

End impunity for killing journalists

Authorities must protect journalists, expedite trial of all murder cases

Two back-to-back incidents in recent weeks have perfectly epitomised the two gravest challenges confronting journalists today: their lack of safety and the lack of consequence for any harm inflicted upon them. The first incident saw a journalist brutally murdered in Jamalpur, while the second saw the deadline for submitting a probe report in the Sagar-Runi murder case deferred for an unbelievable 101st time. These incidents not only highlight the perils faced by journalists but also the urgent need for comprehensive measures to ensure that those responsible for silencing them are held accountable.

Unfortunately, far from remedying the situation, the authorities have repeatedly dismissed concerns raised by activists. One of the major concerns is the unsolved killings of journalists. As per a report of *Prothom Alo*, 30 journalists have been killed in the last 15 years, with the families of victims yet to see justice in most cases due to delayed investigations and trials. While the Sagar-Runi case is perhaps the most protracted one, there are other long-running cases equally lost in the judicial maze. Meanwhile, many of the accused – with known affiliations with the ruling Awami League – are out on bail. Imagine the plight of families who have been left without justice, or closure, or any protection from the state. One of them is the 80-year-old mother of slain journalist Julhas Uddin, who is unsure if she will see justice before her death. Many are not even convinced about the fairness of the investigative/ trial processes.

All this paints a deeply troubling picture of the media landscape in Bangladesh, which emerged as the eleventh worst country for unsolved killings of journalists in the CPJ's 2021 Global Impunity Index. It is largely because of this questionable legal response that the country is becoming a haven for anti-journalist criminal elements. According to the Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), from 2008 to May 2023, there have been some 3,641 incidents of harassment and torture of journalists, with 682 of them recorded in the last three years. The extent of dangers facing journalists is truly alarming. And the addition of modern repressive tools like the Digital Security Act have only made things worse.

We urge the authorities to take a long, hard look at this state of affairs. They must allow journalists to do their job without any threat of physical, psychological or reputational harm. And they must ensure that the killers of journalists and their political backers are brought to justice.

Prevent a dengue wave post-Eid

Authorities, residents must take rigorous measures to stop it

We share the concern raised by dengue experts about a potential increase in the breeding of Aedes mosquitoes when tens of thousands of people leave Dhaka during the upcoming Eid holiday. Empty houses are ideal breeding grounds as stagnant water can accumulate in many places. Experts, therefore, have suggested some precautionary measures which can help address this threat.

Most of the steps they suggested are simple: clean out all containers and keep them upside down so that water does not accumulate; cover commodores with lids or plastic wrap; clean the house thoroughly, etc. Also, residents should remain generally careful during the rainy season, and use mosquito repellent spray or mosquito nets as an added layer of protection.

One of the major worries ahead of the Eid is local transmission – asymptomatic patients may carry the virus to their destinations. While a person with the dengue virus cannot directly infect another person, mosquitoes become infected when they bite an infected person and can then transmit the virus by biting a healthy one. So people should look out for typical symptoms such as high fever, severe headache and joint pain, get tested, and seek quick medical attention if they test positive. Vehicles that people will take to go to various districts must also be sprayed thoroughly with insecticide before travel. The city corporations should carry out such spraying at all bus terminals.

This brings us back to the failure of the city corporations to take preemptive measures before the dengue outbreak. Experts have frequently pointed to insufficient anti-mosquito campaigns and surveillance efforts which, ideally, should be conducted round the year. With well over 6,000 cases (out of which 1,404 are outside Dhaka) and 40 deaths, we hope that the government will take immediate steps to prevent a widespread outbreak in the districts outside Dhaka as well as within it when people return from vacation. Going forward, the government must vigorously take round-the-year measures to destroy breeding grounds, make insecticides available for the public, and create public awareness to prevent an epidemic in the near future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Support elderly pensioners

Old pensioners surrendered their pension money as per the past pension rules. They did it to address various causes that were genuine. Considering that many of them are suffering in the post-Covid era, the government should kindly consider a reversion to pension payment for the concerned old pensioners.

Unless the time limit for eligible pension after 15 years of retirement is reduced, given the health issues these elderly people are prone to suffer from, their survival will be increasingly difficult. I am sincerely requesting the government to reconsider.

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Lessons from the five city corporation elections



THE STREET VIEW

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Elections in the five city corporations concluded recently without any major untoward incident. With the main opposition BNP choosing not to participate, election results were predictably in favour of the ruling Awami League except for in Gazipur. These elections were the biggest electoral exercise before the parliamentary elections scheduled between late December and early January. So, how should we view these elections in light of the upcoming national elections? And what messages do they convey for the ruling Awami League?

Before the city polls, political commentators were terming the elections as a test case for the Election Commission (EC), which they were most certainly not. At least not in terms of managing a multiparty election. This time, the commission hardly faced any challenges, as there were scarcely any challengers. Moreover, as BNP was rather strict even about councillor candidates for the first time, the competition basically took place among ruling party contenders.

All five city polls were conducted through Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), but the national election will be held through ballot papers. The two are distinct voting mechanisms and require different types of management. So, from this point of view, too, they were not a test case.

The only positive of these five city polls was the voter turnout. Although the voter turnout in local government elections has traditionally remained high, these elections saw an average turnout of around 50 percent. Obviously, the councillor candidates always play a crucial role in raising the voter turnout. Despite that, it can be said that people will turn up at the polling centres if the atmosphere is good. In other words, a congenial atmosphere would be sufficient to get people to come. But the question remains largely about what would happen if the elections become competitive and are accompanied with the tensions and apprehensions typically surrounding a combative election.

Many believed that the commission



The only positive of these polls was the voter turnout.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

failed abysmally when a mayoral candidate in Barishal came under attack. The comment that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal made after the attack drew huge criticisms. When Barishal city mayoral candidate Syed Faizul Karim was assaulted, journalists asked the election chief about the matter. He replied, "Did he die? No. I did not see him bleeding. But we heard that someone punched him from behind." If any ruling party's mayoral candidate had come under attack, would the CEC have made the same remark?

Apprehension of clashes is always high when the election is competitive. Attack on a mayoral candidate indicated a grave lapse on the part of the EC in fostering an appropriate voting environment. As a result, the Islami Andolon Bangladesh boycotted the elections for Rajshahi and Sylhet city polls. The mayoral candidate in Gazipur, Zaida Khatun's motorcade also came under attack before the

polling day.

In the 2018 elections in the five-city corporations, the allegation against the then KM Nurul Huda-led commission was that it had failed to establish control over the police and administration. At that time, the BNP-backed mayoral candidates alleged that they were driven away from the field even before the voting started

betrayal of ruling party members. In Barishal, the incumbent mayor Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah did not get the party nomination, but his uncle Abul Khair Abdullah did. The division was very much visible and the media reported that Sadiq did not even go to the polling centre to cast his vote. In Rajshahi and Khulna, the party did not face any challenge as there was

One year on, how has Padma Bridge changed Bangladesh's southwest?

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Last year, on this day Bangladesh made global news as the country ushered in a new era of communication. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was there in person to inaugurate the megastructure – the Padma Multipurpose Bridge (PMB) – amidst a huge presence of excited onlookers and supporters. The 6.1km megaproject was seen not only as a remarkable achievement of the current Awami League government but also regarded as a major landmark in the development history of Bangladesh.

But the journey to make Padma Bridge a reality did not start smooth, owing to fund-related issues. Added to that, a variety of both national and international pressures posed a major challenge for the government in realising this project. But these obstacles were overcome and the dream finally came true; PMB was made with the country's own resources and is one of the largest river crossings in the world now.

But there is a persistent fear worldwide that despite its many socio-economic potentials, development projects such as PMB are likely to have adverse impacts on local communities. Most importantly among them is the fear that project affected people are expected to face the loss of physical and non-physical assets (such as homes, land, resources, jobs, communities, social and cultural networks, and so on) that might trigger food, health, and social insecurities. So, now after one year of PMB, these are relevant questions to ask:

How have these issues of concern been tackled in the case of PMB? Is PMB going to pay off its promised dividends over time? After the inauguration of PMB, to what extent has this mega project changed or improved local people's lives and livelihoods?

As far as economic growth and connectivity are concerned, PMB is dubbed as a strategic instrument for achieving the development visions (e.g., Vision 2041) of the government by creating an urban space, infrastructure development, and accelerating myriad channels of growth. The southern regions of the country have been traditionally neglected and local people continue to experience a slow pace of growth. Another noteworthy aspect is with the removal of major physical barriers, PMB has set up a road connection between Dhaka and the southwestern part of the country.

Aside from the tangible benefits of a mega structure, local people also value non-monetised issues such as culture, good neighbourhoods, and other factors promoting inclusivity. Among the local communities, the general perception is that PMB has earned them a sense of pride, a distinct identity other than of course promoting connectivity.

PMB underpins the spread of urbanisation and development that is not only related to roads, railways, or telecommunication but also opening the doors to more public investment. It is also expected that cargo movement

will increase between Dhaka to Mongla and Payra Ports and this will eventually reduce the immense pressure and reliance on Chattogram Port.

The bridge has also addressed issues arising from the limited ferry capacity to cross the Padma River, owing to which people had to wait for hours, especially on special occasions (e.g., Eid vacation). Ferry services were also unreliable as they would get suspended for a few days at a time due to inclement weather. The unsafe, overloaded, and unreliable ferry services contributed to the frequency of accidents as well. Now, passengers can save nearly two to three hours when travelling to southwestern districts via the Padma Bridge.

Data collected from resettlement and adjacent areas of PMB legitimises the argument that PMB is a role model among many mega projects in Bangladesh since it was developed through an inclusive participatory approach. This can be said because local communities exhibited a positive attitude and showed their overwhelming support by giving their lands for the mega project. Residents were very positive about PMB as it acts as an important source of opportunity creation at national level (e.g., tourism expansion, rapid industrialisation, etc) and on the local level (e.g., new job creation).

However, it is too early to judge, measure, or assess dividends fully sourced from PMB. It has been further revealed that although PMB offers some positive dividends, it also poses challenges that need consideration. For example, some pressing issues are directly related to resource allocation and livelihood security which was a monumental task to take on in the early stages of the project. Although

the local people were given housing and other facilities as compensation, PMB has directly impacted their livelihoods, especially those who lost a huge amount of cultivable land due to displacement. Usable cultivable land has been an important resource in areas adjacent to PMB as local communities find land for cultivation to be scarce. There is also a lack of proper infrastructure (such as mills, factories, and markets) in Munshiganj, Shariatpur, and Madaripur that could have generated alternative sources of income for locals. Education facilities, an absolute necessity to be able to harness the full potential of PMB, are also scanty outside the camp areas in Mawa, Shibchar, and Jajira.

So, how can strategies of mega projects like PMB be better designed for addressing such concerns in the future? To ensure dividends, investing in people is crucial. Some pertinent issues also need to be considered at a micro-level (including investing in intangible human development components, especially health, and education and promoting river-centric tourism and eco-tourism to ensure livelihoods); and macro-level planning (developing appropriate communication, feeder road, investing in Mongla Port, and safeguarding the environment). Working on mega projects such as PMB with the country's own funds is a comparatively new experience for Bangladesh. Thus, post-monitoring of mega projects is crucial to get leverage in this area by bridging plans from local to national level. Since 2023 is the year of the mega project, proper implementation of this Padma Bridge project is crucial for taking it as a lesson learned for the other mega projects.