

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND 'JP will never form alliance with BNP'

H.M. Ershad, chairman of Jatiya Party (JP), as army chief, usurped state power in a coup d'etat on March 24, 1982, and ruled the country first as chief martial law administrator and then as president. He was compelled to resign from power in December 1990 following a mass upsurge. Later he was elected to the fifth parliament from jail and JP became the third largest party in the parliament. Rashidul Hasan and Suranjith Deabnath took his exclusive interview.

Do you have any confusion over holding parliamentary election on December 18?
I have no doubt at all. As far as I know, election must take place on December 18. I am certain about it. The present caretaker government should leave after holding the parliamentary election for the greater interest of the nation. All major political parties have raised demand of withdrawal of state of emergency for holding of election, except you. Why?
It is a settled matter. The caretaker government has already announced that election would be held under emergency. Otherwise, all the corrupt people and thieves, who are in jail, will come back and try to destroy the peaceful atmosphere. Emergency should remain during the election for stopping terrorist activities, ensuring the voters' security, resisting snatching of vote boxes, and halting casting of fake votes.
You also support holding upazilla election -- but is it possible to hold the upazilla election only five later after the parliamentary election?
Both AL and BNP stated several times that they wished to hold the upazilla and parliamentary elections on the same day. Actually, they do not want holding the

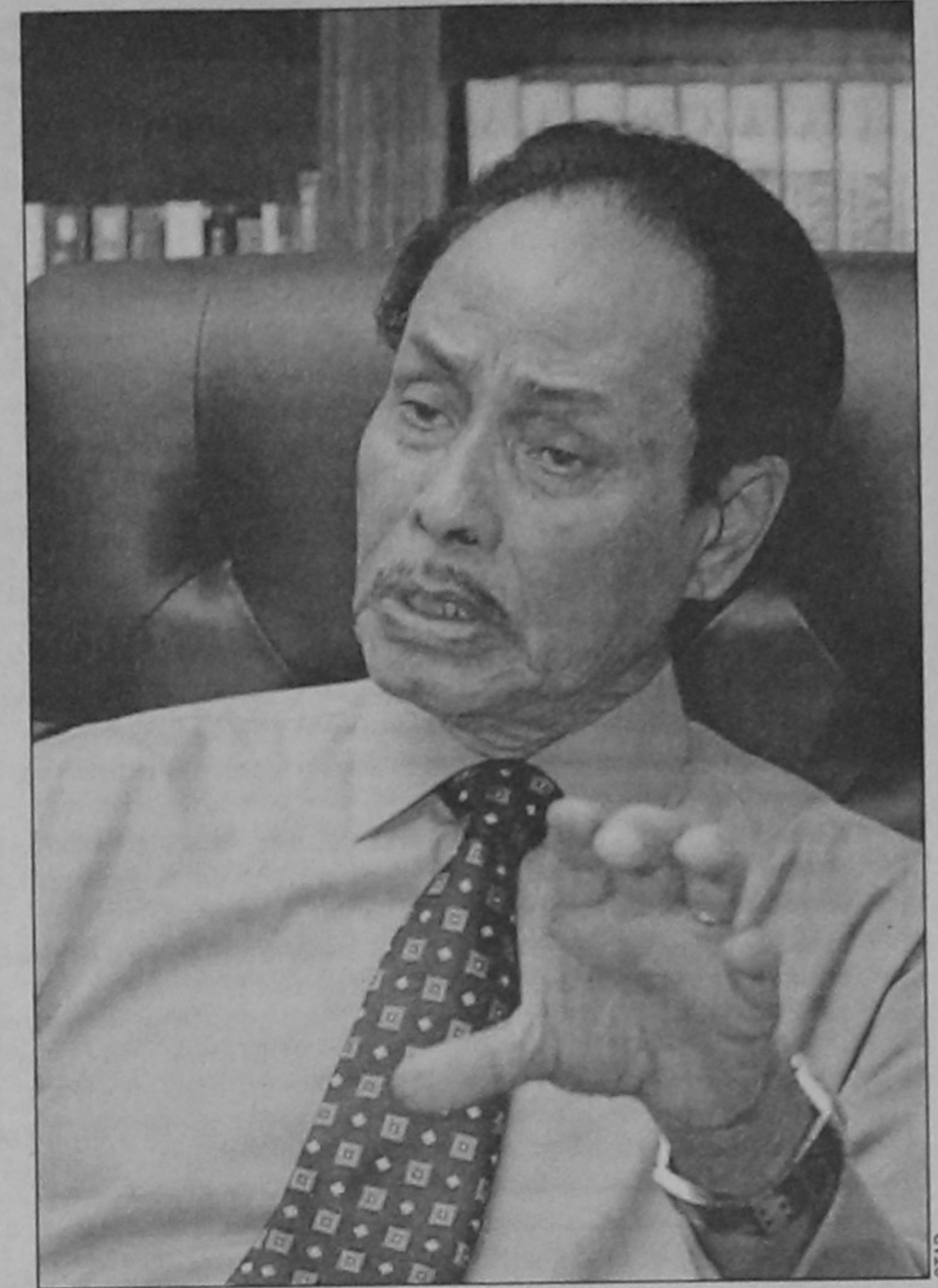
upazilla election. Previous times, both parties did not hold upazilla election even after the order of the High Court. I think that the present election commission should not change the upazilla election schedule.
AL opposes local observers for coming poll. Do you support it?
Yes, I support it. The chiefs of many local observers are loyal to BNP. But foreign observers should be allowed more during the election period.
Which issues will get priority in your party manifesto?
If our party wins in the election and forms government, we will introduce provisional government system, provide special foods for distressed people, distribute seasonal loans to the real farmers, establish atomic power plants, and build accommodation building for police.
Have you started seat-sharing discussion with AL? How many seats you are expecting?
We want at least 60 seats, as we got this number of seats from the grand alliance for January 22, 2007 elections. Though this time we may ask more seats if we find competent candidates.
What will you do if AL agrees to give less seats against your

demands?
Never it will be done. There is no problem for JP to get 60 seats from grand alliance because I regularly talk with Sheikh Hasina about seat sharing. We have good communication with each other.
The results of last three parliamentary elections showed a downward trend in JP popularity. How do you justify seeking so many seats?
I was in jail during 1991 and 1996 election, and I was not allowed to contest election in 2001. For these reasons, I could not conduct election campaign. Now we are a very popular party because our countrymen have found many positive things during my tenure which were absent during AL and BNP ruling period.
Will JP join BNP-led four-party alliance if other component of 14-party alliance refuses you?
JP will never form alliance with BNP whereas grand alliance with AL could be formed or not. JP has the ability to contest the general election alone. Sheikh Hasina knows JP is more valuable or more useful than 14-party others partners. So, she will decide JP will be involved or not with the grand alliance. I don't have any comment against the opposing position of alliance partners.

After 1/11 you raised question several times against the existence of the grand alliance. Now why are you eager to return the grand alliance?
It is wrong. I did not raise question against the existence of grand alliance. I was in grand alliance and my party is still in grand alliance because it is yet to be split. The existence of grand alliance will be decided after Sheikh Hasina returns from abroad.
There is a wide allegation that JP is an autocratic political party -- means much more Ershad-dependent party. What measures have you taken to ensure democratic practices in the party?
I have curtailed my power through changing the party constitution. Now I have to take action after talking with presidium members. After introducing this, I hope JP is now more pro-democracy compared to the previous time. Now the party's chairman and secretary general will be elected for three years but for no more than two terms.
Do you believe the culture of the country's politics will be changed due to Representation of People Order (RPO) revised by the EC?
We have welcomed EC and accepted the conditions of RPO. I

believe it will help to change our political culture. But it is very important to change our attitude in political parties. This country does not belong to any political party. All parties must understand this. When any party go to power, its leaders should keep this in mind.
Did you bring changes in JP constitution due to pressure from EC?
I believe political reform is not a matter of imposing and it should be brought to meet the party's demands. We changed our party's constitution not only due to pressure from EC but also making the party more democratic. But it is true that all political parties started to amend their constitution following the RPO condition of the EC.
After 20 month long anti-corruption drive, many corrupt individuals are now coming out under bail. What is your comment regarding this?
We have welcomed the anti-corruption drive. Our countrymen have also welcomed it because BNP-Jamaat alliance broke all of the previous records of corruption. Discontent has emerged among people because corrupt individuals are coming out through the bail. I don't give any comment due to fear of contempt of court.
Should the political parties give nomination to those who are either convicted or accused in graft cases?
Of course never. Corruption charged politicians have still huge amount of money. They can purchase votes using their black money which is contrary to any democratic practice and fair election.

There were huge allegations of corruption against you. Do you think yourself fit as a candidate for election?
I have no allegation of corruption. All corruption cases were false. All the allegations against me have been proved wrong.
What's your opinion on proposed dialogue between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?
There is no need of dialogue between the two leaders. What they will talk about when there is no agenda? Once we thought they might discuss about national government. But that is also out now. It will be better atmosphere if all political parties, sitting together, take decision to never call hartal or walk-out from parliament.
You have an allegation of receiving huge money from AL and BNP before the cancelled January election in 2007. Is it true?
You can ask Sheikh Hasina. She is the only person who can tell you. On the other hand, I came out from the four-party because I did not take any money from them.
Will you become president if your grand alliance with AL wins the election?
It is a very difficult question to answer (smiling). When we formed the grand alliance last year, there was an understanding between the general secretary of AL and the secretary general of JP that the alliance would make me president.
How many seats will you contest in the upcoming election?
Three constituencies -- Rangpur-3 (Sadar), Habiganj-3 (Sadar and Lakhai), and Dhaka-17 (Dhaka



cantonment-Gulshan) according to the new demarcation of constituencies.
What is the lesson of 1/11?
We could not know the depth of corruption if 1/11 had not come. Qualitative changes could not come in the nation without it. It brought changes in our mind. Now the politicians are thinking in a different way. 1/11 was really an eye opener to our politicians.
Everyone has termed you as a former autocratic ruler. What is your comment on it?
I am not an arrogant person. Such a polite person like me is rare in the country.

Just an election is not democracy

If democracy means that the poor people of this country, the farmers and the labourers, will continue to be poorer and the nouveaux riches richer, and that election held sans some elite personalities and some elitist political parties no matter how corruption-infested they are will not be graded legitimate or credible, as some people are saying, then I do not call it democracy.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

HERE is no denying the fact that free, fair, and credible election is essential for transition to democracy. But election by itself will not help democracy strike roots in this country unless the government and the election commission ensure that those who are going to be elected representatives of the people and who are going to wield political power to rule this country for the next five years are all men and women of impeccable credentials.
That we have not succeeded in establishing genuine democracy and democratic culture in our political parties and our system of governance even after 37 years of independence will bear it out.
If thieves, dacoits, murderers, listed criminals, corrupt politicians, dishonest businessmen, and such morally degraded people are allowed to contest elections unhindered, they will easily outnumber and outshine honest and competent

people for the simple reason that they possess what these good people do not -- plenty of black money and muscle power.
They will drive out good people from politics as indeed they have much the same way as bad money drives out good money from the market. Voters cannot but be chary of these people because they wield considerable influence. The only way out is to debar these criminals from contesting elections and encourage well meaning and patriotic elements to come forward and engage in nation building tasks in greater number without let and hindrance.
Keeping this in view, the framers of our constitution have very wisely stipulated under Article 66 of the constitution certain criteria which will render a citizen disqualified for election as or for being a member of parliament. But these criteria are by no means the last words. These can be and must be improved upon through further amendments in view of the massive criminalisation of politics which has taken place over

the last three decades.
It was expected that this caretaker government would initiate necessary reforms in this regard especially after the saga of massive corruption and wrongdoings by political bigwigs flashed across the media.
Thanks to the ACC under the leadership of its charismatic chairman and the initial bold initiative of this government, most of these political heavyweights and light heavyweights, including two former prime ministers, ministers and lawmakers, were indicted on charges of massive corruption and wrongdoings. While some were punished and others were in the process of being tried and punished, suddenly the drive against corruption seems to have come to a halt with almost all of the tainted politicians coming out of jails in droves on bail.
For reasons best known to the government there has been a considerable climbdown in the government's stance on corruption. Besides, no worthwhile reform to democratise our political system has



Democracy in action?

been done. At this point of time it looks as if the government is desperately trying for an exit from power without further tarnishing its image.
In the process it is working hard to hold general election in December and hand over power to an elected government no matter what sort of people are going to be elected.
AL and BNP seem to have sensed the vulnerability of the government and are making the most of it. AL is insisting on Sheikh Hasina being freed on bail in all cases like Khaleda Zia. Khaleda Zia is already out on bail and is conducting herself as if she is already half-way to the corridors of power which she held sway over twice in the past. Advisor Hossain Zillur Rahman visited the Begum at her cantonment residence as the

government emissary perhaps to clarify some doubts prior to the BNP-Jamaat talks with the government on October 14.
If the government decides to water down the amended RPO and strip it of what is being objected to by the two major parties and allow all convicted or under-trial political leaders, including those who are yet to be indicted, to participate in election, it will definitely mean going back to square one. In that case there was no earthly reason for this government to remain in power for two years.
If democracy means that election must be held just because it is mandatory to go through this exercise no matter how disastrous the upshot would be in terms of its political

fallout, then I loathe this democracy. If democracy means that political parties will have no democracy and democratic culture to practice within the parties and the party president or chairperson will exercise absolute power and authority to run the affairs of the party, then I am not in favour of this democracy.
If democracy means that those who rose to Himalayan heights in corruption and wrong-doing as rulers of this country and have become billionaires overnight, are to be given a clean bill of political health so that they can return as elected leaders to rule this country and spawn corruption in our national life as before, then I do not subscribe to this democracy.
If democracy means that elected members of parliament will be entitled to enjoy enhanced salaries, perks and privileges, import luxurious and expensive cars free of duty and flaunt them on the streets of this country where millions of poor people cannot afford to travel by bus or rickshaw, then I do not stand for this democracy.
If democracy means that elected representatives will enjoy the exclusive luxury of living in fully furnished NAM flats with all modern facilities provided by the state by paying a token rent of Tk 400 or Tk 500 per month and continue to occupy those flats even though as many as two years have elapsed after the dissolu-

tion of the parliament while a poor day labourer toiling hard the whole day and earning a pittance cannot expect to live in unhygienic shanties at that rent, then I hate to call it democracy.
If democracy means that the speaker of the parliament will continue to enjoy his enhanced salary and other perks and privileges including accommodation, transport, protocol, security escort, etc in full and undertake tours abroad while he has no function as a speaker as such in the absence of the parliament which stands dissolved for the last two years while this money could feed a thousand hungry mouths in this godforsaken country, then I am not for this democracy.
If democracy means that a cabinet minister will allow a murderer to leave the country in an effort to circumvent the due process of law, evading justice for such a heinous crime in exchange for a hefty bribe of Tk 200 million, and the prime minister of the country would know nothing about it or would gloss over it, then I do not believe in this democracy.
If democracy means that one party will loot and plunder the state wealth and property in the name of ruling this country, giving the opposition no space whatsoever inside the parliament for constructive criticism of the government while the other party in the opposition will boycott

all parliamentary sessions, call shutdowns of shops, mills, factories, educational institutions, etc and mount violent street protests, thus disturbing peace and order and harming the economy of the country all aimed at bringing down the elected government, then I denounce this democracy.
If democracy means that the poor people of this country, the farmers and the labourers, will continue to be poorer and the nouveaux riches richer, and that election held sans some elite personalities and some elitist political parties no matter how corruption-infested they are will not be graded legitimate or credible, as some people are saying, then I do not call it democracy.
I shall wait for an election which seeks to free politics from its accumulated muck, filth and odious garbage, and for a democracy which inspires honest, educated, and patriotic men and women with integrity and commitment to democracy to come forward and serve the people and the country and which can present the nation a corruption free, transparent, and accountable dispensation. We shall have such elections and such a democracy no matter how long it takes.
Brig Gen Shamsuddin Ahmed (retd) is a freedom fighter and former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

Time to re-think our 'development' paradigm?

Is that the path we want to follow? Do the less developed countries, many of which were well known throughout history for the enlightenment of their ancient civilisations, need to calibrate their success by registering a 5%+ growth rate, year after year? Do they need to whet the appetite of the West's consumerism, and become instruments and partners of their capitalist machinery?

RUBAYAT KHAN

THE world's literature on development talks overwhelmingly about economic growth. Writers Dani Rodrik and Jeffrey Sachs are well known for their liberal ideologies and pro-development bent. In "One Economics, Many Recipes," Rodrik points out the need for developing countries to shape their own policies and develop their institutions. In "The End of Poverty," Sachs talks about how the world has the capacity to bring all the countries on to the path to development, and to help the extreme poor to step on the first rung of the ladder of economic development.
Both of them are probably correct in their own approaches. It is true that developing countries today do

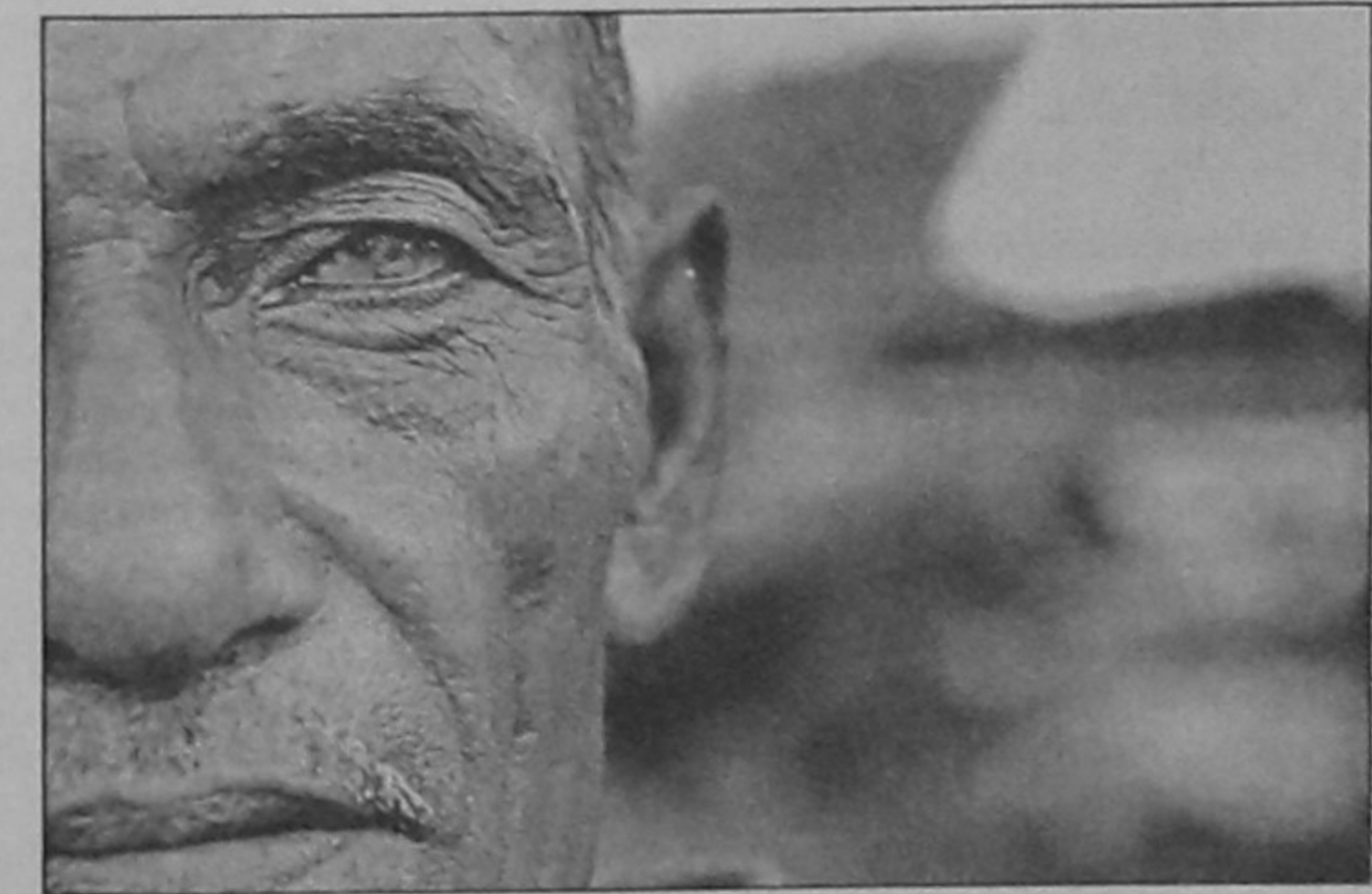
not get freedom to shape their policies. It is true that the Washington Consensus failed miserably to help countries like Argentina, who followed it like a Bible, grow. Indeed, the true success stories of the last few decades -- China, India, Vietnam and other East Asian countries -- grew so fast only with the help of home-made policies that starkly deviated from the consensus. Rodrik is therefore right in vying for more sovereignty of developing countries, and in trying to shift the focus of western powers and their surrogate organisations to development from just trade maximisation.
It is also true that economic growth does mean that first step towards development. When people are dying in their millions from curable diseases and chronic hunger,

when so many do not have access to safe water or sanitation, or even a roof above their heads -- as Sachs brilliantly depicts from first-hand experience -- any other priorities seem beside the point.
In the recent IUCN World Conservation Congress, Prof. Joan Martinez Alier, professor of economics and economic history at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, said exactly this: "Below a certain income level well-being is dependent on economic growth."
However, despite all of this being true, Prof. Alier mentioned one more thing that seems missing in the global development doctrine today. He added: "Happiness is not necessarily a function of economic growth, above a certain level of income."
Completely ignoring this impor-

tant point, the current debate seems to revolve around what is the better route to economic growth, most often measured by a notoriously narrow indicator called GDP growth rate, than how to achieve "development" in a broader sense. Economic growth is deemed synonymous to development, and that is where I find a frustrating tendency to view the world through a very narrow lens. Of course there has been a gradually increasing focus on a more holistic "human development," especially on the index -- HDI -- developed by UNDP. But even that, I feel, only measures some important prerequisites to the real "human development" I am envisioning in this article.
If we look at a large majority of today's "developed" countries, the first thing we will notice is wealth, and sometimes even extravagance. It is an endless cycle of production and consumption, competing with each other and increasing exponentially, often at the cost of "less important" issues such as the environment and human rights. Nike sneakers are sold at a magnificent three-storied store on 5th Ave, bearing no mark of the poor Vietnamese child who made it

with her own hands in dire working conditions, or the despoiled river flowing by the industry which tanned the leather.
This ever-increasing prominence of consumerism has one more casualty, more tragic than the river or the child. That is mankind's shift in priority from spiritual to material wealth.
Some wise person (I forgot who) once said: "The East turns material things into spirit, and the West turns spiritual things into matter." That was indeed so in the past. India, China, and the Middle East of the ancient past were known more for their great philosophers and scientists than their material wealth. The West only became the thinkers of the world very recently. And in the US, even the so-called "knowledge-based society" was developed not as an end in itself, but only because it was perceived to be necessary to sustain the capitalist society and maintain global dominance. The irony behind this knowledge-based society called the United States is pitiful. The vast majority of the American population are kept uninformed and shallow, a vast army of guinea-pigs who need to be sus-

tained as voracious consumers only so that more and more can be produced!
The sad thing is -- the East has followed suit. India and China are gearing themselves for a spiraling race (to the bottom) to become economic giants. In the process, they are selling the spiritual character that so long defined eastern civilisations, and becoming nothing more than Wannabe Westerners. To many (if not most) Indians and Chinese, and indeed Bangladeshis, the definition of success in life is now the tantalising luxuries seen on prime-time television and lifestyle magazines.
Is that the path we want to follow? Do the less developed countries, many of which were well known throughout history for the enlightenment of their ancient civilisations, need to calibrate their success by registering a 5%+ growth rate, year after year? Do they need to whet the appetite of the West's consumerism, and become instruments and partners of their capitalist machinery?
The answer is very simple -- No! It is still not too late to take a step back from the global paradigm that economic growth is the means and the



Casualty of development?

end. Even in the West, think-tanks like the New Economics Foundation (based in UK) are striving for a new economics which redefines "wealth" to focus on increased well-being and environmental sustainability rather than on just having and consuming more things.
Instead of blindly following the dirty and unsustainable path others have trod before us, we therefore have a choice to create our own different route to development so that yet others can follow. Our imper-

ative to pursue economic growth and higher rankings in Human Development Reports should only be as a means to assure every individual of a satisfactory livelihood and a fulfilling life -- to give them a chance to achieve the spiritual growth, knowledge, and all the other great things that each human being is intrinsically capable of.
Rubayat Khan is a member of Jagoree, a non-partisan platform for political engagement of youth. He can be contacted at Rubayat.khan@gmail.com.