

A women-friendly city still a far cry

Women voters' voices need to be heard

SINCE Dhaka is increasingly becoming a city of fear for women, with incidents of rape and sexual harassment in public places and public transports rising by the day, ensuring the safety and security of women through taking some concrete steps should be one of the key responsibilities of our would-be city mayors and councillors. *The Daily Star* recently spoke to several women voters of the DNCC and DSCC and found that they are mostly concerned about their safety in the city, which was ranked as the seventh worst megacity for women by a 2017 poll conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation. According to the polls, it is also the fourth most dangerous city in the world in terms of sexual violence faced by women. Some of the women voters also expressed the need for talking to the ward councillors, preferably women, when in need, given that they do not feel comfortable to talk to male councillors about the problems they face as women.

While it is heartening to note that all four frontrunners in the mayoral race (from Awami League and BNP) have more or less addressed the issue of women's safety in their election manifestoes, there are some issues that did not get due attention. While the AL-backed candidates pledged to introduce a women-friendly mass transit system, women-friendly healthcare centres, installing lights and CCTV cameras on each city street, etc., the BNP-backed candidates promised to introduce separate bus services for women, safe housing and transport facilities for garments workers and also installing CCTV cameras on the street.

Unfortunately, none of the candidates have mentioned anything about how they can make the existing public transports, especially public bus services, safe for women. According to a 2017 Brac study, 94 percent of women experienced some form of sexual harassment while commuting on public transport. In our public buses, the reserved seats for women are still mostly occupied by men and for a woman to get into a public bus in the rush hours is as difficult as it could be. The city authorities will have to address the issues in coordination with the law enforcing agencies.

As for ensuring the safety of women commuters, will only installing powerful lights and CCTV cameras on each street ensure women's safety? None of the candidates have talked about how they will coordinate with the law enforcement agencies to ensure women commuters' security at the local level.

Moreover, according to the City Corporation Rules 2012, holding awareness campaigns on public safety issues and mobilising support from the local people are the responsibility of the councillors. Our would-be ward councillors should be empowered enough to play this role, which is essential to raise awareness about women's safety at the ward level.

According to Election Commission data, out of a total 5,463,467 voters in Dhaka South and Dhaka North city corporations, 2,620,459 are women. Without ensuring their safety, Dhaka can never be made liveable again.

Trump's Middle East 'peace plan'

A rejection of international law and decades of peace process

THE US and Israel have historically been allies and staunch supporters of each other's policies. Despite that, it was a disturbing scene when US President Donald Trump stood next to the smiling Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House and drew huge cheers from the crowd while unveiling what he called "the deal of the century"—a plan that strips the Palestinians of their rights and imposes apartheid-like conditions that would effectively make Palestine an Israeli colony.

For the controversial US president and the equally controversial Israeli PM, who is currently under investigation for corruption in a country paralysed by a political stalemate, this "peace plan" is an honest reflection of their views on Palestinian statehood and a golden opportunity to woo their Christian evangelical voters. However, their blatant disregard for the decades of negotiations and resolutions that have been part of the peace process, specifically the UN-sanctioned 1948 lines and the Oslo Accords, almost beggars belief. Not only does it take away huge swathes of land from Palestine and legalises Israeli settlements built on the West Bank in violation of international law, it gives complete security control of the West Bank to Israel, recognises Israeli sovereignty in disputed territories like the Golan Heights and Jordan Valley, and even makes plans for a "population transfer" of Israeli citizens of Palestinian origin to whatever is left of Palestine—which bears a worrying resemblance to the mass displacements of Partition that are still seared into the memory of the subcontinent.

As a nation of people who have lived under the yoke of colonialism and freed themselves from British and Pakistani occupation, we cannot in any way accept a "solution" in the Middle East that does not take into account the voices of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian National Authority. Nations of the Global South must stand together and speak out against injustice in the same way that we fought against injustice, and we urge the Bangladesh government to be a strong advocate for Palestine and lead the way in this respect. It is disappointing to see a muted response from the Arab world, and we urge the international community to now step up and condemn this attempt to use military and economic strength to overshadow the rights of a people to self-determination. After decades of speaking of universal human rights and the equal rights of all people regardless of where they are, it is time for US allies and intergovernmental organisations to put their money where their mouth is and take a stand against injustice, even at the risk of opposing the biggest bullies on the global playground.

Grappling with growing pains

Bangladesh's growth story cannot take the country far unless it is translated into sustainable development.

MACRO MIRROR


FAHMIDA KHATUN

BANGLA-DESH began 2019 with a renewed hope that its newly elected government would bring in political and economic changes as promised in its election manifesto. Although the economy has maintained high GDP growth, electoral promises remain unfulfilled in several critical areas. Many old woes continue to hamper the economy: a weak fiscal balance, a fragile banking sector and a shaky external sector.

Apart from high economic growth, the other silver lining for Bangladesh economy is the robust growth in remittance income. This helps maintain Bangladesh's low current account deficit. But exports and imports performed poorly last year, with export growth negative from June to November.

The textile sector—the main driver of exports in Bangladesh—experienced a larger decline than non-textile products, causing a dip in total exports. Amid the US-China trade war, Bangladesh's textile sector could not capitalise on the opportunity to increase exports to the United States, mainly due to a lack of supply-side capacity and product diversification. Currency devaluation in competing countries such as India and Vietnam also contributed to Bangladesh's poor export performance.

But as an importing country, Bangladesh's policymakers are cautious about devaluing the Bangladeshi taka against the US dollar because they want to avoid imports becoming too expensive. Imports declined in 2019 and capital machinery imports were negative, indicating low investment. Private investment has been stagnant at around 23 percent of GDP for the past few years. As a result, new job creation is limited and youth unemployment is 10.6 percent. High economic growth also failed to reduce inequality; instead, consumption and wealth inequality have widened.

Bangladesh has the lowest tax-to-GDP ratio among South Asian countries at 9.2 percent in the 2018-2019 fiscal year. The high target of resource mobilisation set for the National Board of Revenue (NBR) remains unfulfilled. Not only is the tax net narrow, tax avoidance is also high. NBR automation, human resource development and, above all, institutional autonomy and transparency are crucial for high revenue mobilisation efforts. The tax system has shifted towards indirect tax instead of a direct, progressive tax system.

Due to limited resource mobilisation, the government depends on bank borrowing to finance its development programmes. Several mega infrastructure projects are underway, including the Padma multi-purpose bridge, a mass rapid transit system, an LNG terminal and several power plants and deep sea ports. But delays in the implementation of these high-value projects have hugely increased their cost. By December 2019—only halfway through the fiscal year—the government had almost reached its planned bank borrowing target.

now functioning under the direction of external political forces, provided perverse incentives to loan defaulters. One example is the rescheduling facility. Last May, the central bank announced that it would allow loan defaulters to pay only a 2 percent down payment to reschedule their loans, extending the repayment period to 10 years, with a one-year grace period. Such undue benefits, granted to incentivise defaulters, also discriminate against good borrowers.

The government tried to rescue state-

Bangladesh's 2020 economic outlook will largely be determined by its performance in 2019 and the policies that its government pursues. A short-lived drive against corruption last year created a ray of hope for citizens. Such clampdowns on corruption must be continued and encouraged. Until now, policymakers have largely been averse to structural and institutional reforms needed to improve the economy.

What has been ignored and denied is that Bangladesh's growth story cannot



Delays in the completion of high-value infrastructure projects have hugely increased their cost.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

So, the government will face major fiscal challenges in managing expenditures and continuing development initiatives.

The most significant challenge for the economy is the weakening of the banking sector. Presently, banks are facing a liquidity crunch. This is mostly due to banks holding large amounts of non-performing loans (NPLs). NPLs accounted for 11.69 percent of total outstanding loans last June, and many of these are due to wilful defaulters.

Making things worse, policymakers have granted leeway to the defaulters. The central bank has lost its independence, and

owned banks by recapitalising them every year for the last decade. But this has not improved the performance of state-owned commercial banks, where NPLs account for over 30 percent of their total loans. Private commercial banks have also been afflicted by a loan default culture and experienced various scams.

But instead of letting the poorly performing banks die a natural death, the government provides them with funding. The internal governance of banks is also sometimes weak and needs to be strengthened through monitoring and technological adaptation.

take the country far unless it is translated into sustainable development. Cracks in the economy became prominent in 2019 and will remain in place unless they are addressed.

This year, Bangladesh will celebrate the centennial birthday of its founding father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The greatest respect can be paid to him through fulfilling his dream of establishing a just and equitable society.

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This article is part of an East Asia Forum special feature series on 2019 and the year ahead.

KAMAL AHMED

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ON January 23, when the President of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Abdulgawi Ahmed Yusuf, at the onset of his deliberations pronounced that "the Court's references in this Order to the Rohingya should be understood as references to the group that self-identifies as the Rohingya group," some of us in the press room were elated. And then again, while establishing the link between provisional measures and the rights whose protection was sought, he said: "In the Court's view, the Rohingya in Myanmar appear to constitute a protected group within the meaning of article II of the Genocide Convention." Those survivors of the atrocities who were present inside the chamber and in the gallery later described their feelings as electrifying. Yasmin Ullah of the Rohingya Rights Network told a press meet that "it was a feeling of what was like to be human and equal to others."

The ICJ order that brought joy among the persecuted Rohingyas and humanists all over the world was, however, a rude shock to Myanmar and its powerful military. And it was reflected in their first official reaction. A statement by Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that "Myanmar takes note of ICJ decision. There was no genocide in Rakhine." There was no outright rejection of the ruling. Instead, it tried to blame human rights defenders for allegedly presenting a "distorted picture" of the situation in Rakhine, and highlighted the findings of its own investigation which concluded that war crimes might have been committed, but not genocide. The statement also said "it was important for Myanmar that Court [ICJ] reaches a factually correct decision on the merits of the case."

It was something similar to an own goal for Myanmar. The Court's unanimous view on the level of atrocities committed against the Rohingyas was reached on the basis of two premises: one on the conclusions reached by the UN Fact-Finding Mission, and the other on the admission by the state party, Myanmar. ICJ Vice President Xue Hanqin, who had dissenting views on the reasoning, had noted that "during the oral proceedings, Myanmar acknowledged

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that during their military operations, there may have been excessive use of force and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Rakhine state." In her view, the provisional measures indicated by the Court "would enhance the control of the situation." Noting that "it is apparent that the Rohingya as a group remain vulnerable under the present conditions," Justice Xue Hanqin continued: "with more than 740,000 people displaced from their homeland, the situation demands preventative measures."

Some experts believe Myanmar will simply ignore the Court's ruling. But it will not be that simple. Myanmar had accepted the ICJ's authority and jurisdiction when Aung San Suu Kyi appeared before it and stated: "For materially less resourceful countries like Myanmar, the World Court is a vital refuge of international justice. We look to the Court to establish conditions conducive to respect for obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law, one of the fundamental objectives of the United Nations Charter." Myanmar also knows that its major backers—China and Russia—would be facing an awkward and daunting task to block any resolution at the UN Security Council on the enforcement of the ICJ's order.

The ICJ's unanimous ruling is also

an opportunity for Suu Kyi as she can now tell her backers in the military and extremist monks that to remain part of the rule-based global system, there is no alternative but to implement the provisional measures as ordered. There is, however, a suspicion that the Myanmar government will claim it is trying as best as it can and find various excuses to delay and dither in bringing real changes. The ruling party's reaction gives rise to such suspicions. A spokesman for the ruling National League for Democracy, Myo Nyunt, told Reuters that "the government is already doing most of the orders."

"One more thing we need to do is submit reports," he added, referring to one of the several measures approved by the Court requiring Myanmar to submit reports on progress at regular intervals. And The New York Times quoted a spokesman for Myanmar's military, Brig. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, that it would "cooperate with the government and we will work under the guidance of the government" in response to the ruling.

Diplomats and observers who had followed Myanmar over the years are familiar with this tactic of the current leadership of the country. In relation to the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees, Myanmar has wasted the better part of last three years in so-called verifying process and, more recently, telling the world that it is Bangladesh which is not cooperating with it to implement the process. Clearly incensed by such an accusation, after the second attempt of repatriation failed in last August, Bangladesh responded by saying that it was "baseless, ill-motivated and totally unacceptable".

In the ICJ ruling, there are at least two points that give Bangladesh some advantage in pursuing its objective to repatriate all the refugees. Quoting the General Assembly resolution of December 27, 2019, the ICJ opined that "the Rohingya in Myanmar remain extremely vulnerable." Rejecting the country's claim of steps taken to facilitate the return of the Rohingya refugees present in Bangladesh, the Court noted that "Myanmar has not presented to the Court concrete measures aimed specifically at recognising and ensuring the right of the Rohingya to exist

as a protected group under the Genocide Convention." This observation by the ICJ gives Bangladesh a powerful tool to press Myanmar to resolve the citizenship issue because of which the Rohingya refugees have so far refused to go back to their country.

The second advantage for Bangladesh is the recognition of Rohingyas as a protected group under the Genocide Convention. In its reasoning for ordering provisional measures, the ICJ referred to a particular part of the UN General Assembly resolution of December 27, 2019, where it said: "in spite of the fact that Rohingya Muslims lived in Myanmar for generations prior to the independence of Myanmar, they were made stateless by the enactment of 1982 Citizenship Law and were eventually disenfranchised, in 2015, from the electoral process." This observation certainly removes the chance for all those frivolous labelling of Rohingyas as Bengalis by the Myanmar authorities.

On the other hand, Bangladesh has so far maintained all the niceties in its endeavour to resolve the Rohingya crisis, presumably due to the strategic preference of Myanmar to the two big regional powers, namely China and India. Bangladesh's inability or unwillingness to take a stronger position on the issue did not go unnoticed. The dissenting Justice Xue, while arguing against the Gambia's legal standing before the Court, opined that under the rules, this right belongs to "the injured state, the one which is specifically affected by the alleged violations."

The ICJ ruling has now provided us with a huge opportunity to pursue a forceful course of action. And it is not only for the repatriation of a million-plus refugees, but also for the sake of taking a moral position against genocide. Any nation that is not standing up against the Myanmar regime should also be advised not to be complicit in the genocide. Standing up for an oppressed people, the Rohingyas, is the right thing to do. It will also send a strong message to other nations who are systematically making religious minorities stateless.

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