

## Eid-e-Miladunnabi

### Beacon for humanity

ALL around the world Muslims will celebrate the extraordinary life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) today. It is done in a manner that seeks to reflect upon his ideals and follow the teachings of Prophet Mohammad (SM) in letter and spirit. As we observe the day, we vow to relive the legacy he left behind, one that goes beyond the simple spreading of Faith and fosters brotherhood, equality and peaceful co-existence between all communities.

The Holy Prophet's (pbuh) association with the quotidian details of existence before he received the call from Divinity is a story which is as much his as it is a shining beacon for us. And then there is, of course, the huge impact Prophet Muhammad (SM) has had on the lives of millions, on the imaginations of the generations that followed his propagation of Islam.

Islam literally means peace and therefore has no place for violence and intolerance in the lives of Muslims. Our solemn pledge for this year's Eid-e-Miladunnabi is to cultivate and practice tolerance, avoid conflicts and establish peace, and live in harmony with peoples of other faiths in accord with the spiritual wisdom of our Holy Prophet (pbuh). It is important that steadfast pursuit of our religion with all its spiritual values be our goal. Exploitation of religion for political gain should be consciously avoided, if we are to demonstrate our love and respect for the Prophet of Islam (pbuh).

## Booming freelancing industry

### A boon for all

THAT the freelancing industry is booming thanks to an increasing demographic of young, creative and dynamic Bangladeshis is certainly a cause for celebration, especially for a country with a high youth unemployment rate. Around 5.5 lakh registered Bangladeshi freelancers are leading the revolution, accelerating the pace of innovation and outperforming competitive rivals from across the globe. In fact, of 186 countries, Bangladesh in terms of earnings is ranked as the seventh most popular outsourcing destination.

What is even more encouraging is that our youth are on course to earn about \$100 million a year by 2020 working freelance from home, which is five times more than what they are earning from jobs outsourced by companies abroad currently. In a fast-paced global economy marked by rapid technological advances, that our youth are not only managing to compete in but coming out on top signals an exciting future for the country.

With flexible work hours, high income and a great degree of independence, it is no wonder that freelancing is appealing to entrepreneurial youngsters. Even those without university degrees or other qualifications can get jobs if they can prove to be efficient, innovative and savvy. This means that, if fostered, the freelancing industry can be a much-needed boon for unemployed young Bangladeshis whose hitherto untapped creativity can be channeled through freelancing more effectively than through low-paid, tedious jobs.

The government must nurture this booming industry, provide necessary incentives and live up to its promise of a 'digital Bangladesh' if the sky is to be the limit for our innovative youth.

## In search of lost future

M.M. JALIL

RECENTLY, during a *hartal* day, as I was going to a hospital in an autorickshaw, I spent some time thinking about my escape plans should my vehicle get soaked in gasoline and set on fire; after all, setting ordinary citizens on fire to achieve political mileage seems to be a legitimate approach for our 'opposition' party. Only recently a teacher lost her life, a family of three was burned, and if one's memory stretches back a year, a Herculean task no doubt, then one can recall the burning of a bus near Shahbagh which killed many. Senior members of opposition take cheap shots at the Father of the Nation, undermining their own respectability and showcasing their lack of taste and finesse. We are indeed in a sorry state of affairs if they are our political representatives and are supposed to look after our interest. But it takes two to tango and, therefore, to blame the opposition singly would be naïve indeed.

Our government ministers are deluded and have an infantile notion that inflated HSC/SSC grades are a reflection of improved education system; an analogy would be for an economist to think that Zimbabwean economy is strong since a piece of bread costs millions of Zimbabwean dollars! While the government spends millions to procure high-tech war machineries, our fire service lacks the capability to save a kid stranded a few hundred feet underground; how can we forget that we had to borrow cranes from a business company to save labourers stuck under the rubble of Rana Plaza.

We the ordinary Bangladeshi citizens, docile as always, have adapted ourselves rather beautifully to this absurd situation. We glance over the news of innocents burned by political miscreants; we obligingly follow when treated as second grade citizens in our own country, either by our police or other law enforcing agencies; we look at injustice being committed by political goons and thank God it wasn't us. This is the life of proud Bangladeshi citizens, but then "If a little dreaming is dangerous, the cure for it is not to dream less but to dream more, to dream all the time." Let us dream for a brighter future as this New Year begins!

The writer is a graduate of King's College, University of Cambridge.

# Waiting for democracy

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

FOR Bangladesh, democracy is a constitutional commitment, and the government in power is obliged to establish a democratic polity in the country. As we approach the first anniversary of the Tenth Parliament, it will be useful to take stock of our democratic credentials, especially in view of the fact that the ruling Awami League and the main opposition party BNP are now bickering on whether the events of January 5, 2014 in the name of 'elections' actually saved or destroyed our democracy.

One essential feature of democracy is periodic elections, which are free and fair. Democracy also requires rule by the people's representatives not only at the national level, but also at the local level. Article 59 of our Constitution provides for elected local bodies at all administrative units to manage local affairs. Thus, unless local body elections are held at regular intervals, democratic governance remains incomplete.

Another distinguishing feature of democracy is that it requires effective institutions for proper functioning. To this end, our Constitution provides for several institutions. Two of these institutions – the Executive and the Parliament – are created through parliament elections. The party winning majority seats in the parliament elections forms the government and in this process a group of parliament members becomes ministers and performs the roles of the Executive. The council of ministers thus created, headed by the prime minister, govern the country with the assistance of the bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies. The other members of the parliament, especially those belonging to the opposition party, are expected to ensure the transparency and accountability of the Executive. Thus, if the parliament elections are not genuine, the legitimacy of both the Executives and the Parliament becomes questionable.

Yet another distinguishing feature of democracy is that in such a system, people enjoy certain unalienable rights. Part III of our Constitution recognizes a set of rights as fundamental rights of the citizens. They include freedom of expression, religion, assembly, association, movement, right to protection of law, protection of right to life and so on. Only in extreme cases citizens can be denied their fundamental rights.

Have the elections of January 5, 2014 fulfilled these three essential features of a democratic polity? Have the elections been free, fair and competitive, that is, genuine? Are the institutions performing more effectively after January 5? Are the rights of the citizens safeguarded following the elections? The answers to these questions will determine the state of our democracy.

The elections of January 5, 2014 were far from genuine. They were not competitive as only 12 of the 41 registered political parties participated in the elections. Of the 300 MPs, 153 were elected unopposed and hence there was no voting at all in those constituencies, not to speak of constitutionally-mandated 'direct election'. In the remaining 147 constituencies, based on the counting of counterfoils of ballot books from nearly nine thousand polling stations, Election Working Group (EWG) estimated that the voting rate was about 30 per-

cent. However, according to media reports, there was widespread ballot-box stuffing and other forms of flagrant rigging during the elections. Nevertheless, if we accept the EWG's estimates, the total number of vote casting in 147 constituencies was about one crore 33 lacs, which reduces the average voting rate for the entire country to about 14 percent, compared to nearly 87 percent in 2008 elections. But according to knowledgeable observers, the actual voter participation rate in the Tenth Parliament elections was less than 10 percent. In *AFM Shah Alam vs. Mujibur Rahman* [41 DLR (AD)1989], the Bangladesh Supreme Court stated: 'That is no election that is no democracy. Election is needed to sustain democracy and a perverse or voter less election destroys democracy.'

In addition, the overdue local body elections – namely the Zila Parishad and Dhaka City Corporation elections – were not held after the elections of January 5.

Our institutions have not become stronger either during the year following the elections of January 5. In fact, the institutions have increasingly become weaker and losing their vitality and effectiveness. The Tenth Parliament has no opposition as such since the Jatiyo Party now is also a part of the government. The bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies have become more partisan since the election. Many citizens are concerned that the law enforcement agencies are now acting more like personal force of the ruling party.

Since the government formed after January 5 has no popular mandate, it has been trying to stay in power by infringing upon the rights of the citizens. The infraction of the right to expression and peaceful assembly appears to have reached a dangerous level. The state and all its apparatuses are now hyperactive in undermining the rights of citizens, although in a democratic society limits are placed on state's authority.

According to reports published in *Prothom Alo* (December 10, 2014), there were 82 unaccounted for disappearances in the first nine months of 2014, which is the highest in the last eight years. Although 23 dead bodies were found, there were no traces of 39 other persons. Thus, the right to life of 23 persons was nakedly violated and the lives of other 23 are in danger. According to latest report of *Ain O Salish Kendra*, the state of human rights is alarming in Bangladesh, with crossfire and enforced disappearances on the rise (*The Daily Star*, January 1, 2015). In addition, the denial of the rights of the people to vote on January 5, 2014 itself represents a violation of their rights to expression as Courts now recognize that voters exercise such rights through voting [*Union of India vs. Association of Democratic Reforms* (2002)5SCC294].

To conclude, since 1991 we have had an 'electoral democracy' in Bangladesh, where people could more or less freely exercise their franchise. However, the situation has completely changed after the so-called elections of January 5, 2014, when the vast majority of the people were denied, through manipulations and unfair practices, their right to vote. It is clear from the foregoing that the events of January 5 caused a serious setback in our endeavor to create a 'substantive democracy' in Bangladesh.

The writer is Secretary, Citizens for Good Governance (SHUJAN).

## Time for India to play its part

DR RUPAK BHATTACHARJEE

A fresh momentum was added to the multifaceted India-Bangladesh relations in 2014 after the formation of new governments both in Dhaka and New Delhi.

The government formed by the Awami League (AL) under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina following the largely boycotted and violence marred parliamentary elections on January 5 was immediately recognised by India.

India's friendly ties with Bangladesh were further consolidated in June when External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj paid a three-day visit to Dhaka. She held extensive talks with her Bangladeshi counterpart A.H. Mahmood Ali on all bilateral issues. A major focus of the bilateral talks was the identification of sectors integral for enhancing economic cooperation.

Her visit demonstrated the priority New Delhi attaches to ties with its strategically located and economically important South Asian neighbour. Sushma Swaraj conveyed to the AL leaders that India is keen to forge a "comprehensive and equitable partnership" with Bangladesh.

Reports suggest that the Bangladeshi officials were seeking "clear answers" from the Indian side on two major unresolved issues – ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and sharing of the Teesta river waters. Bangladesh has repeatedly been saying that people in its northwestern region face hardships every year, especially between December and March, when the flow of water is greatly reduced. She reassured Dhaka that India is in the process of building national consensus on the contentious Teesta issue so that an interim agreement can be inked soon.

There has been forward movement on the question of LBA. In a significant development on December 1, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs placed its report on the Constitution (119th Amendment) Bill that intends to reformulate India's boundary with Bangladesh in certain segments by exchanging enclaves which are in adverse possession.

Once the agreement is ratified in parliament, some of the vexed issues such as illegal migration from Bangladesh and transnational crimes may be resolved. Besides, it would boost joint management of the long international borders and put an end to infiltration of militants across the borders.

Another important development relating to India-Bangladesh relations last year has been the peaceful settlement of the long-standing maritime disputes between the two countries. The July 7 verdict of the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration has wide economic implications as it will open the door for exploration of oil and gas in the Bay of Bengal which is believed to have huge energy reserves.

Since the formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, India has been consistently engaged with Bangladesh. Some of the major bilateral engagements of this year include: India-Bangladesh Business Conclave in Dhaka on August 23-24, home secretary level talks in Dhaka on September 2-4 and Bangladesh foreign minister's visit to New Delhi on September 20. Mahmood Ali and Sushma Swaraj reviewed the entire gamut of India-Bangladesh relations during the third meeting of the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC). Bangladesh's President Abdul Hamid arrived in India on December 18 on a six-day visit to strengthen the existing friendly relations.

Both the nations have also intensified cooperation on security and counter-terrorism in the wake of the October 2 Burdwan blast and reported regrouping of the Bangladeshi fundamentalist groups. The security and intelligence agencies

of the two countries have been jointly working to combat extremism and cross-border terrorism.

The two other key aspects of bilateral relations have been trade and development cooperation. India is a key partner of Bangladesh in the latter's socio-economic development endeavours and upgradation of transport infrastructure. India is also the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh. Dhaka's exports to India have witnessed an upward trend after India's grant of duty and quota-free access for Bangladeshi items in November 2011. Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) nations.

However, a huge trade deficit has been persisting in bilateral trade over the years. During the third JCC meeting, both sides agreed to promote balanced trade and remove para-tariff and non-tariff barriers to expand bilateral trade and commerce. New Delhi agreed to enhance Indian investments in Bangladesh which would not only reduce the trade deficit but also increase Dhaka's exports to other countries. The Hasina government has recently allocated land for a Special Economic Zone for India and extended cooperation to the Indian entrepreneurs to invest in it.

The current AL leadership's approach towards India has been sincere and steadfast. It is the Indian leadership whose efforts remain half-hearted while dealing with Bangladesh. Dhaka's political elite and intelligentsia often complain about the slow implementation of decisions already taken and pledges made to Bangladesh earlier. The people of Bangladesh, surrounded by India from three sides, expect their neighbour with a much bigger economy and resource base to be more magnanimous and proactive on bilateral matters.

India must demonstrate political will to take the relations to a higher level. New Delhi's main concern should be to resume negotiations with Dhaka in seeking a speedy and mutually acceptable solution to the lingering Teesta issue. The need of the hour is to take West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee into confidence before a treaty is signed. Shedding her previous objections, she has cooperated with the centre on the LBA. One hopes that she will display a similar accommodative spirit on the Teesta issue resulting in a satisfactory outcome in the coming days.

The former Indian high commissioners to Bangladesh and vice versa attended a two-day summit on November 14-15 in Dhaka where they observed that issues of security and economic cooperation will likely dominate future bilateral relations. Muchkund Dubey has suggested a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement between India and Bangladesh to reduce trade imbalance, boost multimodal connectivity, tackle environmental issues and facilitate water resource management.

It is also imperative that both the governments start discussions to renew the Bilateral Trade Agreement which is due to expire on March 31, 2015.

The last year had been more or less fruitful for India-Bangladesh relations in terms of building a personal rapport between the leaders at the highest level. The two prime ministers met on the sidelines of regional and international summits on a number of occasions, holding meetings ensuing in cordial and meaningful talks. Once the Indian political leaders reach a consensus on the Teesta issue, it is expected that Modi will undertake a visit to Bangladesh in the coming future.

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## LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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### Poaching of migratory birds must stop



Every year during winter migratory birds come to our country. Although many stringent measures have been taken by the authorities to stop bird poaching, some depraved people won't stop doing it. This year, I hope the authorities will take proper steps to monitor 24/7 the spots where these guest birds gather in large numbers, so that no one can catch and kill them. We should make sure that they get a safe sanctuary, because they not only enhance the beauty of nature but also help maintain the ecological balance.

Samiul Raijul  
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### Keep faith in Tigers

It's good to know that eventually BD cricket team have come back on the right track. They finished last year with a significant ODI and Test series victory. Although it came against a weaker opponent, this victory has restored their confidence, which is very important, especially when the 2015 World Cup is round the corner.

It will take a lot of doing to beat India and South Africa. But they are in a winning mode after the Zimbabwe series, so we should keep faith in the Tigers and support them.

Md. Abdullah Al-Hadee (Sohag)  
Savar, Dhaka

### Logic of disenfranchisement!

When Castro was urged to free up Cuban politics and allow democratic elections in his country he flatly dismissed saying, "Cuba is not for sale." His euphemism is understandable. He knew that in the event of allowing the Cubans any freedom of choice he ran the risk of losing his more than half a century-old job. He had Churchill's fate in mind. People don't stomach the same old stuff again and again in a democracy.

When the outgoing Canadian High Commissioner asked our law minister to hold dialogue with the BNP for a meaningful election in the country, he ruled out the possibility in the same Castro style snafu. He echoed his boss that the BNP leader doesn't believe in the country's independence and rule of law. (Ref: The Daily Star, Dec 11, 2014) Is this good logic to deny people their voting right? The irony is, without disenfranchising the people no one can perpetuate his grip on power. This is not what we fought the Liberation War for.

Yusuf Azad  
Chief Evaluation Officer (Retd.)  
Education Board, Rajshahi

### Comments on news report, "Pay hike may not fuel inflation," published on December 29, 2014

Habib

You can never predict what is going to happen in Bangladesh tomorrow. It is a country of every possibility. What you may think quite bizarre or irrational or shouldn't be happening is pretty likely to happen. We often see demand-supply theory proved wrong. We have developed a rule of 'no rule'. There is no one to monitor, no one to regulate. Definitely, a pay hike will lead to rise in prices even though the pundits fail to find any reason for that. Expectation plays a big role here. It's really a challenge to make a statement in this context.

PlainSpeaker

Inflation depends, as a rule, on balance in production, supply, demand and purchasing power; you do not need to have a Cambridge or a Harvard PhD in Economics to understand this simple economic lesson. Of course, there would be inflation when pay hike is not matched by production and thereby equal supply of goods and services in the economy.

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### "Six killed as lorry collides with train" (Dec. 30, 2014)

truthprevails53

The railway department is one of the most corrupt departments of the country, if not the most corrupt one. I know many railway officials who have crores of taka and many flats both in the country and overseas. But the trains are prehistoric. The best thing would be to get rid of the deadwoods and improve our railway sector.

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### "Hartal violence takes school teacher's life" (Dec. 30, 2014)

Sabuj Banik

How many innocent lives would have to be lost before such madness stops?