

When power plants power up corruption

Graft involving land acquisition must be investigated

WE'RE disturbed by the carte blanche being offered to those involved with power plants—who, on Thursday, again made headlines in connection with massive corruption involving land acquisition for three coal-fired power plants. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) made the disclosure while unveiling the findings of a study it conducted between February and April this year. As per the anti-graft watchdog, a total of Tk 390 crore was embezzled while acquiring land for these projects—namely the 1,320MW Banshkhali Power Plant in Chattogram, the 600MW Matarbari Power Plant in Cox's Bazar, and the 350MW Barishal Power Plant. And all the usual suspects were there to profit off of it: unscrupulous public representatives, state officials, and the middlemen.

This may be just another case of corruption, but there are important insights to be drawn from here: that corruption continues to be the last word in our notoriously ill-managed energy sector. You see its all-encompassing effects in how environmentally harmful coal power continues to be embraced, despite pledges of renewable energy by the government; in how the corrupt individuals are never held accountable; and in how the same broken system is put to use without question again and again.

The TIB made several other revelations about how the alleged corruption occurred. It said that the money was embezzled in various ways, such as by collecting “commission” from compensations, payment for purchases, grants, and by grabbing land without paying the owners. Also, fake title deeds of government land were made so as to sell the land back to the government. There were instances of excess land acquisition, too. Whereas neighbouring countries reportedly require an average 0.23 acres for every megawatt generated by burning coal—and 0.053 acres in case of LNG—a total of 942 acres of additional land has been purchased or acquired for the three projects surveyed by the TIB. For example, the plant in Barishal should have needed 81 acres, but 310 acres were acquired. In Banshkhali, 660 acres were acquired against a requirement of 304 acres, and in Matarbari, 1,358 acres were acquired against a need of 418 acres. The price of the power produced in these plants was also higher than that of plants in India, China, Pakistan, and Australia.

All this is a sign of a dysfunctional sector that continues to undertake poorly planned and executed projects that hardly benefit the public but grossly and unfairly reward those behind them, making them so hard to dispense with. We urge the government to investigate the allegations brought by the TIB and punish those involved with the three projects, and also formulate a master plan to put the sector on a renewable trajectory for the nation's greater interests.

Is there no end to Israel's impunity?

Deliberate shooting of journalist is deeply disturbing

WE are outraged by the murder of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank on May 11. Abu Akleh was covering an Israeli raid in the city of Jenin early in the morning, wearing a press vest and helmet, when she was shot in the face. Though, initially, the Israeli army did not miss a beat before claiming it was Palestinian gunmen who had killed the veteran reporter, the military chief has now backtracked to say that it is “unclear who fired the shot.” Our outrage and condemnation towards this event are on two counts: For the deliberate execution of a fellow journalist, and for Israel's continued occupation and violence in Palestine.

Journalists present when Abu Akleh was shot have reportedly confirmed that it was indeed Israeli forces who were responsible for her death. This is despite Abu Akleh and her team donning flak vests clearly marked “Press” and also making themselves known to Israeli forces in the area. While the cruel and indiscriminate violence against Palestinians is perpetual, the nature of this particular killing—that is, to shoot in the face of a journalist on the job who was wearing a press vest and helmet—truly encapsulates the extent of Israel's determination to block any news that attempts to tell the Palestinian side of the story.

The recent Russia-Ukraine war has also shed new light on the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The global outpouring of support and sympathy for Ukrainian refugees and victims of war is commendable and well-deserved. But we must wonder, for the umpteenth time, why even a fraction of the same has not been offered to the Palestinian people, who have been going through hell at the hands of Israeli forces for over five decades? Where are the open arms and supportive coverage for them? That race and religion play crucial roles in this discrimination, specifically by the West, is undeniable. Yet, Israeli violence in Palestine continues, as does the US military aid to the occupying state.

All we can now hope for is that Shireen Abu Akleh's death does not get lost in the crowd of the thousands of Palestinian killings before hers. An independent and unbiased investigation must be conducted to find out the exact circumstances of the murder. The fact that the Israeli forces can shoot dead a working journalist in broad daylight gives us an inkling of just how strongly backed the state is by the West. We continue to demand for the international community and human rights bodies to take off their blindfolds and rise to action in order to put an end to Israel's aggression towards the Palestinian people.

Don't normalise living in fear



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BANGLADESH is a nation that is being carried almost entirely by the labour of its underprivileged and uneducated people, who slave away at garment factories and toil abroad to send back remittances. However, due to fundamental flaws in democracy and the rule of law, and corruption, all the power in Bangladesh rests in the hands of the top one percent. Furthermore, the government has failed to protect the average citizen's rights as enshrined in the constitution. In fact, it seems to have set out to actively undermine the freedoms of expression and the press. As the next general election draws closer, we are seeing the authorities step up their attempts to ascertain dominance over public discourse.

It is important to understand that while online expression is recognised under the constitution, it is mostly unprotected in reality. Article 39 (1) of Chapter 2 of the constitution recognises the freedoms of thought, conscience and expression as basic rights, and online expression has historically been deemed within the scope of this article. However, some existing and pending pieces of legislation undercut these rights, and internet users now regularly risk criminal consequences for exercising their right to express freely, as guaranteed by international human rights standards. These laws include the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA) as well as the proposed laws such as the BTRC Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, 2021, the Data Protection Act, 2022, and the Mass Media Employees (Conditions of Services) Bill, 2022.

The way the government is utilising these laws to curb expression is straightforward. The DSA's wording is remarkably vague and open to interpretation. And under the proposed laws, any content or anything that undermines the spirit of the Liberation War, offends religious sensibilities, jeopardises communal harmony, or is against national culture and social values have been prohibited. But there is no definition of what the spirit of the Liberation War means. And who decides the national culture and social values?

The implementation of punitive measures under these laws is also absurdly wide-ranging. No arrest warrant is required, and any person can claim DSA violation against any other person, who will subsequently be detained without trial. The system has been designed to facilitate an Orwellian dystopia where



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citizens turn against citizens and keep themselves in line, as a Big Brother government watches everything from above.

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Dr Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor at Illinois State University and the lead investigator in the DSA tracker project, presented some key figures from CGS's research in a recent webinar. The study's most shocking finding was that members of the ruling party were using the DSA to target journalists and political opponents. According to the research, 30.98 percent of those charged are politicians, and more

consistently falling well behind. All due to the propagation of these laws.

In 2021's Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, Bangladesh has dropped ten places. According to the research, Bangladesh's status is now worse than that of Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh is ranked 162nd out of 180 nations, from 152nd last year. The report also stated that the country was one of 28 globally that witnessed “extremely serious” press freedom breaches in 2021.

According to the Net Freedom index 2021, provided by Freedom House, internet freedom in Bangladesh hit an all-time low as the authorities continued to arrest users under the DSA. Self-censorship remains in the face of accusations of torture, brief abductions, and death/torture in custody.

Bangladesh's own Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) has been conducting extensive research on the country's media and press freedom situation under the DSA. According to different media reports, more than 1,500 cases have been filed under the DSA from January 1, 2020 to March 2021. Meanwhile, 925 cases were filed in 2018, 1,189 cases in 2019, and 1,128 cases in 2020. CGS has been able to track 890 cases with detailed information from January 2020 to February 2022, and conducted research where it analysed the cases. All findings under the DSA tracker project are available for people to see at our website freedominfo.net.

than a quarter are journalists. According to the figures, 207 journalists have been charged in the last 26 months.

Prof Ali Riaz determined from the data that such laws were increasingly being used to muzzle journalists and opposition politicians. If this approach continues, a culture of fear and self-censorship will emerge, in which individuals will cease expressing their views and opinions online as well as in books and news articles. Instead of civil discourse, there will only be state propaganda.

Given all this, an unbiased observer could never say that Bangladesh is a nation run by the people, for the people. If we look at the wording of the law, we see clearly that the will of the nation-state supersedes the will of the individuals. Some people may think that these sacrifices in civil liberties and fundamental rights are par for the course on the road to national development. Perhaps they go to bed at night with the naive notion that civil liberties and democratic values will be restored after some arbitrary point of development has been reached. However, if we were to ponder the topic seriously, we must ask ourselves: Why would any government ever give away such power? Power, once given, is almost impossible to take back. If the people and civil society remain dormant while the government takes all power in controlling public discourse, no election promises will ever return the power to the people.

Time for a fresh look at the UN



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ON April 24, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Ukraine to discuss military aid with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. So far, the US has committed USD 3.7 billion in civilian and military aid. On April 28, US President Joe Biden called on Congress to provide USD 33 billion (one-fifth of Ukraine's GDP) in additional security, economic and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine.

In Ukraine, eight million people (about one-sixth of the population) have been displaced, of whom 5.7 million are refugees. World food production is declining, fuel and food prices are increasing, and the inflationary pressure is high. The Russia-Ukraine war has put pressure on an already stressed supply chain. Both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) project lower global economic growth due to the war.

The superpower contest in Ukraine is overtly visible. Russian President Vladimir Putin is not backing down, and Secretary Blinken stated that the US wanted to see Russia “weakened” in this war. On May 3, Pope Francis said that the “barking of Nato at the door of Russia” might have led to the invasion of Ukraine, and that he did not know whether other countries should supply Ukraine with more arms. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' plea to stop the war has not worked. The United

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Nations is helplessly doing the body count and taking care of the displaced population.

During the Korean War (1950-53) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), we saw similar confrontations between superpowers. The UN could not stop the war in Vietnam. It could do little for the two Afghan wars; wars in Chechnya and Georgia; wars in the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen; and most proxy wars. The superpowers contested or ignored these wars as per their national interest.

The League of Nations lasted only 13 years. Established in 1920, it lost its impetus when Japan and Germany, both superpowers at that time, left in 1933. Soviet Union's joining in 1934 could not save it. The US supported the establishment of the League, but never joined the organisation because of its isolationist policy.

Today's United Nations (UN) is an outcome of the conferences that took place among the Big Three (US, UK, and the Soviet Union) in Tehran (November 1943) and Yalta/Crimea (February 1945), and Potsdam (July 1945). The big powers established a system of global governance for peace and stability under the auspices of the UN and its umbrella organisations, including the IMF, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank.

By and large, national interests of most member countries are served by the current UN system. Consistently, the UN has received favourable ratings in Pew Research polls. But at 77, the organisation remains a “superpower and friends” club. It has fallen behind in inclusivity, participation, and power-sharing. Its hegemonic arrangement with veto power is not compatible with the current economic and political realities.

Both Germany and Japan exert more economic power than France and the UK.

Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa can contest the superpowers in terms of GDP and population. Various proposals have been considered to change the veto power status, but so far, no agreement has been reached.

The IMF quota system and voting rights give more importance to the richer nations. The sanctions have brought the dollar-based monetary system to the limelight. Russia's insistence on selling gas/oil in ruble has challenged the dominance of the dollar. Increasingly, the Chinese renminbi is becoming a part of international reserves. The emerging trade and currency war is likely to complicate the situation.

About 7.9 billion people live on this planet with different economic, social, cultural, ethnolinguistic, and religious interests. Conflicts and wars are plausible. The moral purpose of the UN is defeated when the superpowers, as sponsors and guardians of the system, directly get involved in the conflicts.

It is time to take a fresh look at the UN. The organisation has its drawbacks, but it's not broken. The existing system of global governance needs reform. The economic, social, cultural, and military realities have changed significantly over the years. Empowering the UN is essential for lasting peace. The member states should be able to bring changes through honest deliberations.

European conflicts have given us two world wars. We cannot afford a third one. Demarketing the current war is urgently necessary for peace. During the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the nonaligned nations played an active role. Peace efforts can come from them and various trade blocks. The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and religious organisations across the world should also come forward. We need reform for peace.