

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY SEPTEMBER 26, 2016, ASHWIN 11, 1423BS

Political space?

Dissenting views practically non-existent

THE story of Bangladesh's economic development is an inspiring tale well recognised by the world proving the skeptics wrong. We can, however, not say the same about the development of democracy in the country.

There was a time when in the name of democracy lawlessness prevailed, like hartal and killing of innocent people. This newspaper has been a constant critic of hartal and political violence and disorder. We had criticised the BNP's violent attempt to thwart the 2014 election in which 153 MPs were elected uncontested and the violence it perpetrated on the first anniversary of the election in 2015.

But now it seems that we have moved entirely to the opposite direction. The essence of democracy lies in the space accorded to the opposition political parties and to dissenting voices. Unfortunately, very few will take issue with the view that dissenting voices have no space in today's politics in Bangladesh. Intimidation, arbitrary arrests of opposition leaders on a ludicrous number of cases with absurd charges, and pressure on the media, are not at all conducive to a healthy political environment.

There have been many instances of economic development without democracy. But they have essentially been unsustainable like the Ayubs' and Marcos'. Of late there is a tendency to show that democracy and development are incompatible and that for the sake of development democracy can be dispensed with. One doesn't have to be a political scientist to see the fallacy of such a view. We hope that we do not fall into that trap. To face the variety of challenges, the country needs more political space, not less.

Astounding traffic congestion costs

Why bear such losses?

THE loss being caused to the economy by traffic congestions in Dhaka every year is astounding.

The figure, according to a government report, is estimated to be Tk. 20,000 crore a year. Additionally, around 32 lakh business hours are lost annually. Are these in any way, signs of good management or planning?

Economic losses on paper are, of course, not the only costs city dwellers are burdened with. What about the numerous negative human health effects of the routine traffic congestions? We all are already well acquainted with the continuous honking of horns on congested roads across Dhaka. Most areas of Dhaka, according to reports, even the so called 'silent zones', have much higher actual sound decibel than what is allowed and considered to be safe for human health. Taking this and the increased air pollution generation from traffic congestions into account, calculating the actual loss to the economy and on human health becomes impossible. After all, is it possible to determine, in monetary terms, the damage being caused to the health of an individual?

The atrocious situation, to a large extent, has arisen because of bad planning and management on part of the authorities, with the authorities' indifference being the underlying cause. The country could easily see the situation change for the better with an investment equalling the loss it is enduring every year, or even less, had the authorities efficiently utilised state resources to fix congestion problems. Why then do we not see things improving?

Immediate course correction measures should be undertaken so that travelling in Dhaka is less expensive in every aspect.

US ELECTIONS 2016

Leading towards a better world?



MACRO MIRROR
FAHMIDA KHATUN

PRESIDENT Barack Obama's speech at the seventy first session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 20, 2016 carries great significance. This is not only because it was his last speech at the UN as the US president, but also for its content and message. While his speech has implications for the world today, some are probably more relevant for his own country. Emphasising that the world "must go forward, and not backward", he spent a great deal of time highlighting the need for global integration and its benefits. He said that billions of people are now enjoying better lives, and the number of people living in extreme poverty has been reduced from about 40 percent to below 10 percent in the last 25 years, thanks to integration of the global economy. Reference to the contribution of immigrants to the US was another notable point of Obama's speech, as he stated, "Today, a nation ringed by walls would only imprison itself."

As opposed to what President Obama reiterated within the UN building, a part of the US presidential election campaign has been giving a different message outside. The Republican party's presidential candidate, Donald Trump, has been crying for tighter immigration rules, building walls, dismantling trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and keeping the US economy closed for the rest of the world. Being the beneficiary of globalisation himself, Trump successfully imprinted the wrong explanation of globalisation in the hearts of a large number of voters. Trump told them that immigrants would take their jobs and create social problems. His supporters, many of whom have lost their jobs following the financial meltdown in 2008 and many of whom are yet to get a place in the job market due to slow economic recovery, believe Trump's concocted theory. The other cheap and easy-to-sell propaganda is that of terrorist activity by Muslims. While doing so, Trump dangerously equated Muslims with IS militants. Unfortunately, many Western

media often portray Muslims in the same manner. Additionally, his foul and indecent remarks on several people - which he always terms as "jokes" later on - have made him a controversial person. Though initially surprised by even the nomination of Trump, people around the world have now started to realise that Hillary Clinton will have a tough competition with him in the race to the White House.

Is this only because there is a trust gap among voters regarding Hillary? Or because her policies failed? Maybe both. But there is much more to the

president. Relying on this, Trump, however, is taking the opportunity to deviate from the values which America upheld even after the deadly attack of 9/11. This is not to say that American policies towards immigrants are flawless or its treatment towards them is perfect. The attitude towards Muslims has changed post-September 2001. But apparent attempts of tolerance and plurality were eventually taken in the country. Even the Republican Bush administration maintained the tradition of accommodating diversity. But will it be the same after the November 2016 US election?

have been directly recruited by large IT companies in the US. Some even work at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Here in our own country, many of Bangladesh's change agents - from civil servants to engineers to professionals - have been educated and trained in the US. Millions of Bangladeshis follow Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Hundreds of Bangladeshi youths have learned speeches of Steve Jobs by heart. They are inspired by these iconic figures to pursue their own dreams and aspirations. It's the same US that has recognised the talents of a diverse



PHOTO: REUTERS

story than just this. When Barack Obama contested for his presidency for the first time in 2008, history was created. The US could finally vote for a black president. Surely, it wasn't easy for him to enter the White House. But trust the diverse and multicultural American society. America is the champion of diversity in the world. Its identity as a country of immigrants has been at the core of creation of such diversity. Trump, whose campaign is undermining this, is taking advantage of that diversity himself. His candidature reflects that the US can choose anyone as its

Obama's remark at the UN General Assembly that "America has been built by immigrants from every shore" has been truly reflected in academia, the corporate sector, sports, culture, etc. Irrespective of their colour, race, religion and nationality, top universities including Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Stanford and similar centres of excellence continue to enrol students from the poorest countries of Africa or from the Muslim world. They look for talent and innovation. Many students from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET)

group of people, be it Satya Nadella of Microsoft, Sundar Pichai of Google, Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo, Ginni Rometty of IBM, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook or US federal judge Abid Qureshi. Talent and professionalism overruled colour, sex and religion. This is also the reason why the US continues to attract the best from around the world. The US economy cannot sustain if this legacy of diversity and pluralism are discontinued.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Europe's leadership crisis



GUY VERHOFSTADT

THE European Union's list of crises keeps growing. But, beyond the United Kingdom's "Brexit" vote to leave the bloc, Poland's constitutional-court imbroglio, Russian expansionism, migrants and refugees, and resurgent nationalism, the greatest threat to the EU comes from within: a crisis of political leadership is paralysing its institutions.

As if to prove the point, EU member states' leaders (with the exception of UK Prime Minister Theresa May) met recently in Bratislava, Slovakia, in an attempt to demonstrate solidarity, and to kick-start the post-Brexit reform process. The attendees

apparent, especially to its enemies. So now it faces a stark choice: a leap forward toward unification or inevitable disintegration.

Few Europeans want to make that choice. Many politicians are afraid of paying a high domestic political price for pursuing an agenda of EU reform. They argue that pushing for further integration in the current political climate is reckless, and that the EU should focus on doing less, better.

But that is a false trade-off. The EU could build a more integrated economic-governance model to increase investment and create jobs, while at the same time streamlining its operations to address common complaints about red tape and dysfunction.

Few European leaders seem to understand that the real risk to the EU - and to their own political futures

Meanwhile, support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) continues to grow.

Merkel has two choices: She can move to the right, as former French President Nicolas Sarkozy has done in his latest bid for the French presidency, or she can fight to hold the centre by addressing the AfD's simplistic arguments head on. The choice is clear: Merkel should stand and fight, while also advancing an alternative vision for modernising the EU.

Defeating populism will require leaders to acknowledge the people left behind as a result of globalisation, but also to dispel the myth that there is a quick fix, or that globalisation can simply be reversed. Contrary to populist arguments, protectionism will not reduce youth unemployment or income inequality. If EU countries reject trade deals currently under discussion, including the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, the EU's share of world trade will decrease, and the European economy will suffer for it.

Likewise, if the eurozone fails to integrate further by strengthening its economic-governance structures, Europe's ongoing financial crisis will only continue, impeding social mobility and undermining social justice. It is time for EU leaders to make these arguments more effectively.

Across the West, the 2008 financial crisis triggered a political fight that is still in progress. It has changed from a battle for accountability and reform to a clash between visions of open and closed societies, between a global consensus and policies still operating at the national, local, or even tribal level.

If the EU is going to quell the revolt against globalisation, free trade, and open societies, it will need more leaders and fewer managers. European leaders, frankly, should know better than to blame EU institutions, hypothetical trade deals, and refugees for their own failures to tackle unemployment and reduce inequality.

The EU's current crisis-management playbook is running out of pages. We in Europe can either put our heads in the sand while the European project slowly dies, or we can use this crisis to start a new project of renewal and reform.

Here, too, the right choice is clear: EU leaders should offer Europeans a new social contract, based on the understanding that people's legitimate fears about globalisation should be met with a collective, progressive European response.

The EU has been a major force behind globalisation, and only the EU has the power to help manage the consequences. European leaders must explain to their voters why nationalism cannot.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)



made some progress toward creating a European Defense Union, which should be welcomed, and toward admitting that the EU's current organisational framework is unsustainable; but there was scant talk of meaningful institutional or economic reform.

Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's refusal, at the close of the summit, to appear onstage with French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel all but confirmed fears that rudderless leadership is fueling institutional dysfunction. A summit that was supposed to be a display of unity revealed only further division.

EU leaders must take responsibility for this latest failure. For starters, they must stop issuing empty declarations. The EU's institutional impotence is

- is the status quo. And with populist movements across Europe pummeling traditional parties in the polls, the window for delivering real change is quickly closing.

It does not have to be this way. Too many leaders are paying lip service to domestic nationalists and populists, mistakenly thinking that this will preserve their domestic poll ratings, when they should be showing genuine leadership and fighting for the common good.

Upcoming national elections in France and Germany will be bellwethers for the future of European leadership. In recent German state elections, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and its government partner, the Social Democratic Party, experienced notable losses, which could mean that Germany's grand coalition is at risk ahead of next year's election.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Effective precautions against terrorism

Given the development of terrorist acts all over the world, the government should set up an independent Counter Terrorism Unit. The unit should seek technical assistance from developed countries and be run by professionals in management and intelligence gathering.

A citizen
Bangladesh

Ensuring a safe workplace for employees

Incidents such as the Rana Plaza collapse, the Tazreen fire tragedy and the recent Tongi blast have proved that we do not have sufficient safety measures for hard-working workers in our country. Such incidents are occurring rapidly and thus many innocent workers are sacrificing their lives. I believe that the relevant businesses and of course the government can create an impact towards preventing such incidents by investigating deeply into this matter.

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