

The cost of speaking truth to power

The calculated murder of our intellectuals in 1971 has left a permanent wound

Every year, December 14 serves as a stark reminder of the devastating loss this nation suffered during the Liberation War, when the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators dealt a lethal blow to the Bangladeshi consciousness. Facing an inevitable defeat before the indomitable Bangladeshis, they picked up the brightest minds of our nation and killed them in the most brutal manners. The wound created by this calculated move is felt to this day, 52 years later.

Intellectuals build a nation's collective conscience and keep the powers that be accountable, acting as the moral check and balance. Pakistan understood this well, which is why, since the very onset of our Liberation War, our intellectuals were targeted by the Pakistan occupational force and their local collaborators. Academics, journalists, free thinkers, politicians, artists, litterateurs, etc—those who acted as the voice of the people, and those that the rest of the nation looked up to for guidance, inspiration, and courage—were routinely surveilled and eliminated, as Pakistan conducted its macabre campaign to subjugate us. It's a disservice to the legacy of our martyred intellectuals that Bangladesh still has to decry the lack of public intellectuals that will boldly speak truth to power, like they did all those years ago.

There is no doubt that the space for free expression, critical thinking, constructive criticism, and speaking truth to power in our country is compromised today. Repression of dissent and opposition voices with draconian laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA)—rebranded as the Cyber Security Act this year—has led to an environment of censorship and fear across the country. Our youth, the future of our nation, feel unsafe to voice their opinions, as a survey found recently. How can we hope to grow intellectually when free thinking is suppressed this way? How can we have robust intellectual exercises, where ideas would flow without constraints, in an environment of fear?

Today, as we remember those who gave their lives so we could be a free nation, we must reflect on their legacies, and how they stood up for us to cement our civil rights. For our society to be truly progressive and for our country to be truly democratic, freedom of expression and critical thinking must be ensured in every aspect of our lives. Fear must not dominate public discourses, especially those which are critical of power.

An unprecedented move

EC's demand to ban political gatherings will further muddy the waters

In an unprecedented move, the Election Commission (EC) has sent a letter to the home ministry, asking that political parties be stopped from holding rallies and other public events that may obstruct the election process and discourage people from casting their votes. The commission has suggested that the measures be in place from December 18, 2023 to January 7, 2024. We are at a loss to understand on what grounds the EC can make such a demand of the government.

To begin, the right to assemble and participate in public meetings is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the constitution. As long as demonstrations are peaceful and law-abiding, what justification can there be for a blanket ban on all political gatherings in a country that still calls itself a democracy? If the EC is concerned with unruly or unlawful behaviour, the law enforcement authorities are there to intervene and bring things under control. In fact, over the past few months, we have seen them take increasingly high-handed measures during gatherings and demonstrations against BNP and like-minded parties. At a time when the EC should be ensuring that the government allows all political parties to carry out their activities peacefully and without fear of arrests or unwarranted obstructions, we are disappointed to see them take a diametrically opposite stance.

If the EC is really concerned about voter turnout, then it ought to ask itself whether the election that it is so ceremoniously organising, spending Tk 1,600 crore of public funds, will actually inspire confidence in voters to exercise their voting rights in the absence of the biggest opposition party, its allies, and left-leaning political parties. Having failed to ensure a level playing field since its term began, or bring together the major parties in a meaningful dialogue, the EC now wants to ban all political demonstrations altogether in a move that is tantamount to cutting the head off to get rid of a headache.

We should not have to remind the EC that an election is about the people's right to choose their own representatives. If citizens are unhappy with the electoral process and feel that their right to vote is being violated, then surely, citizens also have the right to express this dissatisfaction. If the EC is truly concerned about voter turnout, then it's time for it to do some serious soul-searching. Instead of addressing the underlying issues that are likely to deter voters from participating in the upcoming election, banning political gatherings altogether will only raise further questions about the EC's independence from the government and erode people's confidence in it.

New Message

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Subject

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EDITORIAL

Strengthening our blue economy



Dr Haseeb Md Irfanullah is an independent consultant working on environment, climate change, and research systems; and is a visiting research fellow at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). Email him at hmirfanullah@outlook.com

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

We often assume that a blue economy is all about exploring oil and gas from the ocean floor and monetising it. But there's much to it than that.

In October 2019, an article titled "Blue Economy – Development of Sea Resources for Bangladesh" was posted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. The write-up put 25 sectors under the blue economy banner, with a couple of the less talked-about sectors including the conservation and sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystems (such as mangroves), and the livelihoods of the people depending on those resources. Examples of the latter—also known as blue livelihoods—are small-scale coastal and deep sea fishing, crab collection from the Sundarbans' floor, post-larvae collection of shrimp from the Kholpetua River in Satkhira, and the harvesting of honey and *gol pata* (nipa palm leaves) from the mangroves. The 65-day annual fishing ban in the Bay of Bengal imposed by the government since 2019—to increase fish production and deter illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing by commercial fishing boats from Bangladesh and neighbouring countries—is also critical to sustaining our blue economy.

Protection of marine and coastal ecosystems is also crucial given its importance for human well-being, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and biodiversity conservation. Bangladesh, for example, has three Marine Protected Areas (the Swatch-of-No-Ground, Nijhum Dwip, and Saint Martin's Island) that boast rich populations of whales, dolphins, sharks, rays, corals, seaweed, and other plants and animals. The country also owns 60 percent of the 10,000-square-kilometre Sundarbans, half of which is now protected as wildlife sanctuaries. From a climate change mitigation standpoint, such protection is vital for removing carbon from the atmosphere by mangroves, seagrass (marine flowering plants), seaweed (large marine algae), and microscopic phytoplankton algae. This is branded as "blue carbon" and these ecosystems are called "blue carbon ecosystems."

But in order to take ocean related activities forward, we need money (or Blue Finance). While presenting Bangladesh's Tk 761,785 crore national budget for 2023-2024, the finance

minister linked the blue economy directly with the fisheries sector. There is however no data on how much money the country is investing to advance the sea-based economy. Blue Bond—wherein a financial institution sells bonds to raise money for ocean-based activities—is mentioned in the Mijib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041 (MCPP2041). In September 2022, Bangladesh Bank issued a Green Bond policy to guide the establishment of green bond mechanisms to realise environment-friendly, renewable energy-driven economic activities. But till now, we haven't seen any concrete attempts to launch blue bonds or ocean-focused financial tools.

While thinking of a sea-based economy, we must think of "Blue Justice" and "Blue Equity" to ensure people's rights over coasts, seas, and the resources therein. We need to see if, in the name of exploring and protecting our marine resources, we are negatively affecting local communities. The annual 65-day fishing ban (May-July) is apparently a good thing for conserving fisheries in the Bay of Bengal. But are fishers being sufficiently compensated? Do they even have the identity cards that

ensure their representation in the governance structure and meaningful participation in decision-making, and that the implementation process is accountable and transparent.

The Blue Economy Cell of Bangladesh was established as the focal agency for the blue economy in January 2017, thus facilitating blue governance. Almost seven years on, the Cell has been struggling to meet expectations. The government could intervene in three areas to speed up the Cell's pace.

First, from the Energy and Mineral Resources Division of the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources, the Cell should be transferred to the Planning Commission of the Ministry of Planning, because the role of the Cell is essentially strategic planning based on evidence, involving a large number of public and private entities. Bangladesh's Planning Commission, especially its General Economics Division (GED), has some commendable achievements under its belt, such as Delta Plan 2000 and the Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041. Relocating the Cell to the country's apex planning body would accelerate its role.

Second, over the last few years,

Bangladesh has been publicly disclosing its annual climate-relevant budget, gender budget, and poverty-reduction expenditure as part of its financial accountability in these priority areas. The Blue Economy Cell could develop a guided template to collect budgetary and expenditure information from concerned ministries and agencies, and prepare the Blue Budget for FY 2024-2025.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Such an exercise will increase the self-awareness of government stakeholders in the blue economy; improve the profile, leadership, and value of the Cell in terms of blue governance; and subsequently create a momentum for an ocean-based economy (which is long overdue).

Finally, the Maritime Affairs Unit of the foreign ministry recently published the Blue Economy Development Work Plan based on consultations with a wide range of stakeholders. Out of 56 action points, the Work Plan identifies the Cell's role only in oil and gas exploration, pollution management, and marine spatial planning. Instead of preparing a new strategy and plan, the Cell should urgently take initiatives to operationalise the Work Plan. While doing so, the Cell should take blue justice as one of the core guiding principles of the implementation instrument by ensuring inclusive and equitable actions. This can be done by enhancing the livelihoods of communities living along Bangladesh's coast, ensuring environmental sustainability while harvesting mineral resources from the Bay, and by implementing sustainable natural resource management.

How we assess education matters



EDUCATING EDUCATION

Rubaiya Mursheed is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She is also a lecturer (on study leave) at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka.

RUBAIYA MURSHED

The nature of competition in the education system, something manifested in the way we assess students, can be fatal unless we make a crucial distinction. When we test children in school, we end up ranking them against each other, thereby making the competition to be between children. This is where the flaw lies, as the competition aspect of educational assessment is meant for students to be ranked against their own prior achievement, not against their classmates.

To identify the grade level a child is at, they need to be assessed properly. This is why my main concern about the assessment system changing with the new reform—"no more exams"—is that I am not sure that the new methods will allow us to properly identify children's grade levels. If the goal is to decrease the pressure on students, simplifying the curriculum seems like a good first step. Was it so necessary to suddenly eliminate exams? How can we reliably test whether a child can do, for example, a subtraction in the new system?

It is not a binary matter, really. It's not that we can either have exams or we cannot. To decrease pressure on students, changing the format of questions in exams could have played a strong enough role. For example, instead of asking a student to write a particular poem by Jibanananda Das,

policy by state governments in India to reach 33 million children—was to place children in groups according to their achievement level (not by age) and then to provide remedial teaching so that those who'd fallen behind could receive the support they needed to catch up to grade level.

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It is not a binary matter, really. It's not that we can either have exams or we cannot. To decrease pressure on students, changing the format of questions in exams could have played a strong enough role. For example, instead of asking a student to write a particular poem by Jibanananda Das,

we could ask them to write what they felt after reading a poem. The former only tests students' memorisation skills, while the latter would test how well a student understood the poem and how well they could articulate their thoughts on it.

Undeniably, the type of assessment we use depends on what we expect students to know. And this is also the reason why assessment cannot

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be the same across school, college and university. Open-book exams, for instance, are more suited for the university level, not for school. At school, students need to learn some basic things—hence, we test them on those. At the university level, if the goal is for a student to be able to think critically, then the way we frame exam questions matters significantly.

In our university admission tests or civil service exams, have we ever researched the questions we set

in terms of whether they can help determine who will get a seat in our classrooms or who will become our civil servants? How we assess these candidates comes down to what we want from them. Do we want them to be free thinkers; have the ability to be critical, to be creative, to be ethical? The Malaysian civil service exams include questions to test candidates' ethics by presenting scenarios to see how they would solve a problem—whether they would take a bribe or not, for example.

I welcome the effort to move away from memorisation-based rote learning. But even so, I am sceptical about at what cost this will be achieved. There are some aspects of an education that will always require memorisation, such as learning the alphabet or when training to be a doctor. The task is to filter out rote learning unless it is strictly needed, and to thereby question the presence of memorisation where it is not needed.

Education systems around the world, the best of them, research their assessment methods and constantly update them to meet the current criteria of what is expected of students. Notwithstanding matters of whether the rest of the education system is ready for a substantial shift in assessment, the question for the Bangladesh education system is: what is the goal and how are we sure that such a change will achieve it? Without a clear answer to this question, it seems unfair to launch something new and let our children be experimented on. Experimentation should be ex ante for children before a big reform is introduced, not ex post on children.