

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Don't allow corruption to hurt businesses

What happened to govt's zero-tolerance policy against corruption?

The findings of a recent study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) – which itself is a part of the World Economic Forum's annual survey – are quite alarming, if not entirely surprising. It says that Bangladesh's business environment deteriorated in 2022 largely because of corruption, with as much as 65 percent of respondents complaining about it, saying corruption was proving to be a major barrier for them to conduct business. The majority of the respondents faced corruption in paying taxes (48 percent), receiving licences (54 percent) and securing connections for utilities like gas, electricity, and water (49 percent), as well as during export-import activities (75 percent).

About 53 percent of small and micro level enterprises consider corruption as the most important barrier to doing business in Bangladesh, while 71 percent of medium sized firms and 59 percent of large firms also feel the same. In such dismal circumstances, it is ironic that the party in power still claims to have "zero tolerance" for corruption. It is also ironic that it tries to take credit for being pro-business at every opportunity, when the reality is, corruption has reached never-before seen levels during its tenure.

The CPD survey has also found inadequate infrastructure to be the second most problematic factor in doing business, followed by inefficient government bureaucracy and limited access to finance, as per feedback from senior officials of different firms based in Dhaka, Chattogram, Narayanganj, and Gazipur. The effect of all these institutional factors has been exacerbated after the emergence of new challenges such as higher inflation, volatility in the foreign currency market, and policy instability.

Because corruption has become so widespread and deeply entrenched, the cost of production for businesses has gone higher too, which ultimately leads to additional suffering for the general people who have to pay more for goods and services. And that has been made worse with the government raising fuel prices by unprecedented amounts in recent times. All these factors are worsening the business environment in the country, when businesses are already suffering due to external issues.

The fact that Bangladeshi businesses have made tremendous progress over the years, in spite of these obstacles, speaks to their potential. Had corruption been lower in the country, businesses surely could have contributed more to the economy, and exports could have been more competitive, eventually adding to our foreign exchange reserve – which is currently under substantial pressure. This is something that needs to be urgently recognised: that under the current circumstances, where businesses are already under immense pressure, corruption and poor government policies will definitely hurt us much more than if things were normal.

With Bangladesh being on the cusp of graduating from its Least Developed Country status – which will change how the world interacts with us – and the new challenges that it will bring forth, the last thing our businesses need is to be set back time and again by unchecked corruption. The government, therefore, needs to take immediate measures to prevent it, instead of repeating its outdated rhetoric.

Why is air pollution still a non-issue?

Govt must save residents of Dhaka, other cities from massive pollution

It's disturbing to see the massive decline in the quality of air in Dhaka and nearby cities in January. In Dhaka, according to a report, air quality has been consistently poor throughout the month, reaching "dangerous" levels on all but one of the first 24 days. Even on Monday, Dhaka recorded an air quality index (AQI) score of 263, thus making it to the top of the global list of cities with the worst air. Meanwhile, the air in Narayanganj has apparently become even more dangerous, with the AQI score there having averaged an unbelievable 400 or higher from the beginning of January until the 24th.

Such pollution has clearly raised the stakes much higher for the residents. Imagine, you're literally exposing yourself to a life-threatening danger simply by stepping out of your home and breathing in. How ironic that our first act outdoors is also probably our most consequential health-wise, even though its effects may not be immediately visible. These effects – causing the death of about 88,000 people every year in Bangladesh, and decreasing the average life expectancy of Dhaka residents by seven to eight years – are somehow still not serious enough to merit proper response from the authorities, especially those in charge of reducing pollution.

We must ask, why this apathy when so many people are dying or suffering from various health complications? This is totally inexcusable. Any other city in any developed country would have declared a state of emergency with health precautions if it faced the situation that Dhaka or Narayanganj is doing. The causes of air pollution are not unknown, nor is there a shortage of regulations to prevent it. Although a law is yet to be passed in this regard, the main problem is not lack of legal or institutional safeguards but lack of initiative and implementation.

As well as the failure to put a lid on the known sources of dust, smoke and fumes, there are wider issues at play that the authorities are refusing to address, including filling of wetlands, destruction of greenery, unplanned construction of buildings and structures, etc. Many of the infrastructure projects that have been taken up over the last decade have hugely impacted the environmental health of the country. Can we stop air pollution without addressing these wider policy issues? Will we continue to indulge in self-harm by prioritising only our material progress?

However, the threat of air pollution can no longer be ignored, given its alarming level which seems to be getting progressively worse by the day. We urge the authorities to take this issue with the seriousness it deserves. Given the present level of pollution, with the summer knocking on the door, they must undertake urgent steps to tackle major air pollutants and other contributing factors, and also hold to account the relevant agencies for their failure.

One nation, one version, one law to rule them all



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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BADIUZZAMAN BAY

Think the Awami League will finally bring reforms in the Digital Security Act (DSA) to restore public trust in the democratic process in the lead up to the general election? Think again.

Recently, two ministers, within the space of two weeks, talked in rather glowing terms about the law. On June 15, the foreign minister, perhaps bolstered by the "satisfaction" expressed by a top US official about the "tremendous progress" achieved in reducing extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh, categorically said, "The DSA is a very good law." Then, on January 28, the law minister underscored its importance again, saying it was needed in the present context, rejecting complaints that the law was being abused to curtail free speech and press freedom. Rather than initiate the process of amending or rectifying the law, as promised by key members of the ruling class in the recent past, the government appears to be in no hurry to do so. It doesn't want to appear abusive, but wants us to develop Stockholm syndrome anyway.

While the manner in which the DSA is being defended – short on logic, long on rhetoric – is nothing new, the timing of the defence bears significance. It signals that Awami League may not change its tactic imminently. At the very least, it will try to hold off any amendment as long as possible. After all, the law has been tremendously useful for the party. It has been like a political bonfire on which critics and rivals could be roasted, without a bitter aftertaste. As a recent review of the four years of DSA has shown, on an average, one case has been filed every week by ruling party activists during this period. It proves – if any proof were needed – that the DSA has been every bit the tool of repression that it was feared to be all along.

There are more insights to be drawn from this review based on data collected by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), which logged cases filed under the DSA between October 2018 and August 2022. Overall, it recorded 1,109 cases, of which around 60 percent were over Facebook activities. Predictably, politicians and journalists formed the majority of those accused.

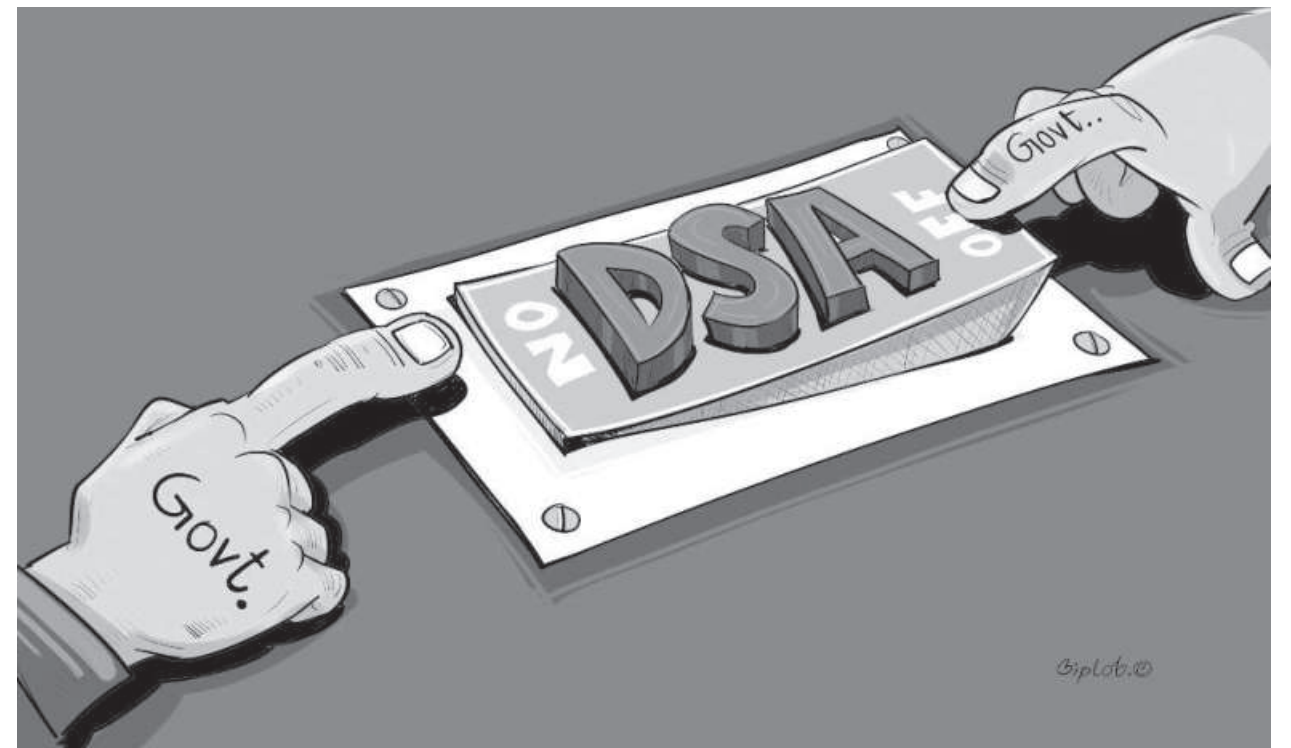


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

Politicians – or ruling party affiliates, to be more specific – were also the largest group of people prosecuting journalists, mostly on charges of defamation.

However, most complainants were not even direct victims of said defamation, as they were filing cases on behalf of someone else. A point to be noted in this regard is that as many as 140 cases – mind the number – were filed for allegedly defaming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who recently invited the opposition to "point out my failures." One wonders how encouraged the latter will feel given how past attempts of criticism often ended up.

What's equally alarming, of the 2,889 individuals accused in all cases, is that only 52 – or two percent – saw their cases disposed of by the court. This means that the vast majority of the accused have been kept hanging. Also, at least 725 of the cases being investigated by police are from before 2022 – which indicates a clear violation of the legal time limit given to wrap up investigations. This, as well

as the extremely cumbersome and unfriendly justice process, inevitably exposes the accused to various pre-trial horrors – including prolonged stay in police custody, struggle to secure bail, prolonged uncertainty over their fate, etc. This is harassment, plain and simple, with one out of every three people accused being arrested.

just a replacement. It was brought on to serve a purpose. And serve it did.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh seems to be increasingly turning into ground zero for the experiment of "one nation, one version," with one law to rule them all. Everyone must speak the same, think the same, see the same. Hence the attempt to "right-wash"

All this is just for exercising their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech. This is where the "beauty" of such legal harassment lies, which perhaps explains why the ruling party wouldn't let go of the DSA yet. It can be defended without looking monstrous on paper – because, as the law minister claimed, "misuse of any law is not unusual," right? It offers an illusion of justice, pinning any "misuse" on the system. It also doesn't draw as much scrutiny as physical violence or extralegal excesses – recall the US sanctions on Rab imposed in December 2021 – but still has the same intimidating effect.

It may be hard to believe now, but before the trauma of DSA began to unfold fully, there was an expectation that the Awami League, as the party accused of introducing the law as a tool of political repression, would err on the side of restraint – rather than of excess – when using it, even if merely to prove the critics wrong. It was a fleeting hope of a people desperate to turn the page on the infamous Section 57. But the DSA was not meant to be

school textbooks and curricula. Hence the attempt to monopolise historic narratives. Hence the ban on dissident publishers from participating in Ekushey Bôj Mela. Hence the shrinking of civic and political spaces under various pretexts. The wolves are always at the door. Any challenge to the status quo or failure to accommodate it will be frowned upon and punished.

But in such a culture of fear, even prolonged silence can be deceptive. It can be prolonged calm before the storm. The authorities should be wise to remember that, if played wrong, Stockholm syndrome may give way to the Streisand effect. Silencing tactics like the DSA can only take them so far. After four years, there should be enough sobriety on the part of all concerned to understand that this law, regardless of what legal vacuum it has filled, has been nothing but a tool of repression so far, and it's too late to change public opinion about it.

Bangladesh can and should be able to contain multitudes of opinions. This is the only way forward.

The West versus the Rest



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ANDREW SHENG

Twenty-five years ago, Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington penned an influential article on the West and the Rest. Building on his 1993 classic *The Clash of Civilizations*, he argued that the West has won the Cold War, but it cannot flourish in a more hostile world until it abandons its universal aspirations.

In his mind, the clash is about identities defined by cultural civilisations. He defined eight civilisations: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western, Latin American, Orthodox, and African. For him, "the West" refers to broadly Western Christendom, covering Western Europe and North America, including Australasia. Japan is counted as part of the West today, not just for being the first Asian state to industrialise, but also to emulate Western imperial history.

European thinkers have long debated the West's role in sustaining modernity. America carries the mantle of leading the West, but much of her intellectual power was boosted by European science and social scientists who fled from Nazism or Communism after the 1930s. Milton Friedman's free market views were hugely influenced by Austrian philosopher/economist Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992). But it was the Hungarian political philosopher Karl Polanyi's (1886-1964) ideas that are more durable than the neoliberal thinking that pervades the West today.

In his book *For a New West*, Polanyi saw presciently in 1958: "The material and scientific products of the West are avidly consumed by the nascent nations, but with an un concealed contempt for the interpretations set upon them by ourselves. That cultural entity, the West, of which the thinkers and writers were the traditional vehicles, is no longer listened to; not on account of a hostile public, as we persuade ourselves to believe, but because it has nothing relevant to say."

"Western universalism – this is the Jewish-Christian inheritance – was the claim to a way of life of universal validity... it was not a conversation, rather a spirited monologue. Since no answer came, we carried on in our train of thought – unsustainable, but also uncontradicted."

Sixty years later, the Russia-Ukraine war has revealed cracks in that logic. The fact that 59 percent of the world's population voted against or abstained on the UN condemnation of Russia in March last year showed that the West today is a minority "we." The Rest remains unconvinced that the West is able to condemn with clean hands, having also violated international principles to invade other countries in its own interests. Many saw parallels between the Ukraine conflict as a civil war with Great Power intervention, not unlike those in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan.

Ukraine events essentially upended

the view that wars can be fought on purely moral grounds. The brutal realist view is that amid the complex domestic civil war issues, the geopolitical game is to weaken Russia in order to determine who ultimately controls energy, food and military security at the European and global levels. Some cynics think that Europe fell into a trap whereby in defending Ukraine sovereignty, she lost her own sovereignty by being ultimately dependent on American energy and military security, including dictating who she can or cannot trade with. India saw very clearly that the war was more about self-interest, and therefore chose not to be on anyone's side except her own. The fog of war and propaganda cannot hide the ugly truth that power is ultimately determined by sources of energy.

We see today that the Industrial Revolution was really an energy revolution. Production driven by coal and fossil fuels made the West realise that the command of energy ensured imperial power. Hence, colonial expansion was all about the grab for land, people, energy and power. The Americans improved on the British imperial model by using the power of reserve currency, namely the US dollar, to acquire global goods and services, rather than having to conquer colonies. But the financialisation model has reached the stage whereby the West is on the brink of World War III with World War II debt levels. Every aircraft carrier and missile launched is funded by more debt. If we were on the gold standard, there would be no more money to fight.

The 1970s was a masterstroke of Western ingenuity. Having induced China out of the Soviet camp, the West benefited from Chinese labour to produce cheap global goods, plus cheap Russian food and energy after

the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The West's Great Moderation period of good growth with low inflation relied on Chinese factories and Russian/Middle East oil, plus commodities from the Rest, because everyone loved the US dollar. The Middle East has woken up to the harsh reality that after discovering shale oil, America has become a strategic competitor rather than a major customer. The US dollar has also become weaponised.

Thus, the Russia-Ukraine war has realigned global energy power. Russia and the US are energy self-sufficient, but Europe, China, India and Japan remain energy-starved. By pushing Russia eastwards as not a part of Europe, the West has now pushed Russia, the largest country by geographical size, to provide food, energy and fertilisers to the Rest.

The emerging new world order is shaping up as a three cornered tussle whereby the South will try to balance the East (Russia and China) and the West as to who gives them more benefits. In an eight-billion world, the geopolitical contest is really about whether the one-billion West or 1.8-billion East can win the hearts and minds of the 5.2 billion in the South.

Polanyi was clear on whether the West would thrive in a multipolar world. First, "the survival of democracy depends upon the measure of its (West) success in tackling the global tasks of the time." Second, the market economy must be tamed by the nation-state, not in the name of what Polanyi called a "predatory empire," but "an adjusted, tolerant West" where the Rest are partners, not vassals in the new order.

Welcome to the new global power game.

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