

Actions of self-destruction

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First, shutting down the telephone companies, next came closing the TV channel, then came blocking the facebook and now cancellation of the declaration of a newspaper; one after another, the government actions do not testify well for a democratically elected government committed to upholding the right of its citizens, ensuring free flow of information, building digital Bangladesh and safeguarding freedom of press. These are all integral elements of a democratic system which the current government is boastfully pledging to enhance. However, the government actions over the aforementioned matters in the last few months are absolutely paradoxical, to say the least.

A few months ago BTRC, a regulatory organ of the government, raided a few telephone companies' offices and shut their operations down in the pre-text of using illegal VOIP. Before taking such a drastic action, did the BTRC ever think of the inconveniences of their tens and thousands of innocent subscribers who were not a party to that alleged illegal operations? Hundreds of employees of those organizations lost their livelihood in the abrupt actions of the BTRC. It is the government's action that is solely responsible for their inconveniences and naturally the blames fell squarely on government's shoulder. Subscribers or unblemished employees did not find any one in the administration to address or redress their government-created grievances. Should we attribute this as a 'government for the people'?

A TV channel allegedly owned by the opposition supporters have been shut down on the ground of some 'technical' irregularities, which is neither transparent nor understandable to most of the ordinary citizens that resulted in laying off thousands of workers who are rightful citizens of the Republic. Making an analogy, by some quarters or individuals, to closing down the Ekushey TV by the erstwhile government does neither bode well for the free flow of information nor for the superior democratic credential of the current government, as it continues to claim.

In the pre-text of removing an objectionable cartoon of the Prime Minister, it is simply ridiculous to close the most popular website, namely, 'facebook.com'. It is debatable if the drawing a cartoon of the PM in cyberspace, in a democratic society, is a crime to start with. Even if it is so, only the perpetrator of the crime should be dealt with as per law of the land, not by closing down the website which reportedly has almost a million users from within the country itself and many more millions of users of Bangladeshi origin from every nook and corner of the globe who keep in touch with their near and dear ones back home on daily basis through this website. In fact, popularity of facebook in Bangladesh should be testifying positively in support of government's pledge to build a digital Bangladesh. The damage has been irreversible and the self-inflicting wound will never be healed while the government's reiteration of building digital Bangladesh would simply sound self-contradictory.

Finally, a newspaper owned and edited by an opposition politician, has been shut down and its declaration has been cancelled. To make the matter look even worse, its acting editor has been arrested in the wee hour of the morning. The arrest capped a 17-hour drama played out after the paper's publisher who himself was briefly detained sued the acting editor on Tuesday night. Ironically, it is the same person who dragged five of the eminent personalities of the nation to dock with a shady accusation of calling him a 'rajakar', is behind bar for a charge not more tenable than the one brought up by him a few years ago. This is not to say that the detained acting editor is an icon of journalism by any measure. Since his assumption of the ownership and editorship of the vernacular news daily, an otherwise inclusive daily has been transformed into a mouth-piece of blunt lies and third-rated propaganda machine of the main opposition. It ceaselessly spreads anti-Indian and anti-government venoms through baseless stories, a hallmark of BNP-Jamat politics. As it was complained many a times, it never bothered to publish any rejoinder sent by the victims of its baseless stories, a basic journalistic norm to start with. Having said that, what the government has done in dealing with the yellow journalism is not only unacceptable but absolutely self-inflicting.

In the arena of press freedom, anyone is entitled to his opinion, but is not entitled to creating a 'fact' of his own. It does not entail any one to say or write anything about anyone without proper substantiation. It does not give the journalists an absolute immunity from divulging their source of information. For instance, in a landmark ruling last month, Canada's highest court said journalists do not enjoy a constitutional right to shield the identity of sources during police investigations. The onus, however, is on a media outlet to prove the public interest in protecting a source outweighs the interest in investigating a crime. Every democratic society must be having well-defined laws and rules to deal with the publications of unsubstantiated stories involving individuals, society or the government resulting in defamation, a serious offence in a free society. It was reported that as many as 31 cases have been filed against the detained acting editor in various courts in the country involving publishing unsubstantiated stories resulting in defamations. However, so far none of them has seen the light of the day and no serious legal proceedings has ever been drawn against him in the court of law. It reflects either the weakness of the existing laws in dealing with the crimes or the shortcomings of the judicial system to bring the perpetrators to book thereby giving an unreserved immunity to publish the unsubstantiated stories to mislead the members of the public with the ulterior motives.

If there are weaknesses in laws, the government has all the legislative powers within its arsenal to legislate new laws, guarding the absolute freedom to publish truth and nothing but the truth and with well-defined consequence to deter practicing of yellow journalism. Failing to resort to due process, arrest of a grade B politician-turned grade C journalist will simply backfire in transforming him into a martyr. It is a simple lesson of history. Instead of doing what the government ought to have done, what it has done is simply self-inflicting and will simply

accelerate its sliding further down the slope of democracy and good governance if it, at all, means something to the government leaders of the day.

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