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Political parties must stop raising thugs

They, too, are liable for the misdeeds of their student activists

THE first judicial ruling on the brutal murder of a student has been delivered. Twenty students of Buet have been sentenced to death for their direct involvement in the murder of Abrar Fahad, a second-year student of the country's premier engineering university, who was beaten to death. Five other students have also been sentenced to life imprisonment by the court for their involvement in the grisly murder that shook the country in October 2019. We appreciate the strong message delivered by the court through this verdict. Without commenting on the merit of the case, we would, however, like to express our sadness at the fact that 20 young people are now facing death penalty.

Right now, we would like to concentrate on the message sent out by the teachers: to end criminality in the name of student politics. In the case of Abrar's death, 12 of the accused were members of the Buet wing of Bangladesh Chhatra League, while the rest were their followers. Over the years, we have seen the student wings of the ruling parties becoming increasingly more violent and involved in all forms of criminal activities. Whenever a party comes to power, we see their affiliated student wing terrorising university campuses and taking over their dormitories. Our once glorious student politics has now become a hostage for criminal elements. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our independence, it is a great shame that the student movement, which played such a pivotal role in the emancipation of our people, has been reduced to this.

At this lowest point for our student politics, we have to restore civility back into our universities. We have to take this moment to address the moral degradation of values that is taking place at our educational institutions. For years now, we have been witnessing how politicians and major political parties have been using student activists as cronies for their criminal agendas. This is turning more and more young people on the path to becoming hardened criminals.

The misuse of student activists by their political leaders and parties must stop. As we lament the ruthless and criminal behaviour of the ruling party's student activists, we cannot help but wonder the role of their political backers in all of this. At the end of the day, all political parties are responsible for using student organisations as a factory for raising goons to serve their ill interests. Therefore, we call on all our major political parties to self-reflect and bring such practices to an end, so that no more innocent lives have to be lost in the hands of their party activists.

Rising inequality a cause for concern

Planners must address the glaring wealth gap

IT is flustering news that only one percent of Bangladesh's population is in possession of 16.3 percent of the total national income. This fact was revealed in the report titled "World Inequality Report 2022," released by the World Inequality Lab in Paris. The latest update of the index, published on December 7, showed that the figures did not change much from the previous year, but clearly indicated how income inequality had been rising since the 1980s. In 1981, the share of pre-tax national income of the top one percent of people was 11.8 percent, while the bottom 50 percent held 20 percent of the wealth.

According to a UN study, "one of the consequences of inequality within societies is slower economic growth. In unequal societies, with wide disparities in areas such as health care and education, people are more likely to remain trapped in poverty, across several generations." When we look at the Bangladesh perspective, we see that the root causes of inequality have not been removed. For example, Bangladesh did not create the desired number of employment opportunities for its large number of unemployed youths; also, it did not spend enough on the health and education sectors and on social safety net programmes.

As a result, the number of poor is increasing day by day and also the number of rich is increasing proportionally. It has been noted by experts that even during the pandemic, people have gone from rich to richer. Economists and social researchers tend to agree that inequality has been increasing for years as the country's GDP is not increasing inclusively. They suggest addressing the incidence of corruption and weak taxation structure, which are contributing to the rising spectre of inequality. A great deal has been deliberated on the issue of wide-ranging corruption in the country and its impact on the economy. But, despite some small steps taken towards addressing the issue, the enormity of the burden remains hanging around the neck of the nation like the proverbial "dead albatross."

It is a common feeling that merely wishing the inequality index to go away will not happen for anyone. Pragmatic planning to address issues like global warming, migration, adoption of technology, and providing financial support to the sectors involved in income-generating activities must happen at the right time.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No faith in e-commerce

People became used to e-commerce platforms during Covid-19. At the beginning, these companies delivered as they promised. But with time, they started a Ponzi scheme: they took advance payment from new consumers to repay the existing customers. Then, officials from these companies started to run away, and the customers were left to suffer. The government has intervened and started setting new guidelines for the sector. However, the damage has already been done; people have lost faith in these platforms.

Md Iftakhar Ahmed, student, North South University

Why the chasm between state commitments and access to rights?



C R ABRAR

DECEMBER 10 marks the Human Rights Day (HRD). It was on this day that a landmark document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), was proclaimed by the United Nations

(UN) General Assembly in Paris in 1948 as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. Not only have most states in their constitutions espoused the tenets of the UDHR, but the document has also been the source of at least 70 human rights treaties at global and regional levels.

The principles of equality, non-discrimination, justice, accountability, diversity, participation, and the rule of law are some of the core blocks on which the UDHR rests. States and societies that ensure protection and promotion of human rights for everyone are not only more resilient and sustainable, but are also better equipped to withstand challenges of all kinds—including wars, pandemics, and the climate crisis. The successful attainment of the much celebrated 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with concomitant commitment to "leave no one behind" makes it mandatory for the states that they respect and promote rights and dignity of everyone, irrespective of their status.

While the UDHR encompasses a whole range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, which were subsequently expanded through various international human rights treaties, this essay will essentially examine the status of enjoyment of the freedoms of assembly and expression by people in Bangladesh. The UDHR acknowledges that "(e)veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression ... without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Article 18). It also guarantees that "(e)veryone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association" (Article 19).

Both these principles have been further elaborated in a number of international treaties that Bangladesh is a state party to. As a member state of the UN, the country is obliged to honour each and every article of the declaration as well as the provisions of those treaties. Needless to say, the principles laid out in the UDHR have also been enshrined in the country's constitution, the supreme law of the land. Hence, it is incumbent on the state of Bangladesh to ensure that its citizens enjoy all those rights and freedoms without encumbrance. However, a cursory examination of the human rights situation pertaining to the freedoms of assembly and expression prevailing in the country leads one to surmise that there exists a wide chasm between the state commitments and the lived experiences of citizens.

Though the right to peaceful assembly has been guaranteed in Article 19 of the UDHR as well as the Article 37 of the constitution, it has increasingly become restricted in the country. Under the law, if political parties and organisations plan to hold rallies, meetings, and marches, they are required to secure prior permission from the police commissioners in the metropolitan cities and superintendents of police at the district level. In the past, granting such permission was a routine matter; over more than a decade, the applicants find it increasingly difficult to secure permission. The reasons for refusal of permission are not communicated.

Experiences show that, while the ruling party and its associate organisations do not face any problem in holding public programmes, opposition political parties have reported facing severe restrictions (Prothom Alo, November 26, 2021). There have been instances in which opposition

permission, police action and attacks by pro-government loyalists. On several instances, leaders and activists were detained, imprisoned and charged for holding unlawful meetings, creating public disorder and the like. The attack on civic protests marked a new low when a number of people protesting the visit of a foreign leader were killed or injured by police fire and arrested in different parts of the country. On March 14, 2021, during a press conference, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) banned political programmes during the state celebrations of independence, declaring that parties that would fail to comply "will be considered as traitors" (Dhaka Tribune, March 14, 2021).

Freedom of expression/speech is another fundamental prerequisite of any democratic polity and has been recognised as such (Article 18 of UDHR). Yet, over the decades, this has been subjected to serious erosion under successive regimes. Despite

also come in handy to tame the press. The Special Powers Act, in particular, accords substantive powers to state functionaries to detain individuals—including journalists and whistleblowers—for committing "prejudicial acts." The relatively recent legislations such as the Information and Communication Act (ICT), 2006 and the DSA have taken a serious toll on freedom of expression—including that of the media.

Apart from legislative measures, the state can exercise control over the media by exercising its discretion on issuance of licence, directing the flow of advertisements, and influencing the formats and contents of reports/programmes through "informal advice," a practice that has its roots during the military dictatorships.

In recent times, the DSA has turned out to be the most important instrument to control freedom of expression. Quoting the Department of Prisons, a recent Amnesty International (AI) report informs that 433 individuals have been imprisoned under the DSA as of July 11, 2021. The report further informs that more than 1,300 cases have been filed against about 2,000 people under the law, and nearly 1,000 people have been arrested since the law was enacted in October 2018. Amnesty claims more than 100 journalists have been sued under the law between January 2019 and July 2021, and at least 40 of them have been arrested. The vague wording of the law provides the state agencies the scope to clamp down on dissenting voices on social media, websites and other digital platforms. The punishment that can be meted out under the law extends to life imprisonment.

In addition to the legislative instruments, journalists and dissenting voices face threats and intimidation from various official and private quarters as well. The absence of an enabling environment that encourages free and unfettered reporting and analysis leads to the practice of self-censorship. Various national and international media watch reports have time and again expressed concerns about the constraints in which journalists, particularly those at the grassroots level, have to work in Bangladesh.

Thus, freedoms of expression and assembly have largely remained a chimera for the Bangladeshis. This failure of the state to uphold its constitutional and international legal obligations in upholding the rights to free speech and freedom of assembly amounts to undermining the very spirit of the Liberation War. The Human Rights Day exhorts people to stand up for their own rights and those of others. The onus, therefore, rests on all conscientious citizens, organisations, civic bodies, learned bodies and academics, artists, poets, and writers' guilds to contest and challenge the state and hold it accountable. Being humans, we all are innately entitled to enjoy these rights—rights are no charity.

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While the freedom to express one's opinion and dissent is ensured in our constitution, the reality on the ground says otherwise.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

rallies organised after securing due permission were subjected to attacks by the police or supporters of the ruling party and its associate organisations. Those include denial of or very delayed granting of permission, calling of parallel meetings on the same venue and date by the ruling party or its associates, imposition of "virtual curfew" on the day of the event and, in some cases, severance of all road and railway links, monitoring passengers on trains, creating obstacles in securing accommodation, and public requisition of buses and motor launches to disrupt the flow of supporters (Prothom Alo, November 26, 2021).

In addition, spontaneous rallies and demonstrations by groups of students and the youth, mobilised on issues such as revoking the VAT on student fees, road safety, and government service quota reform, were also subjected to denial of

the constitutional acknowledgement of those freedoms, those were curtailed through continuation of colonial vestiges, such as the provisions of the Penal Code, 1860 pertaining to defamation and sedition, and the Official Secrets Act, 1923. The defamation provision in the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018 and the Penal Code are legal instruments to intimidate journalists and free-thinking individuals. In most countries, defamation is a civil offence; in contrast, it is a criminal offence in Bangladesh. Section 198 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1898 explicitly stipulates that the plaintiff has to be an aggrieved party; in practice, defamation cases admitted by magistrates were filed by individuals who had no *locus standi* to file them.

Other legislative instruments such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act, 1973 and the Special Powers Act, 1974

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The global coal hypocrisy



SHASHI THAROOR

INDIA has somehow emerged as the villain of last month's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), blamed for resisting cuts to coal consumption even as toxic air envelops its capital,

New Delhi. The country's supposed crime in Glasgow was to join China in insisting on a last-minute change to the conference's final declaration, in which countries pledged to "phase down" rather than "phase out" coal. For that, India, whose per capita carbon dioxide emissions are a fraction of those of the world's leading emitters, was widely criticised for obstructing the global fight against climate change.

The irony is that India has done far less to intensify the planet's greenhouse effect than either China or the developed West. True, the country is a major coal consumer, and derives about 70 percent of its energy from it. But, as recently as 2015, at least a quarter of India's population couldn't take for granted what almost everyone in the developed world can: to flick a switch on a wall and be bathed with light.

Worse, Indians are among the biggest victims of climate change, periodically enduring devastating floods and unseasonal droughts, in addition to choking on polluted air. Delhi is a poster child for poor air quality, which hovers between "severe" and "hazardous" for much of the year. The causes include PM2.5 particles emitted from coal-fired power plants, fumes from dense traffic, industrial pollution, and the burning of crop stubble by farmers in the neighbouring states—all combined with winter fog.

But given India's traditional role as a leading voice of the developing world, it became the face of the last-minute change of language at COP26. The "phase down"

wording regarding coal consumption had already appeared in a US-China bilateral climate agreement, signed earlier in the conference. Nevertheless, India became the focus of global opprobrium.

India does not deserve to be the fall guy. For starters, the country has 17 percent of the world's population but generates only seven percent of global CO2 emissions. (China, with 18.5 percent of the world's people, generates 27 percent of emissions, and the US, with less than five percent of

Copenhagen in 2009), and refused to transfer advanced green technologies. And COP26 singled out the coal used by developing countries, not the oil and gas used extensively in the West.

India's energy requirements are expected to increase faster than those of any other country in the next two decades. Since COP21 in Paris in 2015, India has announced ambitious plans to scale up its production and use of renewable energy, which currently accounts for only 18 percent of its electricity generation. And at COP26, India complemented its explicit commitment to phase down coal with a pledge to achieve net zero emissions by 2070.

India has also updated its nationally determined contributions (NDCs), which it must fulfil by 2030. The country is now pledging to increase its installed renewable energy capacity to 500 gigawatts (GW), and meet 50 percent of its energy requirements from non-fossil-fuel sources. Furthermore, India aims to reduce its CO2 emissions by one billion tonnes and lower its emission intensity (which measures emissions per unit of economic growth) by 45 percent from the 2005 levels.

For now, there is no viable alternative to coal. Blessed with abundant sunshine, India has become a solar power enthusiast and plans to generate 40GW of green energy from rooftop solar installations by 2022. But it has achieved barely 20 percent of that target so far. Vast amounts of solar energy cannot be generated overnight, and battery storage remains expensive, while green hydrogen technology and facilities are still unavailable in India. Wind energy is minuscule, and the country lacks significant oil and gas reserves. Nuclear power accounts for less than two percent of India's electricity, and nuclear power plants constantly face opposition from the residents of surrounding areas.

As a result, India's performance on greenhouse gas emissions will get worse before it gets better. According to a study by BP, India's share of global emissions

will increase to 14 percent by 2040. Coal will by then account for 48 percent of the country's primary energy consumption, and renewable energy only 16 percent. And because of India's high dependence on agriculture, which engages nearly two-thirds of its population, and its vast number of cattle, the country did not sign the global deal announced at COP26 to reduce methane emissions.

Of course, reducing emissions is not the only way to combat climate change. India plans to bring one-third of its land area under forest cover, and to plant enough trees by 2030 to absorb an additional 2.5-3 billion tonnes of atmospheric CO2. It has made a start, with forest cover increasing by 5.2 percent between 2001 and 2019, though progress has been uneven, with the northeast losing forest cover while the south visibly improves.

Still, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that achieving global net zero emissions by 2050 is the minimum needed to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Climate Action Tracker calculates that—based on the countries' current 2030 climate targets—the world faces a temperature rise of 2.4 degrees Celsius by 2100. Some scientists warn that global warming could eventually exceed four degrees Celsius.

If this happens, the resulting heat waves, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels would cause devastating loss of human life, mass extinction of animal and plant species, and irreversible damage to our ecosystem. India would be a major victim of such a calamity. The country will therefore make a good faith effort to help avert climate disaster—but only within the limits of what it can feasibly do.

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