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Political reforms: Players and prospects

It will be a gross mistake if the parties think they can go back to their old-style politics that led to the break down of the rule of law and made all public institutions non-functional. The parties need to commit themselves to reforms and draw lessons from the mistakes of the post-1/11 government as to the "dos" and "dons" of how to promote reforms.

ROUNAQ JAHAN

THE prospects of political reforms, which appeared to be quite bright soon after the change of government on January 11, 2007, now appear to be rather dim. Despite repeated calls for a qualitative change in politics by the military-backed government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed,

the results of the city corporation elections held on August 4 this year demonstrated that old-style politics and politicians are alive and well.

The highly visible campaign for "honest and qualified" candidates, launched and sustained by civil society and the media over the last several years, and the frequent public statements sup-

porting the election of such candidates by the chief adviser, members of the Advisory Council and the army chief of staff, General Moeen U. Ahmed, have failed to make any visible impact on the electorate. Instead, voters have decided to elect several candidates who have been imprisoned for their alleged corrupt activities. The re-election of Badruddin

Ahmed Kamran from his prison cell, as the mayor of Sylhet with a greater majority of votes than the previous election was a sober reminder to the advocates of "honest and qualified" candidates that such candidates cannot win an election exclusively on their own merit, and would need to draw on the support of the major political parties.

Kamran had been imprisoned since May 29, 2007 on several graft cases, yet he was able to poll 115,446 votes against his nearest rival A.F.M. Kamal's 32,097 votes. Out of the 46 mayoral contestants for the four city corporation elections, 36 lost their deposits. Only those candidates who were supported by political parties, particularly the two major parties, the



Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), did not forfeit their deposits. The results of the August 4 elections thus underscored once

again, the importance and the strength of the AL and the BNP as the two main players in our electoral politics.

However, political parties

should not misread the election results as a popular verdict against clean politics and an endorsement of going back to politics as usual, marked by mastaans, money, corruption, and confrontation. They need to recognise that the idea of reforms, particularly the anti-corruption drive of the Fakhruddin government, initially had a lot of popular support, but the government made a number of strategic mistakes in pushing the reforms agenda.

The political parties, who now aspire to be at the helm of government after January 2009, need to be responsive to the demand for political reforms. The parties need to design, of their own volition, a comprehensive agenda of reforms which still retain a lot of popular

support, particularly of civil society and the media, notwithstanding the election results.

It will be a gross mistake if the parties think they can go back to their old-style politics that led to the break down of the rule of law and made all public institutions non-functional. The parties need to commit themselves to reforms and draw lessons from the mistakes of the post-1/11 government as to the "dos" and "dons" of how to promote reforms.

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Golden opportunity

It is well known that corruption is endemic in BJMC mills, particularly in jute purchasing. Many BJMC mill managers receive kickbacks from jute suppliers in exchange for accepting low-grade jute at a high price.

ZAHIN HASAN

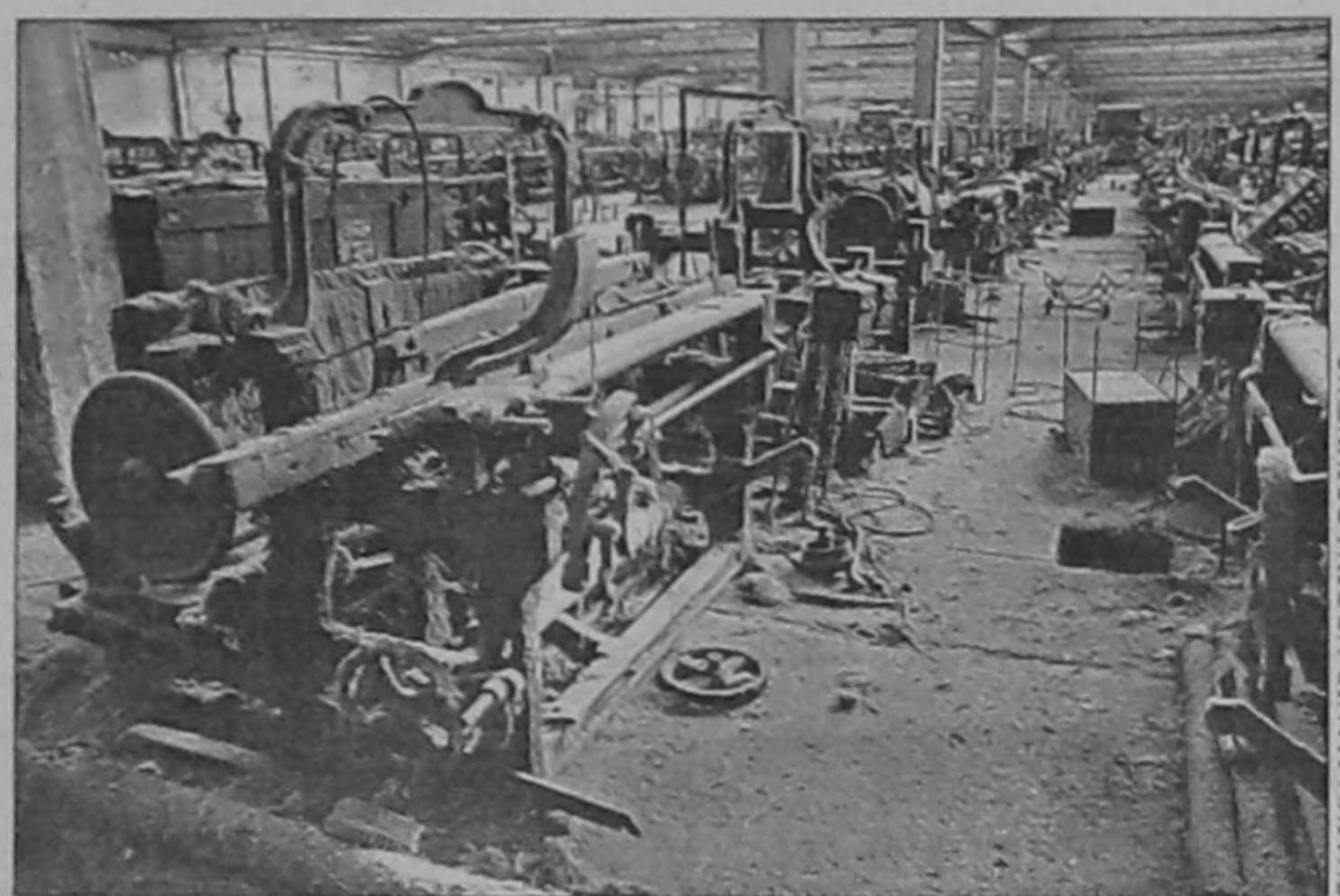
THE long decline of the jute industry is a chapter of our history which we are already forgetting. It has become popular to blame the World Bank and IMF for forcing the government to close BJMC jute mills. But the fact is that competition from cheaper synthetic substitutes (such as woven polypropylene sacks, which have replaced jute sacks for most applications) is what killed the jute industry.

If the jute mills had not been nationalised in the 1970s, competition from synthetics would have forced the jute industry to become more competitive by increasing both productivity per worker and productivity per machine. This is

not rocket science. It requires investing money in machine maintenance and improvement, and in giving workers incentives to be

more productive.

After the jute mills were nationalised, BJMC never took any steps to become competitive. We never



had a government which viewed BJMC jute mills as businesses which must be run profitably and expanded. Governments were solely interested in rewarding their supporters with jute mill jobs; BJMC mills were packed with high numbers of unnecessary workers.

Businessmen view excess workers as an excess cost. Politicians view excess workers as happy voters. Productivity of BJMC jute mills declined continuously for years and years because money which should have been spent on machine maintenance (to say nothing of machine improvement) was paid out as wages to excess workers. As the loss-making mills could not afford to buy spare parts, they cannibalised parts from some machines to keep others running. Gradually more and more cannibalised machines were reduced to useless piles of scrap metal; productivity plummeted.

Low productivity is not the only reason why BJMC jute mills run at a loss. It is well known that corrup-

tion is endemic in BJMC mills, particularly in jute purchasing. Many BJMC mill managers receive kickbacks from jute suppliers in exchange for accepting low-grade jute at a high price. However, low productivity probably costs BJMC more money than corruption.

Peoples Jute Mill is a case in point. With the equipment it had, Peoples Jute Mill should have been able to produce over 70 tons of jute goods per day. To do so it should have required no more than 3,500 workers (50 workers per ton of output per day). Under BJMC management, output fell every year until it reached the abysmal level of only 13 tons per day (just before it was finally closed). During its long period of declining production, excess workers were not shed.

If Peoples Jute Mill had been run by an entrepreneur, machine maintenance would have been prioritised; output per machine would not have been allowed to fall. Excess workers would have been shed to make cash available

for machine maintenance (and improvement). State owned companies like BJMC will probably never become profitable, because politicians will not allow them to shed excess workers.

With the rising price of petroleum, the government's budget is under increasing strain. Diesel is widely used to fuel irrigation pumps; the government continues to sell diesel at a heavily subsidised price rather than incur the wrath of millions of farmers. Governments of rich countries can afford to buy popularity by paying subsidies. Bangladesh and other poor countries face tough choices. Continuing fuel subsidies means that other subsidies -- like subsidies to loss-making BJMC jute mills -- must stop.

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Zahin Hasan is a director of Kazi Farms Limited. His views do not necessarily reflect those of his employer.

The shame of August 15, 1975: A personal account

My moral stand is clear: if killing a human being is unacceptable, then killing someone who sacrificed so much for his people is an abominable crime. What ethical position can condone, let alone justify, such heinous acts of killing a nationalist father figure, innocent women and children, and close relatives and associates?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

RECENTLY, I was showing a Tk 500 bill to my daughter, telling her I found it quite odd that I met -- in fact, knew -- the person whose picture was on this bill. "It would be like knowing George Washington," quipped my daughter. She was born 13 years after the gruesome murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family on August 15, 1975.

I told her that I had the rare privilege of shaking his hand, and had an informal conversation at his residence. This is definitely not a big deal because there are many

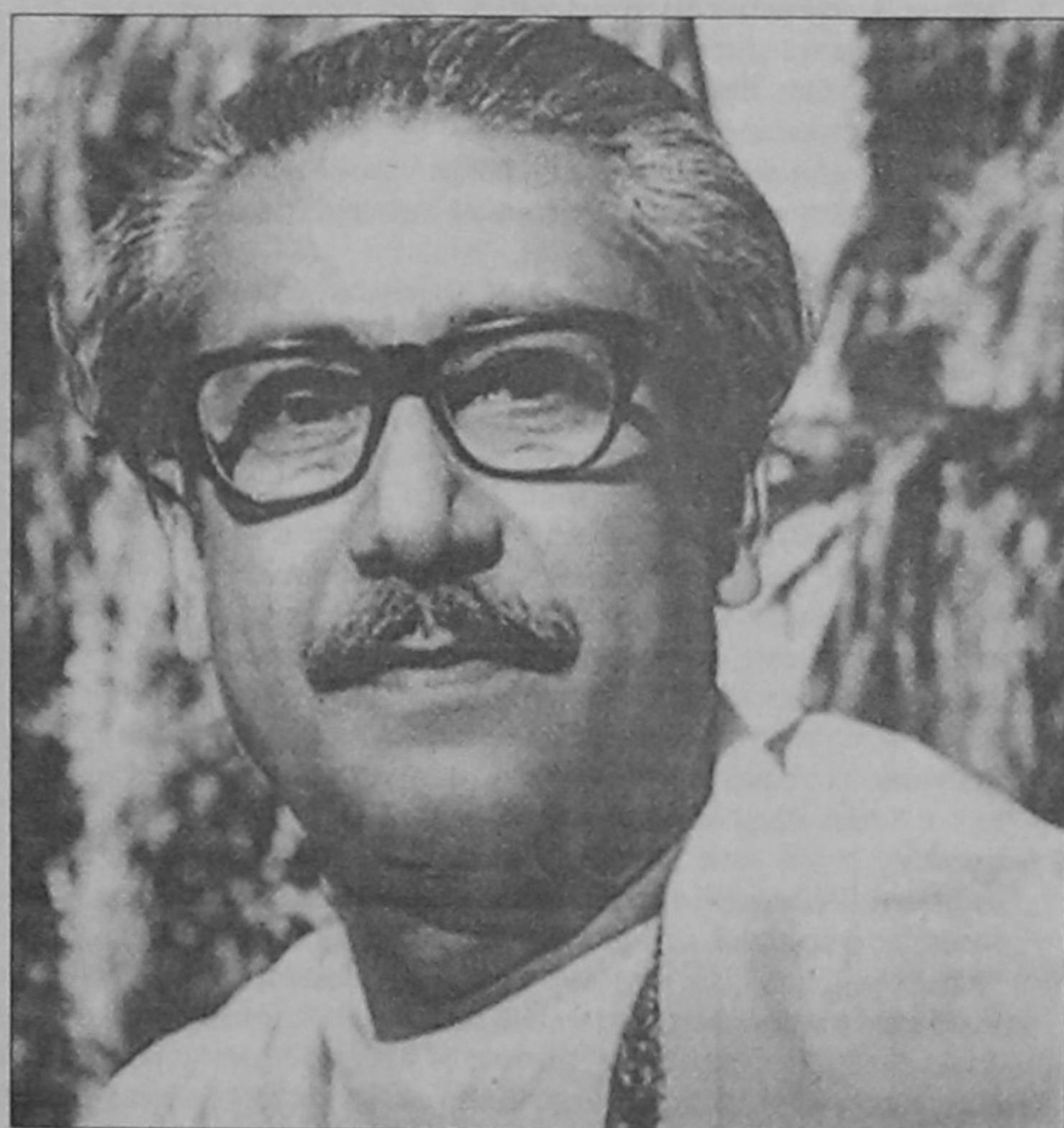
around us who had much closer ties with this man, worked with him closely, and could write volumes about him. I am only thinking of a future generation -- say, the one of my children who would grow up to tell stories to their children about my own generation's trust with history.

I have a simple gauge for someone's moral, and not just political, position. It is revealed in his or her evaluation of the murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh. Those who fail to condemn this murder are people to whom I give a wide berth.

Political figures, however great,

are not immune to criticism. In Kolkata, the statue of Mahatma Gandhi was defaced once. Of course, there are people who can be very critical of Gandhi's politics. Bangabandhu was by no means above criticism; he made his share of mistakes, errors in judgments and what political pundits call these days, "misspoken" statements.

But my moral stand is clear: if killing a human being is unacceptable, then killing someone who sacrificed so much for his people is an abominable crime. What ethical position can condone, let alone justify, such heinous acts of killing a nationalist father figure, innocent women and children, and close



relatives and associates? The crime, in its lowness, is comparable to the

morally reprehensible crime of killing four other founding leaders

of Bangladesh inside the Dhaka central jail in early November 1975.

During an afternoon in December 1975, I was taking a rickshaw back to Tajmahal Road where we lived from Dhaka University after I went to see the results of our MA final examination. I looked at the Bangabandhu residence on Road 32, and memories flashed back.

Not too long ago, it was in that house that Sheikh Kamal, whom I used to coach once in a while on sociological theories and issues, had introduced me to Bangabandhu. I was having lunch with the Bangabandhu family in their first floor dining room. Kamal took certain pride in introducing me to Bangabandhu, saying, "Abba this is Habib, he is the first boy in our class. He will also secure first position in the MA final exam."

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The Zionist stratagem

The Zionists proposed to liberate Jews from European persecution by arranging for their exodus from Europe. This had always been the dream of European anti-Semites: to cleanse their landscape of Jewish presence.

M. SHAHID ALAM

ANTI-Semitism has grown and continues to grow, and so do I."

As a self-defined movement for the national "liberation" of European Jews, Zionism had an anomalous relationship with its perennial Other, the Gentile nations, from whom it wanted the Jews to secede and become a distinct nation under a Jewish state.

The Zionists did not define Europe's Gentile nations as the adversary they would have to oppose, and against whom they would struggle, to secure the rights of Jews to emerge as a distinct nation.

On the contrary, the Zionists

would harness the strength of their perennial Other -- their adversary -- to gain their nationalist objective. Unlike nationalists, who secede from a state or empire by drawing new borders, the Zionists did not demand any European territory; they planned to establish their Jewish state outside the borders of Europe.

In other words, the Zionists were offering to execute what any state facing secessionist demands would have embraced quite avidly: the Jewish "secessionists" would sail away from Europe and establish their state in the Middle East, well-removed from Europe. This was a novel approach to national liberation.

As a first step, the Zionists proposed to liberate Jews from European persecution by arranging

for their exodus from Europe. This had always been the dream of European anti-Semites: to cleanse their landscape of Jewish presence. Over the past thousand years, different states in Europe had periodically attempted this voiding of Jews through forced conversions, pogroms, expulsions, and segregation of Jews from Gentiles.

The Zionists were now proposing to purge Europe of its Jews on a scale never attempted before, and without the inconvenience of disturbing the peace. It was a contract that Europe's anti-Semites would have difficulty turning down. Indeed, the Zionists fully expected the anti-Semites to give them whatever help they needed to effect the Jewish exodus.

The Zionists were counting on this help; it was indispensable for the

completion of their project. The second step in the Zionist plan was to seize control of Palestine, open it up to Jewish colonisation, and when the Jewish colons had gained sufficient demographic mass in Palestine, they would convert it into a Jewish state, preferably without the natives. The Zionists could not undertake this step without the help of European powers. This was a clever stratagem: quite original to Zionism.

The Zionists sought to convert an impossible nationalism -- with little prospect of ever achieving its goal inside Europe -- into a settler-colonial project. In addition, they would convert the Jews' erstwhile adversaries into strategic partners. The Zionists expected to persuade at least one European power to play the part of "mother country" to the Jewish colons in Palestine.

It appeared that the Zionists were going to outperform Moses of Jewish tradition. Moses too had chosen to liberate the Hebrews of ancient Egypt by marching them out of Egypt into Canaan, where they would establish their own state.



There were important differences, however, between the two plans.

The Zionists did not seek divine help, but they would receive help from the anti-Semites. Moses had divine help but his plan was opposed by the Egyptians. The Egyptians could not have agreed to Moses' long march because he was running away with their property -- their Hebrew slaves. In Europe, on the other hand, the Jews owned considerable property -- banks,

bank accounts, factories, houses, lands -- that they would leave behind.

Clearly, the Zionists were offering the Europeans an attractive deal. Help us create a Jewish settler-state in Palestine: and we will solve your Jewish problem, free you from Jewish competition, free you of the Jewish presence, and you can have all the property we leave behind. This Jewish property was another gift the Zionists offered to Europe's anti-Semites.

To Europe's anti-Semites, the deal was irresistible. In fact, some of them would think they could kill two birds with the Zionist stone. They would get rid of the Jews, and renew the Crusades against the Muslims.

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Leaders of the future

Community service is the practical aspect of BYLC's third and final goal, through which they hope to encourage BYLC students to utilise all they have learnt, bringing it forth within themselves into a real life situations, aimed at improving social conditions in Bangladesh.

NABILAH KHAN

It would seem that our cry for informed and powerful future leaders of Bangladesh might finally have been answered. In fact, Ejaj Ahmad, the founder of the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) would like to reassure you that this is indeed the case.

Ejaj, a recent recipient of an MPP from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and second-year MIT student Shammi Shawkat Quddus both won the Davis Peace Prize from MIT in January 2008. With this initial fund from their prize money of \$10,000, Ejaj was able to realise a past dream and start his quest by encouraging promising young men and women from the younger generations to receive training in leadership and decision making for the future development of our country.

BYLC conducted its inaugural program in Chittagong, selecting qualified students from English and Bengali medium schools as well as madrassas. Along with the cooperation of YPSA, a local non-profit in Chittagong, this first batch of BYLC students took part in the very first leadership training for high school students under the direct guidance of both Ejaj and Shammi.

BYLC has three main goals, according to its founders. Both Ejaj and Shammi spoke of the huge gap in comradeship between English medium, Bengali medium, and madrassa students that they themselves felt during their own school years in Bangladesh. Thus, not surprisingly, one of the first goals of BYLC is to build bridges

between the three distinct schooling systems in Bangladesh and provide a common ground for students of different backgrounds.

Ejaj himself strongly believes that such a division in our society, cultivated from a young age in our lives, is a very definite threat to the economic, social and political progress of Bangladesh. "If future leaders, in whatever field, cannot understand where the other half of the population is coming from, then how will they exercise correct judgment and leadership?" asks the founder of BYLC.

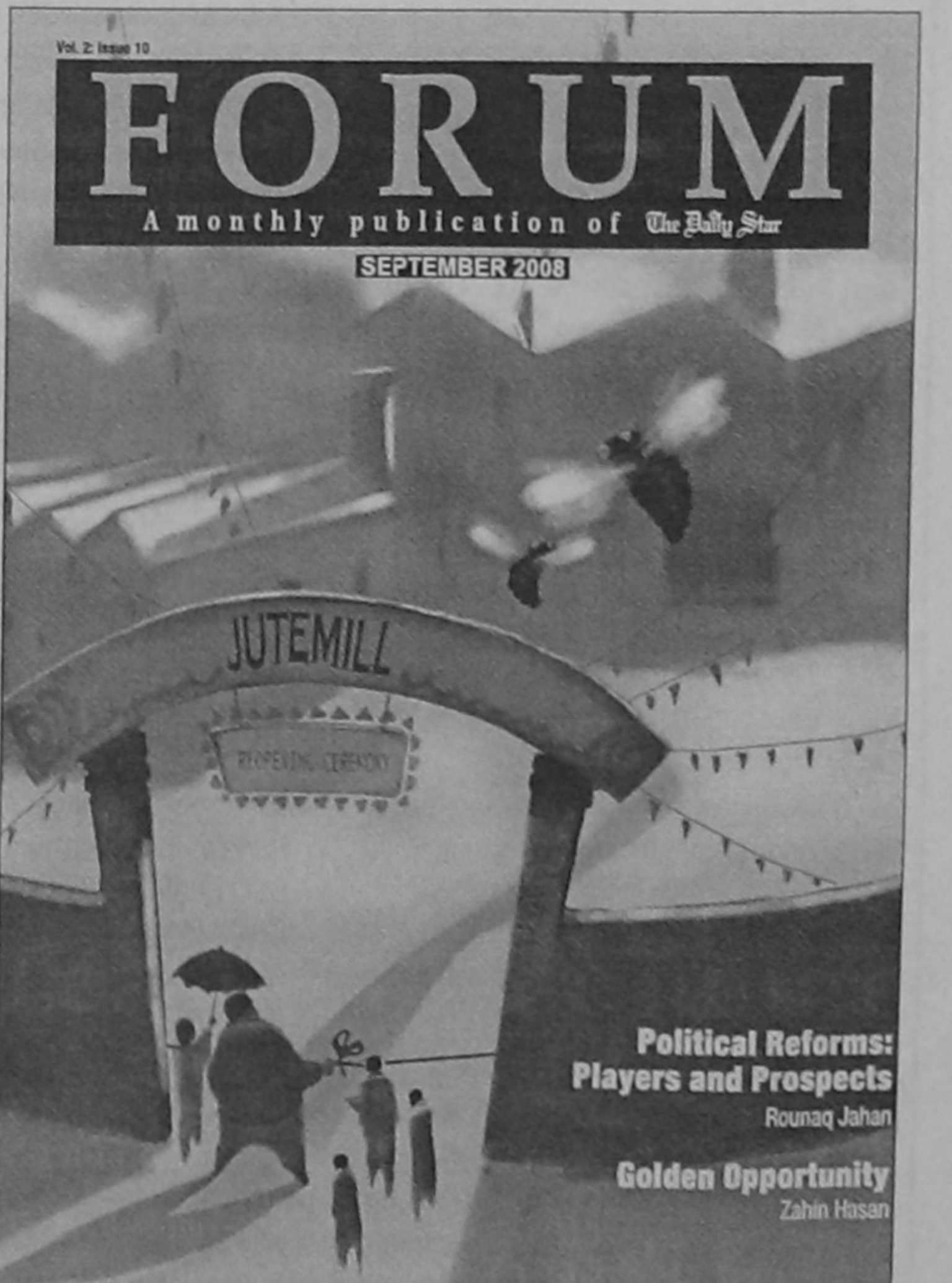
The organisation's second goal is "leadership training", as the name itself indicates. BYLC aims to encourage youngsters to realise and focus on their own goals, whether large or small. Goals that they themselves have set, and through leadership training, is able to build the courage required to accomplish such aspirations in life.

Community service is the practical aspect of BYLC's third and final goal, through which they hope to encourage BYLC students to utilise all they have learnt, bringing it forth within themselves into a real life situations, aimed at improving social conditions in Bangladesh.

Ejaj explains their third goal by saying: "We believe that leadership as a position of authority alone is of no use unless it delivers positive results for others."

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