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Journalism under threat, now more than ever

Repressive governments are targeting journalists worldwide

The killings of 67 journalists and media workers around the world so far this year, as reported by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) recently, are a reminder of the growing threats to press freedom and freedom of expression as well as the impunity surrounding these murders. The figure marks a big jump from last year, when it was 47. According to the IFJ, the war in Ukraine has taken the lives of 12, mostly Ukrainian journalists. While covering a war always carries the risk of casualties, there have been many cases where states have been directly involved in silencing journalists. The shocking shooting of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli forces in May is a prime example of the risks journalists face when they expose truths that contradict the state narrative.

In countries where there have been public uprisings against repressive governments, journalists have been targeted quite blatantly. Since the US troops left Afghanistan and the Taliban regime took over, journalists in both electronic and print media have been arrested, some even killed. Women journalists in radio and TV channels were forced to give up their jobs and even flee the country to save their lives. The IFJ recorded at least 375 media professionals currently in prison; most of them are in China, Myanmar, Turkey, Iran and Belarus.

But what about democratic states? Are journalists safe from arbitrary arrests and physical harm? In Bangladesh, for example, there has been a proliferation of newspapers and TV channels, but does it mean we have total press freedom? The Digital Security Act (DSA) has become the greatest obstacle to independent journalism in the country, as it gives carte blanche to law enforcement agencies to randomly arrest people for publishing/sharing digital content that may be construed as being "seditious" or "hurting religious sentiments" or some other vaguely defined offense. The DSA and other laws related to the media have resulted in self-censorship, which is the first symptom of an ailing democracy. Moreover, the ownership of media is being dominated by individuals or groups connected to political power which leads to further compromises in objective, authentic journalism.

Meanwhile, in many democracies, social media has been used as a tool to spread misinformation as well as discredit, humiliate and intimidate journalists who have been critical of governments or have exposed uncomfortable truths. Women journalists especially have been targeted for relentless misogynistic trolling and incriminating rumours. The IFJ has also criticised the new form of mass surveillance, Pegasus, used to spy on people including journalists.

All these constitute major threats to the rights of journalists to pursue their careers freely and independently. Governments around the world are failing to realise that apart from providing the public with objective, authentic information, the media also helps governments to keep track of anomalies in their institutions which need to be corrected. It will, therefore, be in their own interest to ensure a safe and enabling environment for journalists, so that they can do their job without their lives and livelihoods being threatened.

A shift in global order?

China-Saudi agreements herald a new era with potentially far-reaching implications

Amid continued economic and political disturbances around the world in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, signs of what could mark a shift in the global order have come in the form of "milestone" agreements between China and Saudi Arabia. On Thursday, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's multiple-day visit to the kingdom, the two countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement that includes a number of deals and memoranda of understanding. On Friday, Xi Jinping and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman participated in a major meeting. In these, the two sides have agreed to support each other on a swathe of wide-ranging issues including oil, technology, infrastructure and security, while choosing a policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs – presumably including on issues of human rights and domestic rule.

For a traditional ally of the United States to form a strategic partnership with a country viewed as a top threat to the US' global dominance is interesting indeed. It comes amid frayed ties between the US and both countries over oil production, human rights abuses and other issues, indicating a shift in the global geopolitical order – away from the US. It should be noted that the US-Saudi alliance, which has endured through seven Saudi monarchs and 15 presidents, has been basically built on an oil-for-security premise. Riyadh could count on US weapons, and the US could "almost always" count on cheap Saudi oil. That understanding seems to have changed under US President Joe Biden, following the blowback over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and later when the Saudi-led OPEC+ decided to cut oil production in October. That decision appeared to benefit Russia – another threat to US dominance – amid sanctions on Russian energy that drove up fuel prices around the world, including in the US.

Although, after the agreements with China, Saudi Arabia has maintained that it doesn't believe in choosing sides, it is clearly choosing friends through the lens of its interests. Saudi Arabia and China have a shared interest in the oil markets. China is the world's largest importer of crude oil, for which it is heavily reliant on Saudi Arabia. For Saudi Arabia, China is its largest trading partner, with Chinese exports reaching USD 30.3 billion in 2021 while Saudi exports totalled USD 57 billion in the same year. Having the world's second-largest economy as a critical partner can have far-reaching implications as Saudis push to diversify their economy as well as alliances. In fact, as Reuters reported, Riyadh is thought to have signed USD 30 billion in defence contracts with China.

A single alliance doesn't represent a major change in the global order, however. Only time can say how the future will pan out. We need to keep our eyes open.

Unfair policing of opposition making ordinary citizens suffer too



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KAMAL AHMED

Now that the dust has settled in Dhaka following the peaceful and orderly staging of BNP's mass rally, we need some answers to a few simple questions. A rally that was expected to last a maximum of six hours has cost more than 10 million Dhaka residents anything between a day and four days (varying on locations) of their normal daily routines, including office work, children's coaching, medical appointments, shopping, leisure and other activities.

The images of anti-riot armoured vehicles, water cannons, and AK-47 wielding special forces patrolling certain city streets resembled a war zone and not a democratic square. The worry and concerns expressed, and issuance of advisories by foreign missions in Dhaka to their own nationals, therefore, were not that unwarranted, especially after some ministers expressed annoyance at and issued veiled warnings to foreign diplomats.

The BNP announced its series of rallies in 10 divisional venues on September 27, and according to the now-imprisoned Secretary General of the party, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, it sought permission from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner to hold the Dhaka rally at Nayapalton on November 13. Since the BNP's first divisional rally in Chittagong on October 12, it became clear that the opposition party was on the path of organisational revival.

The ruling party, Awami League, seemed to have realised this, but adopted the wrong strategy. It thought threats, harassment and creating overt and covert barriers to these rallies would discourage opposition supporters. They were likely utterly surprised to find that none of those overused tactics were effective anymore. BNP supporters showed remarkable defiance and turned up to display their party's strength.

The media has reported on reprisals for attending the rally, thereby showing a disturbing trend of not only preventing the opposition from organising, but of punishing them afterwards too. Shutting down of businesses and not allowing them to reopen in Barishal's Agailjhara upazila is one such example. Weeks before the Dhaka rally, it became clear



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

that the more preventative measures put in place by the administration, the more defiant the BNP grassroots became. It is, therefore, perplexing to understand the rationale behind the administrative actions (and inaction) over BNP's application to hold the rally at Nayapalton, in front of its central office.

One may question the judiciousness of the DMP chief, who had previously granted permission for at least half a dozen rallies at Nayapalton that had either fully or partially stopped traffic flow in surrounding areas, but kept the BNP's application for the December 10 rally hanging. His refusal came only after the ruling party's pronouncement that BNP would have to move to Suhrawardy Udyan. There's no dispute about the authority of the DMP chief in granting and cancelling such permissions, based on security and safety assessments. Had there been any credible intelligence about possible subversion or breakdown of law and order, he could withdraw such permits at any time.

It was even more intriguing that until the ruling party directed its student wing Chhatra League to bring forward its annual conference, Suhrawardy Uddyan was not available for organising

about the policing of the BNP rally in Dhaka, although the bungled process of granting permission for the event is at its core. Media reports suggest the Detective Branch (DB) chief was in the driving seat, instead of the DMP supremo, in negotiating with the BNP leadership to settle on an alternative venue.

The same branch of the police picked up Mirza Fakhrul and another BNP senior leader Mirza Abbas in the dead of the night from their homes, thereby setting a new precedent of taking top level politicians to the DB office for quizzing based on suspicions. In legal lexicon, this is called a "fishing expedition", where suspects are taken into custody without proof or evidence of wrongdoing. Had there been any solid evidence, they would have been arrested and produced before the court. I tried to research another example of a politician being taken to the DB office for interrogations like this in the last 51 years of our independence – without any success.

The reason given for the sudden raid at the BNP central office – which led to the shocking loss of a life, dozens of injuries, hundreds of arrests and hundreds sued in a number of cases – has been disputed by the BNP. Their

rally has once again exposed the stark contrast – BNP is denied space on the streets in Dhaka, but the AL and its organisations set up dozens of pandals across the capital to hold mini-rallies on the same day. While the police didn't allow anybody near the BNP central office, AL workers cooked food in a makeshift kitchen in front of their central office under their watchful eyes.

The policing in the run up to the rally was especially troubling as they restricted freedom of movement, indiscriminately frisked passengers and walkers, and engaged in unauthorised and wholesale breach of privacy by forcing people to handover their mobile phones and show personal messages and images. These are clear violations of the constitution and Supreme Court directives.

The random searches of mobile phones and quizzing of passersby were not limited to the police force, but done by members of Chhatra League, too. Why didn't the police stop such vigilantism? If the ruling party outfits have the right to form vigilante groups, would that not encourage similar formations in the opposition? These questions are crucial for the future of our democracy and rule of law, and should not be ignored.

From Grading to De-grading



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I recently conducted an oral examination at a college that offers a Master's programme. The meeting started with a plea from colleagues about not failing anyone, otherwise the college would get into trouble. They had incidents where examiners were detained, and cars of teachers were vandalised. The only way to avoid this was to give a bare pass grade in the viva-voce, as they would fail the written examination anyway.

Once the candidates started coming in, I realised that there was no way they could pass, as most of them could not even remember what texts they attempted in the exams they took about a month back. Most of them were irregular students with no interest in pursuing a career related to their MA degree's major. It was a wonder how they made it this far without the required knowledge and skills to be in the tertiary system. Their literacy skills were of primary, or at best, secondary level.

During the exam, I could not help but think about the nearly 90 percent of students who have passed this year's SSC examinations. The switch from online teaching to an offline mode was a massive challenge for them. Their syllabus was shortened. They were given generous options to choose from for subject mapping. In other words,

they could further avoid a section of their textbooks. The bar was lowered for them to succeed.

The number of near-perfect golden GPAs has also increased. Still, not everyone is happy. At Chittagong Board, 14,485 students have challenged their grades, asking for a re-check (of which, 7,823 candidates want their English scripts to be reassessed).

The frenzied celebration of the achievements of graduating students, who are now qualified to be in the intermediate waiting room before embarking on their journey of higher education, made me think of their preparedness for the next level. The students I met in the oral examination are products of a system that has allowed them to move on to the next tier without any difficulty.

Of their necessary credentials (i.e., GPA), I have no doubt. They have come through a system that credits grades as everything. But the time has come for us to ask: are grades the real indicator of the aptitudes and acumen of our students? What are the dangers of making grades the yardstick of achievements? How do grades impact the future career trajectory of students?

Whether grades help or hinder student learning is a debate that is as old as the River Buriganga. Some feel

grading on a point scale encourages students to chase good marks without meaningful learning. Then again, students know that unless they obtain better grades, their chances of getting into a good college, earning their desired degree, or finding their preferred career will diminish. Such pressure sparks anxiety and stress. We cannot take this lightly, as more than 400 young adults committed suicide in the 14-16 age group last year, according to a mental health service provider survey.

The problem is made worse by the lack of opportunities. Not all colleges and universities have qualified teachers or satisfactory infrastructure. A bad grade means missing out on admission into a good institution. The government has assured that the number of seats at intermediate colleges is higher than the number of candidates. But from a parent's or student's perspective, there are colleges, and there are colleges. Even the fear of a bad grade can cause anxiety and stress, leading to a decline in academic performance and even self-harm.

The mad rush for grades can reduce the creativity of students as well, and suppress their self-esteem. The grade chase makes students adopt cheating and plagiarism, as the public perception of success dictates a logic where learning takes the back seat. Their reliance on memorisation or shortcuts they learn from their teachers at schools or mentors at coaching centres make them ill-equipped for today's career spectrum.

If an institution gets a reward or punishment based on this GPA barometer, they too feel obliged to cater to the grade lust. I won't be surprised if a sociological study of grade inflation finds a connection

between social obsession and grade obsession. When news of SSC successes hits national headlines to add to the glory of policymakers, we realise that these grades are beyond the pay grade of educators.

The traditional assessment system made students accountable for their work with a simple frame of reference for their overall standing. The summative grade-point system, in theory, is an international benchmark. These grades give students, and the institutions they apply to, some idea of their overall performances. But the problem arises when there is a mismatch between obtained grades and learning objectives.

Often, we get queries from foreign missions where visa officers are confused over academic transcripts and the knowledge of the subjects they studied. For example, eyebrows are raised if a CSE graduate fails to describe a software. Their confusion is the same as mine.

We need to start making small changes. There are too many stakeholders. The higher number of graduates will make many of the punters – individuals (i.e. students, parents, family members), institutions (i.e. colleges, coaching centres), accessory suppliers (i.e. books), service sectors (i.e. transport, housing, food, dress), happy. A sudden decline and "degradation" will be political suicide for incumbent administrators.

The grade chase is symptomatic of our obsession with numbers. We need a change in the system that holds grades for its quality of evidence. And to ensure quality, we must first change the factors. We need to educate educators. We need to change the mindset of grade glorification. Above all, we need to focus on the learning outcome, not the number of learners.