

## Stop top criminals holed up abroad

Authorities must fix existing challenges to bring them back for trial

WE are alarmed to learn that over a dozen top criminals, who fled the country about two decades ago, are pulling the strings behind many criminal activities here. According to the law enforcers, these criminals – many of them now citizens of different countries – have links with tender grabbing at government offices and extorting businesspeople. Although their names often come up during criminal investigations, and police and Rab have been monitoring their activities for years now, they cannot be brought back home for trial due to a lack of information about their whereabouts. Unfortunately, it cannot even be proved that they are Bangladeshi criminals as their biometric data is not available to our law enforcers.

Two such notorious criminals are Jisan Ahmed and Jafar Ahmed Manik, whose involvement with two recent murders has again brought the issue to the fore. Reportedly, Jisan was accused in at least eight cases including six for murders, while Manik used to control the underworld of Motijheel. These criminals are among the 23 who are on the home ministry's list of top criminals. Other than them, there are many other top criminals who are also living abroad. According to an official of the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, these criminals call their targets using the phone numbers of a third country to extort money, making it difficult for the police to trace them.

Now the question is: what can our law enforcers do to overcome the challenges in bringing them back to the country? First of all, there needs to be better and regular coordination among police and the ministries concerned. Reportedly, in the absence of efficient coordination, some of the top criminals who were arrested abroad could not be brought back in the past. For instance, Jisan was arrested by the Interpol in 2019 in the UAE but could not be brought back home. The coordination issue must be solved once and for all.

Then, it should not be so hard to bring back the criminals absconding in India, since Bangladesh and India have an extradition treaty according to which the Indian authorities can hand them over to their Bangladeshi counterparts. Why is that not happening yet? Furthermore, shouldn't our police force have the efficiency and technological capacity to gather required information on these wanted criminals so that unavailability of information does not become an issue in identifying them in foreign lands? Last but not the least, we should definitely take the help of the Interpol in extraditing these criminals to our country by giving them the required information.

All these issues mentioned above need to be addressed with priority if the authorities are sincere about bringing back these top criminals to the country and trying them as per the law.

## Why are young boys disappearing?

Authorities need to be careful about extremist threats

IN a world of rising hatred and bigotry, the threat of radicalisation is never too far away. This is especially so in Bangladesh, where the clash between liberal and right-wing ideologies is increasingly taking an ugly turn and the old enthusiasm for democracy is evaporating into cynical disillusion. This is an ideal breeding ground for extremism. Recently, we got a reminder of that after two batches of young men in Cumilla, apparently radicalised by an Al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist outfit, came on the radar of the police. The two batches – comprising seven and four youths each, mostly students – reportedly left their homes within the space of a week.

While the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) claims to have apprehended the four who left on September 1, the seven, who left on August 23, remain missing. All of them, Rab says, were brainwashed by the same outfit, Ansar Al Islam, and bound for a "hijrat" (a reference to the Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina) to unknown destinations. This is quite worrying. Bangladesh witnessed a similar case of young boys going missing from 2014 to 2016, which eventually culminated in a deadly attack on the Holy Artisan café in Gulshan on July 1, 2016. Ansar Al Islam, also known as the Bangladesh chapter of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), is said to have adopted a similar strategy of making its recruits perform "hijrat" as part of their indoctrination.

We are told that besides Cumilla, there have been disappearances in Chandpur as well. In July last year, four young men in Sylhet also left their homes. The next month, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of police claimed that at least 19 people were missing from Narayanganj's Araihaazar Upazila. Are we seeing a trend here? Is it part of a sinister plan? After Holy Artisan, one can never be too careful. Reportedly, after the Cumilla incidents, law enforcers have begun making a list of suspected missing youths. They are assuring us that things are under control. But recent developments suggest that militant recruitment and activities are ongoing.

This calls for clarity and caution. Police need to regularly monitor both online and off-line spaces for signs of extremist activities and indoctrination. The problem with extremism in Bangladesh is that it is still considered a law enforcement issue. It is much more than that. Parents, schools, and religious and social institutions all need to work actively to ensure that the impressionable minds of young men are not polluted by extremists. The government also needs to step up its deradicalisation programmes to ensure that misguided men have a way of coming back. Given the increasing ideological polarisation in society, we also need to promote dialogue and discussions to civilise the expression of differences.

# The unjust and discriminatory face of corruption



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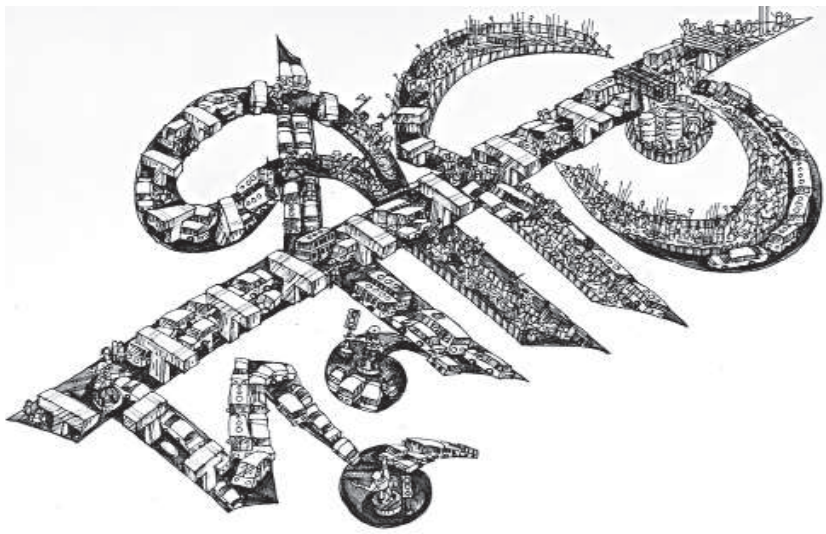
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CORRUPTION increases injustice and discrimination; its impact is multidimensional. Grand corruption, meaning collusive abuse of political, governmental and business power for private gains via manipulations of public interest-related decisions, benefits a few at the expense of the whole society. Vast amounts of public money are siphoned off through high-level corruption by perpetrators, depriving the common people. When grand corruption flourishes to the extent of state capture, the institutional, legislative, regulatory and law enforcement capacity are systematically engineered to protect and promote impunity.

The cost of grand corruption in Bangladesh is high. A former finance minister was quoted to have recognised in 2015 that at least two to three percent of our GDP was annually lost to corruption. Credible data on illicit financial transfers out of the country, as reported by Global Financial Integrity, shows that through trade-related misinvoicing alone, Bangladesh lost USD 8,275 billion annually during 2008-2015. More updated data would show the amount to be much higher, no less than USD 12 billion annually. Illicit financial outflows take place in several other ways, including the conventional method of hundi. Duly validated or not, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of police recently reported that Bangladesh was losing USD 7.8 billion of remittance annually through mobile financial services (MFSs).

Corruption generates disproportionality and inequality. Corruption affects the poor and marginalised through an unduly increased cost of, and limited or even no access to, public services. They also suffer as government resources are diverted away at the expense of investment in public sectors.

When grand corruption flourishes unabated, petty corruption involving duty bearers of service delivery also spreads deep and wide, to an extent



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VISUAL: MOMI TU UR RAHMAN/TIB

that it becomes a way of life. For perpetrators, corruption is a matter of narcotic addiction to illicit enrichment, while for the victims – the common people – it is an extremely distressing experience in daily life that is unjust and discriminatory. This is the key message of the National Household Survey 2021 on Corruption in Service Sectors, released by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) on August 31, 2022.

Nearly 71 percent of the respondents of the survey were victims of various forms of corruption, including bribery in 16-plus service sectors covered by the survey. Meanwhile, 72.1 percent of the victims of bribery reported that they were forced to pay bribes as they wouldn't have access to public services otherwise. There is also strong evidence according to the survey that corruption affects the marginalised sections of society more than the average victims.

The worst corruption-affected sectors, according to the experiences of respondents who had interactions in the respective service sectors, are law enforcement agencies (74.4

percent), followed by passport delivery (70.5 percent), public road transport services (68.3 percent), judicial services (56.8 percent), healthcare services (48.7 percent), local government (46.6 percent) and land (46.3 percent). In addition to bribery, corrupt practices include extortion, fraudulence, embezzlement, negligence of duties, nepotism, and harassment. The data period of the survey was December

The discriminatory nature of corruption is further manifested in terms of victimisation of households headed by persons with disabilities (PWD). At least 80.3 percent of such households were victims of corruption, compared to the national average of 70.6 percent. In terms of bribery, the rate of victimisation is 51.8 percent for PWD-headed households compared to the overall 39.8 percent.

While there is little variation in the victimisation of corruption based on the professional identity of household heads, interestingly enough, over 51 percent of government officials are also victims of corruption. More strikingly, retired public servants are victims of corruption at a higher rate (68.3 percent) than their in-service peers, which validates that while corruption does not spare anyone, the weaker the service recipients are in terms of identity and status, the more they are vulnerable to corruption.

Corruption – grand or petty – is a major impediment to inclusive development and democratic governance. It weakens institutions, prevents rule of law, and erodes public trust in government. Corruption is protected and perpetuated by biased policy regimes and faulty governance practices that favour the rich and well-connected. Accordingly, the more pervasive corruption is, the higher income inequality and social exclusion become.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Bangladesh is placed high on the global list of the fastest growing countries in terms of the super rich, according to Wealth X. The Global Inequality Lab reported that 44 percent of Bangladesh's total national income was held in 2021 by only 10 percent high-income people, while the bottom 50 percent possessed only 17.1 percent of GDP. Just one percent of the population owns more than 16 percent of total national income.

Promotion of integrity in public service is crucial to controlling corruption. So long as scope remains for abuse of power with impunity, relevant laws, rules and regulations remain unenforced, and institutions of accountability remain politicised and dysfunctional, corruption will only flourish. Much depends on the extent of political and governmental appetite, courage, and commitment to serve public interest and ensure accountability without fear or favour.

# Is there a third way for social equity markets?



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FOR too long, we have been told the choice is between state and market. Former US President Ronald Reagan famously said, "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." Together with former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he launched the global shift towards "Free Market Fundamentalism." This was a right-wing reaction to the endless fiscal deficits and inflation generated by left-wing Keynesian economists' preference for government intervention to solve market failures.

By the 1990s, former US President Bill Clinton and UK Premier Tony Blair pioneered the neoliberal middle way, adopting free market ideas of privatisation, whilst preaching kinder, gentler social protection. Instead of solving government failure, they ended up with the failure of both market and government with rising inequality, climate warming, populism, and social polarisation. Neoliberal free market ideas, in effect, pushed a bigger government capture by big business and huge vested interests. This sparked forces of polarisation since the one percent benefited more than the 99 percent. The Guardian columnist George Monbiot argued that the failure of neoliberalism ended up with fascism that wants to go back to old times. US President Joe Biden's framing of the fight between democracy and autocracy sounds suspiciously like Big Business Democrats trying to look green and inclusive, versus MAGA (Make America Great Again) Republicans who seem

like macho white supremacists to many non-Americans.

Economics or politics is supposed to be about why, what, and for whom. But behind that set of questions is: Who acts to deliver what the people want? Thus, the Trumpian call is for the private sector or Big Business to make change, whereas the Bernie Sanders solution is for more government to do the job.

Is finance serving the real sector, or is it eating up the real economy? When a government is too powerful and captured by the one percent, how different is that from an unelected bureaucracy ruling the 99 percent? Central banks just print money to enable the politicians to buy the votes. Once elected, everything is forgotten on promises till the next election. Top-down political structures cannot work when the feedback from the bottom up is missing. Worse, welfare programmes end up not reaching the poor and underprivileged, which is exactly what the inequitable vaccine distribution showed amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

So what is the alternative to Big Business or Big Government?

Historically, we had the social institutions to deal with the problems of excessive state or markets – the importance of mutual, cooperative and community charitable work. When the social contract is broken, in the sense that the state is no longer functioning to deliver essential public goods and services or failing to protect the masses from raw capitalist greed, then communities organise to help

themselves. Social enterprises are non-government or for-profit organisations that try to provide public goods not provided by the state or Big Business.

Some of the best public goods, such as changes in global public health, education, and Green Revolution, were financed by charity organisations like the Rockefeller Foundation. Today, the Gates Foundation are big funders of

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social change.

Driven by the young, social enterprises are beginning to make waves in the areas of climate action, gender, poverty, and social injustices. But their impact has been limited because they lack the knowhow or talent, funding, and branding.

Harvard business strategist Michael Porter was one of the first to ask why corporate philanthropy has not worked to fund more social enterprise work. The answer is that CEOs were not focused or incentivised to push corporate social responsibility (CSR). Today, as investors expect CEOs to deliver on ESG (environmental, social and governance), CEOs still face the problem on how to allocate corporate

philanthropy resources.

The hard reality is that the best talent on organisation, knowhow and access to funding is with the for-profit corporations. Their employees may be best positioned in their spare time to help micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) become more effective in delivering social projects that enable real change at the frontiers of climate action or social justice. Social finance is defined as the network of processes, decisions and institutions that finance the production of public goods with participation of the private sector. But that network does not exist, because MSMEs often are too small and weak to access the talent, funding, and branding/trust that donors (state, business, or large charities) demand.

But the technological platform for raising public funding already exists in the form of stock markets, which have the approval, listing, trading information, registration, clearing, settlement, and payment mechanisms. They simply do not operate for non-profit social enterprises.

Similarly, private equity/venture (PE/VC) capital firms already have the technology, knowhow, and funding to "coach" good companies for listing or raising capital for profit. So why can't there be PE/VC firms that use their portfolios of MSMEs to decide which ones have for-profit potential, and which can be groomed best in the not-for-profit social objectives?

In short, markets like Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur have the opportunity to create social equity markets. From a philosophy point of view, Islamic financial markets are actually risk-sharing stock markets with moral issues defined by the shariah. So far, few Muslim countries have used stock markets to make social change.

A third way, therefore, is already technically feasible. All it takes is some courage to think and act out of the box.

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