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Migrants return to Malaysian labour markets

A positive development that must come with renewed efforts to tackle labour exploitation

IT is good to know that Malaysia will soon open its labour market for Bangladeshi workers, after more than three years of suspension of the process. Reportedly, Bangladesh and Malaysia will sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) today in this regard. While we appreciate the likely reopening of the migration process, we would also like to see the major issues that stopped labour migration from the country in the first place solved before we send our workers to the country again.

The Malaysian government froze recruitment from Bangladesh in 2018 following allegations of labour exploitation, high costs of migration and the syndication of a few agents. Now that the process is likely to reopen, the question is: Will the two governments take the necessary measures to stop these from happening again?

The high costs of labour migration is an issue that must be addressed immediately by our authorities. According to experts, the migration cost in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world, while our workers earn one of the lowest. Reportedly, it takes more than Tk four lakh for a worker to migrate to Malaysia, although the government-fixed rate is much lower. The reasons behind the high costs, as identified by experts, are the extra payments that our workers have to make to intermediaries at various stages of the process and the "visa trade"—middlemen and agents in labour-sending and receiving countries who "sell and buy" work visas, which is prohibited by law.

There is also the issue of syndication. Since Malaysia is not keeping the market open for all Bangladeshi agents and will only select a few of them to operate, this again creates risks of a syndicate taking over the whole migration process, leading to increased migration charges and further labour exploitation. Besides, Malaysia currently does not follow the ethical recruitment model, according to which, employers should pay the full charge of labour migration and the workers will repay them subsequently. Since we are already sending our workers to Qatar under this model, we should also negotiate with the Malaysian government to do the same.

Moreover, the issue of low payment of our workers must be addressed. Although our migrants are working in many sectors that are risky and require extremely hard labour—such as in construction, mining and quarrying—they are not being paid accordingly. According to the Cost of Migration Survey-2020 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Bangladeshi workers need nearly 18 months on average to recover the money they pay for migration, while workers from other countries such as India and Nepal need much less time to repay their debt. Therefore, we must bargain for higher pay for our workers while negotiating with the Malaysian authorities, as well as other labour-receiving countries.

These are the few issues that need to be addressed by our authorities on a priority basis in order to check the high migration cost, reduce labour exploitation and prevent any syndicates from doing illegal business.

Slow death of a river

Recover what is left of the Old Khowai

THE name of Old Khowai River is to be found in the history books of this land, alongside many other mighty rivers of the country. Unfortunately, it is perhaps on its way to being added to a list of dead rivers unless something is done immediately to save it.

This once flowing river, winding through Habiganj town, is now slowly choking to death from the garbage that is indiscriminately dumped into it. The level of pollution in the drastically narrowed down river has taken a serious turn as municipal waste is also being dumped there. And to add to its woes, some unscrupulous people are grabbing the land on the dried up riverbed and on its banks with total impunity, despite the fact that eviction drives were initiated in 2019.

The Old Khowai River, in its heyday, used to be the lifeline of the district town. It was 250 to 300 feet wide and 25 to 40 feet deep. Today, it has shrunk to 20 to 150 feet in width, and a lack of water makes it barely navigable. Waste materials are rotting in its shallow water, polluting the surrounding environment as well. Reportedly, a number of structures, from private residential ones to government buildings and a multi-storey general hospital, are being built on the banks of the river. It beggars belief that such illegal activities are being carried out right before the eyes of the relevant authorities.

For years, this daily has been persistently reporting on the stories of encroachment, land-grabbing and pollution that have led to the sad demise of many other rivers around the country. In almost all of these instances, we have found the fingerprints of local influential people, operating under the protection of politically powerful groups. In the case of the Old Khowai, we have also found the presence of such quarters behind the destruction of the river.

Environmental activists have also pointed out that the river plays a vital role in maintaining the town's rainwater harvesting and ecological balance during monsoon. However, it can hardly play its due role in the present moribund state. Unless steps are taken immediately, the river will soon be heading towards death.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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We demand a public library

In my village, around 3,500 residents have to work hard to send their children to school. But it is a matter of sorrow for us that we don't have a public library. Students have nothing except their academic books, so how will they broaden their minds? We request the authorities to address this issue urgently.

Fazle Rabbi, *Monohorpur, Kuliarchar, Kishoreganj*

SANCTIONS ON RAB

Does it reflect a changing US foreign policy?

MUBASHAR HASAN

DOES the news of the Biden administration's sanction on the elite force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and seven officials indicate a changing US foreign policy under the Biden administration? The logic, the context, and the implications of Biden's policy depict that the US has shifted the core ideological spectrum of its foreign policy from counter-terrorism and increasing security to democracy and human rights.

Sceptics may downplay any analysis using ideology as a core tenet of US policy. Still, historical analysis of US foreign policy shows that a value-based ideological pattern has dominated its engagement with the world for years.

After the Second World War, the US established liberal global order. It singlehandedly helped rebuild war-torn Europe through the Marshall Fund and set up the Bretton Woods Institutions to facilitate international cooperation, negotiation, and means of dispute resolution. The Cold War tested the limits of the professed capitalist system against communism, though the US came out victorious by championing the ideas of democracy, free speech, the rule of law, a free economic system and human rights. Even the highly controversial War on Terror was also an ideological war, where the Bush administration's so-called "Freedom Agenda" framed terrorism as an outcome of suppressed democracy in the Middle East. At the time, President Bush infamously said, "either you are with us or with the terrorists."

However, the decline of democracy worldwide in the last decade has caused significant setbacks to the US and its allies. Emphasis on wars as a means to establish dominance over the enemy and resolve conflict did not do the US any favour, as one could see from the case of Afghanistan.The deaths of hundreds and thousands of civilians in the wars of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the mass movement of refugees, show the limitations of war.

Meanwhile, there was a stable rise of autocracy as an ideology for governments worldwide, who used brutal force to suppress dissent while championing the idea of "growth and stability."

The Democracy Report 2021 of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index points out that "autocracies are now homes of (the) world's 68 percent population" while "liberal democracies diminished over the past decade from 41 countries to 32, with a population share of only 14 percent." The V-dem index collects data on "voting rights, clean elections, equality before the law, constraints on the executive, and freedom of association and expression"—one of the largest-ever social science data collection efforts with a database containing over 28.4 million data points.

V-Dem notes that "the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990." In its latest report, Washington-based Freedom House too observed that "democracy's defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes," and that has "shifted the international balance in favour of tyranny."

Against this backdrop, on February 4, 2021, US President Biden, in a speech delivered at the US state department, said: "American people are going to emerge from this moment stronger, more determined, and better equipped to unite the world in fighting to defend democracy." Subsequently, the US Interim National Security Strategy Guidance was published in March 2021. This critical policy document claims to chart "a new course of foreign policy and national security."

It placed significant emphasis on "defending the democratic values" and notes that "defending democratic values does not end in the [American] shore," as "authoritarianism is on the global march." It also emphasises alliance-building to revitalise democracy globally. The policy outlined that the idea of democracy is under threat as the promotion of alternative models of authoritarian governance is on the march. While it is made clear that the policy is framed upon defending democracy, it is arguably targeted at China.

Biden's Democracy Summit is a step towards realising this set of national security policy goals, where

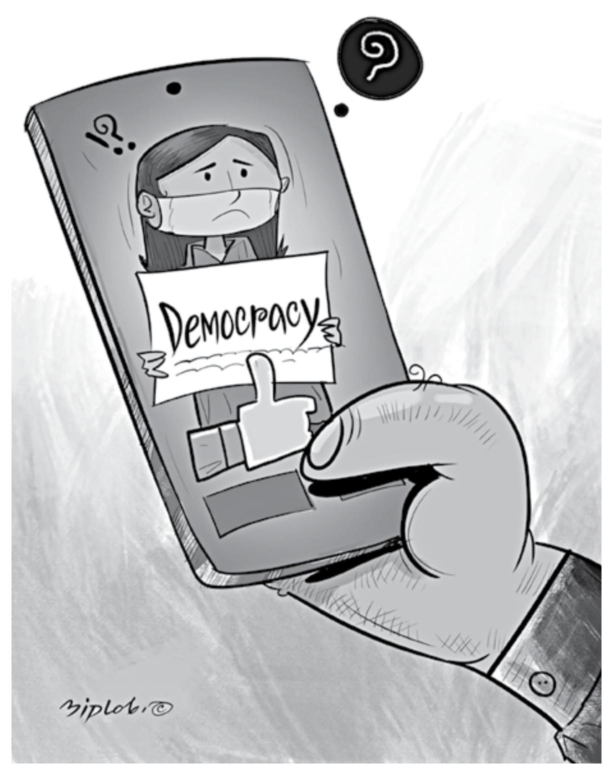

ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

The decline of democracy worldwide in the last decade has caused significant setbacks to the US and its allies.

the current US administration is trying to reinvigorate and defend the idea of democracy. Perhaps that is why the framing of the US treasury sanction on RAB as an entity was tied with the threat to US national security.

The analysis of this highly curious sanction stipulates two powerful messages to analysts. First, this is in conjunction with its national security strategy. The US sees democracies as more stable, richer, and producing fewer terrorists because rampant disregard of human rights violations produces widespread grievances in society. Impunity for human rights violations undermines public faith and confidence in the law and state. However, we should also acknowledge that the US has invited countries with dwindling democracies, like Pakistan and India, to the Summit. These countries are perhaps strategically more important to them.

If people feel they cannot peacefully and safely exercise their democratic rights to dissent and protest, this fuels resentment, anger and can destabilise the state, creating conflict and violence. Bangladesh is a country with a huge population, where the quality of elections remains questionable.Is it possible that US interests coincide with having a stable, functioning state, rather than a state persistently suppressing people through a draconian act like the Digitial Security Act, or through extrajudicial activities?

Second, the sanction seems to be an effort to balance with China, as China is yet to call out widespread allegations of human rights abuse in Bangladesh or raise questions about the quality of elections. Therefore, it is more likely that the US may consider this sanction as a deterrence strategy for Bangladesh so that it does not move towards China. It is undeniable that the US has a lot of leverage over Bangladesh as it is the biggest export destination of Bangladeshi products and the country's most significant development partner, on top of holding significant influence over the UN as one of its top donors.

Does the US expect that this pressure will induce reform in Bangladesh? The previous US policy toward Bangladesh appeared to be courting the country by keeping its criticism on democracy and human rights muted. The Democracy Summit and sanctions are an abrupt shift but, it is also part of the same goal of keeping Bangladesh from China. It is a switch from the "carrot" to the "stick" regarding Bangladesh, in hopes that it will induce democratic reforms, which will in turn keep it from China.

Critics, including the Democrats in the US, have a strong point about the "hypocrisy" of the sanction given the US' human rights record and the allegations that its justice system is racially biased. Police brutality towards Black populations and other people of colour in the US, too, puts a big dent in its image of championing human rights globally. However, one should acknowledge that police officers guilty of committing brutality regularly face courts in the US. By contrast, that record in Bangladesh is close to nil.

While the Bangladeshi government has rightly decided to engage with the US diplomatically, it should also engage in improving the democratic sphere of the country. Today, all the globally accepted indicators for measuring a country's democratic quality have been persistently depicting a regressive image of the nation.

For example, the World Press Freedom Index 2021 puts Bangladesh at 152 out of 180. It ranked 115th out of 128 countries in the rule of law index of the World Justice Project. The Freedom House termed it as a "partially free country", while the V-Dem index has categorised Bangladesh as an "electoral autocracy." A forum of international human rights organisations has been documenting allegations of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the country for many years, although the government has trashed those allegations as a "conspiracy against the state" and perpetrators have enjoyed impunity.

One can see how such an image of Bangladeshi politics and the human rights situation stands at odds with Biden's projected national security strategy, where emphasis on democracy is placed at the heart of US foreign policy.

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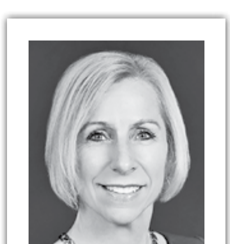
New research reveals obstacles and opportunities for women-owned businesses in Bangladesh



REBECCA PEARSON

WHEN it comes to business ownership, women just need fair and equal access—something easier said than done. Centuries of common practices and processes have created fundamental gender-based access disparities. Financial marginalisation and limited property rights are also significant impediments to women business owners. These limit potential buyers and business partners from ever seeing innovative solutions that women-owned businesses have created in engineering, automobile parts, logistics or AI, for example. Add conscious and unconscious bias to the mix and it is often an uphill battle requiring specific focus to overcome the hurdles.

To better understand the obstacles that women business owners face across South Asia, the US Department of State's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs helped fund research on their status in corporate value chains and why so few of them win procurement contracts from corporate buyers. WEConnect International, a global non-profit that helps women-owned businesses compete in the global marketplace through capacity development and connections to large buyers, conducted the research as part of its "Women's Empowerment through Economic Inclusion" project, where 399 women-owned businesses and 199 large corporate buyers were surveyed.

Some key regional takeaways from the women-owned businesses surfaced. These are: women-owned businesses are unable to effectively articulate their unique selling propositions and differentiate themselves from competitors; the lack of access by women to business networks, due to socio-cultural barriers, continues to keep men's and women's affairs separate; and women are at a disadvantage when accessing the full range of debt and equity alternatives required to set up and grow a business.

Financial marginalisation and limited property rights are significant impediments to women business owners.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

In Bangladesh, lack of capital remains the most challenging issue with 90 percent of women business owners identifying it as the biggest impediment to running their businesses, while 48 percent indicated that a lack of connections to procurement and corporate buyers is a significant challenge.

From the end of the buyers, a few crucial issues came up that need to be dealt with. For starters, the majority of corporate buyers did not have policies or practices in place to source from women-owned businesses. Although many buyers indicated product/service quality to be a key determinant in the selection of suppliers, they could not effectively pinpoint if women-owned businesses were lacking in this area. The disconnect between the business language of the buyers and women-owned businesses is also a concern. On top of that, buyers are tied to corporate credit policies that are often at odds with the needs of women-owned businesses, which are smaller and unable to withstand the pressures of longer-term credit recovery. Finally, there is a poor understanding among buyers on Gender Inclusive Sourcing practices.

In Bangladesh, with respect to sourcing from women-owned businesses, 52 percent of buyers said they do not, 29 percent said they do, while 19 percent said they do not know. In addition, the majority of the respondents said they did not know how to find women-owned businesses.

This is a problem with a solution: Gender-inclusive sourcing is a proactive supplier diversity strategy that addresses gender gaps in value chains to increase access to markets for women-owned businesses. The research indicates that there is appetite for change.

The majority of buyers believe there is high potential to create market linkages, and 86 percent of corporate buyers are willing to buy from women-owned businesses when quality standards are met. Research suggests that there is a demand and supply match across many product and service categories in all countries. On average, 82 percent of corporate buyers are willing to learn about Gender Inclusive Sourcing practices and implement them in their organisations, and there is significant potential for women-owned businesses to become tier two and tier three suppliers to corporations.

As beneficial as it is to the business owners themselves, and the communities in which they operate, investing in women-owned businesses also makes dollars and sense for large organisational buyers. Small changes to large organisational buying practices such as inclusive sourcing policies can have a significant impact on the business and its ability to find the best products and services at the best price, especially from women-owned businesses.

Now is the time for Bangladesh to focus on empowering women and achieving gender equality. As the world slowly begins to adjust to a pandemic-stricken environment, harnessing the power of the entire business community to accelerate recovery and create opportunities for its citizens becomes the smartest strategy of all.

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