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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Increasing living costs in Dhaka a cause for concern

Check the rise in prices of essentials

ACCORDING to the recent findings of Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), the living cost in Dhaka has increased by 6.5 percent in 2019 due to the rising prices of essential commodities and services. And the trend may continue this year because, according to CAB, over the last couple of weeks, consumers have been paying more to buy daily essentials, such as edible oil, onions, chicken, powder milk, sugar, fruit and vegetables, etc., and there is no sign that the prices of these items will come down anytime soon. Besides, from the first day of 2020, the price of liquefied petroleum gas cylinder has increased and the electricity tariff is in the process of being hiked. What is more, the house rent in the city has also increased, leaving mostly the mid and low-income people in distress.

Currently, prices of some vegetables are so high that people in the low-income bracket cannot even think about buying those. Although the supply of these items is now adequate in city markets, the prices are not coming down. Apparently, the government's failure to contain the prices of the essential items, mostly onions, have encouraged traders to indiscriminately increase prices of other products. Still, one kg of onion is selling at Tk 170-180 in the local shops. Questions can also be raised about the increase in the price of LPG for the second time within three months.

Needless to say, the high costs of the essential commodities and services have been affecting the living standard of city residents, since their income has not increased in line with the high cost of living. In order to give some respite to city dwellers, the government should take immediate measures to contain the price spiral of essentials. Those who are trying to create volatility in the market by unnecessarily increasing the prices should be identified and brought to justice. We would also like to see judicious decisions from the government when it comes to increasing the prices of gas and electricity. Last but not the least, for checking the spiralling house rent in the city, the House Rent Control Act 1991 should be fully enforced.

Railway accidents on the rise

Acute manpower shortage to blame

THE railways minister has stated that there were 129 railway-related accidents last year, in which 39 people were killed and 155 injured, and that most of the accidents were caused by signal violations and derailments. According to Nirapad Sarak Chai, however, at least 198 people were killed and 347 injured in 162 railway-related accidents, while Shipping and Communication Reporters Forum (SCRF) stated that at least 421 people were killed and 366 injured in 393 railway-related accidents in 2019. We are baffled at the discrepancy between the minister's estimate and the figures suggested by non-governmental organisations, and we urge the ministry to keep reliable and detailed records of the accidents and the gratuitous loss of human lives so that adequate steps can be taken to address the reasons behind these accidents, and to prevent such untoward incidents from happening in the future.

The horrendous train accident in Brahmanbaria last November was a tragic reminder of the neglect with which our railway has been treated over the years. Seventeen people died and at least 54 were injured when two trains collided because of the negligence of one of the drivers and his assistants. A report in this daily at that time had stated that Bangladesh Railway has been experiencing severe manpower crisis, which is one of the reasons why we have seen a spike in railway-related accidents. In fact, according to the annual report of the Bangladesh Railway, the organisation is being operated with only one-third of the required loco masters, stationmasters and guards. Many technical staff lack the necessary training to carry out their responsibilities.

The railways minister has said that major reforms are underway, including introduction of modern technology to prevent accidents, more intercity trains, construction of more rail tracks, rail bridges, level crossings, etc. Illegally occupied land belonging to the railway has also been recovered.

These are no doubt heartening news. But we would like to see immediate recruitment of more railway staff and capacity building of the workforce so that human errors do not result in loss of human lives. Additionally, we need to ensure proper maintenance of existing and future infrastructure so that the railways can become a safe and reliable mode of transport in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How much is too much?

The front page of *The Daily Star* on Tuesday shattered my heart! For how much longer must we endure the curse of rape? When will it end, or will it ever? It's a matter of shame that the topic of rape and sexual abuse has become a staple in our daily news. According to Ain O Salish Kendra, at least 1,413 women were either raped or gang-raped in 2019, and this number is alarming, to say the least.

As a woman, I am constantly in fear of my life every time I step out of my home. I just don't feel safe anymore. Whether I am going to my university or for work or grocery, travelling alone is no longer an option it seems.

Who will we reach out to so that safety for women is ensured? Even when the perpetrators are caught, it is difficult for victims to get justice. It's a shame that we failed, as a society, to fight the recurrence of this disgusting act!

Nishita Sanaul, Dhaka

Tension mounts again in the Middle East

Likely scenarios after US assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani

MAJOR REZA UL KARIM

A US air strike near Baghdad International Airport (ORBI/BGW) resulted in the death of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani and several high-profile Iraqi paramilitary leaders on January 3. Soleimani, the commanding officer of the influential Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force special operations unit, was widely regarded as being the second or third most powerful official in Iran, and one of the most influential figures in the greater Middle East.

The January 3 air strike has significantly exacerbated tensions between the US and Iran. Relations between the US and Iraq have become strained as well. Protests against the incident and the wider influence of the US in the region are likely to flare up in the near future. Armed confrontation between US military forces and various armed groups could be a possibility as well; however, direct military confrontation between the US and Iran is less likely to occur.

While a number of associated disruptive incidents could happen in future, these incidents are significantly less likely to take place in the Persian Gulf countries—including Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The most likely locations for potential conflict include Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iran itself, where Iranian security forces have previously established fairly overt military assets. Israel and parts of Saudi Arabia may also be impacted by any Iranian military retaliation through the use of its proxy militias.

Michael Ware, a former *Time* magazine and CNN correspondent, who was based in Baghdad from 2003 to 2009, described the ongoing crisis between the US and Iran as "a decades long war"—because the war between the United States of America and Iran has been underway for more than 40 years. He added that it's the American coup that led to the 1979 revolution that placed the Ayatollah on the throne and ensured rule by the mullahs still in power today—the very same mullahs that the now-dead General Soleimani served.

In response to the death of Soleimani, Iran is likely to leverage the strategic and military relationships it has established



Iranian mourners carry a picture of Ayatollah Khamenei (R) and deceased Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.

PHOTO: AFP

with various Shiite militias and paramilitary groups in the Middle East. This includes the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Retaliatory attacks may comprise rocket and missile attacks, bombings and coordinated armed attacks. US military assets and interests in the region are the most at-risk for retaliatory military action, primarily US bases and diplomatic missions in Iraq. PMF militias and associated groups in Iraq have conducted rocket attacks in recent days targeting the Green Zone in Baghdad and Balad Air Base. These attacks are not thought to be a part of Iran's response to Soleimani's death; however, such independently coordinated rocket attacks are likely to continue in the near term. As US troops deployed in the Middle East are scattered all over, "Lone Wolf" attacks could occur which means that the attack might be launched by anyone, any group, or anyone who is stimulated by any group to spark violence in the region.

While Iranian retaliation—either directly or through its proxies—is more

likely to be directed at US assets in the region, a heightened risk is also posed to its allied countries in the region. Israel has raised its security alert level in areas near the Gaza Strip-Israel border and the Lebanon-Israel border in response to heightened regional tensions between Iran and US. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have made general threats aimed at Israel, but Israeli security officials have not identified any specific, credible threat at this time. Saudi Arabia also maintains a higher risk for retaliatory attacks, although this risk is largely localised to areas near the Saudi-Yemeni border due to its ongoing conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthi militia groups.

Protests in opposition to, or in support of future developments, are among the more plausible associated security situations that may occur in the region. Demonstrations can result in localised traffic congestion and block access to major roads. Areas that are closely associated with the US government, including US embassies and consulates, could become locations of possible protest actions. While no such

demonstrations have been reported or were announced in recent days, travellers should avoid all large gatherings they encounter.

Risks in the Persian Gulf remain secondary in nature. While no particular countries face heightened security risks, incidents with shipping vessels, like the one that occurred last year, are possible. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz remains a possibility, but is unlikely, given Iran's dependence on the strait to transport its oil exports. Security incidents impacting maritime commerce in the Persian Gulf could prompt increases in oil prices. Reports of conflict in nearby countries could also prompt aviation providers to make use of longer routes to avoid flying over "at-risk areas".

While direct associated risks appear to be limited in the region at this time, the ongoing security situation remains fluid. Risks of collateral disruptions or direct Iranian action against locations in the Middle East could increase as additional developments occur.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

What Happened to India?



SHASHI THAROOR

IT'S a question I hear increasingly these days. International news media report on repression in Kashmir, mounting Hindu chauvinism, widespread protests against new laws, assaults on women, and more. The India the world once celebrated—the world's fastest-growing free-market liberal democracy—seems to be giving way to a violent, intolerant, illiberal autocracy. The reports are true, and the picture they paint is not a pretty one. But India's well-wishers should not give up on the country. The democratic opposition is fighting back, buoyed by the support of young people protesting spontaneously, and not at the behest of any political party, against the excesses of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Democracy has deep roots in India, and it will not collapse without a fight from the country's many independent institutions and politically aware citizens.

India's current predicament is the culmination of three decades of evolving trends in Indian politics. Eight stand out.

First, there have been the *social consequences of deepening democracy*. Viewed by many observers as a fragile transplant at independence in 1947, democracy has become deeply entrenched, empowering previously marginalised castes and communities. Thanks to the implementation of the Mandal Commission proposal in 1989 to provide "reservations," or quotas, in government jobs, universities, and the like to the "Other Backward Classes" (such set-asides already existed for Dalits, once outcastes, and tribals, India's aboriginal people), the former underclass has become a potent political force. Three generations of political empowerment, including of people with modest educational attainment, Hindi mother tongue, and small-town backgrounds, ended the dominance of the urban, anglophone elite that had established liberal secularism as India's ruling ethos. A different mentality now prevails in power.

Second, there has been a *backlash against cultural globalisation*. India, like Turkey and the United States, has witnessed growing resentment of cosmopolitan secular elites, with their Westernised lifestyles and perception

of themselves as global citizens. Indian social conservatism shuddered at the breakdown of social and sexual mores, depicted in films and television shows. Traditionalists recoiled at women going to work, dressed in jeans and other non-Indian clothing, returning home late at night after shifts in call centres attuned to Western business hours, freed from the bonds and the bounds of local social custom.

Third, there has been a *revolt against the political insider class*. The denizens of "Lutyens' Delhi," shorthand for the government enclave in the heart of the capital where the high and mighty lived, were seen by their challengers as corrupt, complacent, inefficient, and resistant to change. The first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by a growing rejection of all they stood for, including liberalism, secularism, political "insider trading," and sub-

wealthy business community that was anxious to see more obstacles removed and rent-seekers eliminated, and willing to finance political change to make it happen. Modi and the BJP benefited from this, too, not least in generous funding from the capitalist *nouveaux riches*.

Fifth, the worldwide phenomenon of *increasing religiosity* over the last quarter-century found its counterpart in Hindutva revivalism. Partly this was in reaction to the propagation of Wahhabi/Salafi theology in shiny new Saudi-financed mosques. As Indian Muslims, too, began more consciously to identify with the global Muslim *umma*, they began to redefine their Islam in ways that alienated them more visibly from Hindus.

In parallel, a greater Hindu consciousness was abetted by the popularity of television serialisations of

this helped the spread of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS, the khaki-shorts-wearing stormtroopers of Hindu chauvinism, who brought ideological clarity and organisational heft to inchoate Hindu resentment. The BJP's growth from the mid-1980s followed on the coattails of the RSS.

Sixth, this rise in Hindu consciousness occurred at a time when Muslim Pakistan stepped up its campaign of *inciting, financing, and carrying out terrorism* in India. Support for militancy in Kashmir gave way to outright military aggression, such as the attempt to seize the heights of Kargil, from which Pakistani troops were repulsed after a short but bloody war in 1999. Growing hostility to Pakistan, and the repeated failure of attempts to make peace with it, intensified Hindus' belief that they were being targeted.

Seventh, India is the world's *youngest major country*, with 65 percent of the population under 35. Young Indians are impatient for change and progress, tired of the old politics (especially the messy coalitions that reigned from 1989 to 2014 and the political oscillations they embodied), and want India to be self-confident, assertive, and ready to take on the world. Modi's strutting confidence spoke to these desires.

Finally, *social media have become ubiquitous*, with platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp serving as major influencers and recyclers of prejudice. Social media reinforce people's worst beliefs by exposing them to prejudices they might not have dared to express in the past, but that now no longer seem rare and disreputable. Suddenly, bigotry became respectable, and animosity toward Muslims, previously concealed under a veneer of civility, became an electoral asset.

All of this came to a head when the moment found its messenger: Modi, charismatic orator of unchallengeable Hindutva credentials, tough and efficient Chief Minister of Gujarat, marketed by a skilled campaign manager and Svengali, Amit Shah, as a no-nonsense administrator who would preside over economic growth. India was primed to receive Modi's message and elected the BJP in 2014 and 2019. We are living with the consequences now, but these eight factors explain how we got there.

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party Amit Shah gesture as they celebrate victory in India's general elections at the BJP headquarters, in New Delhi, on May 23, 2019.

PHOTO: AFP

optimal governance. This sentiment was captured in the 2011 protests of the Gandhian leader Anna Hazare. The protesters' demand that the country be cleansed of its corrupted ruling class contributed significantly to Modi's victory in 2014.

Fourth, the *liberalisation of the statist Indian economy* from 1991 onwards, in response to global market realities, led to the empowerment of an increasingly

the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics; concerns about "Muslim appeasement" following such steps as a law overturning a Supreme Court ruling that would have awarded alimony to a divorced Muslim woman; and the popularity of a BJP-led initiative to replace a sixteenth-century mosque, the Babri Masjid, which most Hindus believed stood on one of their holiest sites, the Ram Janmabhoomi, or birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. All