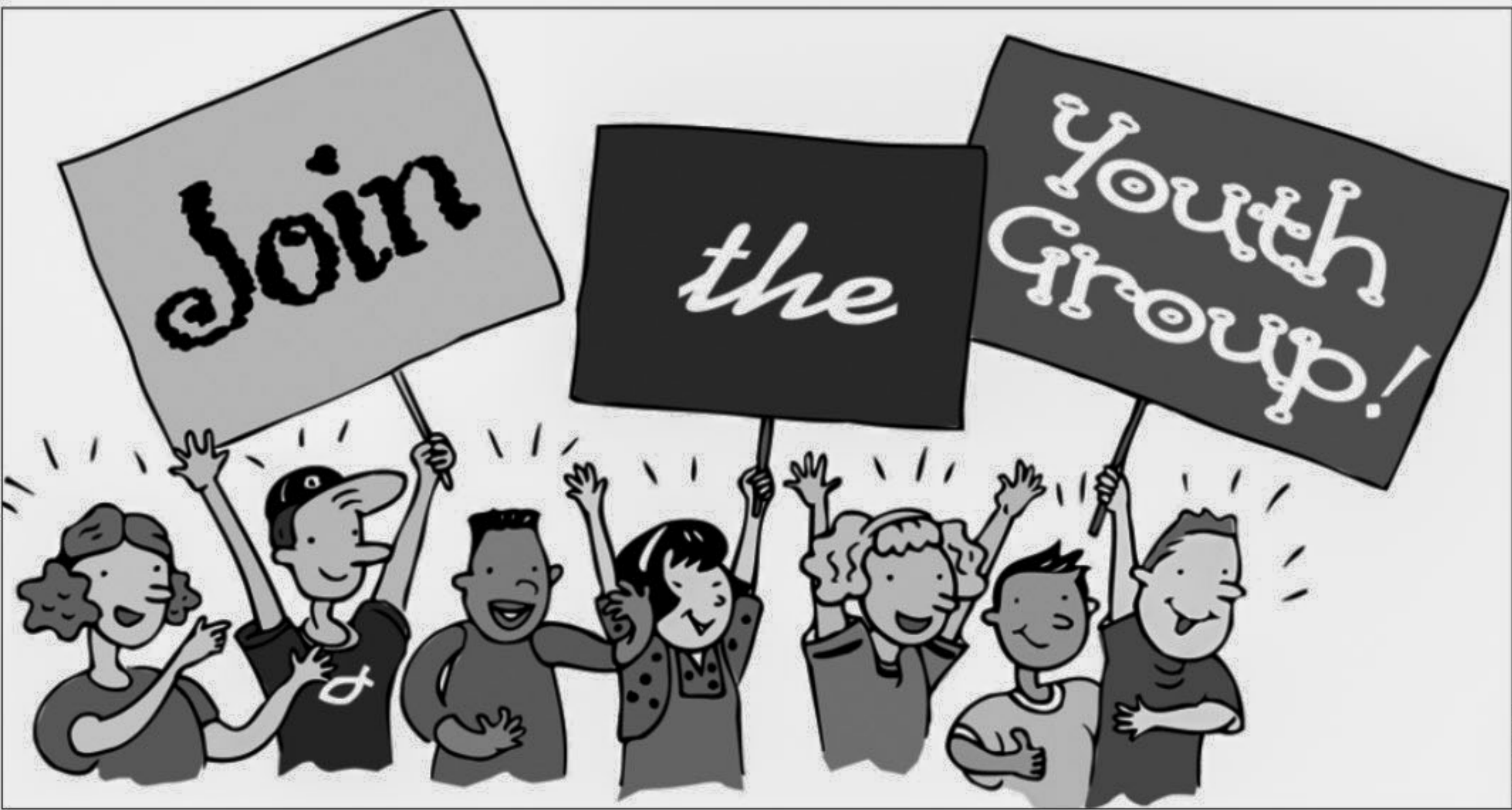


Youth for development



To take the country forward.

Young people are the ones who can change the world because they have the idealism of a better world, the energy to try, and the motivation to change. They are tomorrow's world leaders and are in touch with social development of the world more than any other generation.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

OBAMA acknowledged young people, who thrust him into the White House, as much as he could in his victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park after winning the presidential election: "It was the young people who rejected the myth of their generation's apathy, who left their homes and their families for jobs that offered little pay and less sleep."

In November, 2008, the world was delighted with an epic love story between Barack Obama and the youngest generation of voters in America, who turned out at the polls in unprecedented numbers to elect him as the president of the United States because they wanted to change the perception that America was an arrogant and greedy nation.

Times have changed, and the way we engage with issues that matter to us has changed too. Young people are the ones who can change the world because they have the idealism of a better world, the energy to try, and the motivation to change. They are tomorrow's world leaders and are in touch with social development of the world more than any other generation.

The future has always been considered to have been in the hands of young people. While the progress of any country is determined,

amongst others, by how much we involve the young people -- in thoughts, words, and action -- in developing the present and building the future, young people in Bangladesh have little or no influence over government decisions.

A recently revealed survey by the British Council -- commissioned in Dhaka -- indicated that three-quarters of the youth in Bangladesh were not interested in politics. The first-ever nationwide survey, titled "Bangladesh: The Next Generation," interviewed 2,166 young people between the age of 15 and 30 at their work, educational institutes and homes in 2009, and three in every four young people disagreed with the statement, "I am interested in politics."

However, one-third said they should be involved in politics. Apart from their political stands and thinking, 60% of them feared that corruption would worsen in the next five years.

There seems to be a feeling that the next generation is politically inactive. Though many young people in Bangladesh care about politics and want to make things happen, a lot of them think that political parties in Bangladesh hardly work on common issues. Lots of young people have opinions and views, but they're not necessarily party-political ones. According to the survey, 79% are interested in development and common issues.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni is right. The

young people elected the present government because they are hopeful and want to bring change and want to focus on development issues. "I do not believe that the youth do not have any capacity to influence decision-making," she said as the chief guest at a program at Sheraton Hotel on Saturday, June 12, 2010.

Young people are sceptical about politics in general and feel disillusioned. Politicians in Bangladesh rarely tell the entire truth. They usually concentrate on what they want to concentrate on, which aren't necessarily the same things that matter to ordinary people.

The decisions that the government makes affect everyone, but most of the time it's very hard to find any difference between any of the political parties, and people don't believe things will necessarily improve whoever comes to power. People want to believe that whoever is in government will act in their best interest, and take on board the issues that affect everyone.

According to the survey, young people in the country are happy, but a large portion of them would prefer to live abroad for education facilities and better job opportunities. If a country sees that its youth are migrating to countries that have more favourable policies for youth, it should be persuaded to make changes in its own policies.

For instance, thirty years ago, many South Koreans were seeking opportunities to live and work abroad. But now, it's very hard to recruit them to work at the World Bank outside of Korea. In India, in the past five years, there's been a huge influx of highly skilled diaspora. As Indians, they are eager to have the opportunity to develop their careers in their own country.

For most young people in our country, the most important thing is that their education should be safe and free from volatile political

practices. As much as 36% of the respondents in the survey said they believed that student politics had a detrimental effect on educational institutions. Education in Bangladesh is being hijacked to serve gross political interests. The student affiliates of the major political parties have always had a major hand in the decades-long perverse politicking in Bangladesh.

There are plenty of issues they care about, like prospects of getting a job, securing free transport for young people, improving the benefit system, and improving the economy. They are very sensitive about politicians' false promises and their wrongdoings and criminal offences. Young people sometimes feel that the parties are trying to sell them their policies.

Bangladesh should establish economic policies that give young people more work opportunities. Industries that are heavily export-oriented, such as textiles and electronics, usually employ young people at about twice the rate of other industries. These are not always skilled jobs, but they provide employment for inexperienced young people who have fewer skills.

Many inexperienced Bangladeshi young people are working in the different industries throughout the world. On the other hand, there is also a high demand for young people in areas where creativity is valued.

There are 1.3 billion young people now living in the developing world -- the largest-ever youth group in history. The majority, almost 85%, of the world's youth live in developing countries, with approximately 60% in Asia alone. The next generation holds much promise for countries that adopt policies to ensure that their youth are better educated and healthier than previous generations.

According to the 2007 World Development Report, "Development and the Next Generation," record numbers of young people between the ages of 12 and 24 could give developing countries a big advantage over developed nations in the next generation, producing surging economic growth, and sharply reducing poverty.

In an effort to harness the energy, imagination and initiative of the world's youth in overcoming the challenges facing humankind, from enhancing peace to boosting economic development, the United Nations on December 18, 2009, proclaimed an International Year of Youth commencing on August 12.

The International Year is about advancing the full and effective participation of youth in all aspects of society. By 2025, the number of youth living in developing countries will grow to 89.5%.

Youth are the hope of the nation. They are the most energetic and productive segment of the population in Bangladesh. Therefore, our leaders should take youth issues into consideration in the development agenda, and focus their efforts to prepare and inspire the youngest in order to make the future changes in the society.

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Budget and needs

In the proposed budget of 2010-2011 economic growth has been estimated at 6.7% on some assumed factors like global turnaround from financial crisis, continued growth in agriculture sector and capacity to sustain domestic demand.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

ON June 10, the finance minister presented the budget 2010-2011 before the Parliament for approval. Despite a number of constraints the budget is big and ambitious. The principal objectives of the budget are reaching high performing growth, bringing poverty to a minimum level and securing health and education for all.

The main opposition party, i.e. BNP, has not accepted the budget well. It has branded the budget as too ambitious and full of tricks and ruses to deceive the people. In fact, BNP has come up with a shadow budget against the national budget. The finance minister has stated that the proposed budget of 2010-2011 has already accommodated 70% suggestions as embodied in the shadow budget of BNP.

In the proposed budget of 2010-2011 economic growth has been estimated at 6.7% on some assumed factors like global turnaround from financial crisis, continued growth in agriculture sector and capacity to sustain domestic demand.

Sectors like agriculture, power and energy and education are regarded as the key sectors for economic and social development. Agricultural development is essential for survival of the farmers and the country as well. In the budget under consideration total allocation has been raised from Tk.185.21 crore to Tk.421 crore.

Special emphasis has been laid on development of power and energy. The finance minister has submitted a report, titled "Road Map for Development of Power and Energy Sector," along with his budget proposals to assure the citizens about the government's intention and the action plan to make them aware of the future direction of these two sectors.

Apart from non-renewable sources, a renewable energy policy has been prepared to produce 5% of total power generation by 2015 and 10% by 2020 from renewable sources like air, waste and solar energy. An agency named Sustainable Energy Development Agency (SEDA) has been set up.

Power generation in our country depends basically on supply of natural gas. In the past, we have not given due attention to augmentation of the gas supply and exploration of new gas fields. This has resulted in creation of a gap between demand and supply. The government has proposed an increase in the allocation by 61.5% over last year's revised budget.

Education is a fundamental right. It is one of the core strategies for poverty alleviation and development. The government has approved National Education Policy 2010 with 24 targets. An allocation of Tk.17,959 crore has been proposed for the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Primary and Mass Education.

The Bangabandhu Fellowship and Award has been reintroduced for encouraging PhD level research work. For production of 4,000 computer engineers and scientists by 2014, postgraduate diploma courses have been introduced in 13 public universities.

It is agreed that we need an ambitious budget for our big population. Some may be frustrated with the existing weakness at the implementation level because of shortage of gas and electricity. We need not lose heart because the government has been able to diagnose its problems rather correctly.

Adequate scope has been given to boost investment. Efforts are on to mitigate the impacts of global financial crisis. Due attention has been given to increasing energy and power. The need for structural change in crop pattern has properly been realised. Taking appropriate steps in developing jute, small and medium enterprises and pharmaceutical, and widening the tax net and boosting collection of both income tax and value added tax are appropriate measures for economic and financial development.

To make the budget proposals effective and successful, all-out efforts, along with the people's cooperation, are necessary.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

Leaders' euphoria imperils politics

We need to find an antidote immediately to save our democracy, our economy and our values lest they should be engulfed by an all-devouring turmoil which looms large. The feeling that our leaders are invincible and unmatched has to be challenged, which will be possible if only we construct and consolidate institutionalised politics.

Z.A. KHAN

IT is axiomatic that politics in Bangladesh does not centre around peoples' aspirations any longer. Today we witness a numbed despair among our polity because of the worsening political environment due to predominance of guns, goons and gold. Most people think that this is happening because of the leaders' patronisation.

One does feel the wind of chilling disregard of many towards our leadership, which could be a prelude to a backlash. A mild tumult has already set into our political environment, which may snowball into a climate of collapse that may not augur well for the sustenance of our democracy, rule of law and economic development.

I feel that it is our responsibility to evaluate the current confrontational political situation to find out as to what has prompted our otherwise vibrant politics to come to such a pass that people seem to have been seized with a vague disquiet. Will it be conjecture if I assume that the people are losing interest because their leaders have failed to deliver time and again?

When asked as to what may come of it, they remind me about Parkinson's Law, which is "work will always last as long as time is available for it." Is this an outburst of enormous frustration or an expression of fierce scorn?

During the last two decades we got the opportunity to exercise our rights of franchise four times. In all these elections the incumbent party had to eat the humble pie of defeat for its unsatisfactory performance.

Succinctly, winning and losing in all these elections depended largely on the top leaders, who are hardly aware of grassroot politics because they did not have to earn leadership, which was thrust upon them due to accidental death of their predecessors. Once catapulted to the driving seat they relished the associated privilege, leaving routine politics in the hands of leaders of their choice -- who were far more interested in keeping their top leader happy rather than in the popular politics.

Thus, a new brand of leaders mushroomed, who managed to occupy enviable positions by using the power of gold and gun. Top leaders who hitherto felt insecure missed no opportunity to rally the support of these as they were bent upon climbing the ladder of name and fame by hook or by crook. The entire nation had to accept captivity under these muscle-flexing leaders either for patronisation or for protection.

In the melee, the politics of value was thrown into shadows of oblivion, creating discords that distorted the harmony and moral fabric of our society. Our nation, in the meantime, got divided into two streams, which were separated from each other by an impenetrable wall of prejudice and blindness. There was hostility and jealousy because the leadership was endowed to the families that did not see each other eye to eye.

These new leaders left no stone unturned to draw the coveted attention of their top leaders even by skulduggery and sycophancy. They resorted to slyness and deceit to impress their

leaders, and falsely claimed a negative situation to be a prosperous and popular one. This had added to the leaders' belief that their personal popularity was monumental and momentous.

To the utter dismay of the saner segment of our polity, the top leaders enjoyed the hero worship of the aspiring flashy leaders who were otherwise regarded as disruptive elements that threatened to destroy social values. Nurturing the belief that what did not suit their political design could not hold good for the nation, the leadership parted ways from the time-tested adage "treat formidableness as foe and value as an ally."

Chastised with the belief that one should not worship the goddess of lubricity but the goddess of morality, the time-tested leaders who were in obscurity ventured to stage a comeback. But the exercise was aborted because of the muscle-flexing new leaders and the media, assisted by a pliant civil society, which kept changing sides. Even public abhorrence has failed to make the single-mindedness of the leadership flexible and reform-friendly.

Are we then expected to indulge in changing our values to add to the euphoria of the leaders? Indeed, we have propelled their euphoria by standing at a distance while their party henchmen loudly propagated that their leaders could commit no wrong.

This has not only caused a slowdown of the development of our democracy but has also inhibited the zeal of our rising middle class, which is supposed to play a vital role in enlightening our people about democratic values. Is it not a ploy to diminish any opposition to the leaders' euphoria that there is no alternative to their leadership?

I think we should not remain resigned to the prevailing political situation as a fait accompli as our life is not long enough to bring about reform in our political culture. Our politics has indeed reached a nerve-wracking juncture.

We need to find an antidote immediately to save our democracy, our economy and our

values lest they should be engulfed by an all-devouring turmoil which looms large. The feeling that our leaders are invincible and unmatched has to be challenged, which will be possible if only we construct and consolidate institutionalised politics.

Since ours is a democratic country, we should religiously adhere to the parliamentary stipulations and should not condone any lapse in the way of making the Jatiya Shangshad the centre of all political activities.

The Election Commission (EC) should be made strong enough to stipulate provisions to force the parties to follow their constitutions in letter and spirit after they have been vetted by the EC. Any violation should warrant the EC's admonishment and legal dispensation. The EC's decision should be legally cleared by the judicial branch so that any violation can be treated as contempt of court.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) should be staffed with persons of integrity whose character, honesty and firmness in giving judgement cannot be questioned. None should escape the ACC's supervision. If somebody's actions go against its acts and provisions he/she should be put through the legal procedure.

The government should extend all-out cooperation to the institutions of civil administration that are designed to protect the political system so that leaders cannot utilise them for informal and gainful purposes. Any tampering of their rules should be handled fairly and firmly.

The nation should embolden itself to remove the facade of greatness of the leaders who are undeserving. Sincere leaders with unremitting commitment to serve the people with undiminished zeal, and who are honest to the penny, should emerge from the current political debris and take charge of our political and moral development.

Z.A. Khan is a former Director General, BLISS.



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