

End the environment of fear and intimidation

Justice for crimes against journalists must be ensured

In the 18th century, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Edward Carrington that if he had to choose between “a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government,” he would “not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” The reason for that is that Jefferson believed the people to be the only censors of their governors, for which they must be given full information of their affairs by the free press. Today, as we mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, we shudder at the state of free expression in our country and, as an extension, media freedom, and government accountability.

There is no denying that the space for free expression in our country has been fast eroding over the years. In this year's World Press Freedom Index prepared by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Bangladesh slipped 10 notches from the previous year and ranked 162nd among 180 countries. Moreover, Bangladesh was one of only 28 countries in the world which saw “very bad” press freedom violations this year. RSF also noted that journalists in Bangladesh are not only exposed to police violence, attacks by political activists, and murders orchestrated by Jihadist or criminal organisations, but such violence continually go unpunished, creating an environment where journalists have very little safety. And the perpetrators of such crimes have little to no disincentives for perpetrating such egregious crimes.

Since 1992, as many as 34 journalists and media workers have been killed in Bangladesh, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Many of these murders have remain unsolved – the murders of journalist couple Sagar and Runi being the most sensational one – and the authorities in most cases have shown no urgency in getting that sorted out. Thus, the CPJ last year ranked Bangladesh 11th on its Global Impunity Index for countries with the most unsolved journalist murders. Aside from being outright murdered, journalists in Bangladesh are also being physically attacked, tortured, and sued just for reporting news. According to data of Ain o Salish Kendra, at least 119 journalists have been subjected to various attacks, lawsuits, and torture between January and July this year alone.

Ultimately, if forces with vested interests are able to silence independent journalism with violence, and face almost no consequences for doing so, what does it say about the state of press freedom in a country? Given that journalists in Bangladesh are already operating in ever more policed spaces, with the threat of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) hanging over their heads, such a state of affairs only adds to the environment of fear.

Aside from the personal costs that this imposes upon journalists, the harm that it's causing to people's right to know – and to our democracy as a result – is immeasurable. Therefore, we demand that the journalists who have been murdered in Bangladesh receive justice without any further delay, and we urge the government to create a safe and enabling environment for media workers in the country.

One Man’s Rail

Developments in the railway must be proportionate and even

Although it constitutes a tiny fraction of the nation, Panchagarh is getting top priority when it comes to rail services. Five intercity trains, including three from Dhaka, currently run to Panchagarh which is the highest among all districts other than the divisional headquarters. Meanwhile, every other railway project undertaken since 2019 for overall development is running behind schedule, according to the project documents.

The great boost in the Panchagarh railway connectivity took place after Nurul Islam Sujan, member of parliament from the Panchagarh-2 constituency, took charge as the railway minister in early 2019. Since then, six intercity trains and one inter-country train have been added to the railway fleet, of which Panchagarh got two. Another intercity train service was extended to the district.

While this specific district has seen massive growth in connectivity, other connectivity projects are lagging behind. Even though the railway ministry has had a significant budget increase over the past decade and became one of the five ministries or divisions that received the highest development fund allocations, it has been among the low performers. It could not even achieve the average ADP implementation rate twice in the last six fiscal years, as per an Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) report.

According to reports published by this daily, Bangladesh Railway missed the deadline for a majority of its projects that were scheduled to finish within the last fiscal year. The majority of the connectivity projects of the railway have been extended and costs have gone up due to rising costs of raw materials and other causes. Some projects have been going on for 10-12 years, and sometimes even longer. This goes to show how slow the BR is in finishing its projects. And while these nationally important projects are put on hold, the minister's hometown keeps getting new trains.

The stark contrast between the priorities given to different aspects of the Bangladesh Railway is staggering. One remote district is getting numerous intercity trains while important projects for other parts of the country are getting delayed. Bangladesh Railway is a national asset run by taxpayers' money. It is supposed to run in a manner that benefits all the people, not just a select few that happen to live in the hometown of the minister. This malpractice of favouring one's constituency over other parts of the country when in charge of a specific ministry must come to an end. The railway minister is in charge of the railway service that must serve all the people of the country, not just the less than one percent of people living in Panchagarh. The delays in the implementation of major projects need to be resolved promptly, and the wastage of public money on ever-extending projects needs to be stopped.

Economic and political reforms must go hand in hand



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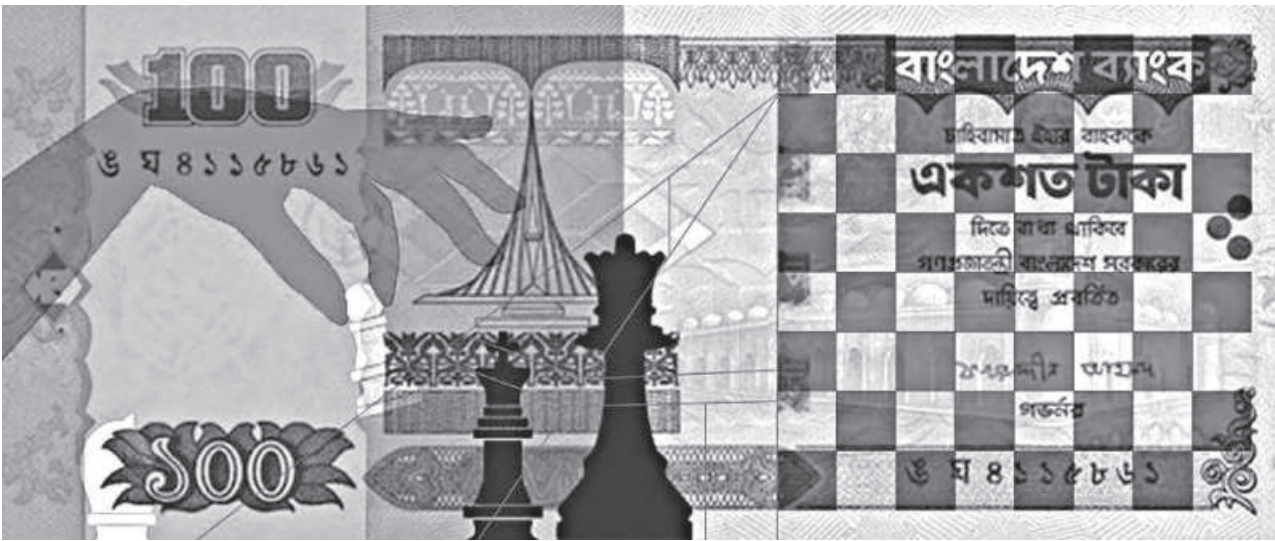
BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

A couple of weeks ago, our prime minister talked about protecting Bangladesh from a possible famine in the coming days. More recently, her power and mineral resources adviser warned us about possible daylong power cuts in the future. We are already facing an unprecedented financial crisis due to reckless cronyism, mismanagement, rampant looting and plundering, and siphoning the loot abroad. All our institutions are crumbling because of politicisation, inefficiencies, and corruption. Our electoral system has broken down, representing serious democratic deficits. Signs of governance failure are visible everywhere. In the meantime, prices of essentials have been skyrocketing, causing serious hardship for common people.

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Although troubles have been brewing for quite some time, they have gotten worse in recent months, creating potentially unprecedented crisis on economic and political fronts. Unfortunately, the growing problems are largely attributable to mismanagement and broken promises of the ruling party.

Before the 2008 election, the Awami League published an election manifesto titled “*Dinbodoler Sanad*” or “A Charter for Change,” making wide-ranging pledges. The party assured the voters that they envisioned “a democratic system where people choose their government freely and get services from it without hassle, enjoy freedom from fear and intolerance, live with dignity; where every citizen is assured of social justice, environmental protection, human rights and equal opportunities; and where the rule of law and good governance flourish.” Yet, Bangladesh



VISUAL: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

saw two failed elections in 2014 and 2018, and the country is now widely viewed as an autocracy.

In view of the prevailing serious power shortage, *Dinbodoler Sanad* promised a comprehensive long-term policy for the country's energy sector focusing on economic usage of oil, gas, coal, hydro power, wind power and solar energy. It also promised to prioritise exploration and exploitation of oil and new gas fields. Yet, according to experts, because of cronyism, corruption and mismanagement, the present crisis in the power sector would have occurred even without the war in Ukraine.

The Awami League's 2008 election manifesto also promised to take effective actions against corruption. “Multi-pronged measures to fight corruption will be put into place. Powerful people will have to submit wealth statements annually. Strict measures will be taken to eliminate bribes, extortion, rent-seeking, and corruption. Strong measures will be taken against those having unearned and black money, against loan defaulters, tender manipulators, and users of muscle power in every stage of state and society,” it said. In subsequent years, the government declared zero tolerance against corruption. Yet, corruption is out of control now.

Dinbodoler Sanad made concrete commitments regarding governance: “Genuine independence and impartiality of the judiciary will be ensured. Extrajudicial killings

will be stopped. The judgment of Bangabandhu murder case will be made effective and the retrial of jail killings will be held. Trial of real criminals responsible for the grenade attack on August 21, 2004 will be arranged through proper investigation. Rule of law will be established, the Human Rights

Commission will be strengthened and made effective, and an ombudsman will be appointed. Human rights will be strictly enforced.” But the government reneged on all promises except for the implementation of the Bangabandhu murder case verdict and the retrial of the 2004 grenade attack. *Dinbodoler Sanad* also pledged that the “ongoing reform programme of the Election Commission and electoral system will continue... security and rights of religious and ethnic minorities will be ensured. Courtesy and tolerance will be inculcated in the political culture of the country. Militancy and extortion will be banned. Awami League will take the initiative to formulate a consensual and unanimous charter of political behaviour.” Yet, political intolerance in Bangladesh is now at an all-time high, and there are serious allegations of the reconstitution of Election Commissions with partisan individuals who essentially destroyed our electoral system.

The ruling party's *Dinbodoler Sanad* further committed that the “administration will be freed from politicisation and be pro-people... in order to provide security to every citizen, police and other law enforcement agencies will be kept above political influence. These forces will be modernised to meet the demands of the time.” Unfortunately, flagrant politicisation of the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies have now become the biggest

healthcare programmes and all other development plans, as well as for the maintenance of law and order. Every union will be made the headquarter for development and administration of the area and be developed as a planned rural township.” Instead, local government bodies in Bangladesh have become increasingly ineffective, corrupt, and largely subservient to the functionaries.

It is clear that the democratic deficits and governance failures that prevail in Bangladesh have destroyed its accountability structure – vertical accountability of the government to the people created through credible elections, and horizontal accountability through a system of checks and balances ensured by independent institutions. Such a dearth of accountability along with the absence of rule of law have not only been behind the creeping economic and political crises in the country, but they are also the main obstacles to overcoming the daunting challenges created by the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

The government is trying to deal with the growing economic crisis by borrowing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and others, and are now negotiating with the lenders. It is certain that our authorities will agree to certain conditionalities for economic reforms. But economic reforms without concomitant political reforms will be like pouring water into a jar with big holes underneath.

When will impunity for crimes against journalists end?



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Today, as the world observes the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists for the ninth year, it's only proper to remind our readers a sad but glaring fact about how Bangladesh is doing in this regard. Just two days before, a Dhaka court, for the 93rd time, granted the Rapid Action Battalion's (Rab) request for more time to complete their investigation into the killings of journalist couple Sagar Runi. Though no one should ever foretell any judicial action, in this case, people's presumption that the investigating official would certainly hit a century in seeking time extensions should be forgiven.

It is also the 10th anniversary of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Ironically, more than 10 years have passed since those ghastly double murders took place on February 11, 2012. It's not just the murders of Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi that remain unsolved; according to the Unesco Observatory of Killed Journalists, there are 13 unresolved cases of murdered journalists in

Bangladesh. The observatory statistics lists a total of 26 journalists killed between 2004 and July 2022.

Even worse is the government's inaction and disregard to engage and cooperate with international organisations on the issue of ending this impunity. A summary of the Unesco director-general's report, published marking the day, shows that the UN body sought information from 65 countries, and Bangladesh is among the 23 non-responsive ones. It didn't even acknowledge receiving the requests about 13 unsolved cases of journalist murder. The Unesco Observatory lists show four new entries, two each for the years 2021 and 2022, of journalists killed in Bangladesh. All these four victims were local journalists.

Another disturbing fact is that, since 2016, the proportion of journalist killings have been on the rise in countries that are not in armed conflicts. Another data that should worry us more is that the situation is the worst in the Asia Pacific region – almost 42 percent of journalist killings registered worldwide occurred in this

part of the globe. In its report, Unesco says that, in the past, TV journalists were the top targets, but with the changing nature of journalism, journalists working for cross-platforms have become the most vulnerable.

The latest two victims in Bangladesh were local journalists, too, and they were working on local stories. Hashibur Rahaman Rubel was the acting editor of *Dainik Kushtiar Khabar*, whose decomposed body was found in Kumarkhali upazila, Kushtia on July 7, a day after he disappeared. His family and colleagues alleged that had the law enforcement agencies acted immediately after his missing report was filed, he could have been recovered alive. The other victim was Mohiuddin Sarkar Nayem, a reporter for the local newspaper *Dainik Cumillar Dak* in Cumilla district. Reports suggest that narcotics dealers shot and killed Nayeem as he had unveiled their narcotics trafficking business.

There's little doubt that the alleged perpetrators of these killings have taken advantage of the existing intimidating environment for free media and journalism, and the history of impunity in attacking journalists. Reports compiled by various rights groups, including Reporters Sans Frontier (RSF), Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and International Press Institute (IPI), have consistently shown that violence against working journalists shot up alarmingly during the pandemic. Continued weakening of democratic institutions and the increasing tendency

of authoritarianism have also contributed to creating a culture of fear in the media industry. Introduction of draconian regulations such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) and their widespread abuse have caused immense suffering for the freedom-loving professional journalists. The Global Press Freedom Index, compiled by the RSF in association with Unesco, ranks Bangladesh 162nd among the 180 countries it assessed.

The Impunity Index 2021, prepared by the CPJ, however, showed one notch improvement for Bangladesh “due to convictions in February in the 2015 murders of secular blogger Avijit Roy and his publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan.” Since then, there has been no visible progress in any other cases of journalist murder. There's allegations of political motives, too, from some critics, including Avijit's wife, about the trial. Understandably, expediting trials of the murdered bloggers helps build a secular profile of the ruling party and the government. Similar emphasis on trying the killers of journalists is clearly not in their mind. Hence, a perception has emerged that violence against journalists and the press does not count as a crime in Bangladesh.

Polarisation and divisions within the media industry have also made things difficult; as a result, justice remains elusive in Bangladesh. We can only hope that when there is a democratic revival, rule of law will return and that will bring an end to the impunity for the crimes against journalists in this country.