

Another year of missed opportunities against corruption



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Another year of missed opportunities ends with hardly any specific progress to effectively prevent and control corruption, which continues to cause endless harm to the state and to our society.

High-level pledges against corruption continued to be reiterated in 2022, as in the past several years. Soon after taking over, on January 2, the Chief Justice of Bangladesh compared corruption with cancer, and called for zero tolerance for it. Later, at a seminar on National Mourning Day, he stressed on resisting and rejecting corruption as a means to ensuring justice. And on Constitution Day, he reminded us that corruption adversely affects democracy, weakens the foundation of the state, antagonises the people and causes rage among them.

This anti-corruption narrative from the highest echelon of justice not only echoed the prime minister's frequently reiterated commitment towards zero tolerance against corruption and of sparing no one (including those in her own party), but also represented the responsiveness of the judiciary to ever-growing public suffering and frustration as a result of deepening and widening corruption.

On August 17, the PM, at a meeting with secretaries of the government, called for tough action against anyone involved. Echoing her, at a seminar on International Anti-Corruption Day, the president also called for exemplary punishment for the corrupt, irrespective of their political identity.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh continued to be ranked poorly by nearly every credible governance- and corruption-related international indices, like those on WJP's Rule of Law, Regulatory Quality Indicator, Government Effectiveness, Political Stability, Voice and Accountability, Press Freedom, Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Corruption Control, Bribery Risk Matrix and the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). According to the latest CPI, in fact, Bangladesh scored only 26 out of 100, way below the global average of 43. We remained the second worst performer in South Asia after Afghanistan.

Institutional ineffectiveness is among the main reasons for our failure to improve our performance in the aforementioned indices. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) continued to face challenges of trust and credibility on whether it can even handedly deliver its core mandate of effectively controlling corruption beyond the small fries, and hold to account bigger fish. The ACC's credibility took on another negative dimension around the controversial dismissal of one of its investigation officers, whose annual performance assessment was consistently high grade. It happened against the backdrop of his courageous investigation against some key syndicates of grand corruption in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar. It caused a large section of ACC staff to resort to unprecedented acts of protest for their rights, including job security. The incident also reinforced concerns about the ACC's seriousness of purpose, governance challenges, and organisational effectiveness.

Though hard to concretely measure, the cost of corruption in Bangladesh is staggeringly high, amounting to at least two to three percent of GDP, as informed by the then finance minister in 2015. Corruption, grand or petty, is also discriminatory and a major impediment

to inclusive development. This was a key finding of the National Household Survey on Corruption released by Transparency International Bangladesh on August 31, 2022. Nearly 71 percent of the respondents of the survey experienced corruption, and 72.1 percent of victims had to pay bribes to access public services.

The burden of bribery, in terms of proportion of annual income, is seven times higher on lower-income households compared to their higher-income peers. The rate of victimisation of corruption among rural households was significantly higher, at 46.5 percent, than the rate for those in urban areas at 36.6 percent.

The discriminatory nature of corruption is further manifested in the victimisation of households headed by persons with disabilities, as 80.3 percent of such households were victims of corruption, compared to the national average of 70.6 percent.

The year 2022 brought corruption's distributive injustices into sharper focus while also exposing corruption-induced macroeconomic fragility, especially in the banking and financial sectors, which have been pushed to the brink of collapse by a triangular trap of loan forgery, tax evasion, and money laundering.

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Hardly any of the kingpins of these scandals, who most often use fake and anonymous entities as their key enablers, have been brought to account. The beneficial owners – who own, control, and profit from such secretive companies and shadow bank accounts – secure loans to never repay, but mainly to launder. Instead of being subjected to justice, beneficiaries of this dirty game have secured lobbying power for themselves to the extent of policy capture to extort even more concessions.

The year also saw unprecedented privileges granted to money launderers when the national budget for FY 2022-23 made a provision to "bring back" illicitly accumulated wealth and overseas income without any question. This was a self-defeating, immoral, discriminatory, unconstitutional, and corruption-conducive enticement, and an example of ridiculing the high profile pledges of zero tolerance against corruption.

The amount of annual illicit outflow of money from Bangladesh, even by the most conservative estimate, is at least three times higher than the USD 4.5 billion of IMF loan that the government negotiated to be receivable in 42 months, which is not only repayable with interest but also compromises our policy autonomy. Ironically, it is well within the reach of the government to make such loans redundant if it had the political will and institutional capacity to even moderately prevent money laundering.

The institutions authorised to control crime and repatriate stolen assets (by enforcing relevant laws and taking advantage of available avenues of international cooperation) have been evasive at best. Their energy appears to be invested more on disputing the reported data on money laundering and critics thereof.

On October 26, 2022, the High Court rebuked the ACC for failing to take concrete actions against money laundering and recover laundered money.

The first official recognition of the massive problem of trade-based money laundering appeared when, at a media briefing on November 15, Bangladesh Bank (BB) officials disclosed that a special audit had detected illicit financial transfers out of the country through 20 to 200 percent misinvoicing by importers and exporters. Half a month later, the BB governor mentioned nearly a hundred such unnamed cases of misinvoicing in the month of July 2022 alone.

It clearly took the central bank the unprecedented foreign exchange crisis (driven by the Covid pandemic) and the Ukraine war to wake up. Nothing is known, though, of any actions to be taken to prevent and control this long-nourished practice of invoice manipulation in import and export businesses to illegally transfer massive amounts of foreign currency abroad and evade taxes – a phenomenon which is neither unknown to relevant authorities nor takes place without the collusion of sections of relevant officials.

Unlike well over 120 countries, including some of our neighbours, Bangladesh remains evasive about adopting the Common Reporting Standard (CRS) for automatic exchange of information on banking transactions, which could facilitate live tracking within and across borders. By adopting CRS we could have taken our starving revenue system and anti-money laundering efforts to a more effective level.

Similarly, there appears to be no interest from authorities to ensure beneficial ownership transparency, which could be a powerful tool to salvage the banking sector from the brink of collapse. Will the government have the political courage to undertake such badly needed reforms, in a context where the policy regime continues to be possessed by beneficiaries and protectors of loan defaulting, tax evasion, and money laundering?



Science in 2022: Breakthroughs of the year



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Since 2020, the coronavirus has overwhelmed our lives and there was not much to celebrate, nor anything to think of besides the pandemic. Now that the dark cloud of Covid has begun to lift somewhat, it has become apparent that there have been some pretty amazing scientific discoveries in 2022.

In this article, I will highlight some of the discoveries that will profoundly impact our lives for the better, as well as contribute to humanity's accumulation of knowledge beyond measure – for years to come.

In Cosmology

Seeing the cosmos as never before: Parked a million miles from the Earth, it has been a triumphant year for Nasa's James Webb Space Telescope. The telescope captured, with amazing clarity, "the deepest view of the Universe ever," an image of a distant cluster of galaxies that was formed more than 13 billion years ago – almost close to the beginning of time. Another breathtaking image from the telescope is the now-ionic view of the Carina Nebula – a stellar nursery and home to some of the most luminous and explosive stars in the Milky Way.

Successful deflection of an asteroid: Nasa's DART spacecraft successfully altered the trajectory of the asteroid Dimorphos by crashing into it at a blistering speed of 14,400 mph. Although the asteroid was never a danger to the Earth, "this is a watershed moment for planetary defence and all of humanity," according to Nasa.

In science and technology

Quantum brain: A team of scientists at Trinity College in Dublin conducted a mind-bending experiment that led them to conclude that our brains use quantum computation. To put it simply, our brain activity, and maybe even our consciousness, operate on a quantum level.

A black hole in the lab: A team of physicists simulated the event horizon of a black hole, which is a bizarre terminus beyond which everything in the Universe is forever hidden from our view. They observed the equivalent of what is called Hawking radiation, that is emitted by the creation of particle-antiparticle pairs near the event horizon of a black hole. This will help resolve the longstanding conflict between two irreconcilable frameworks for describing the Universe – Einstein's general theory of relativity, which describes the behaviour of gravity as distortion of space, and quantum mechanics, which describes the behaviour of discrete particles using the mathematics of probability.

Fastest supercomputer: A supercomputer, named Frontier, at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee crunched numbers with a mind-blowing speed of 1.1 quintillion operations per second. (A quintillion is 10 raised to the power 18, or billion times billion.)

The next fastest computer is three orders of magnitude slower. Frontier is expected to lead to breakthroughs in everything from climate science to medical science to particle physics.

AR contact lenses: In July 2022, Mojo Vision announced the development of augmented reality (AR) contact lenses for the first time. Equipped with a display that is 30 times sharper than that of an iPhone, and outfitted with all the technology needed to track a user's eye movements, AR will allow the wearer to interact seamlessly with digital images.

Seeing things without looking at them: Using the principles of quantum mechanics, a team of scientists has devised a technique to see objects indirectly, without the complex interaction of light with the cells in the retina of our eyes.

In biotechnology

Genetic editing: The latest genetic editing discovery, called PLANTeDIT, can easily edit plants genetically, so that they can

have a longer shelf life.

Precise medication: A biotech company has developed AI-based gene therapy that can treat humans while avoiding the side effects of medicines.

Bioprinting: An Italian company developed a 3D printer which, unlike conventional printing with ink, uses "living cells" from bones, skin, muscles, and other body parts. It can help people in need of prosthetics, or to fix tissue damage.

Lab grown meat: An Israeli startup company produced sustainable meat in a laboratory from a healthy cow's muscle tissue, without killing it. This lab-grown meat could help reduce animal slaughter and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from animal farming.

In medicine

Diabetes: A new drug, tirzepatide, will help in improving control of the measure of blood sugar levels in adults with type-2 diabetes. Also, an immune therapy has been developed for the first time that can delay the onset of type-1 diabetes.

New Alzheimer's disease drug: Results from the trial of a drug called lecanemab on individuals living with mild cognitive impairment due to Alzheimer's disease and mild Alzheimer's dementia show that it can significantly reduce clinical decline from the disease.

Next generation of mRNA vaccinology: Advancements in the generation, purification, and cellular delivery of RNA have enabled the development of an effective Covid-19 vaccine. This landscape-changing technology has the potential to quickly and efficiently eliminate some of

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healthcare's most challenging diseases.

In archaeology

A vast Roman town found in England: Construction of a high-speed rail project near Northamptonshire in England has led to one of the most exciting discoveries of the year – the remains of a Roman settlement with roads, roundhouses, kilns, wells, jewellery, cosmetics, pottery and more than 300 Roman coins.

New timeline for human evolution: While conducting research in South Africa, scientists from Purdue University in Indiana found that an Australopithecus, one of the earliest relatives of the genus Homo, was between 3.4 and 3.7 million years old, more than a million years older than what was previously estimated.

In artificial intelligence (AI)

An AI tool may make it easier to predict if a person will have a heart attack based on the amount and composition of plaque in the arteries that supply blood to the heart.

The AI proved more successful in assessing and diagnosing cardiac function when compared to echocardiogram assessments made by technicians.

Another AI tool accurately predicted who could develop pancreatic cancer based on what the person's CT scan images looked like, years prior to them actually being diagnosed with the disease.

These are some of the landmark scientific and technological achievements of 2022. Let us hail them all with no small measure of pride.



11/28/22