

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**



**291**

New cases in 24hrs



**5,40,266**

Total cases



**8,266**

Deaths



**4,86,767**

Recoveries

**GLOBAL UPDATE**



**2,398,723**

Deaths



**108,921,608**

Total cases

## Majority rule giving way to majoritarianism

FROM PAGE 1  
this contradiction between the moral height of being a literary person versus the sometimes quite dirty level of politics. In our region, sometimes politics is known to be horse-training. How do you live in these two worlds?

**Shashi Tharoor:** It does not always have to be, but there are often compromises. There is always a contradiction between an individual with his own convictions who belongs to a party with its own policies. There is no guarantee that your convictions will be the same as that of your party. I have a duty towards my party and its policies, but I also have a duty as an individual, so what I tend to do is, I stay loyal to the party's choices but I do not allow myself to say things I do not believe. If the party takes a decision that I'm in profound disagreement with, I will either explain the party's stance without myself advocating it, or I go silent. There have been a number of instances where I have chosen silence rather than to break ranks with my party because by doing so, I will damage the people with whom I'm working. I am not prepared to compromise beyond that. I believe my intellectual and moral integrity is what I can bring to the world as politics and if I start tarnishing that by selling that short, then in the end of the day it seems to me that I may as well not be in politics because you can get any number of cookie-cutter political figures who will do any say what they are told for temporary gain.

**Mahfuz Anam:** What is your overall view about the state of media freedom in South Asia?

**Shashi Tharoor:** The truth is our press freedom across South Asia has a number of challenges. On the one hand, it is not as bad as the most pessimistic will describe it to be. Even in the military rule of Pakistan, there were relatively courageous journalists writing. In Bangladesh, The Daily Star and Prothom Alo have flourished quite effectively in spite of challenges. In India even though much of the media is accused of complicity, of having sold out, of having compromised, there are still people in the media who have nonetheless been able to stand up for what they believe in. They can be minor websites, but the truth is somewhere being told, if you know how to look for it. It is a mixed bag. While it is true that we all in South Asia have governments who would not encourage criticism, it is also true that in the media, there are enough journalists who believe in their mission and have courage.

**Mahfuz Anam:** Why do our governments always feel so hostile towards the free press?

**Shashi Tharoor:** Our countries are flawed and fragile in spite of being democracies. Each government has felt a certain level of insecurity for certain reasons which is why they want a sympathetic narrative towards what they believe to be their good efforts to how they run the country and if that narrative is not available they undermine the ones providing the narrative, and want to silence them. By definition, press freedom has to be antagonistic because the role of the press is adversarial. This is a conceptual element in much of Western journalism. Because the press abets the public in holding the government accountable, their job is to question the government, be cynical about the government's claims. The adversarial stance is built into press freedom. Many of us feel that that is part of our conviction as independent commentators. You are obliged to be critical in a context where the government distrusts your criticism.

Then there are these populist cult leaders who believe that they are the voice of the people, so who are these unelected journalists to pull them down? They believe that you are actually betraying the people if you attack them.

**Mahfuz Anam:** You are a writer, columnist and now a politician. Do you feel differently about the press/media when you are wearing different hats? As a politician do you see us differently than as you see us as a writer? Did you feel differently towards the media when you were a minister in 2009?

**Shashi Tharoor:** First of all, the existing media culture in India was generally an accepting one. That the media would attack me, I took that as the price one paid to be in politics. I never thought of the media as something that could be cajoled, threatened, intimidated or silenced. I took media criticism seriously and accepted their rights to criticise me.

What is different in the last few years is that the new people in power do not share that set of assumptions. They have an attitude suggesting you are with us, or against us. They have not hesitated to use many of the resources at the command of a majority government. In the case of the BJP, if they felt that an editor who wrote an unfriendly piece should lose his job, or the proprietor will get a tax raid, they can carry it out. I know I am not officially supposed to

say that happened, but that is the kind of thing that can happen, and that some would say has happened.

You have in India a populist leader who has direct rapport with the populace and contempt for the media because he simply doesn't need it. He enjoys unmediated access to popular masses, because the creation of social media meant that you can bypass traditional media. His party is extremely skilled at manipulating social media, and then he can treat the traditional media as irrelevant. He is the first prime minister who has never held a press conference in India, and taken unscripted questions. Every question is vetted in advance. To him it is simply theatre -- it is not an exercise in being accountable to an independent mind. That does not interest him at all.

**Mahfuz Anam:** How do you view this development of social media and the traditional media being bypassed?

**Shashi Tharoor:** I view it with concern but also inevitability. The reach of social media is something you have to appreciate. Eighty percent of the Indian electorate is connected to the internet via their mobile phones. I have witnessed the astonishing growth of social media and its ability to transform. We are seeing for example that Mr Modi has made it compulsory for every minister in his cabinet to have a Twitter account, but not made it compulsory for them to hold press conferences. That is the difference. The mainstream press is now secondary in the government's approach. What is concerning about this is that social media is devoid of filters. Anyone is basically as authentic a voice as the most professional journalist. There is no editorial control and fact-checking. There are now independent fact-checking websites but they have a fraction of the audience that the original fake story has. This means that those who want their narrative to be believed can reinforce it without any accountability to the actual truth. You can also get pliant traditional media to translate your social media messages.

**Mahfuz Anam:** We now have the Digital Security Act to control the digital space which very severely controls what somebody is posting. What is the legal framework in India?

**Shashi Tharoor:** As chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology, I can say that what we have is a rule going back to the 19th century which desperately needs updating. The Indian Telegraph Act 1885 governs much of telecommunications in the country. The time is ripe for a serious rethinking. The anxiety that many people have is that will the rethinking take place if it is under a government that is not terribly committed to press freedom.

There are an awful lot of Indians who are comfortable with modern technology. The government will struggle to control technology. There has already been backlash against Twitter's refusal to shut down certain accounts that issued tweets that the government deemed unacceptable, and the government asked them to shut them down, and Twitter following its own codes, did not shut them down, saying that having reviewed them, the company felt that it wasn't keeping with its own laws. Whereupon the government said who are you to decide what India's laws permit. We are telling YouTube shut those accounts, and if you don't, you will be punished. They might be a private company but they are working in a public space -- they have social and political obligations. These are challenging questions that are being debated around the world, but there is no clear answer.

The original balance of power between the Legislative, the Judicial and the Executive branches of the state, or the concept of check and balance has enormously shifted towards the Executive. In the hands of charismatic, popular and effective leaders this shift has further intensified. This has greatly reduced the accountability of the governments.

**Mahfuz Anam:** What's your view? Is there a role of the media here?

**Shashi Tharoor:** We are caught up in a dangerous climate in our politics. Ideas of nationalism have come which say that challenging the elected majority, elected government is somehow anti-national. When you are saying that I am just doing my job as a journalist, and the government wants to put me in jail for it, the government can say "I have the right to do what I want because the people have voted for me. Who are you?" They are citing democracy to undermine democratic practices.

In India, many of our media houses are owned by people with other business interests. It is very easy for the media to subvert the business interests, and those business interests' vulnerabilities to be used against the media. It is very easy to pick up the phone and call the owner if the editor goes out of line.

**Mahfuz Anam:** Where is democracy going?

**Shashi Tharoor:** In a bad direction. Surveillance increased last year since more and more things had to be done online. Even something as basic as trying to protect the health of the population by getting people to download an app that sees who they were in contact with, can be used for surveillance. All of this technology has abetted those who want to undermine democracy. When this technology first came into development, we all saw this as empowering. Technology was supposed to give voices to the voiceless. It seemed to be a democratising element. Today this seems to be an undemocratic development.

**Mahfuz Anam:** As a parliamentarian, are you able to play your constitutionally prescribed role?

**Shashi Tharoor:** Yes and no. I do have the right to speak. Obviously, when the government has a decisive majority it is not obliged to listen. But at least the parliament gives us space to express our views, which can then have a second life on social media, and so far that has not been stopped. But the difficulty with our democratic institutions in India today, is that it is a sobering matter to realise how easily it can be abridged. We have a fervent nationalism that extols every Indian achievement, real or imagined, such that the mildest protest is labelled anti-national or even seditious. I have five different sedition cases against me because of a Tweet, and I have to go to five different states to plead innocence. Almost every independent institution has been hollowed out and made into an instrument to be used for the government's dominance. Political freedom has ceased to be a virtue. Conformity is what the government prefers. Dissenting voices are somehow seen as less fitting in this nationalism.

**Mahfuz Anam:** The re-emergence of religion in our politics is something that is true for the whole South Asia, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Hinduism in India and Islam in Pakistan. Bangladesh is also seeing a similar rise. As a "thought leader" what do you think is our way forward? Why in 2021 does religion get revived?

**Shashi Tharoor:** Pakistan was founded on the assumption that people of a certain religion must have a separate country to live in. India rejected that. In the Indian context, it didn't matter what your religion was, you had the same rights. Now I find that this is being questioned. A question was asked in the parliament when the constitution was being hammered out, stating should India not be a Hindu country. This was debated and rejected by our founding fathers and mothers. It was considered impolite to spread communal messages in society. That has changed. In addition to that, you have a genuine problem because we have constructed a nation with 16 percent Muslim minority and remained largely free of any existential issues because that minority has felt safe.

If you start demonising that minority, accuse them of acting as agents of the hostile neighbour -- if you take 15 percent of your population and say you are a traitor unless you prove otherwise... our survival and success depends on our ability to maintain cohesion. It is the secret to our development. There is something very fundamentally wrong with the communal approach in our society. This communal virus has to be inoculated against. For the first time, politically we have a discourse coming from the people in the establishment that is virulently hostile to certain minorities.

There is a perception assiduously cultivated by rhetoricians from the ruling party that a lot of Indian governance was about appeasement of minorities that must be shed for a more belligerent, assertive Hinduism. People who are the vehicles of that belief are very intolerant of dissent. Critics are routinely urged by ministers to go to Pakistan -- the mere choice of the destination itself is supposed to point to their traitorism. The use of polarising along communal lines in order to win a seat is today's successful tactic by the ruling party. In order to consolidate the vote of the majority, they are othering the minority. The narrative of polarisation is in fertile ground because some people can absorb the fears of certain majorities. This is undermining the biggest strength of democracy which is to bring people of different identities together. The most tranquil places in the world are where there are no minorities but that is not the solution. Part of the arch of democracy is learning to live with people unlike yourself.

**Mahfuz Anam:** As a neighbor, we look with trepidation at the tension between China and India. We would want both the giants to grow with peace and prosperity and then share that prosperity with the rest of the region, but it seems they are going towards an arms race, if not conflicts. Diverting resources from poverty alleviation does worry us as neighbours. Any comments?

**Shashi Tharoor:** Yes, we in India

thought it was good for us and for the region to have good amicable relations, to keep differences on the border on the back burner while developing trade and economic cooperation and other kinds of cooperation, including on the international platform. Our trade went up from \$200 million in 1991 to \$100 billion a year ago. We were absolutely prepared to ignore our differences. Yes, we could not agree on our border, but we said it didn't matter. We will concentrate on the prosperity of our people and both should benefit. It is for us a mystery that China has abandoned that approach and is belligerently flexing its muscles on its own borders within its own country and in Asia. There are horrific stories of mistreatment of Uighur Muslims, assertion over Hong Kong with new security law, intimidation in Taiwan etc, and worst of all, in my point of view, the belligerents on our border. They have taken a large chunk of Bhutan already, they are trying to capture territory on the line of control in India, which is actually a disputed border but neither side believed it should be settled by military force. They have used military force and killed 20 of our soldiers. That is unacceptable. No self-respecting country will accept that. Frankly, the opposition is united with the government on this issue. We cannot accept what China has done unprovoked. We have absolutely no reason to believe that there was any provocation. It clearly seems to be a strategic move by the Chinese to dominate the junction of two rivers for purely military strategic advancements. The Indian soldiers were on the way and they killed them. We should ask China why you are doing this.

**Mahfuz Anam:** There is a specific question on the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. India has a very good relationship with Myanmar, but we think our relationship is closer and more important. We found India hedging its bet way too much, trying to be on both sides of the fence, which has disappointed us.

**Shashi Tharoor:** It has disappointed me too in the opposition and I've said so in parliament. There is unfortunately, to be very blunt, certain bigotry at play here articulating the policy on the Rohingya. The ruling party unfortunately communalised the issue of the Rohingya as you know they are Muslims and the Burmese government is largely Buddhist. The Burmese government, especially in the days when the problem erupted, I knew revered civilians like Aung San Suu Kyi were seen as pro-Indians, so India did not want to antagonise Burma. Myanmar also has natural gas and fuel, and India has trade relations with Myanmar. Moreover, Burma has the capacity to be a nuisance to India as they once were when they were fomenting insurrection, by giving refuge to the insurgent groups, giving them arms and channeling Chinese money. So, they did not want that to happen again. So, there was a hard-headed decision thinking why would we show sympathy to the Muslim refugees and jeopardise our relationship? That's an excessively cynical kind of decision. Still India in normal ways offered refuge to the Rohingya but they have been harassed quite a bit and I am sorry to say that the government has returned some Rohingyas which I find quite unacceptable.

**Mahfuz Anam:** How does the media speak to the power if power defines what is the truth, controls the flow of information, and it is in a position to term what is fake news?

**Shashi Tharoor:** We see this in India where criticism in the media is deemed as being out of touch of the people in reality. The press is hopelessly dismissed as biased, and sold out. I am afraid that contempt is used very often by the government to undermine and dismiss the press. In that atmosphere, how do you speak to the power? I think you have to have the courage if you want to run the risks. Some of the most courageous journalism in India is done by digital websites that practically own no property, have no printing press and have only a few employees and use a lot of freelancers, and are often financed by foundations or non-profits or by subscriptions. They are the ones who are the most courageous, because you have very few vulnerabilities, whereas mainstream media invested millions of rupees and also have business interests. So, standing up, speaking truth to power, depends entirely to the extent of your vulnerabilities to reprisals. Many of the small independent operations are harassed, have cases and sedition charges filed [against them]. Very often, the courageous lawyers represent them without charges. All of these issues will show in many ways that courage of our democracy to stand up for rights, but by no means, one can be complacent about it. This is a battle that is worth waging, but is a battle that can be lost. I wish you the courage and strength in waging the battle in your own country as we are doing in ours.

The Daily Star recognised Izahar Ali and Abdul Aziz for their lifelong contribution to the newspaper industry during its 30th anniversary celebrations yesterday. They were each given a crest and Tk 1 lakh each as a symbol for inspiring those who struggle to enlighten people.

## The Ustad behind the printing machines and serves the people

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After spending almost all his life behind printing machines of different presses, now it is very hard for Abdul Aziz to stay at home in the evenings, when he used to go out for work.



Abdul Aziz

Even after retirement, he often goes to the press to spend time there and chat with former colleagues. But Covid-19 pandemic, took away that option.

"Now I am passing very boring and hard times. Never faced such a situation in my life," he said.

In the evening, he feels like going to the press just to listen to the noises of machines, take in the smell of newly printed newspapers, he said.

"I am so much into newspaper printing work that my wife says I often dream about the press and sleep talk with colleagues from the press," he added.

Aziz, the most experienced press machine operator, former web in-charge of Transcraft printing press, was talking about his long career with different newspaper printing presses.

For the last 42 years, Aziz sacrificed his nights' sleep and carried out one of the most important tasks, final printing of newspapers.

In his long career, he witnessed the growth of the country's newspaper industry.

The machine that printed the country's first magazine in four colours, was operated by Aziz. He earned respect from all employees of printing press industry. They call him "Ustad".

Aziz said he started his career with the daily Ittefaq in 1977 as a press machine assistant when he was just 20.

Even though he was not much educated, he was sincere and responsible and soon became one of the key operators of newspaper printing machines.

In 1982, when publisher of the Dialogue, a new weekly magazine, was looking for an expert and responsible machine operator, Aziz was chosen.

"The Dialogue was the first colour magazine in the country. They imported a modern printing machine from London. So the authorities sent me to London to be trained on how to operate the new web printing machine," he said.

After returning from London, he joined the press of Dialogue as press machine operator. Later, he became the in-charge of the press there.

Eventually, he worked for the daily Bangla Bazar, Manabazamin, and Inqilab. He joined Transcraft printing press in 1998 when Prothom Alo started its journey.

"I started working there since the beginning of the newspaper and continued their till 2019," said Aziz.

He said bringing out newspapers on time is a big responsibility. Any delay in printing process could hamper delivery of newspapers to readers.

"And I did that for more than 40 years. I even lost two of my fingertips while working in a press. But I have never been negligent in my duty," he said.

"I love the noise of the press machine. It is my life," said Aziz with a smile.

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

When Md Izahar Ali became a newspaper hawker in Jashore, the price of a newspaper was only 10 paisa and some papers used to reach Jashore a day later.



Md Izahar Ali

"I am talking about 1958 when I started this profession. I was a 12 year old. Some newspapers used to come from Dhaka and also some from West Pakistan. They used to put the date of the next day on the Dhaka edition of newspaper published from West Pakistan," Izahar said.

"So people would think it is today's newspaper, but actually it was yesterday's edition from West Pakistan," he said.

Izahar became a newspaper agent in 1963.

When he started his agency, only 400 copies of dailies Ittefaq, Azad, The Morning News, The Observer, and then newly launched Sangbad and weeklies Begum and the Holiday used to reach Jashore.

Slowly his business grew. Now Izahar's and two other agencies distribute around 20,000 copies of different newspapers in the district.

"While doing my newspaper business, I got the opportunity to be acquainted to different kinds of people, like politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, students and people of other professions. I realised education is the key," said Izahar.

"So I planned to start a school in our village. I talked to some people from the village and donated a piece of land where we started a school," said Izahar.

"Most of the students of the village were poor. They did not have any ability to pay tuition fees. The school was about to be shut down. So I decided to give a part of my income to pay for the salaries of 11 teachers. I did that for 18 years until the school became a government affiliated school a few years ago," said Izahar.

Now Dakatia High School, initiated by Izahar, is a government school with a two-storied building.

Talking to this correspondent, Izahar was humble. He insisted, "It was the villagers who helped start the school. Otherwise, it would not have been possible."

When The Daily Star correspondent went to Dakatia in the suburbs of Jashore, the villagers explained how Izahar changed their lives in other ways.

The farmers were in trouble with irrigation. So Izahar came up with an idea of forming a farmers' association, which set up a deep tube well.

"Operation of such a tube well is expensive but when nine farmers share the cost, it becomes easier," he said.

Now nearly 50 acres of land, owned by 200 farmers, are irrigated from that well.

Izahar has been in the newspaper distribution business for 62 years but his heart is with the people. "With my little ability, if I could do something for the people, it would be the biggest achievement."

He said he was glad that he was able to give his children good education. "You know what, two of my grandchildren are doctors."

## Fake NIDs fetched

FROM PAGE 1  
It is believed that Halder forged national identity cards bearing the names of non-existent people and later used the cards to have trade licences issued to those non-existent people.

"The addresses used on the trade licences are also non-existent," the official said.

The ACC is looking into allegations that Halder, the managing director of now defunct NRB Global Bank, and his associates laundered over Tk 10,000 crore taken from four non-banking financial institutions (NBFIs) between

2014 and 2019.

He used the names of firms that existed only on papers to take over the NBFIs by buying their shares. He later appointed his aides on key posts at the NBFIs and managed to launder the money with their help, the official added.

The NBFIs ruined by him are International Leasing and Financial Services Ltd (ILFSL), FAS Finance, Reliance Finance, and Peoples Leasing and Financial Services Limited (PLFSL).

The JK Trade International received another loan of Tk 300 crore from FAS

Finance and ILFSL.

A loan defaulter businessman from Chattogram helped Halder in the forgery.

"That businessman sold a five-star hotel in Cox's Bazar to Halder for Tk 84 crore," ACC officials said, adding Halder helped the businessman get Tk 650 crore from different banks.

The businessman also has a five-star hotel in Montenegro which cost Tk 600 crore to build, an ACC source said, adding that Halder invested in the hotel.

ACC source said, "At Jubilee road and Station road branches of One Bank

in Chattogram, they opened several accounts for JK Trade International and one for a firm called BD Trading. The owner of the last company on papers was Irfan Ahmed Khan.

"About Tk 450 crore were laundered between 2014 and 2018 by these organisations," said the official.

An officer said Halder dropped several hundred crores to a bank account in Dubai. The money was laundered out of the country.

In a similar fashion, about Tk 100 crore was sanctioned to an organisation called Drinan. The money was

transferred to an account of Bank Asia's Dhanmondi Branch.

The NIDs used during the transactions were fake, the officers found.

On Thursday, Halder's close associate Sukumar Mridha told a Dhaka court that over 100 people, mostly bankers, had helped Halder execute financial scams.

They included a former chairman and a managing director of two private banks.

Halder came to national discussion during the 2019 crackdown on illegal casinos. The ACC had launched an

investigation into Halder and 42 other people's involvement in the illegal casino business.

On January 25, the ACC filed five cases against 33 people, including Halder, for allegedly laundering over Tk 350 crore taken from the ILFSL.

The graft watchdog on January 8 last year filed a case against Halder over amassing wealth worth Tk 275 crore illegally.

On Thursday, Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit directed all banks to freeze for one month the accounts of Halder and 63 others.

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