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Protect maize farmers' interests

Ensure proper storage, processing facilities

WHILE it is good to know that maize production in Bangladesh has become profitable for our farmers, particularly in the country's northern region, it is disconcerting to note that proper storage and processing facilities for maize still remains a major concern. In the absence of such facilities, farmers are not getting good prices for their produce. According to a report published by this daily yesterday, farmers in Lalmonirhat are getting more interested in growing maize, as it grows on sandy soil and needs less irrigation, and also because it gives a relatively better return compared to some other crops. According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), more than 20,000 families, mostly based in the district's char areas, have achieved food and financial security by growing the crop.

Maize cultivation began in Lalmonirhat district in 1995. At that time, only 150 hectares of land was being used to cultivate it. Over time, about 100,000 hectares of land in the country's northern region has been brought under maize cultivation. Currently, Lalmonirhat produces about one-third of the total maize produced in Bangladesh's northern region.

Since more and more farmers in the northern region are turning towards maize cultivation, the need for proper storage facilities has also grown. According to farmers, while each maund of maize can be sold for around Tk 700-800 during the harvest period in May-June, two to three months later, the price goes up to Tk 1,050-1,200. It means that the traders who buy the crop directly from the farmers during the harvesting period are benefitting more, while for the growers, it's a lost opportunity. Since various feed companies and local buyers purchase maize directly from the farms at fair prices, farmers can sell their produce directly to the buyers if proper storage facilities are ensured.

Farmers across the country in general often have to incur losses, despite having bumper yields of their crops, due to the absence of proper storage facilities. We have seen how vegetable growers across the country suffered for lack of storage facilities during the countrywide shutdown enforced to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Against this backdrop, we think the authorities concerned should increase crop and vegetable storage facilities across the country to protect the interest of farmers. And to protect the maize farmers' interest in the northern region, the authorities should not only build storage facilities, but also set up maize processing centres nearby. Not only will it give farmers the scope to earn more from the crop, but it could also help ensure that Bangladesh can soon become self-sufficient in maize production.

Bangladesh needs more investment in infrastructure

The government should explore all financing options

AT a webinar on Sunday, experts said that Bangladesh needed to have a vibrant bond market to meet the country's requirement for long-term financing for infrastructure development. Additionally, channelling the huge amount of liquidity presently available in the banking sector into bonds could also help to meet our massive infrastructure investment needs. Despite Bangladesh's recent boom in infrastructure development, there is no doubt that the country is still lagging behind most of the developed and developing countries. Moreover, we must remember that the scale of the country's investment must be on par with the future needs of its population, which is clearly many times more than what it has been. Therefore, we couldn't agree more with the experts that Bangladesh should try and utilise every available channel to finance its infrastructure projects.

So far, it has been clear that the amount of local funds currently available is far too inadequate to cover for our infrastructure needs. Depending on the banking sector alone will not suffice. And an over-reliance on foreign funds—whether that be in the form of loans or aid—may be detrimental for our long-term development dreams. That's why it is essential for Bangladesh to build its own financing capacity, while simultaneously looking to increase foreign investments.

What is important to remember is that, in the long run, investing in infrastructure will give us substantial returns in the form of faster economic growth, more job creation, etc. However, that will be possible only if our investments are made smartly. In line with that, Bangladesh must also seek to better utilise its resources. In recent years, cost overruns and time extensions have become the norm when it comes to most of our development projects. That is a major issue that the authorities must immediately address and resolve.

As experts have pointed out, there are many creative ways for Bangladesh to raise funds. That includes availing foreign currency solutions, for which the country has to focus on attracting commercial loans and bond investments. Improving our sovereign credit rating will also help us get better financing deals. Therefore, the authorities have a lot of options to look into for long-term financing. Making proper use of them is now the biggest challenge.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's woeful traffic

With life slowly returning to normal after the pandemic, inhabitants of Dhaka are again suffering due to the city's awful traffic. It is truly shocking how authorities over the years have failed to address this problem, despite the huge losses people have to incur because of it on a regular basis.

Akbar Ali, Dhaka



THE SOUND & THE FURY

SUSHMITA S. PREETHA

It is unlikely to forget the helplessness and fear coursing through his bruised being, as he kept on uttering the words, "Please, brother, I won't write anymore." Stripped off his clothes, his bare body showing clear signs of torture, a traumatised Sarwar thought he was still being held hostage by his abductors as he pleaded for their mercy. He was picked up on his way from work, four days after he published an article alleging that a minister's family had been involved in land grabbing. Since his "reappearance," Sarwar has recounted



Everything that we feared would happen with the enactment of the DSA has already come true.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

the horror of those three "missing" days of his life, when he was held near a railway track and beaten profusely every time a train passed by. Sometimes the beatings were so severe, he thought it might be the end. He heard one of his abductors ask on the phone, "Should I finish him off?" The voice on the other side retorted, "No, keep him alive, so we can teach the other jourmos a lesson."

Sarwar might have thought the worst was over, but as the story goes, it was only the beginning. There have been multiple threats to his life over the course of the year, and two false cases were filed against him, soon after his recovery, by "influential quarters" for his reports, one of which accused him of causing damages

worth Tk 100 crore. On the other hand, the case he filed with the police following his abduction has predictably seen no progress. I say predictably because the police had made no efforts to rescue him back when he was missing, even though his family was contacted at least five times by the abductor(s), using his own mobile phone. We know the police have the surveillance capacity to track phones (from the efficiency with which they track down dissidents and protesters), so what possible explanation could there have been for their ostensible failure to do so in his case?

A "conversation" of Sarwar with five to six policemen, including the officer-in-charge, assistant sub-inspector and sub-inspector of Chattogram Kotwali police station might offer us a clue. During a recent interview with *The Daily Star*, Sarwar recounted how he was interrogated for four and a half hours by the policemen, who essentially tried to dissuade him from pursuing the case further. "Why are you getting yourself in trouble by fighting this case?" "How will you fight the powerful

to re-investigate the case. But given the reach of the vested, powerful quarter that Sarwar has angered, is there any hope at all that justice will be served? Not if we are to believe the Kotwali police—or every other "well-wisher" in Chattogram who has told Sarwar to back off and save himself and his family, before it's too late.

Even a cursory glance through the reports of journalists arrested confirm that a majority were picked up for shedding light on corruption, irregularities or state-sanctioned violations.

The pursuit of justice sounds noble as a rallying cry, but we all know that at the end of the day, our law enforcers are more adept at making criminals out of journalists than finding the criminals who harass, abduct or murder them. We've been (unwilling) witnesses to how the state left no stone unturned to portray photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol as a high-profile criminal—dragging him through the court with his hands cuffed behind his back, and denying him bail 13 times over seven straight months in three cases filed against him under the Digital Security Act (DSA). Yet, one and a half years have passed since he was found at the Benapole border after his enforced disappearance for 53 days, and there hasn't even been a pretence of a follow-up by law enforcers about why and how Kajol went missing, and what, if anything, it had to do with the DSA case filed just a day before his disappearance by a ruling party lawmaker and party activist. Despite repeated calls for investigation, both from national and international quarters, the inaction of the law enforcers speaks volumes.

Meanwhile, without even a shred of repentance, the government has dismissed the untimely death of writer and entrepreneur Mushtaq Ahmed—who was arrested under the DSA and denied bail six times—in custody as a "natural" occurrence. But what is natural about being picked up by Rab for social media posts criticising the government's handling of Covid-19 (not much different to those shared by many of us) and rotting in jail for nine months, without so much as a chance to see his family? What is natural about a 53-year-old, with no previous history

of serious illness, to be dealt the "death penalty" for exercising his constitutional right of freedom of expression, without so much as a trial?

Mushtaq's comrade, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, who was also arrested in the same DSA case, insists that both of them were tortured in police custody. Subsequent probes conducted by the jail authorities, the Gazipur district authorities, and the home ministry did not find any negligence on the part of the authorities. But even if we pay no heed to Kishore's allegation of torture, the state cannot evade responsibility for the unfairness and arbitrariness of Mushtaq's arrest, denial of bail and eventual custodial death. If nothing else, Mushtaq may simply have died from the heartbreak of his beloved country turning into an autocratic state, and in the process turning him into a criminal.

A recent analysis of 668 DSA cases filed over three years by the think tank Centre of Governance Studies shows that 142 journalists were sued during this period, the second highest profession to be targeted after politicians. Interestingly, however, the percentage of journalists arrested (13 percent) were higher than that of politicians (11.3 percent). In many cases, investigation reports are not filed within the stipulated period, and with many of the more used sections of the DSA being non-bailable, the accused are effectively punished in custody even before trial—with Mushtaq paying the ultimate price. Even a cursory glance through the reports of journalists arrested confirm that a majority were picked up for shedding light on corruption, irregularities or state-sanctioned violations.

Much has been said by those who care about the terrifying repercussions of the Digital Security Act—at any rate, as much as can be said without themselves being picked up and tried under it. Everything we feared would happen with the enactment of the DSA—and worse—has already come true. At this point, it feels like I am stuck in a loop, much like in a Kafka novel, writing some variation of the same editorial or op-ed, over and over, demanding justice, asking for authorities to be held responsible, wishing for the DSA to be repealed, and so on. Meanwhile, things just go from bad to worse, with impunity for crimes against journalists—and the public at large—gnawing away at what remains of this elusive thing called the rule of law in this country.

Every so often, I put away the laptop and decry the end of my writing career. What is even the point of writing if we can't write what we want? But then I remember, threatening or tiring us into submission—isn't that what they really want?

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Using a wartime slur to score political points



PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

and abuse to denote those who acted against our struggle for freedom and the Mukti Bahini, and those who helped the Pakistan occupational forces during the war. The Razakars were directly involved with the killings of our intellectuals just before our victory on December 16.

After liberation, Razakars were treated as pariahs in our society. Even their descendants have not been spared of this disgraceful tag, and have had to bear the brunt of the stigma. However, the absence of an official list of Razakars has, more often than not, allowed people and political parties to abuse the term to attack their opponents. A partial list of Razakars was prepared in December 2019, but the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs withdrew it amid huge controversy and criticism, as the flawed list contained the names of many Language Movement veterans and freedom fighters.

For the Awami League, the party which led the country to liberation from the Pakistan occupational forces, a Razakar is a face of anti-liberation and communal force. The largest secular democratic party of the country used this slur to run smear campaigns against the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami as well. Unfortunately, the dubious tag has turned against the ruling party, with its leaders and activists now freely using "Razakar" to slander each other and malign political reputations of inner party rivals, regardless of whether they are actually Razakars or not.

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader himself acknowledged this disturbing trend during a programme at the Sonargaon hotel on October 27. "While scrutinising the candidates vying for nominations for the upcoming union parishad elections, we have observed that the party members are slandering each other with such allegations," Quader said. Expressing his annoyance, he called this phenomenon "insufferable."

The slur "Tui Razakar" ("You are a

Razakar") first gained popularity in vernacular discourse when BTV aired popular writer Humayun Ahmed's drama-series "Bohubrihi" in the late 80s. This was a period when the history and the events of the Liberation War were being dragged through deliberately muddled waters. Distortions of historical facts ran rampant, and open and honest discussions about the events following the Liberation War were filtered through the partisan lenses and censorship. It was at this crucial

However, the popular slogan that was once a call used for the common cause of a secular society got lost in translation over time, because of vested interests. Branding someone as a Razakar has now become, among many other things, a common weapon for grassroots Awami League leaders and activists to blame each other during the ongoing union parishad elections. Many contenders from across the country are alleging that the ruling party is nominating a Razakar or a member of



ILLUSTRATION: STAR GRAPHICS

The accusations of being a "Razakar" that many grassroots members of the ruling party keep throwing at each other has become a headache for the central leaders.

juncture of history that "Bohubrihi" was aired, and the play tactfully uttered the taboo word "Razakar" via the mouth of an unimpeachable being—a parrot. The parrot, trained to be the voice of a censored nation, opportunistically let out shrieks of "Tui Razakar," bringing to the forefront what could not be said.

Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam, who lost her son to the Liberation War in 1971, gave the first push for the trial of war criminals during the 1990s. She led an unprecedented movement in the early 90s to bring the perpetrators of 1971 war crimes to justice. She led the formation of *Gono Adalat* (People's Court) on March 26, 1992, where former Jamaat-e-Islami chief Ghulam Azam, the mastermind of the atrocities during the war, was tried.

In 2013, this slur again resurfaced, as a rallying call, a slogan during the Shahbagh movement, through which justice against war crimes gained momentum. Demonstrators let out blood-curdling battle cries of "Tui Razakar" to unite the nation to take a stand against war criminals.

a Razakar family as its candidates. They are holding press conferences, bringing out processions in their local area, and even sending written allegations to party chief Sheikh Hasina's Dhanmondi office, which the Awami League general secretary mentioned in his remarks on October 27.

For instance, the grassroots workers of Tambulpur union in Rangpur's Pirgachha upazila wrote a letter to the Rangpur union president and general secretary of the party, asking to take action against Shaheen Sardar, general secretary of the party in the union unit, alleging that his father had been involved with the Peace Committee, which was formed by the Pakistan Army to help them against the Bengali freedom fighters during the war in 1971. Shaheen Sardar received Awami League nomination for the chairman post of Tambulpur union parishad.

The same allegation has been raised against the Awami League candidates in Bancharampur upazila of Brahmanbaria, Monirampur upazila of Jashore, Sujanagar upazila of Pabna, and some other districts. This scenario is nothing new. This

happened before, during the ruling party's student wing Chhatra League's central council election in 2018. At that time, Chhatra League leaders and activists accused each other of being affiliated with Razakar families or the BNP student wing, Chhatra Dal.

If, for the sake of the argument, we assume that the allegations raised by the grassroots leaders are true, then the next pertinent and very serious question is: How have so many Razakars infiltrated the Awami League, a party that led the Liberation War successfully and claims to be the flagbearer of the Liberation War spirit? And how did those intruders get party portfolios?

In the recent past, the Awami League leaders, on many occasions, alleged that many opportunist activists from Jamaat and its student wing Chhatra Shibir infiltrated the party and were now creating chaos within the party.

As the grassroots leaders are branding each other as Razakars and even filing written complaints to party high-ups against each other, it appears that these intruders have been and are being rehabilitated within the party, despite Awami League President and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the rest of the party top brass repeatedly warning that they should not allow "infiltrators into the party."

In 2020, the party had claimed that they had prepared a list of infiltrators and would take actions against them. But no action has followed that promise yet.

The Awami League has been in power for 13 years, which is the longest period for a party to run the government in Bangladesh. Political analysts argue that if a party remains in power for a long time, it is common for people from different platforms to infiltrate it and commit many misdeeds using the ruling party's name. And the ruling party bears the brunt of it. There is also the fact that, in the absence of an opposition, a section of the ruling party members become corrupt.

The onus is certainly on the Awami League to stop the infiltration and rehabilitations of communal forces within the party, if it is to maintain its image as the home of liberal and free-thinking people. But the big question is: Who is going to tie the bell around the cat's neck?

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