

# The Daily Star

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## Burgeoning middle class

### The driving force for development

ACCORDING to the study 'Size and growth of the middle class in Bangladesh: trends, profiles and drivers' unveiled recently by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), 1 in 4 Bangladeshis will belong to the middle class by 2025. This is being made possible thanks to access to education, finance, IT services and an expansion of the private sector. Indeed, going by what has been published, should present trends prove true, a third of the population will belong to the middle class by 2030.

Greater capital accumulation has led people to invest in secondary or higher levels of education, especially English education. Although two-thirds of the populace still choose Bangla as their choice of language for education, policymakers need to give more emphasis on English as a second language. That more people are moving out of poverty is due to many factors.

One cannot discount the fact that of the 1.3 million people who found employment over the period 2010-13, 0.5 million actually went to work abroad. The ripple effect of billions of dollars of remittances annually is being felt throughout the economy, particularly in more and more people owning property and getting engaged in the informal economy and eventually moving out of poverty.

For Bangladesh to maintain growth, it will require macroeconomic stability, the gradual development of the financial sector, along with liberalisation of the trade regime. What could potentially hold us back is the poor implementation capacity of the government that is leading to cost overruns and missing project deadlines. This is where the challenge lies.

## Many unable to decide their healthcare needs

### Still a long way to go for women's empowerment

AT least 37 percent women in Bangladesh are unable to take decisions about their own healthcare, according to a report published by UN Women titled, "Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights." Despite the tremendous progress made in terms of women's empowerment over the last decade, that women must still depend on their husbands or other family members for their own healthcare needs goes to show that there is still a long way to go before equality can be established within the household and the larger community.

In both rural and urban areas, a significant proportion of women are unaware of their sexual and reproductive rights, or are unable to exercise them, because of constraints such as societal restrictions, lack of education, and limited access to resources. Patriarchal mindsets in our society dictate that women remain passive within the household, suppressing their views and ignoring their medical conditions, no matter how severe. This has had disastrous impact on maternal health, child mortality, life expectancy and overall quality of life of many women.

The UN Women report states that women's economic empowerment plays an important role in increasing her access to decision-making in the family. As more and more women become financially independent, the hope is that they will be better able to challenge patriarchal norms and have more of a say, particularly when it comes to their own lives. Consciousness-raising at different levels, among both men and women, is necessary to establish the importance of enabling women to make their own decisions. At the same time, we need to ensure quality yet affordable healthcare for all women.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### We are moving backwards

Freedom of speech without any limitation or reservation is a prerequisite to democracy. Over the years, the freedom of expression has been systematically curtailed. The serial killings of Razib, Jagatjyoti, Avijit, Neeley and Dipon and the attacks on Tareq, Randipam, and Tutul are direct consequences of that.

Neither the state nor the society has done enough to promote religious and cultural pluralism. The educational institutions and the text books hardly encourage or promote respect for different opinions. We have already sacrificed our patriotism for narrowly-defined nationalism.

We need to find out why we are gradually moving toward a homogeneous society. Is this why the War of Liberation was fought? Why do we now have less than 9 percent Hindu population where as it used to be almost 28 percent during the partition? The growing intolerance and hate have to be stopped and it has to be done by the state and the society. The state cannot just shrug off this responsibility. We see countries around the world where the separation of religion and state has firmly been established and as a result of that, how they are moving forward drawing strength from their diversity of population. On the contrary, we are moving backward in this aspect. The liberal voices are being silenced one after another while the state is doing nothing to protect them. We all have to be united to protect all voices before we lose our own.

Faisal Adnan  
Poet, activist

# For a healthy body politic!

REBECCA HAQUE

THERE was a time in this green, riverine land of mine when children frolicked in the sunshine and plunged into crystal ponds and lakes and bathed on grassy banks under warm spring showers. They were loved and cherished in towns and cities and villages. Nature was bountiful and men and women were gentle and generous. There was a balance of give and take, of needs and wants, of skills and labour, of time and money. It was not paradise, but there was just reward and deserved punishment, there was clean comfort of home and hearth, and there was deep respect for the 'Maker-See': the teacher and the pundit. There were good men and women at the helm of every homestead; the revered few, the seers and pathfinders securely and solemnly sought on their humble patch of earth. This was a time when rivers and canals were free-flowing and wide. A flotilla of boats and paddle steamers glided upon clear streams and rivulets, as the ubiquitous piper's magical tune brought the horizon closer to the zenith before and after the evening call to prayer. The six seasons were in harmony, bringing deluge or drought, famine or the alluvial soil's plenty, as the solar and lunar cycles moved in synchronic and diachronic circles.

Sadly, that time is no more. Sadly, I now see a sickness, a plague ravaging the lives of the little children of my land. I see a great populace withering under a curse, and I think to myself, "Is this Thebes? Is this the fruit of the incestuous coition of pollution and corruption?" Inwardly, I wail at the crazed killing of the innocent. I rage powerlessly at the rabid psychopaths who are slaughtering the young, honest, toiling boys. I claw my own flesh in despair at the criminal indifference of the legal protectors. Oftentimes, the killer absconds, or

gloats from across the border, or throws a mighty cog in the wheel of justice. I ask myself, "What is the disease of the mind of the lawgiver and presumed protector who surrenders his conscience to monetary gain, who willingly barter his soul for earthly profit, denying humanity and morality? Does he genuflect in the Devil's dark and dirty courtyard? Does his satanic god demand such terrible

others—metaphorically speaking, I have walked a mile in every person's shoes on the roads I have travelled across time upon this earth. Empathy is too hurtful, too close to the sinew and the synapses; it is both a curse and a gift. But I am infinitely grateful, after the gut-wrenching pangs and the grieving tears, for the benefaction of a calm low tide of sympathy which unknits the mind's tether and allows

healthy body-politic, a culture and a society accountable for its misdeeds and misdirection. Look into your hearts, and hold fast to your strengths. Hunt down the demons, and rid our land of sickness and filth. Stand tall and be counted. Practice what you preach. Do not speak in the twisted jargon of newspeak or with the hypocritical words of doublespeak. Speak with the pure tongue of the

*Look into your hearts, and hold fast to your strengths. Hunt down the demons, and rid our land of sickness and filth. Stand tall and be counted. Practice what you preach.*



PHOTO: NPR

blood-letting, or does the glitter of gold make the mortal a demon, a cannibal?"

I have no real answers to these questions. I am truly unable to negotiate the psychology of such men, as I am equally unable to fathom the brutality of rapists and molesters. Destiny and my character, however, make me instinctively empathise with the pain and suffering of

me to compose my thoughts.

Thus, with the 'still, sad music of humanity' vibrating in the ether, I address you, my nation-builders and upright lawmen, to ponder the questions and provide a solution to a critical dilemma in urgent need of redress. You owe us all, you owe our progeny, you owe all my country's children a possible and sustainable

happy child. Speak with the fond sympathy of a parent. Lead with the secure direction of a trustworthy guardian. Lest, upon our head befall the fate of Hamelin—left bare, barren, dead. A wasteland, bereft of all the children led away by the merry pied piper's dream.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# THE ASSAD DEAD END



PHOTO: AFP

### THE WORLD IN WORDS



BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

FORGET principles and morality. Forget, or try to forget, the quarter-million deaths for which Bashar al-Assad is responsible, directly or indirectly, since choosing to respond with violence to a peaceful uprising of the Syrian people. Set aside the fact that Assad's forces have caused 10-15 times more civilian deaths thus far than the Islamic State, whose

horrific execution videos have overshadowed the Syrian dictator's invisible massacres. But even if you can purge all of this from your thoughts, a policy for Syria that posits Assad as an "alternative" to the Islamic State is simply not viable. Assad, after all, literally unleashed the Islamic State's current savagery: in May 2011, he released hundreds of Islamic radicals from prison, quickly supplying the infant group with fighters and leaders. He then methodically shelled positions held by moderate rebels, while no less methodically sparing the Islamic State's stronghold in Raqqa. And then, in mid-2014, he allowed Iraqi elements of the Islamic State to find sanctuary in eastern Syria.

In other words, Assad created the monster that he is now pretending to fight. Is all that not a little much for a potential ally? Can working with Assad possibly provide a sound basis for what is supposed to be a common effort?

The bottom line is that Assad has no interest in winning. The man who now holds himself up as civilization's last bulwark against the Islamic State is also the last man who wants to see it eliminated.

After all, does a chess player, even a bad one, intentionally sacrifice his most powerful piece? Do any of us ever tear up our insurance policies? Do we really

believe that Assad and his cronies are too stupid to have realized that their political survival depends on that of the Islamic State and on maintaining themselves as the keepers of the gate through which the rest of us must pass to wage war against it?

"Of course not," the advocates of working with him concede. "But let's take a two-step approach. Let's defeat the Islamic State and then worry about Assad."

But this approach, too, assumes that dictators are more stupid than they really are. Worse, it ignores that politics follows its own logic, or at least its own dynamics. What the sorcerer's apprentices who want to work with Assad ignore is that they would most likely have a great deal of trouble, when the time comes, distancing themselves from an ally who would not be shy about claiming his share of the victory. As a result, jihadism would rush back in, though perhaps in a different guise.

"Bashar al-Assad is the Syrian state," the same people say. "And we must not commit the fatal error of destroying the state." But this argument is not valid, either. The state has already failed: Assad controls only a fifth of Syria's territory, and the remaining four-fifths will never willingly resubmit to its terrifying control. If Assad's regime prevails, the state's citizens will continue to flee in droves to Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe.

In fact, Assad's regime cares so little for its pseudo-state that it abandons its own soldiers caught beyond the territory it controls, as occurred in Tabqa, near Raqqa. Baathist Syria, whatever its friends in the Kremlin and elsewhere say, is dead and buried. And no military trompe l'œil can revive it.

But the supposed realists refuse to accept reality. Just as it was necessary to ally with Stalin to defeat Hitler, they claim, we should not be afraid to play the Assad card to rid ourselves of the Islamic State. Yes, jihadism is the fascism of our day, infected with plans, ideas,

and a will to purity comparable to those of the Nazis. I was one of the first to suggest the comparison some 20 years ago.

And yet it is absurd to compare the power of the two phenomena, or to suggest that in the confrontation with the butchers of Mosul and Palmyra, the democracies face a strategic challenge analogous to that of the Nazi Wehrmacht. This historical leap is possible only for people whose political irresponsibility is matched by their proclivity for lazy analogy.

Make no mistake: the Islamic State is strong. But it is not so strong as to leave those who would fight it with only the politics of the lesser of two evils.

The West must decide what to do. In the aftermath of last week's peace talks in Vienna—which convened the United States, Russia, Iran, China, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, Jordan, Lebanon, and key European Union members—that question becomes increasingly difficult. Should we equip what remains of the Free Syrian Army? Should we deal with the few remaining Alawite leaders whose hands are not stained with blood, or those members of Assad's clan who chose exile early and thus were not involved in the massacres?

Perhaps there is still time to bring together, on neutral ground, some of the elements that comprised the old Syria. Or perhaps more radical solutions—of the type implemented in Germany and Japan after World War II—are now required.

All of these paths remain open, but they are narrowing. And none of them depends on the political survival of Bashar al-Assad.

The writer is one of the founders of the 'Nouveaux Philosophes' (New Philosophers) movement. His books include *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2015. www.project-syndicate.org

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