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That the Rohingya community (mostly Muslims) has been subjected to the most acute form of societal scorn and institutionalised discrimination in their own country for decades is all too well-known. The situation started getting bad in the late 1970s, when more than 200,000 Rohingyas were driven out of their homeland in Myanmar's Rakhine (originally Arakan) state by the country's military government, and were forced to take shelter across the border in Bangladesh. Their eventual return was ensured through negotiations between the two countries.

But in 1982, Gen Ne Win's government took the drastic and most undemocratic step of stripping the Rohingyas of their citizenship, even refusing to recognise their ethnic identity and, instead, describing them as "Bengali Muslims." A new wave of expulsions followed in the early 1990s, when a similar number of Rohingyas were driven out of Rakhine to Bangladesh. Protracted negotiations, this time with the United Nations' involvement, ensured voluntary repatriation of a majority of them.

Even after the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi assumed office in 2016, albeit with seriously curtailed powers under the military-crafted constitution, there was no visible movement on determining the status of the disenfranchised Rohingyas. Instead, a new threshold was reached in August 2017, when the Myanmar military using Suu Kyi as a cover, launched a concerted campaign against the Rohingyas with

rampant murder, rape, torture and arson, causing more than 700,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres described the genocidal acts as “a textbook case of ethnic cleansing.”

Bangladesh demonstrated extreme generosity by sheltering the Rohingyas fleeing death and destruction at home. Over the last five-plus years, Myanmar has made no tangible move to even signal a possible repatriation of the persecuted lot. The one thing that has changed in Myanmar, though, is the forceful and undemocratic removal of Suu Kyi and the re-elected National League for Democracy (NLD) by the military, who then went on to assume complete power in the country. The supreme irony here is that it was Suu Kyi, clearly under pressure from the generals, who had defended the 2017 military crackdown against the Rohingyas at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). They repaid her with imprisonment on unproven charges of corruption. The chicken came home to roost.

The international community was reduced to watching these bizarre developments with utter helplessness, hamstrung as they were by the limitations set at the UN Security Council. Five years on, an economically challenged Bangladesh, with its own issues of overpopulation, continues to bear the burden of housing more than a million Rohingyas – and counting – in temporary shelters, where conditions are barely habitable at best. Law and order in the camps continue to be a major problem for



Remains of a Rohingya village in Rakhine, Myanmar, after the security forces razed it to the ground during the 2017 crackdown. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Bangladesh, compounded further by the growing disharmony between the host community and refugees. International commitments of economic and financial help for the Rohingyas are far from adequate. On top of all this, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sharply shifted whatever focus there was on the Rohingya repatriation issue.

All the Bangladesh-Myanmar-China tripartite arrangements over the past few years have remained dormant. The military leaders in Myanmar are currently occupied in brutally dousing the fire of domestic discontent and a growing chain of insurgency to even think of taking up the Rohingya issue with any seriousness. Even the ICJ ruling on a case filed by the Gambia, backed by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

(OIC), against the Myanmar government for committing genocide against the Rohingyas has done little to rattle Naypyidaw.

The question that logically comes to mind is, facing major sanctions from the West and censure among its fellow Asean members, what sustains the Myanmar authorities that they can demonstrate a business-as-usual mindset with seeming impunity? In short, the answer is geopolitics and geoeconomics.

Myanmar is strategically located in the Asian canvass and is resource-rich. Here, countries like China and, to a lesser extent, India have immense geopolitical interest. Some Asean members and Japan have invested heavily in Myanmar and are not willing to risk that. In such a situation, the Myanmar military, having lived in

isolation for long, feel no pressure to change course and adopt a path of civilised behaviour.

There is no denying that China is a friend of Bangladesh and a major development partner. Myanmar, though, offers a far greater geopolitical value. Against this backdrop, one is reminded of a supposed quote from Brutus who, trying to justify his fateful stabbing of his friend Julius Caesar, said, "Not that I loved Caesar less, but I love Rome more." Let the wiser among us interpret the analogy.

That China has major clout over Myanmar was recently made abundantly clear by the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh as he, on more than one occasion, said that it was Beijing's pressure that had made the Myanmar military stop the

repeated violation of the land and air space of Bangladesh, ostensibly in "hot pursuit" of Arakan insurgents. On the Rohingya repatriation issue, the ambassador said it would take time due to Myanmar's internal problems. This could mean a prolonged wait for the Rohingyas to return. In fact, it puts the issue squarely in the realm of gross uncertainty, because no one knows when Myanmar's internal problems will end or what shape they would eventually take. In fact, credible reports indicate that domestic dissent in Myanmar shows no signs of abating anytime soon, while insurgents gain strength and ground.

India, whose close relations with Bangladesh are based on history and geography, has a somewhat varied geopolitical and security interest when it comes to Myanmar. India needs Myanmar's continued support in its efforts to combat Mizo insurgents, who at times seek shelter inside Myanmar's territory. Delhi does not wish to risk losing that by putting too much pressure on Myanmar on repatriating the Rohingyas from Bangladesh.

A well-regarded Australian scholar who has insight and some knowledge of regional geopolitics feels strongly that in a scenario where geopolitics takes precedence over humanity, Myanmar feels next to zero compulsion to take the Rohingyas back. He strongly believes the Rohingyas are here to stay, and feels the fear psychosis in the Rohingya mind runs deep, and Bangladesh should look at a Plan B.

Such a gloomy and uncertain scenario puts Bangladesh in quite a tight spot. However, it cannot afford not to continue to pursue all stakeholders, bilaterally, regionally and globally, to bring pressure on Myanmar to ensure safe and dignified return of the Rohingyas. It undoubtedly is a very long and difficult path, but giving up is not an option.

Success stories can improve our woefully low awareness

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Syed Fazle Rabbi Dollar, a resident of Bogura, has been concerned about the harmful effect of the rampant use of nitric acid on the environment and its abuse by criminals. He has been particularly bothered by its uncontrolled use at more than 500 jewellery shops/workshops in his city. He learnt that 400 of these enterprises had no licence at all to use nitric acid in their workshops. And yet, all of them used it indiscriminately to dissolve solid metals such as gold, silver and bronze, causing health hazards and emitting foul smells. Nitric acid can lead to breathing problems and severe asthmatic attacks. The liquid discharge from the acid used in these workshops passes through drains to end up in the nearby Karatoa River, poisoning its water and killing fish and other living organisms.

To make things worse, as obtaining acid was relatively easy, acid-related crimes, including acid attacks on people, were on the rise. Efforts by the local community to draw the local administration's attention towards the problem produced little result. So, an exasperated Fazle Rabbi finally decided to submit a Right to Information (RTI) request to the Office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Bogura on July 31, 2022. He sought information on how many business entities/workshops were issued licences to use nitric acids, whose licences were renewed, and the number of those who had licences to sell and transport acids. And then he waited.

To his surprise and great satisfaction, Fazle Rabbi received a response to his RTI request from the assistant commissioner within the stipulated period, together with the information sought. Being a journalist, he immediately decided to share the information in the local daily Amader Kontho. And to his further satisfaction, he soon found that the local administration

had gone into quick action and conducted raids at various places in the city. The drive resulted in the eventual closure of many entities/workshops that operated illegally. Many others who were in the business of using acids hastily approached the DC office to obtain the required licence. As a result, the local administration now possesses the information on the number of entities licensed to operate acid-related business at one place.

Fazle Rabbi used one of our most powerful instruments to hold our government accountable. The recent release of the "Right to Information (RTI) Survey, 2019" on Bangladesh, convoked by the DFID and the World Bank, provides useful data on the use of the law, particularly on aspects hampering its application, which could help proponents identify appropriate remedial measures. We must do so in order to fully benefit from this potent instrument for citizens to monitor our government's work and contribute to better governance.

Both positive and negative messages emerge from the survey. Clearly, the most positive finding is the seeming preparedness of the supply side for its role in the implementation of the law. The survey found 99.7 percent of Designated Officers (DOs) appointed by public offices, including government bodies, are aware of the RTI Act. This is an increase from the 94 percent found in a 2012 survey. Equally impressive, 97.9 percent of the heads of government offices knew about the law. It must be noted, however, that only around 40 percent of them were aware of its objectives, and even less of its procedures. Additionally, among DOs, two-thirds had never received an RTI request.

Complementing this, the survey also found that on the demand side, only 7.7 percent of our citizens were

aware of the law. This is a precipitous drop from 23 percent in 2012. The few who use the law and contribute to an average of 10,000 RTI requests annually must, therefore, be mainly those helped by NGOs engaged in promoting the law, plus those motivated and helped by individual RTI activists and, of course, those who attended training sessions conducted by the Information Commission.

For a nation long known for its political activism, why should there be such neglect of a most potent instrument for change and progress? A law of such revolutionary possibilities must not be allowed to wilt away.

Despite the general lack of knowledge about the law, the few who are aware of its tremendous power are indeed using it for beneficial purposes. And the objectives, though still largely limited to personal and professional needs, often include important areas of public interest. We believe that while we search for other ways to excite our fellow citizens, bring awareness to them, and motivate them to a greater use of the law, one effective approach would be to acquaint them with success stories that continue to emerge from its use – such as that of Fazole Rabbi.

Locals have observed that increased monitoring by the DC office and strict enforcement of the law has helped control the rampant and illegal use of nitric acid. More importantly, due to strong monitoring of the acid business by the government, the sale of acid to criminal elements to maximise profit is likely to drop significantly.

Such an inspiring story about the dramatic impact of an RTI intervention by an ordinary citizen is likely to raise people's awareness about the efficacy of the law in promoting public interest, and will hopefully lead to its greater use. It depicted a win-win effect of close collaboration between citizens and the government. As a nation of storytellers and oral historians, let's use those skills to spread such tales.

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