

# BTRC's independence is key to innovative telecom marketplace



MOINUL ZABER

THE draft of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act, 2021 does not have the word “independent” in relation to the BTRC, according to a report by *The Daily Star* published on September 7, 2021. The report says if this act gets approved by the government, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) will have to wait for the telecommunication ministry's green light for most of its decisions. The original act, which was implemented back in 2001, gave the independent commission the power to issue or revoke telecommunications licences, fix tariffs, allocate frequencies or make decisions on call charges. The first blow came in 2010 when an amendment to the act made it obligatory for the BTRC to “take approval of” the ministry before they could make decisions on licences or set tariffs. Now, if the new act gets approved, the BTRC will have to get the ministry's approval for almost “everything it plans to do.”

This article is a pledge to the Bangladesh government to reconsider their stand on this issue. If we want our dream of “Digital Bangladesh” to be realised, then we must ensure the “de facto” independence of the BTRC. I will explain why.

As a dynamically changing marketplace, shaped by new disruptive technologies that bombard us every day, telecommunications is now a domain of experts who have the knowledge of both technology and society.

The growth of this marketplace

depends largely on the outlook and versatility of the regulatory regime. This is the reason why the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a specialised agency of the United Nations, tracks the versatility of the regulatory conditions across the world. They rank the countries based on the parameters of regulatory authority, regulatory mandate, condition of the regulatory regime and the competition framework. Between 2007 and 2020, Bangladesh has improved considerably in all these parameters (although, in comparison, most of the peers have done better).

Among the parameters, regulatory mandate that indicates how free the BTRC is has been somewhat satisfactory, while competition framework has remained far below the acceptable level. (Readers who are interested to know more can always visit the ITU's ICT regulatory tracker.) However, if the new draft law gets approved and implemented, our ranking will surely fall. This is because healthy competition and active regulation in the



If the new telecom regulatory act is passed and implemented, service delays may become a major issue for the BTRC.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

marketplace are the keys to a prosperous telecommunications marketplace. The telecommunications ministry in Bangladesh, which also oversees businesses at different verticals of the marketplace while also regulating the regulator, distorts the market condition. The new draft law will only aggravate the situation.

Back in 2012, with my adviser Prof Marvin Sirbu, I co-authored a research paper that showed how regulatory decisions shape telecommunications marketplace. In a subsequent paper, I showed that regulatory decisions are shaped by the institutional structure of the regulator. In short, the regulators who can take independent decisions,

have the authority to manage their own financial state, and have the required staffing for decision-making, can make decisions that would have positive impacts on the telecommunications marketplace. There are several other experts who have shown that the “actual” (*de facto*) independence—as opposed to “on paper” (*de jure*) independence—of the regulatory organisations make a huge difference in building a positive and innovative telecommunications marketplace.

There are several important tasks at hand for the telecommunications ministry of Bangladesh. We need to focus on making e-governance resident-centric, automate various governmental

services, get rid of unnecessary use of paper and red tapes, educate people with the effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools, ensure availability of infrastructure, take measures to ensure cybersecurity and personal privacy, and, above all, we need to make sure that the Bangla language can be used as the de facto language while we increase the use of the ICT tools. All these tasks need the telecommunications ministry to be the facilitator, sometimes even as a market player—but not as the regulator. It is unnatural to think that the ministry will always make unbiased decisions that might leave its businesses worse off. Therefore, the regulators need to be independent so that other market entities find the market vibrant, and innovation is sustained.

In a few months, Bangladesh plans to roll out the 5G technology. However, unlike the previous generations, 5G will make the technologies more ubiquitous that may improve the quality of life, but will also increase the hazards related to security and privacy. This means the regulator needs to be fast, proactive, innovative, and equipped with adequately trained staff. Looking at the regulators around the world, we can be sure about one thing—independence is the key.

Our telecommunications ministry has too much on its plate; they should focus on what they already are dealing with, and not on taking on more responsibilities—especially when there is a fully-fledged regulatory body already in place.

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## No Apologies Necessary



ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

IT saddens and maddens me when I hear speakers making it a point to announce that they will be speaking in Bangla—to a Bangla-speaking audience. Think about it. Have

you ever heard a native English speaker announce that he will be speaking in English to an audience that understands English? Granted that some things are better said in one language than another, or shall I say, in one's mother tongue rather than in a second language. But do such announcements not make certain assumptions about the audience? While the speaker may be more comfortable in one language over another, do such declarations not question the intelligence of the audience? Are such announcements really necessary?

My formative years were spent among a community of people who altogether could speak over 525 languages. These people switch and mix languages all the time. It is a natural phenomenon for bilinguals or multilinguals. So language was never something to think about before I spoke. And I, too, learnt to use whatever language came naturally; I still do so. We learn to speak to communicate our ideas and thoughts, our feelings and emotions, our needs and wants. If the language we use to express ourselves is comprehensible to our audience, should it matter which language we use?

I definitely learnt Bangla from my mother—she was the one who read stories and poetry to me every day as she put me to bed—but it was my father who taught me to love the language consciously. I started my schooling in

Nigeria, where the official language is English, but where I had to learn two local languages alongside (just don't ask how much I actually picked up!). With my friends and classmates—Nigerians, Ghanaians, Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Polish—I spoke English. At home, with my parents, and with the Bangladeshi aunts and uncles, I spoke Bangla. I never thought about it. I was never

and write Bangla. He bought me a set of the Class 5 Bangla textbooks, taught me the alphabet, and rudimentary reading. I took those books back with me to Nigeria and pored over them on my own. I tried to figure out the words, often mispronouncing them, more often misunderstanding them, but I did not give up. I don't know when I became able to read and write fluently, but by the time I was to sit for my O Level



Language is a tool—one that is meant to make our lives easier.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

told that I must use one language at home and one language outside. I did it because it came naturally. At home, with my siblings, I spoke a mixed code where we made up our own constructions (“Can you *makhano* my *bhaat*?” I would ask my older sister sometimes). It didn't matter because we understood each other, and it happened organically.

We would visit Bangladesh every two years, and when I was in fourth grade, my cousin decided I should learn to read

examinations, my father decided Bangla was to be one of my subjects. So, in 1988, I became the only (possibly the first) candidate to sign up for Bangla in Nigeria—the only one because, despite our proud linguistic heritage, no one in the Bangladeshi community there saw the importance of or necessity for formally teaching their children their mother tongue. My exam was scheduled on the same day as the Hindi exam which, in contrast to my situation, had

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several candidates. I waited alone at one side of the room for my question paper, but the invigilator, after going in and out of the room several times, finally said my question paper hadn't arrived! Somehow the exam authorities had overlooked this single candidate for Bangla. So I had to sit for it the following year with my A Levels. I questioned my father's choices then; why did I have to be the only kid taking the Bangla exam? Why was I burdened with an extra subject? Why did I have to go to the exam hall when my friends were home? My father had always taught my siblings and I that, as Bangladeshis, we must know our language; I realised much later that this was one of the ways he had chosen to teach me to love my mother tongue.

Language, however, became an issue when we returned to Bangladesh and I applied for university. Not having any idea about the admission process, I enrolled in a coaching centre to prepare for the architecture admission test. The instructor began to teach me maths in Bangla, and I came close to screaming, because while I knew enough Bangla to communicate, read, and write, I had no knowledge of Bangla scientific or mathematical terms. Within a few days, advised by wise relatives, I turned my back on thoughts of becoming an engineer or an architect, and set my sights on the English department. Finally, I thought, I wouldn't have to deal with Bangla anymore, because by

now, I felt quite antagonistic towards the language. But I was wrong. I soon found that my classmates, during at least the first several weeks, spoke to each other in formal Bangla. My exposure to Bangla had been domestic and I only spoke colloquially. I thought if I spoke Bangla, they would look down on me. But if I spoke English, they would think I was showing off. I became self-conscious and withdrawn until I gained enough confidence to express myself in my own way, when I stopped thinking about the language I used. And I simply spoke.

And I speak. I mix languages. I switch languages as they roll off my tongue. If my listener is capable of comprehending me in multiple languages, I make the best use of that opportunity. If I can express myself in the best possible way in multiple languages, I don't sell myself short or short-change my audience by adhering to one tongue. I make no announcements. To declare that I am about to switch implies that my audience may not be able to follow along. I make no such assumptions. Language is a tool, and a tool is meant to make our lives easier. The tool for communication, therefore, should be fully taken advantage of. So I do not, and will not, apologise for speaking in multiple tongues, because my goal is communication—in comfort—for all.

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QUOTABLE Quote



WANGARI MAATHAI (1940-2011) Kenyan activist

In a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see today between human rights, democracy and peace.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

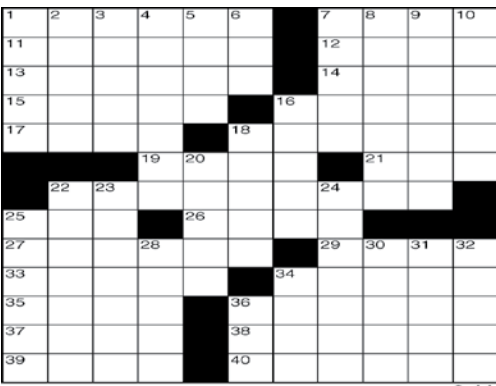
- 1 Red color
- 7 Freshwater fish
- 11 Come in
- 12 Neighborhood
- 13 Put on, as a play
- 14 Comedian
- Youssef
- 15 What “x” sometimes means
- 16 Wanderer
- 17 Vast expanses
- 18 Bach work
- 19 Nicholas II, for one
- 21 Far from cordial
- 22 Yeti's cousin
- 25 Gear part
- 26 Take apart
- 27 Henry Fielding book

- 29 Trapper's item
- 33 Leafy lunch
- 34 Bile producer
- 35 Brewpub choices
- 36 Fake front
- 37 Shopping aid
- 38 Maine park
- 39 Lip
- 40 Let up

#### DOWN

- 1 Galleon poles
- 2 Bandleader
- Shaw
- 3 O'Neill work
- 4 Assimilates
- 5 Preparation times
- 6 Checkers side
- 7 Leslie of “Gigi”

- 8 Language of biblical times
- 9 Boxer's second chance
- 10 Busy time at the bank
- 16 Org. that tracks Santa
- 18 Hot spot
- 20 Ten-armed swimmer
- 22 Kenya neighbor
- 23 Eternal
- 24 In the news
- 25 Cellist Pablo
- 28 Survives
- 30 Skirt
- 31 Acted the usher
- 32 Picked up the tab
- 34 Dolly stuff
- 36 Remote



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



### BETTER BAILEY

by Mort Walker



### BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



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