

Attacks on BNP a worrying sign

Where is the level playing field promised by the EC?

WE'RE quite alarmed by what appear to be well-coordinated attacks on the ongoing countrywide BNP programmes that started on August 22 protesting against the hikes in prices of fuel and other essentials and the killings of two of its leaders in Bhola. The attacks continued on Sunday, concluding a tumultuous week of fiercely resisted opposition politics. Over the past seven days, ruling party men attacked BNP rallies in many districts and also allegedly vandalised local party offices and homes of BNP leaders. At least 62 people were reportedly injured on Saturday, and at least 169 the day before. From the systematic pattern of attacks, with the help of police in many cases, the intention seems to be to create fear in the opposition camp.

Unsurprisingly, a large number of BNP leaders found themselves at the business end of cases slapped after the attacks, along with over a thousand "unnamed" BNP men – a classic prescription to allow for certain names to be added later to the list. The official narrative is also familiar: opposition activists "tried to bar AL processions" and threw brick bats at the police causing them to fire a few rounds. It is as if BNP intentionally provoked ruling party men and police to sabotage its own programmes!

Unfortunately, these attacks are taking place despite the prime minister publicly stating that the opposition should be allowed to protest and should not be harassed. Does this mean that the AL grassroots workers and police have chosen to defy the PM's directives, or is it because they believe no action will be taken against them even if they do so?

The Election Commission, too, claimed that it will do everything to ensure a free and fair election, although we know only too well that precious little has been achieved through the recent series of dialogues with various parties. The reality, therefore, is rather bleak. The idea of that oft-repeated platitude – "a level playing field" for all political parties – has become quite laughable in the current context, with the ruling party adopting the old strategy of total domination in the field through intimidation and violence. Knowing they enjoy endless impunity, ruling party cadres are carrying out this strategy with full force. So why this pretence of ensuring a free and fair environment for opposition parties? Why the farce by the EC of holding dialogues with them when there was no intention of listening to any of their demands?

The images of opposition activists being mercilessly attacked by ruling party men using sharp weapons ominously predict the kind of violence that awaits us as the national election draws closer. Will the government just sit by while ruling party men continue to establish a reign of terror that not only intimidates the opposition but the general public as well?

Stop farcical official trips

Foreign trips are no gifts to be doled out at will to state officials

WE'RE alarmed to see the lack of response to concerns over non-essential foreign trips made by state officials as part of public projects. We have repeatedly brought this to the attention of the higher authorities in recent months. However, apart from occasionally reprimanding project officials for cost overruns or placing blanket but largely ineffective bans on foreign trips, they never really put the brakes on this farcical exercise. As a recent report by *The Daily Star* shows, in the absence of effective interventions, these all-expenses paid "training" trips have turned into "gifts" to be doled out to well-connected officers.

Our report cites the case of 13 projects audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh. These projects were implemented from FY 2017-18 to FY 2019-20 by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the Department of Livestock and the Department of Fisheries. In case of the DAE, as many as 228 officials went abroad under seven projects. Of them, however, 45 were above 55 years of age, with 23 of them just one year shy of their retirement age. More worryingly, 73 others had nothing to do with the projects at all. It was the same case in the projects under the Department of Fisheries, where as many as 30 percent of officials sent abroad for training were not from the implementing agencies. Sixteen percent of officials in two projects were also above the age of 55.

Overall, in all these projects, 16-20 percent of the officials going abroad to gain practical knowledge were above 55. The question is, how does a training trip by a soon-to-retire or retiring officer serve the country or the citizens, who end up paying for these expensive trips? As well as nominating officials close to retirement, often people who were not part of the implementing agencies, or were too high up the hierarchy to engage in knowledge transfer at field level, were also chosen. What we're looking at is an example of gross irregularities both in the selection and approval processes of foreign trips, with the officials not even submitting a post-trip training report or proof of application of the knowledge acquired. The motivation here is clearly personal, a collusive arrangement justified in the name of capacity building under a development project proposal (DPP).

Unfortunately, this has become a part of the project implementation culture in Bangladesh. Large portions of project funds are thus spent in non-essential areas or wasted, eventually contributing to frequent cost overruns that have become typical of most development projects. We urge the government to take a firmer stance against such corrupt practices, and hold all involved accountable for wasting hard-earned public money.

Why we need to rethink the Press Council



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THE ongoing debate on the proposed amendment of the Press Council Act of Bangladesh appears to be quite strange, as the initiator of the amendment, the council itself, has been embroiled in controversy. Its refusal to share the latest draft amendment, which has been approved in principle by the cabinet, despite being requested by the highest body of the country's professional journalists – the Editors' Council – raises serious questions about the Press Council's intentions. The move first came to light in early April, when the current chairman of the Press Council, Justice Nizamul Haque Nasim, announced publicly that the law would contain provisions to penalise journalists up to Tk 10 lakh for false reporting. However, the cabinet, while giving its nod to the amendments, has reportedly changed the terms of penalties.

The current controversy over the proposed legislation seems to be revolving around the following questions: 1) What is the reason for a sudden rush to amend the existing law? 2) Why so much secrecy? 3) Why are journalists not getting an opportunity to see and express their opinion about a law that will affect them the most? 4) Why do we need another stringent law to punish journalists and the press for alleged violations of ethics and mistakes?

The official explanation for the need for such a law is to combat misinformation and fake news. Unfortunately, this argument is wholly misplaced. It has been proven time and again that mainstream newspapers have stricter gatekeeping mechanisms in place, and most of the misinformation spreads through non-traditional media, social media and other online platforms. Besides, the media should not be held responsible for reporting misleading claims made by politicians and public figures.

The secrecy surrounding the legislative process is quite shocking, as the council failed to provide the original draft and meeting proceedings where the decision was made to request the government for amending the 1974 law. The draft could have been published either by the Cabinet Division or the Ministry of Information – as was asked by the Editors Council and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) – but neither has done so. The Press Council, in response to the



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plea by the Editors' Council to publish the draft, issued a press release on August 23, claiming that the process to amend the law began in 2005. It further claims that the draft was agreed upon at a general meeting of the council attended by representatives of the journalists' union, the Editors' Council and the owners' association. According to the press release, the draft was published on the information ministry's website on September 18, 2019 for public consultation. But many members of the council expressed their ignorance about such a draft. A prominent member of the council reportedly said the issue was discussed in the previous committees of the council. A BSS report on July 3 quoted Information Minister Hasan Mahmud telling the newly formed Editors Forum, that "the Press Council has already taken initiative over the issues placed by the Editors Forum." He was responding to a 10-point demand submitted to him by the Editors Forum. These stories indicate that empowering the Press Council to sentence journalists is not something out of the blue, rather a result of a long-term plan.

Now comes the most crucial question: why does the government want to bring in another harsher law? As surmised by this paper's editor, Mahfuz Anam, who is also the president of the Editors' Council, "There are more laws to restrict journalism and free speech than there are laws to restrict terrorism, smuggling, money laundering, food adulteration, selling fake medicine, etc." According to him, at present, there are nine laws that directly or indirectly affect the media, and including the

Press Council (amendment), four more are in the offing.

The Bangladesh Press Council and similar institutions in other countries have at least two marked differences in their characteristics: the level of independence, and funding. The oldest press regulatory body in our part of the world is the Press Council of India, which was founded in 1966, and is purely

the Independent Press Standards Association (IPSO), while others are members of Impress. Neither of the two institutions has any representation from the government, and the government has no role in regulating them. Many European news organisations, too, have voluntarily joined one of these two UK-based self-regulatory bodies.

Though the Press Council Act, 1974 appears to be identical to the Indian Press Council Act, particularly in relation to the objectives and composition of the council, it doesn't have the freedom to review interference from any other authority – statutory or otherwise – and the government. The Bangladesh Press Council is also fully dependent on government funding. As a result, its independence to act as a self-regulatory body remains susceptible to government interference. Media reports also suggest that the proposed amendment to the act expands the council to 16 members in which the majority representation will outnumber journalists and significantly increase the potential of governmental influence.

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We have ignored our needs for effective self-regulation for too long, and the government has taken this opportunity to replace the practice with putting in greater control on regulating the media to its own advantage. The changes we need are to allow the press more freedom, instead of penalising it for trivial lapses to advance the government's political agenda. It is an opportunity to start anew, instead of what was passed on to the new chairman of the Press Council. We would strongly argue that the regressive draft should be withdrawn and a large scale consultation should be launched to find a way forward for better self-regulation to protect press freedom and improve the standard of journalism in the country.

Padma bridge connectivity must be utilised



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ANTICIPATING the increased volume of traffic following the opening of Padma Multipurpose Bridge on June 25 this year, the construction of Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway was a smart decision in road connectivity. The 55km expressway facilitates transportation between the capital city and the south and southwestern districts of Bangladesh. During the first two months of its opening, 19,459 vehicles on average used the Padma Bridge every day. The bridge, built with local resources, is not a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and Bangladesh has the choice of expanding the existing roads or building new roads to effectively connect Barishal, Faridpur, Jashore, Khulna and adjacent districts to the bridge to facilitate expanded economic activities. The bridge is projected to raise the country's GDP by 1.23 percent, and the southwestern region's GDP by 2.5 percent. But it will not be automatic – if a proper road network is not put in place, economic activities will not be forthcoming to the extent expected.

Before Padma Bridge was constructed, transportation between Dhaka and Narayanganj and the south, southwestern and coastal districts of Bhola, Barguna, Barishal and Patuakhali used to be via waterways,

which was time-consuming, taking 12-16 hours, and was uncomfortable. Investors usually decided against setting up large-scale industries and businesses in these districts, and therefore the area remained backward. Due to limited opportunities, migration from these districts to other parts of the country and even abroad remained higher than the rest of the country.

The locational advantage of bridges in riverine Bangladesh remains significant. In this regard, it is appropriate to mention the other bridge on the Padma River, Lalon Shah Bridge, situated between Ishwardi upazila of Pabna district in the east and Bheramara upazila of Kushtia district on the west. The bridge was opened to the public in May 2004. In the last 18 years, the improvement in transportation due to this bridge has resulted in a significant increase in economic activities in Pabna and Kushtia districts. However, the impact of this bridge on other districts south of the Padma has not been so discernible. This is mainly because these areas are not connected by road to the economically vibrant Dhaka city and its surrounding districts. Due to the fact that Dhaka's economy accounts for about 40 percent of our GDP, an efficient transportation

network with the capital city means a lot for the growth potential of the rest of the country.

The Padma Bridge, only 40km away from Dhaka, offers a huge opportunity to 22 south and southeastern districts of Bangladesh. It offers road transportation to Mongla, the second largest sea port in Bangladesh. Another sea port, Payra in Patuakhali district, which can now be connected to Dhaka and other districts, will promote growth of business and international trade in the greater Rajshahi, Barishal and Khulna regions. It will become more cost-effective due to shorter distances for these regions to use Mongla and Payra sea ports when fully functional, instead of using Chattogram and the currently under-construction Matarbari deep sea port in Maheshkhali upazila of Cox's Bazar. It will be more cost-effective to use even the Mongla sea port from Dhaka than the Chattogram port, as Dhaka's distance to Mongla port is 170km, whereas the distance between Dhaka and Chattogram port is 264km.

In addition to improving road connectivity, the new modern railway project through the Padma Multipurpose Bridge will connect Jashore, which will cut time and cost of travelling to and from Dhaka and adjacent districts to these areas. This is expected to improve the socioeconomic condition of the people in these areas. It will be possible to travel to Jashore from Dhaka in only two and a half hours when the Padma Bridge railway link is operational. There is a good prospect of increased activities, i.e. fish trade, food processing, tourism, and trade of jute and other agricultural products, due to the reduced cost of doing business. The government is

required to establish industrial zones, provide enough electricity, gas and other resources to encourage the establishment of garments, leather goods, cement, pharmaceuticals and textile industries, which would open up employment opportunities for millions and help reduce poverty.

The traffic pressure has significantly increased from Bhanga to Barishal, Faridpur, Patuakhali and Khulna areas since the opening of Padma Bridge. There are proposals to widen the roads into four-lane highways from Bhanga to Barishal, Patuakhali and Faridpur districts. In this respect, a proper feasibility study is warranted and projected traffic volume needs to be calculated at each city entrance and exit points. If bypass roads are the best options, then those should be considered in order to divert traffic out of the city boundaries. The proposed four-lane highway should be connected to the bypass roads instead of passing through the cities. For example, in Barishal, the bypass could be constructed between Gariar Par and Dapdapia Bridge.

The other vital consideration should be stopping the cutting of grown trees on both sides of the existing roads from Bhanga to Barishal up to Patuakhali, and Bhanga to Faridpur up to Rajbari. If the existing roads are widened, then hundreds or thousands of trees on both sides of the roads will need to be cleared off, which will be an environmental disaster. It is, therefore, recommended that new highways be built by acquiring land on one side of the roads and preserving all the trees. The existing roads, which are only 24-foot wide, should be improved and reserved for slow-moving vehicles in the future.