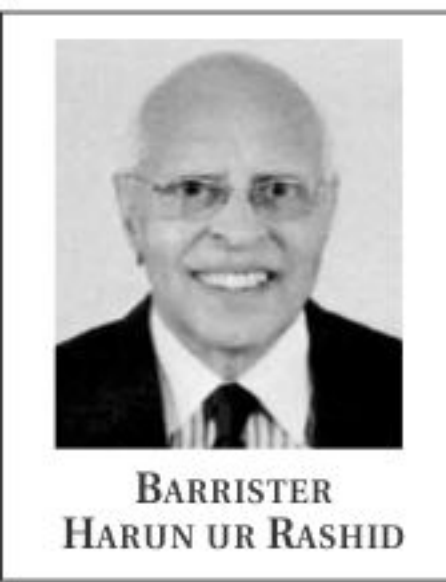


BOTTOM LINE

First South Korean female president: Tough job for a tough woman!



SOUTH Koreans elected their first female President, Ms. Park Geun-hye, on December 19. She is the sixth president since the country adopted a democratic constitution in 1987. Park will assume office in February 2013. Under the constitution, the president serves for a single five-year term.

Ms. Park won the election narrowly defeating Moon Jae-in of the Democratic United Party. She reportedly secured 50.7% while her rival got 48.7% of the votes. Conscious of her narrow victory, she said: "I will reflect various opinions of the people, whether they have supported or opposed me," Ms. Park pledged "impartiality," "national harmony" and "reconciliation," saying she would bring people into her government "regardless of their regional background, gender and generation."

US President Barack Obama sent a message of congratulations to Park. "I look forward to working closely with the Park administration to further enhance our extensive cooperation with the Republic of Korea on a wide range of important bilateral, regional and global issues," he said.

Japan's incoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he would send a special envoy to South Korea's president-elect in an effort to mend ties between the two countries, as the conservative leader tries to balance diplomacy with the hard line he took on territorial issues during the election campaign that brought him to power.

North Korea seemed to have assumed that Ms. Park would win the race and had laid out its demands in a December 1 statement carried on state media.

Pyongyang called for South Korea to revive scrapped agreements from 2000 and 2007 on joint economic initiatives and to begin relaxing sanctions imposed in the wake of the sinking of the naval corvette *Cheonan*.

Ms. Park happens to be the daughter of former president (and dictator) Park Chung-hee, and served as South Korea's first lady after his wife (her mother) was assassinated in 1974.

Many credit her father for pulling them out of poverty and economic despair. Others blame her father for the deaths and broken lives the dictatorial regime

inflicted on them. Therefore, during the election campaign she had to walk a fine line of apologising for what happened without criticising her father.

Like no other political figure before her, 60-year-old Ms. Park grew up in front of South Koreans, thrust into the job of de facto first lady at age 22 when her mother was assassinated by North Korean agents. Ms. Park's supporters see her as someone prepared by history to lead the country.

The election campaign of Ms. Park of the ruling

Park's win means that South Korean voters believe she would evoke her father's charisma as president and settle the country's economic and security woes, according to Chung Jin-young, a political scientist at Kyung Hee University in South Korea.

Saenuri Party took place in a man's world. Her party is seen as being too close to corporate conglomerates and wealthy class of people.

Although South Korean economy is the 15th in the world, and Asia's 4th largest, the income disparity between the rich and poor is stark. Furthermore, people are unhappy over education and employment prospects for its youth.

Since 2006, the number of people living in relative poverty has jumped to 10%. In October, the Bank of Korea, the nation's central bank, lowered its growth forecast for next year to 2.4% from its previous prediction of 3%. Almost one-fifth of the population earns less than half the national average income, according to Statistics Korea, a government agency.

She confronts some difficult social and economic issues, and the following deserve mention:

- People blame the corporate titans, known as *chaebol*, who allegedly enjoy unfair privileges and are hugely influential in grabbing medium and small businesses. To take sweeping actions against titans such as Samsung and Hyundai, which account for an overwhelming share of the country's exports, involves risks for economic downturn. 89% of the country's GDP comes from international trade through the corporate conglomer-

ates;

- South Korean manufacturing industries are performing much better in terms of exports than the Japanese companies partly because of strong value of Japanese currency. When the new Japanese prime minister takes monetary action to lower the value of the Japanese currency, South Korean President will have to maintain the current momentum of exports after erosion of advantage of its currency;
- Any strengthening of South Korean currency vis a vis Japanese currency will adversely affect exports at a time when exports are crucial for countering sluggish domestic demand. With household debt at 70% of GDP in the third quarter, over-indebted consumers will be unable to pick up the slack if exports fall;
- Belligerent noises from North Korea will be a concern for the president, although she pledged a more moderate approach towards North Korea. The "sunshine" policy (reconciliation with aid) towards North Korea was abandoned by the current conservative President Lee Myung-bak to tame North Korea, but Pyongyang became more aggressive. The hard line policy became counterproductive.

Park's win means that South Korean voters believe she would evoke her father's charisma as president and settle the country's economic and security woes, according to Chung Jin-young, a political scientist at Kyung Hee University in South Korea.

Her challenges include reviving the economy, removing gross income inequality among rich and poor, and dealing diplomatically with North Korea. Her success will be measured by how she addresses the vital issues.

Moreover, being aware of the fact that younger Koreans and residents of the southwestern region (Cholla) voted overwhelmingly for her rival, human rights activist Moon Jae-in, Ms. Park is likely to pursue her conservative policy with moderation.

Ms. Park will blaze a new trail for women in a deeply patriarchal country. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, South Korea ranks 108 among 135 countries in terms of gender inequality.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Tribute to Muzharul Islam

STANLEY TIGERMAN



LIKE most of us, Muzharul Islam had feet of clay, but unlike most of us, he lived a noble life straining to be the best he could be. He came into my life when I was most vulnerable to his unique brand of

Muzharul Islam

nobility and after decades of prolonged -- mostly furious -- debate about competing ideologies, he changed my life. Muz had that effect on others as well, but I felt it uniquely because he loved his countrymen more than any of the rest of us seemed to be capable of loving ours. He was a man of the people in every imaginable way, notably at times when such a posture didn't do him a lot of personal good.

We came from diametrically opposed socio-economic backgrounds, but over time, we bonded. Ara, Rafique, Tanna and Dalia came to be family and I share their grief in this most difficult time for them. Mr. Islam never sought respect, but it came naturally and inevitably. His ties to the most humble Bengali were unbreakable and his efforts to improve their lot in this life were heroic. He fought in unique ways for the freedom of his country and will be thusly honoured.

We all have lost a most moral man; one who spent his life struggling to better the lives of others. For we the living -- his wife and children, and yes, even I -- are left to make the most of our lives as we try to seek the nobility that is Muzharul Islam's legacy of trying to be the best one can be for the sake of ourselves; and by so doing for others less fortunate than we.

Mr. Islam has gone to a far better place and we wish him well as he continues on his noble journey.

The writer is an American architect.

Navigating the alphabet soup of English medium education

WILLIAM WESTGATE

EVEN people who work in the British education system can find it to be confusing: "O- levels," "A levels," GCSEs, IGCSEs, BTECs, HNDs, the CIE exam board v Edexcel -- not to mention the IB, and then of course there is the K12 system! Successfully navigating this alphabet soup can be quite a challenge for both students and parents in the process of selecting the most appropriate courses and the route to place at a good university.

First of all, the famous "O-level" (Ordinary level) was renamed the "GCSE" in 1988 when the qualification was merged with the slightly less rigorous CSE exams. However, informally, the two names are used interchangeably nowadays; it is the standard academic qualification for students aged 14-16 years in secondary education.

O-levels v A-levels -- "school" v "college"

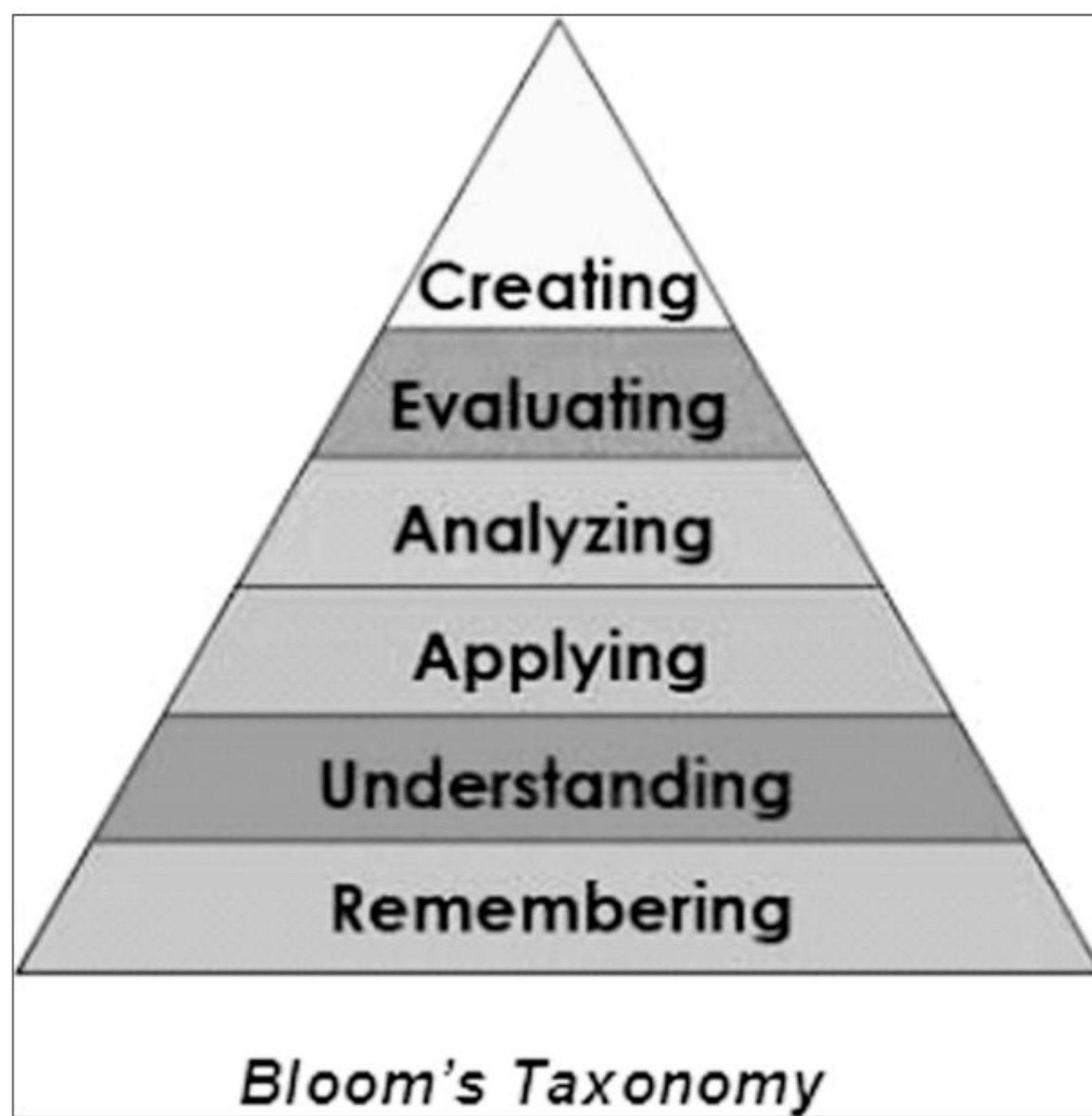
The British system adopted by many countries around the world sees a student take 10-11 years of primary and secondary education resulting in the O-level (or "Ordinary" level) awards. This can then be followed by a further two years of A-level (or "Advanced level" -- also known as sixth-form college). When referring to the various stages we say O-levels (or GCSEs) are taught at school while A-levels are taught at college. Students then go on to take three years for an undergraduate degree at university. In the American model, the students take 12 years of primary/secondary education (widely referred to as "K-12" or Kindergarten to Grade 12) and can then follow that with four years of undergraduate study to get a Bachelor's degree. Note, both systems involve 16 years of education.

In the UK, A-levels are often taught independently from O-level. That is, colleges are physically separate from schools; if they are part of the same insti-

tution they are often on separate campuses. This reflects the difference in rigour and delivery of the subject material -- as well as the maturity of the students. Usually, A-level students are no longer required to wear uniforms and are given much more freedom of movement and expression and they are more responsible for their learning. Another vital part of A-level education should be personal development. This is the non-curricular material which ranges from career guidance to university application process from management and leadership skills to health and well-being.

Determining strengths and weaknesses

One of the most important things to figure out in life is what you are good at and what you enjoy doing. Sadly, many people go through their entire lives without ever figuring this out, which can lead to unfulfilling and unproductive lives. The fact is, almost every human being is good at something and conversely, almost everyone will have things in life they are poor at. This is simply part of the human condition. The real secret is to find out where one's natural talents lie and concentrate on those talents. Life is so much more pleasurable and productive when one plays to one's strengths! Therefore, one of the purposes of the O-level is to expose students to a wide variety of subjects: from languages and literature to maths and the sciences, from arts and the humanities to physical education and information technology. Of course, the idea is for students to have exposure



The idea is for students to have exposure to a broad range of subjects as part of a general education, but a key objective is also to determine in what areas their real strengths and talents lie.

to such a broad range of subjects as part of a general education but a key objective is also to determine in what areas their real strengths and talents lie.

Specialisation -- at AS and A2 level

The A-level -- ages 17 and 18 years old -- should then commence the process of specialisation; ideally the student should drop those subjects they showed the least ability or interest in at O-level and start focusing more on their areas of strength at A-level. Usually, a student will start by taking four subjects in the first year of A-

level (known as "AS") then continue to specialise as they drop one more subject in the second year (called "A2"), leaving them to complete college with three full A-levels. Note, the system is designed for most students to complete just three A-levels. The syllabus is structured to give plenty of academic challenge in those three subject and most universities accept applications based on the grades achieved in three A-levels. Those students who elect to take four courses through to full A-level take on a far greater academic burden without a commensurate benefit -- unless they are particularly gifted and able.

The exam process

A-level exams are very rigorous and seek to challenge the student's broad understanding of the subject and their application and opinion of complex subject matter. Exams results are the main criteria used by

universities in determining a student's suitability for degree level study. Parents and students should be aware that there is a real step-change when moving from O-levels to A-level. The subject material is much more complex at A-level and the exams are far more rigorous. Indeed, many students who do well at GCSE are often surprised to find themselves struggling at college level. As a result, it is strongly advised to select a good college that has the facilities, equipment and staff to properly deliver A-level education.

CIE and Edexcel

In the UK, oddly enough there are five competing exam boards but the material they examine is broadly similar. In Bangladesh most exams are set by just two British exam boards either the CIE (Cambridge International Examinations) or Edexcel (which was formed in 1996 when the University of London Examinations merged with BTEC; the Business and Technology Education Council). Good teaching should not be overly concerned with which exam board is used as both teach the same syllabus. Indeed, over-emphasis on the exam boards can reflect too much teaching to the exam and not enough passion for the subject itself

What Bangladeshi students so richly deserve

The truth is that A-level students are best taught when the college no longer treats them as children but as they young adults that they are. While some discipline is always required in most aspects of life, adults begin to realise that there is not so much punishment for poor performance, rather there are just consequences for that behaviour. These can be far more subtle yet far more powerful lessons to learn as life progresses. They say you can lead a horse to water but cannot make it drink. Well, you can lead a student to college -- but you cannot make him think! Great A-level colleges should combine inspirational teaching with collaborative group and team work at academics and a healthy collegiate environment for young adults to thrive and think creatively for the complex and challenging future that lies ahead of us all. Such an education is not only what Bangladeshi students so richly deserve -- it is what this great nation so urgently requires.

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