the world, and lock him or her out of sight.” That is a precedent not only never seen before, but that has remained unimaginable till now—given the potential consequences it may give rise to once set.

This is why every journalist, media organisation and defender of people’s right to know, regardless of how they personally feel about Assange, must strongly speak out against his persecution. As the fact is that though it’s Assange who is right now in the dock, it is journalism that stands trial. And why Jim Kavanagh warns: “The minute after [Assange’s] sentence is pronounced, every journalist and citizen will open their eyes in a world where a lot of important things they could expect to reveal and see a minute ago will now stay hidden...At that moment, all the bullshit irrelevancies and avoidance mechanisms will instantly dissipate, and it will be clear to everyone what the only issue always was. Too late.”

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