

VISUAL:
BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

PERSECUTION OF JOURNALISTS

Condemnation isn't enough



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY
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The way *Prothom Alo* correspondent Samsuzzaman Shams was picked up from his residence at around 4am on Wednesday by plain-clothed police, and later reported to have been arrested under the Digital Security Act (DSA), demonstrates the deeply disturbing state of freedom of expression in Bangladesh. This was followed up by more disconcerting news that a case has been filed against the editor of the newspaper, Matiur Rahman.

That Samsuzzaman's detention was not acknowledged by police for at least 18 hours after he was picked up is not something unique, but only the latest example of a pattern we have witnessed over the past decade. While police initially claimed no knowledge of his arrest, later Law Minister Anisul Huq and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader told the press that specific complaints had been filed against Samsuzzaman. According to the available information, Samsuzzaman was "arrested" in a case filed by a man named Syed Md Golam Kibria under the DSA with Tejgaon police station in Dhaka. The case against Matiur Rahman was filed under the same law by Abdul Malek, a lawyer of the Supreme Court.

No matter how much the ruling party claims that the large number of media outlets in the country is evidence of freedom of the press, incidents like these are enough to lay bare the real picture. Add to this the government's decision to close down newspapers supported by the opposition party and the cancellation of domain allocation of 191 online news portals based on the information of government intelligence agencies, and one can get a better picture.

The annual freedom of the press index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in May 2022 shows that Bangladesh has slipped down 10 notches in a single year. Bangladesh was ranked 162nd out of 180 countries in the index, with a score of 36.63 in 2022. There is no reason to think that this year's report, expected to be published in May, will show any sign of improvement. This can be assumed from the fact that a recent human rights report released by the US Department of State highlighted the impediments to freedom of expression and the internet in Bangladesh. According to the report, the media, known to be critical of the government and the Awami League, have been harassed. Advertisements in those media have been cut. For this reason, many media houses have voluntarily avoided criticising the government.

Samsuzzaman's arrest has exposed the intimate relationship between the government and the ruling party supporters, including "journalists," "editors" and "media," who have been running a fierce campaign against him after the publication of a report on Independence Day. They can take

comfort in this arrest as a "success" of their campaign. But they not only jeopardised Samsuzzaman's safety as an individual, but also harmed Bangladesh's image and interests. Ironically, these individuals and media outlets are often concerned about the image of the country. Those who think that the way these supporters are explaining these actions will be acceptable to everyone live in an echo chamber.

The entire saga pertaining to the report in question is well-known. As explained by *Prothom Alo*, a "card" used for social media promotion was posted on Sunday quoting Zakir Hossain, a daily wage labourer, highlighting a news report on *Prothom Alo*'s Facebook page. Although Zakir Hossain's name and quote was used on the card, a picture of a child was attached to it (who was also quoted in the report). As the newspaper understood that the quote of one and a symbolic picture of the other could be misconstrued, it was removed from social media less than 17 minutes after it was posted. Later, the report was revised, and the amendment was mentioned and published online again. Nowhere in the report was it said that the highlighted statement was made by the child. Rather, it has been clearly stated that the quote belongs to Zakir Hossain. There was no factual error in this report. One can at best complain about not-so-ap visual, but that, too, is a stretch as using a symbolic picture with a report is not unusual in the media. Yet, the newspaper considered it an error, admitted the "mistake," and corrected it in a short time.

For more than a decade, legal and extra-legal measures have been employed by the government to muzzle the press. Common citizens have been subjected to harassment even for expressing the slightest dissent. Relatives of journalists have been detained, attacked, and harassed. For this, state agencies are being used in white clothes. Additionally, censorship has been "outsourced" or "franchised" to activists of the ruling party. Both offline and online, these forces are engaged in harassing and attacking people who hold contrarian views. It was well-known that these were perpetrated with the knowledge and consent of the government and the ruling party, but the arrest of Samsuzzaman has made it clear that the government and these activists collude in attacking dissenting voices and creating an environment of fear.

The dwindling state of freedom of expression is only one aspect of the overall political situation in the country. Another aspect of this situation is reflected in the arrest and death of Sultana Jasmine, an office assistant in the Rajshahi land office. She was picked up from the street in broad daylight while on her way to work, without a warrant, let alone a case filed against her. She "died" while in the custody of Rab. Incidents of custodial torture

have now become a normal affair, ignoring the clear directives of the High Court and flouting a law passed in 2013. The detention and "death" of Sultana Jasmine have once again shown the nature of the existing system of governance. They showed that the "verbal complaint" of an official of the government is sufficient to activate a force and act against a citizen. The presence of the said government official during "the interrogation" by Rab defies any logic or prevalent laws. But, there have been repeated attempts to justify the unlawful detention, so-called interrogation, the mysterious presence of an official, and the "sudden death" of an arrestee.

It is also worth noting that the legality of this detention is now being constructed through *post facto* filing of a case under the DSA. Needless to mention that the law, since its introduction in October 2018, has been criticised by human rights activists at home and abroad. I have demonstrated with data of 47 months, gathered under a project of the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) (January 2023), that the law is nothing short of a tool of persecution. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said on March 7 that under the DSA, "criminal sentences continue to be handed down against those exercising their rights to free expression and belief." The law has provided state agencies with the power to pick up anyone from the street, as was the case of Sultana Jasmine.

The incidents of being picked up by plain-clothed state actors, denied freedom of expression, being tortured, and dying in custody are essentially no different from the incidents of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. These are now commonplace because the country is being governed by imparting fear. Coercion and intimidation are at the heart of the system of governance. The 2023 annual report of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), one of the world's leading research institutes on democracy, has once again called Bangladesh an "electoral autocracy." In each of the indicators used by V-Dem to measure the state of democracy in a country, the situation in Bangladesh has worsened in 2022 from the previous year. Another research organisation, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), has been classifying Bangladesh as an autocracy for quite a few years. This kind of rule survives through the denial of the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and voting.

It is our moral duty to condemn the arrest of Samsuzzaman Shams and demand his immediate release. In an equal measure, we must condemn the case against Matiur Rahman. However, we must also remember that there is no alternative to repealing the law under which Samsuzzaman and many others have been detained over the past years. It also needs to be clearly stated that his release and even the withdrawal of the case against him are not enough. Until voices are raised against the prevalent system of governance, unless the unaccountable system of governance which rests on force and repression is challenged, incidents like these will be repeated.

On belonging

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YVONNE GAVAN

There's something about moving – whether it's to a new town or a new continent – that always makes me seek out the familiar. And although I don't always notice when I'm doing it – or feeling it – this morning, when it starts to rain in Dhaka for the first time in months, wonderful light, clean rain, I find myself standing on the balcony, breathing in the scent of damp leaves and being transported back to the straggly meadows near where I grew up in England that seemed to shimmer after the rain, revelling in their bright green ness. I remember the fields so clearly that I can almost taste the tinny wet-earth smell and feel the slippery mud that squelched under my shoes. For an instant it's as though I'm there again, back in a place where I felt like I belonged.

Yet I wonder about belonging. Where its joy and relief live in my body. And whether it's also responsible for the moments of loneliness I've struggled with over the years – moments of disconnection and isolation tinged with sadness.

The first time I left London to live overseas with my young family was when we moved to the Caribbean with my husband's job. Everyone back home thought we'd won the relocation lottery and would repeatedly tell me how envious they were of the fact that I got to live next to white sandy beaches and take the kids to paddle in the clear, warm, turquoise sea after school.

Barbados was, and is, a stunningly beautiful island. Yet I struggled with homesickness. I missed my mum, my sisters and my friends – people who made me feel grounded, supported. I wasn't used to seeking out the familiar and became disconnected from myself, struggling to find a way back.

There was also a heaviness to the place. A dark atmosphere that felt particularly strong when I drove through the interior of the island, along narrow roads that cut through winding fields of sugar cane to the east coast, and

stood on the shore looking out over the Atlantic. I later learned that's where the slave ships used to come in, ships that contained people chained together for weeks in horizontal rows, packed in layers like dead fish – many of whom were dead by the time the boat landed.

The survivors are the – relatively close – ancestors of those who now belong to the island, its soft sea breezes and rangy coconut trees, its legacy of derelict cane factories and its dark history. Despite this deeply traumatic beginning, people who call themselves Barbadian today have accepted the land as theirs. And in a sort of enforced yet tender adoption, they, like many of the world's displaced people, have found themselves in the land, a home. And after four confusing,

I wonder about this when I find myself moving through Gulshan one day on a rickshaw. I pass a tea stall, noticing how tired and relieved some of the men gathered on the pavement look, how I've seen that look on faces so many times before, and I watch as a battered bus slows down and a frail old man starts to get off and nearly falls to the ground before a crowd of people rush over to help him. Then there is a dog lying asleep in the road near my building, unflinching, completely relaxed as the cars and rickshaws veer around her. As the evening call to prayer begins, a plaintive song that reminds me where I am, over and over again, I notice how witnessing these interactions makes me feel connected, safe. And I remember that everything changes when I see that we all

I stopped in my tracks when I saw that, among the sea of emerald shrubs, was a bright purple bush that looked so out of place I wondered if it had been spray painted as a joke. As I stood there gazing at it in all its purple glory, I realised this plant made everything else even more beautiful just by being there.

beautiful years on the island, I finally felt at home there before moving again, to Africa.

So, what, then, is home? This is a question I often ask my children who have spent more than a decade living away from the nation emblazoned across the cover of their passports. And the answer is usually mixed. It's part wherever our family of five currently has a home, part sitting under the apple tree in their grandparent's garden on a summer's day and partly the taste of Barbadian sugar syrup and lime, or the familiar sight of the enormous amber Botswana sun slowly disappearing on the horizon.

All of these things feel good. Good. A word which, at its Proto-Indo-European root, means "to unite, be associated with," and ultimately, to belong. It feels good to belong and it feels good to be connected. But to whom do we belong and what is it that connects us?

belong to the world and to each other – that this is what connects us.

There is an amazing abundance of green beside Lake Baridhara right now. Skyward palms, teak trees covered in vines, shrubs and ferns line the path, yet while walking there the other day, I stopped in my tracks when I saw that, among the sea of emerald shrubs, was a bright purple bush that looked so out of place I wondered if it had been spray painted as a joke. As I stood there gazing at it in all its purple glory, I realised this plant made everything else even more beautiful just by being there.

Because, when you focus on difference, there it is – everywhere. Yet when you see all of the tiny imperceptible threads that connect everything, you realise that life is a shared experience. One where we make and remake ourselves through each other, over and over again.



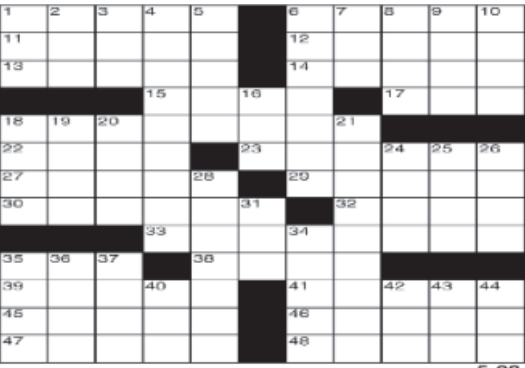
FILE PHOTO: SHAHARIAR TAKEE AFFINDI

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Half of a '60s rock group
6 Neck wrap
11 Even a little
12 Comic's forte
13 Release
14 Dwelling
15 Foreboding sign
17 Notice
18 Endorsement island
22 Indonesian
23 Battery ends
27 Pecks and pounds
29 Athlete's optimal effort
30 Giggling sound
32 – mater
33 With 35-Across, May

- celebration
35 See 33-Across
38 Spelling on TV
39 Make ashamed
41 Book of maps
45 Skirmish
46 Use your head
47 Hearty dishes
48 Unoccupied
- DOWN**
1 Buddy
2 Consumed
3 Touch lightly
4 Set of rules for a math process
5 Replay feature
6 Mock-'50s band
7 Young lion
8 Bible prophet
9 Took the bus
10 On the house
16 Mendes of movies

- 18 Border on
19 Glass section
20 Ballet bend
21 Slide rule quantity
24 Surrealist
25 Jane Austen novel
26 Barking beast
28 Is furious
31 Angsty rock
34 Make speeches
35 Reservoir makers
36 Assist in crime
37 New Haven school
40 Stitch
42 Sassy talk
43 Termite's kin
44 Kite site



WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

C	H	A	S	M		A	C	T	U	P
H	A	G	U	E		F	I	O	N	A
A	L	A	R	M		T	A	P	E	R
S	I	T	F	O	R		E	V	E	
E	T	E		R	E	M	A	K	E	S
D	E	S		I	C	E	M	A	N	
				N	A	O	M	I		
	A	P	O	L	L	O		A	S	S
S	P	O	N	S	O	R		V	I	A
M	A	I		R	A	C	I	N	G	
A	C	R	I	D		N	U	D	G	E
R	H	O	D	E		D	E	L	L	S
T	E	T	O	N		A	S	Y	E	T

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