

Opinion

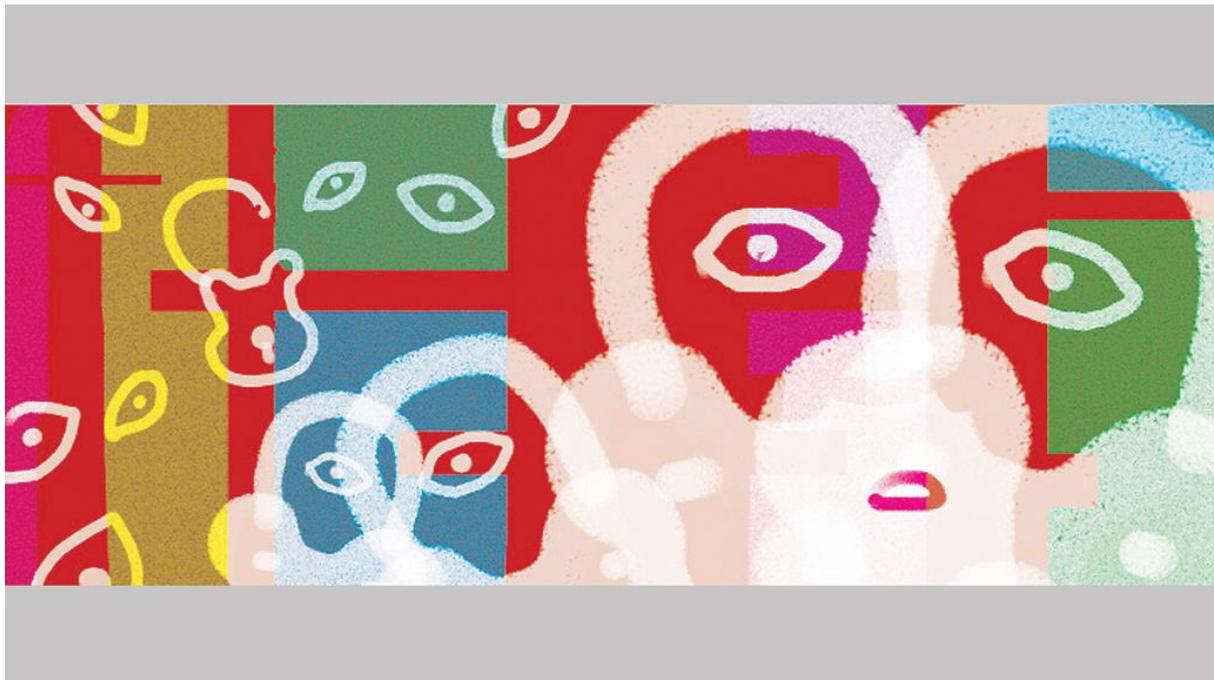
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Does 'mutual understanding' legalise extortion?

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WHEN robbers and dacoits hold guns to the heads of defenceless people and demand money, the victims immediately negotiate with the criminals to protect their lives. In order to avoid bodily harm or even death, they willingly give the scoundrels whatever they want. Such a compromise/agreement results from instant intuition and is driven by survival instinct. Since the victims are aware of the possible risks and serious consequences of non-compliance, they readily comply with the wishes of the robbers. Therefore, the transaction between the perpetrators of robbery and their victims involves an element of (coerced) consent or mutual understanding.

However, this sense of mutuality does not lessen the enormity of the crime of robbery. Irrespective of any consent or refusal involving the two parties, it is robbery – pure and simple.

This simple piece of knowledge seems missing in a minister's understanding of a comparable crime.

In an indoor meeting in Dhaka on February 19, 2026, the newly appointed transport minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Rabiul Alam, said that 'money collected in the name of organisations of road transport owners and workers on mutual understanding was not extortion'.

Yes, there is mutual agreement between the road extortionists and their victims. But there is no difference between this mutual agreement and the instant understanding between the robbers and their hostages.

The distinction the minister made between 'mutual understanding' and some form of forced payment of money is a fallacy. The theory of mutual agreement he advanced to exonerate money extortion on the road is misleading, to say the least. What he called consensus or mutual understanding is reached through coercion, duress, or other unethical tactics. Therefore, money extortion cannot be justified by cloaking it in a mantle of some innocuous terms like 'consensus' or 'mutual understanding'. The most dominant emotions in the practice of money extortion are fear and intimidation draped in mutual agreement and understanding.

Since I came of age, I have been hearing and reading stories of money extortion perpetrated by members of some political groups. We all have been silently observing how this crime has been ruining our country.

In the midst of such malpractices, we had a successful July revolution in 2024. We thought it would herald a new beginning and our country would put the scourge of money extortion and similar crimes behind it. Unfortunately, the minister's statement suggests that people like him seem to hasten the process of relapsing back to the old political culture of chandabaji (money extortion) in a more vicious, albeit legalised, way.

I am not sure if ordinary Bangladeshis understand the full repercussions of the practice of money extortion. Let me unpack this crime a bit.

The beneficiary of chandabaji is not the ruling party as a whole, and its victims are not only people belonging to the opposition. Actually, its beneficiaries are the money extortion criminals only, and its victims are the rest of us.

For example, when money extortion occurs on the road and the bus drivers or owners must pay money to the extortionists, that contributes to increasing bus fares. Eventually, ordinary people, of all political beliefs and persuasions, who use the transport system for travelling have to pay higher ticket prices.

Equally, when money is extorted from businesses and industries, their owners must increase the prices of the products and services to make up for the revenue loss caused by extortion. We go to shops and businesses to buy necessities and thus indirectly pay the extortion money through purchasing various goods and services at higher prices.

Therefore, the problem of money extortion should not be looked at through the lens of any political sensitivities. It harms us all, and, irrespective of our political identities, we should all fight the battle to eradicate this epidemic.

In addition to harming the interest of consumers (we all are consumers), money extortion discourages entrepreneurship and thus limits economic growth. When an entrepreneur or industrialist learns that they will have to pay extortion money right from the very beginning of their business operation, they will be reluctant to start any (risky) economic ventures. When there are not many industries and similar economic organisations in an area, the inevitable result is a sharp decrease in employment.

So, it is not difficult to understand the strong correlation between money extortion and unemployment. No one can dispute the fact that one big reason for large-scale unemployment in Bangladesh is the long-standing system of money extortion which no government has, in reality, sought to eliminate.

The worst outcome of the culture of money extortion is the moral degeneration of the youth of the country. Under the aegis of so-called godfathers, innumerable young people are drawn to the crime of money extortion. Many of them eventually climb the political ladder and hold public offices. Subsequently, they become involved in greater corruption and cause greater distress to a larger group of people.

I was a resident student at the University of Dhaka in the 1990s when Bangladesh was ruled successively by two major political parties. It was common knowledge among us that the so-called cadres (members of student organisations linked to political parties) extorted money from small businesses on the premises of residential halls, on the campus, and in the surrounding areas of the university.

Although information about such practices was no news to us, I was shocked to learn about another method of money extortion which was out-and-out robbery. I overheard that some of those cadres were in the habit of lying in wait at Katabon Road (adjacent to Surjasen Hall and Mohsin Hall) early in the morning to swoop down on the vegetable vendors of Kamrangirchar. These small business people used that road to go to the wholesale market of Karwan Bazar to sell their produce. On their way back home, they used to be attacked and robbed by members of student political organisations.

Such practices have continued unabated under the protection of political connections, and we have watched our country sliding systematically into the abyss of corruption. Eventually, we all suffer the consequences.

Sadly, we have failed to look at money extortion from the perspective of our collective well-being. Instead, we have politicised it. As a result, financial wrongdoers wear the garb of politics to continue extorting money from individuals and businesses. Consequently, money extortion has become a deep-seated disease with a high spread.

It is true that there are political and ideological differences and rivalries among us. However, can't we come to a common platform for the sake of greater interests and hate and resist money extortion in all its forms and shapes?

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