

Why the lax institutional supervision?

Lack of oversight endangers public security

It seems that the matter of public safety features very low on the list of priorities of various ministries and their subordinate agencies. This is particularly so in the case of the ministry of housing and public works, whose failure to exercise regular and strict watch over Rajuk, one of its auxiliary agencies, has resulted in many disasters, like building collapse and outbreak of fire in the capital causing heavy fatalities. This reality was starkly exposed in a report in this paper that informs us that not only has the said ministry not performed its regulatory role with due diligence, even the parliamentary standing committee responsible for oversight of the ministry's work has not held it to account for its failure to do its mandated tasks. It is shocking that 71 percent of a total of 3897 buildings in the eight Rajuk zones are in breach of the stipulations, and Rajuk has done precious little about it and so has the ministry.

One wonders why this reluctance on the part of the housing ministry to hold a very vital agency like Rajuk accountable for its failure to take measures against the countless anomalies in building construction in Dhaka city, in spite of it being fully aware of the state in this regard. After all, what is the purpose of the ministry's going through the monthly ritual of holding a review meeting of Rajuk's plans and regulatory actions and the various decisions that Rajuk board takes if there is no, or at most perfunctory, follow-up actions? It is shocking that the lead agency responsible to ensure that the buildings are safe for habitation—and that the deviants are taken to task for breach of rules—should flout their responsibility to the detriment of public safety with complete impunity.

Accidents can and do occur, but if that is due to deliberate dereliction of duty, then no one involved in the process of the work can avoid culpability in the loss of lives and property.

Justice delayed is justice denied

Solve the issues causing huge case backlog

COURTS in our country continue to struggle with a huge backlog of cases. And many cases filed under some special laws involving rape and torture of women and children, murder, extortion, corruption and narcotics too are not being settled according to the relevant provisions for a speedy completion of the trials.

As of March 31 this year, a total of 1,64,551 cases under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act-2000 have been pending with courts across the country. And 1,64,794 narcotics-related cases and 17,25,270 criminal cases were pending with the lower courts. According to the special provisions under which they were filed, all these cases were supposed to be disposed of way earlier—years ago, in fact, in most cases—despite several High Court directives giving time limits to the lower courts concerned to end the trials.

Also, as of March 31 this year, a total of 35,82,347 cases, including criminal, have been pending with courts including the Appellate and High Court Divisions of the Supreme Court. And we understand that many of them have been stalling because law enforcers have not submitted their investigation reports, which they are duty-bound to do in 90 days, or because witnesses did not appear in the courts. That, however, does not change the fact that justice has been denied to all involved in these cases—litigants and complainants—and that such delays completely defeat the purpose of the provisions for speedy completion of trials.

These cases are tremendously important, particularly those concerning repression of women and children, and it is extremely disappointing that so many of them have been left hanging for years on end, without being resolved. Unfortunately, when it comes to law enforcers not moving fast enough to assist courts to quickly settle cases, lawmakers have not formulated any provisions that could be used to take action against them.

Lawmakers should change this and ensure that law enforcers can be held to account for not submitting investigation reports on time. The various issues that are slowing down the quick dispensation of cases, despite their complicated nature, must be solved in the interest of justice.

BUDGET FY2019-20

Can impoverished coastal regions be part of our development story?



KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

I was on my way to Kuakata, a coastal town famed for its breathtakingly beautiful views and a beach where you can see both sunrise and sunset on the lap of the Bay of Bengal. There, I happened across Runu Begum, who told me that she only cares about the sunrise because it brings light to her home. Her kerosene lamp is too costly to keep it burning for long. She desires to have a solar-powered lighting system one day. I believe this wish may come true through our national budget which has been passed recently—and which the prime minister declared would bring light to every household in the country.

I am thinking about how Runu will be served by the budget. The World Bank has placed Bangladesh within the five fastest-growing economies in the world, its per capita GDP having climbed nine percent to USD 1,909 last year. But there are pockets of underdevelopment in the country where the residents have been left untouched by this growth, and Runu is one of them.

Runu is a single mother. Her husband is (was) a fisherman. He left her and married a Rohingya woman—without her permission, as was required by the law. He pays her no alimony or anything. Runu recognises the injustices but still she waits for him, convinced that he would realise his mistake, and return to her or at least start contributing to a better life for their daughter. She switches between past and present tense when referring to him.

Left alone to fend for her family, Runu is determined to make ends meet. She has no land, but a wealthy local has temporarily given her a little space of 1.5 decimal land for a makeshift shelter. On it she raises her cow, a calf, five ducks, three chickens and a small vegetable garden. She is praying to have a piece of the government's "khas" land to make a permanent home. Meanwhile, she earns Tk 1,000 (USD 12) a month as a caretaker at the local school. But while at work, she must leave her disabled five-year-old daughter, Fatema, unattended at home. So, she constantly worries for her safety.

Fatema is entitled to a social safety net payment for her disability, which she has yet to receive. But even though the share of the national budget set aside for social safety net spending has decreased by 0.34

percent than last year, I am optimistic about Fatema because it promises to add some 1.5 million people to the government's safety net programmes and the total amount has increased. However, Runu is receiving 30 kg rice monthly, a great help indeed.

On the face of it, Runu seems to be impoverished. Certainly, her contribution to the national GDP isn't much to speak of. But to label her a "poor person" would be a mistake because in terms of her humanity, or human capital, I realised this woman is very rich. She avoids

reality in coastal people's lives and has learned how to reduce risks to life and property. She recites to me in detail how to protect one's property and assets during a cyclone, and then, confesses she owns none of these assets that she knows how to protect.

Bangladesh's status as a middle-income country does nothing to show either Runu Begum's economic strife, or her human richness.

If Bangladesh's budget is that of a typical middle-income country, it might let down some of its most vulnerable

returns. Here the fields are empty due to salinity. The farmers only grow crops during one season. The third-highest budget allotment this year is for agriculture, and I am hopeful that some of that budget might introduce saline-resistant crops to help increase farmers' incomes.

As I pass the southern planes, I see lots of potential for innovation in our development model. I see a Kuakata where tourism brings in revenues and alternate incomes for the local community. I see protection



Stumps of Casuarina trees lie on Kuakata beach.

PHOTO: STAR

seeking help from her parents because it won't help her in the long term. She feels similarly about social security from the government. Instead, she focuses on creating a sustained income. "If I can manage four to five more ducks and may be one more cow," she says, "I can improve my situation."

Her inner strength makes her an important member of Friendship's community-based disaster preparedness committee. She knows cyclones are a

beneficiaries. But, in keeping with the nation's tradition of being innovators—consider microfinance, the unprecedented drop in birth rates, and cyclone preparedness—I hope that our budget has some innovative new ways to harvest the human potential of our citizens on the fringes.

Back on the road, I notice acres upon acres of empty paddy fields. Elsewhere, the *amon* crop is promising abundant

and recognition of our heroic coastal fishermen, who harness our invaluable natural resources at great risk to their lives. I see a budget that brings all the partners and actors in one platform to reach people like Runu Begum and create economic balance in the country.

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Searching our souls for national unity

"Bareer kachhe arshee nagar
shetha porshee boshot kore
Ek ghar porshee boshot kore
Ami ekdino na dekhilam tare."



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

Hindus murdering innocent Muslims in Maharashtra, Buddhists pillaging Rohingya villages in Myanmar or Muslims blowing up Christians in Sri Lanka. The simple fact of life is that ethnically we are all the same or of similar ethnic mix

people irrespective of faith. This has frustrated great thinkers and humanists for generations like Lalon, Rabindranath and Nazrul.

Interfaith tolerance is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam and, throughout history, we see numerous examples of Muslim rulers administering the vast majority of non-Muslim subjects with peace, justice and prosperity in the Mediterranean Coasts, the Middle East, the Far East and the Indian sub-continent. However, every time religious intolerance reared its ugly head, the blissful interfaith peace and harmony gave way to wars and social upheavals. While a faith-neutral Mughal Emperor Akbar built a massive empire of untold riches, his last powerful descendant Aurangzeb caused the implosion of that same empire through religious intolerance. As the British East India Company merchants in the

Unless we can inculcate this doctrine into our children from very early on, from pre-K and primary education to higher tiers, and treat all people as one nationality, the mainstreaming of minorities cannot happen.

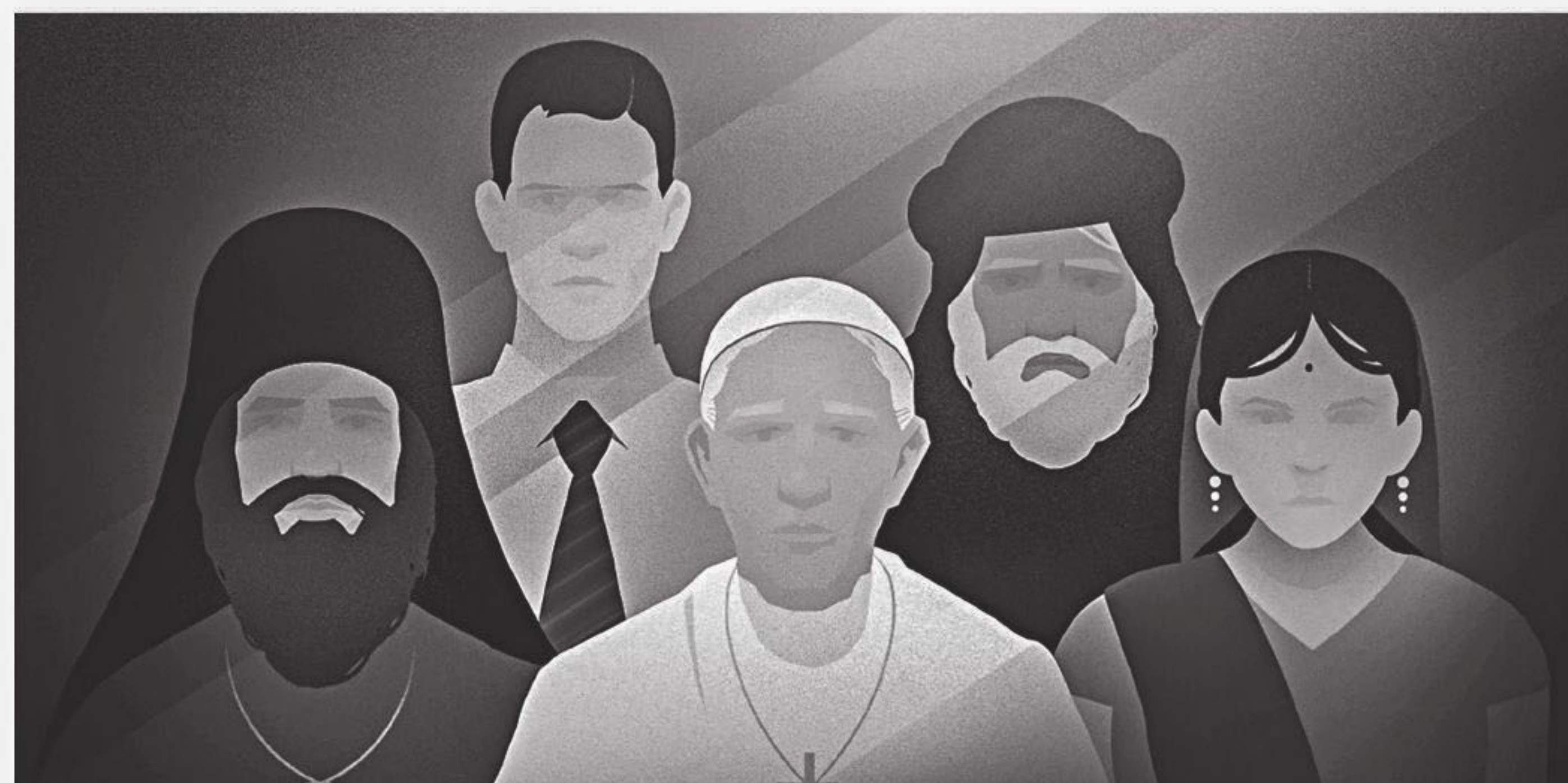
different when it comes to interfaith tolerance. Bangladesh is the land of Bauls—a community of interfaith mystical poets and singers—whose influence in communal harmony is a salient part of our proud heritage. However, political opportunists have used the power structures to take over properties of people belonging to minority faiths. That has not only worked against the full integration of minorities in the mainstream society but also threatened to tarnish the image of the country known for its rich history of communal harmony and amity.

The number of opportunists that prey on people's minority status for illegal and immoral material gains are rising by the day. The leaders in government and civil society have to play a catalytic role to bring all Bangladeshis together, irrespective of their faith, gender, ethnicity and social position. The founder of modern Singapore Lee Kuan Yew's name comes to mind as someone who vigorously promoted the idea of multiple ethnicities but one Singapore, calling out to all citizens to put their best foot forward as a Singaporean first and then embrace their individual ethnic identity. This has worked wonders for Singapore even though more than two-thirds of Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese. Similarly, in Bangladesh, there are Bengalis, Chakmas, Santals, Hindus, Muslims, Qadianis, Christians—different social groups based on ethnicities and religions but all are Bangladeshis—one people, one nation.

Unless we can inculcate this doctrine into our children from very early on, from pre-K and primary education to higher tiers, and treat all people as one nationality, the mainstreaming of minorities cannot happen, and as long as minorities are not made part of the mainstream, they will never feel safe and at one with the rest. Let me end this piece with Nazrul's eternal paean to human equality:

I sing of equality—
There's nothing greater than a human being, nothing nobler!
Caste, creed, religion—there's no difference.
Throughout all ages, all places, we're all a manifestation
Of our common humanity.
Amen.

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but we hardly know our own people belonging to other faiths, living in our midst. The ethnic similarity between a Christian, a Hindu or a Muslim family in any part of the sub-continent is hidden in plain sight by insurmountable walls of religious intolerance and bigotry. Similar complexion, language, customs and culture of Muslims, Hindus, Christians and agnostics in our region somehow have given way to siloed identities belying the stark homogeneity of the

eighteenth century gradually crept into the sub-continent by pitting one faith against another, soon the whole of India was under their iron grip. When they finally left, two centuries later, they made sure the religious divide was indelibly imprinted on the map and psyche of the Indian sub-continent. The whole region is still riveted by the anguish of people belonging to multiple faiths vicariously experiencing the murder, rape and pillage of one faith over another time and time again.

In the Hindu-majority India, the current government led by BJP is stoking the flames of Hindutva and trying to discard all the greatness that India achieved under non-Hindu rule. At the same time, in Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, the non-Muslims are migrating to India or other greener pastures and thereby gradually reducing the share of non-Muslims as a percentage of the population. Pakistan and Bangladesh may be Muslim-majority countries with some common heritage but the two cannot be more

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Diversifying investment

Recently, in a two-day international conference jointly organised by Financial Inclusion Network, Bangladesh and the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development, it was revealed that around 90 percent of loans and advances are based in Dhaka and Chattogram districts. This along with the fact that most of these are received by a few corporate businessmen can be a deterrent for social development.

Economically, geographical diversification is the practice of diversifying an investment portfolio across different regions so as to reduce the overall risk and improve returns on the portfolio. Most large multinational corporations across the world have a high degree of geographical diversification. This enables them to reduce expenses by setting up plants in low-cost regions and may have a positive impact on a corporation's revenues. Firms can lower their risk exposure to political and economic changes and "forces majeure" by locating particular departments and/or resources in different parts of the world.

The scenario in our country is quite the opposite. And it's not helpful for balanced and equitable development. Our government should formulate a policy of inclusive development for diversification of investment based on geographic locations.

Md Zillur Rahman, by email