

## Another disastrous decision for banks

### So much for restoring good governance and holding 'looters' accountable

We are outraged at how the government snuck a controversial provision into the Bank Company (Amendment) Bill 2023 at the eleventh hour, before it was passed in parliament on Wednesday. The provision extends the tenure of bank directors from nine years to 12 years. The version of the bill that was placed for scrutiny by Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on June 8 did not seek to make such an amendment, nor did the parliamentary standing committee on finance ministry suggest it. Yet, the way it was incorporated into the bill – causing a pandemonium to break out on the parliament floor, followed by a walkout by opposition MPs – suggests the move was premediated.

The fact that the government has once again decided to favour bank directors lends further credence to the widely-held belief that powerful banking families have all but gained control of government policies in relation to the sector, and that many policies are taken either with their consultation or directly as per their instructions. This is a blow particularly for those who expected the bill to address the enormous problems plaguing our banking sector, which have come about mainly because of government policies favouring vested interests.

As was pointed out in parliament, directors have been the masterminds behind many instances of "bank looting," but rarely held accountable. It was the Awami League government that, back in 2017, strengthened the hold of families over banks' boards. Since then, the health of our banking sector has gone from bad to worse. It is now saddled with defaulted loans, which were often associated with directors who had ruined corporate governance at their banks. Instead of restoring some sort of good governance in the sector, the government, with this latest decision, has seemingly decided to hand it over to vested interests on a silver platter.

The IMF has called the banking sector the Achilles' heel of our economy. And in light of Moody's downgrading of the sector as a whole – as well as individual banks (that were looted) with influential families/individuals at their head – this move sends out a bad signal. We, therefore, strongly call on the authorities to remove this amendment. It does not, in any way, serve to restore good governance in the sector, or the people. In fact, it does the complete opposite, and must be gotten rid of immediately.

## When will those 48 hours end?

### Our legal system has failed Sagar-Runi's families

The investigation into the Sagar-Runi murder has dragged on for so long that one can be forgiven for thinking that we might never be able to know who killed the journalist couple, and why. On Thursday, a Dhaka court extended the deadline for submitting a probe report for an unbelievable 101st time, after the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) failed once again to produce it. It may be recalled that after Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi were killed on February 11, 2012, the then home minister said those involved would be arrested within 48 hours. That initial deadline has now stretched over 11 years, making a total mockery of our justice system.

Since 2012, journalists and rights advocates have repeatedly demanded answers, but all they got were empty promises and failed deadlines. Frustrated, family members of the slain couple now believe the government may not be willing and sincere about resolving this case. Given the inordinate delay in the investigative process, can you blame them for thinking so? We, too, are exhausted, and cannot help but raise some questions: Is Rab not capable or motivated enough to probe this case, after all? If not, why is it not being transferred to another agency? If the government truly wants the mystery to be solved, as our home minister proclaimed earlier this year, what step has it taken to fast-track the process?

The Sagar-Runi investigation saga is yet another reminder that justice delayed is truly justice denied. Justice, in this case, seems to be elusive by design. In fact, the manner in which cases involving harassment and torture of journalists have been handled over the last decade or so paints an equally troubling picture. Lack of accountability only emboldens the enemies of free press. Just last week, for example, a journalist was beaten to death by a UP chairman in Jamalpur. This trend has to stop. We must protect journalists and journalism. In the Sagar-Runi case, we urge the authorities to ensure it is handled properly and swiftly, so that their families get the justice and closure they deserve.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Let's buy plants for our homes

The national tree fair started at the capital's Agargaon earlier this month. Thousands of plant lovers have been thronging the fair from morning till night. I went there with my daughter and son recently, and we were amazed to see all the colourful plants and flowers. My children particularly liked the various fruit-bearing trees and the fruits hanging from them. We purchased some flowering plants since we do not have the space to plant any fruit saplings in our small balcony. Overall, it was such a wonderful experience for my children. Indoor plants can also be very good for our households. Studies have shown they can improve blood pressure, decrease depressive moods and lessen symptoms of anxiety. The benefits, from health to our mindset, are boundless. In this metropolitan city, as children are increasingly growing up in apartments, plants in the home can make a big difference and nurture them to appreciate nature. I would truly recommend everyone to visit the fair and buy at least one sapling for their home.

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# Our dengue control methods are beyond inadequate



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KALLOL MUSTAFA

The number of dengue patients this year is increasing at an alarming rate across the country. According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), a record number of 281 people died of dengue in the country last year. This year, the number of dengue cases in the first five months (even before the onset of dengue season) is six times that of last year during the same period.

The situation has further deteriorated in June with the onset of monsoon, which is the breeding season for Aedes mosquitoes. According to the DGHS, from January 1 to June 20 last year, the number of people hospitalised with dengue was 781, with zero deaths. But this year, till June 20, 5,564 people were hospitalised and 36 died of dengue. The situation is getting worse with each passing day because the local government and health ministries are failing to take comprehensive steps to control the Aedes mosquito population.

Aedes larvae are not only found in flower tubs in people's houses or in stagnant water on roofs. They can breed in water accumulated in bottles, packets, cans, containers, barrels, abandoned tires, and brick pits in various public places, and especially inside under-construction buildings and structures.

A survey by the DGHS showed that three of the most common breeding areas for Aedes mosquitoes are discarded tires, flooded floors (basement or otherwise), and plastic drums. Flower tubs and trays accounted for only 3.87 percent of the breeding sources.

Dr BN Nagpal, the senior entomologist of the World Health Organization, said during his 2019 Dhaka visit that construction projects are one of the biggest sources of Aedes mosquitoes. By controlling mosquito breeding at construction sites, it is possible to reduce dengue by 40 percent. And it is the responsibility of relevant ministries and departments of the government, including city corporations, to ensure that Aedes mosquitoes do not breed in abandoned tires or construction projects.

It is also the responsibility of government authorities to encourage and compel concerned companies and individuals to not allow the



FILE PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

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accumulation of stagnant water inside privately-owned housing. For this, our cities can follow the steps taken by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Instead of starting its mosquito-controlling activities in monsoon, the Kolkata city authority works round the year to control the population of Aedes mosquitoes. The corporation keeps an eye on accumulation of stagnant water throughout the year and closely follows hospital records to see whether people are being diagnosed with dengue, so that they can take prompt measures. Some 15-20 people, divided into two groups, work in each of the 144 wards of Kolkata city. One group conducts awareness campaigns on the disease, while the other looks for the presence of stagnant water in their assigned areas. Rapid action teams, comprising 8-10 members, are also kept on stand-by in each of the 16 boroughs. When a dengue outbreak is reported anywhere, they quickly move to destroy breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitos.

Singapore is also a great example of what state institutional initiatives should look like in terms of dengue control. Staff from the National Environment Agency (NEA) in

attempts to fulfil its responsibility only by giving advance warning, and neither the city corporations nor the local government ministry take any effective measures to control the population of Aedes mosquitoes and larvae – even after receiving advance warning.

Dengue does not spread everywhere at once; its prevalence tends to be higher in some areas. For example, according to news reports, almost half of the dengue patients under treatment at the capital's Mugda Medical College Hospital are residents of different areas of Jatrabari.

If proper measures are taken to control dengue in such clusters on time, the disease will not spread easily across entire cities or the whole country. Besides working round the year to control Aedes mosquito population (and not just with the beginning of monsoon), it is important for our public authorities to identify dengue clusters by analysing the addresses of patients and take truly effective measures to control the population and migration of Aedes mosquitoes before the dengue situation worsens further each passing year.

## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Without Whistleblowers, the West Is Lost



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Earlier this month, CNN reported that a British court has denied Wikileaks founder Julian Assange "permission to appeal an order to extradite him to the United States, where he faces criminal charges under the Espionage Act." Although Assange's legal team will continue to explore its options, the snare around his neck is clearly tightening. Time is not on his side.

The US and British authorities who are pursuing him can afford to wait for any remaining public interest in his case to dwindle in the face of wars, climate change, anxiety about artificial intelligence, and other global issues.

But if we want to manage such challenges, we will need people like Assange. Who else will expose all the abuses and inconvenient truths that those in power want to keep secret – be it war crimes or social media companies' internal findings about what their platforms are doing to teen girls?

The recent small-scale drone attack on the Kremlin is a case in point. While the Ukrainian government denied any involvement (attributing it to the Russian opposition forces), Russian

President Vladimir Putin promptly denounced it as a "terrorist act," and some Western observers complained that the Ukrainians were pushing the war too far. But what actually happened? The fact that we do not know means that events are playing out under a dangerous fog of war.

But one is also reminded of the last lines in Bertold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*: "And some are in the darkness / And the others in the light / But you only see those in the light / Those in the darkness you don't see." How better to describe today's media age? While mainstream media are full of news about Ukraine, notes journalist Anjan Sundaram, "enormous wars" in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and elsewhere receive almost no attention.

This asymmetry does not mean we should offer anything less than full support for Ukraine. But it does oblige us to think about how we frame that support. We should reject the idea that Ukraine merits assistance mainly because "such things should not happen in Europe," or because we are "defending Western civilisation."

After all, Western civilisation not only ignores the horrors occurring outside its borders; it is often complicit in them.

Instead, Europeans and other Westerners should recognise that, with the invasion of Ukraine, we have gotten a taste of what has been playing out elsewhere all along – just beyond our scope of concern. The war forces us to consider what we do not know, what we do not want to know, and what we know but do not want to care about. We need people like Assange to force such reckonings – to make us see "those in the darkness."

Of course, one can criticise Assange for focusing exclusively on the liberal West and ignoring even greater injustices in Russia and China. But those injustices are already highly visible in our media. We read about them all the time. If Assange is guilty of applying a double standard, so, too, are Westerners who condemn Iran while turning a blind eye to Saudi Arabia.

As Matthew 7:3 asks: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Assange has taught us to acknowledge not only the plank in our own eye but also the hidden connections between it and the sawdust in our enemies' eyes. His approach allows us to see anew many of the big struggles that consume our media and politics.

Consider the conflict between the new populist right and the woke left. In late May, the Davis School District

in Utah removed the Bible from its elementary and middle schools after a parent complained that it "has 'no serious values for minors' because it's pornographic by our new definition" under a book-ban law passed last year. Is this just a case of Mormons waging a culture war against Christians? On the contrary, the district has since received a request also to review the Book of Mormon for possible violations of the law.

So, who is behind these demands? Is it the woke left seeking revenge for bans on material about race and LGBT+ issues? Is it the radicalised right applying strict family-values criteria to its own cherished texts? Ultimately, it does not matter, because both the new right and the woke left have embraced the same logic of intolerance. For all their ideological animosity, they mirror each other. While the woke left wants to dismantle its own political foundation (the European emancipatory tradition), the right may finally have mustered the courage to question the obscenity contained in its own foundational texts.

In a cruel irony, the Western democratic tradition of self-criticism has descended into absurdity, sowing the seeds of its own destruction. What issues are languishing in the darkness while this process hogs all the light? The biggest threat to Western democracies is not Assange and the transparency that he represents, but rather the nihilism and self-indulgence that have come to characterise their politics.