

Marrakech: Can COP 22 live up to the expectations?

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THE 22nd Conference of Parties (COP22) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ended on November 19, 2016 in Marrakech. This beautiful little oasis in the desert hosted the COP for the second time, the first one in 2001 when COP7 was held here. This writer had the privilege of attending both COPs as a negotiator of Bangladesh, and can say that there has been an interesting similarity in the outcomes of these two COPs.

COP7 adopted the Marrakech Accords - the completed rulebook for bringing the Kyoto Protocol into effect, a process that took three years. COP22 was meant for starting the homework, assigned by COP21, of establishing the rulebook for implementing the Paris Agreement. The deadline for the purpose has been fixed as COP24 in 2018. So the Marrakech outcome can be judged as moderate progress, setting the ball rolling for the next negotiations from May 2017 onward.

But the expectations from this COP ran high perhaps for two reasons. The Agreement has come into force with supersonic speed, just after 11 months of its adoption in Paris. So there was euphoria of implementing it in earnest. Second, there was a felt need to show strong solidarity and determination among the 195 parties, including the US delegation representing the Obama Administration, given the shadow of uncertainty in effectiveness of the Paris Agreement cast by the victory of Donald Trump, a diehard denier of climate science, in the US election. Still, the stoical negotiators did try to do the spade work well. It may be mentioned that back in 2001, President Bush Jr. declared US' intention to not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, dubbing it as a 'flawed treaty,' while the presidential candidate Donald Trump called climate science a 'hoax,' wishing to withdraw from the Agreement once he is elected.

However, President Obama took a reverse approach this time - it is the US which pushed for the Agreement's early entry into force, as Obama used his executive power to approve it, bypassing an obstructive Congress. Other countries followed suit in rapid succession, only to Trump-proof the Agreement. Again, the justification for not joining the Protocol then and the potential withdrawal from the Agreement now by the incoming Trump Administration is the same: provisions of the Protocol/Agreement for the US remain unfair compared to other major emitters.

So, the COP during the second week of negotiations witnessed the arrival of about 80 world leaders. In their Marrakech Action Proclamation, the leaders solemnly declared: "We welcome the Paris Agreement and we affirm our commitment to its full implementation." US' Secretary of State John Kerry gave an

emotional speech, recalling his personal efforts in crafting the Paris deal. While outlining the measures taken to address climate impacts mainly with national resources, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina declared her government's unequivocal commitment to the Paris Agreement, the rapid implementation of which will save millions of livelihoods and check migrations.

In Marrakech, speculations were rife about the possible approaches to the Agreement under President Trump. One strand says the US will withdraw without going through the formalities under the

economic and environmental benefits of a rapidly growing and competitive clean energy and technology market. Thus Trump, as a businessman, will be an ultimate convert. Currently, the price and capacity of renewable energy rivals fossil fuels, particularly coal, in many developed and developing countries. Though during the campaign Trump promised to revive coal in US energy mix, the latest study by the International Energy Agency shows that growth of coal is slowing to a crawl, with just 0.2 percent a year against a 50 percent growth by natural gas, and majority of the investments are going to renewables.

solving climate change, which the Paris Agreement actually represents. For example, once China starts its emissions trading scheme from next March, over half of the world's GDP will come under some kind of carbon pricing. The danger of US' withdrawal is that it may have a domino effect, particularly on rapidly growing emitters from developing countries.

In terms of climate finance, a US withdrawal will have more negative effects particularly for the most vulnerable countries. US' discontinuation of the pledged USD 3 billion to the Green Climate Fund will immediately impact adaptation finance, which trails far behind mitigation initiatives. Though the available finance falls short of real needs in terms of magnitude, US' withdrawal will further deepen the fiscal cliff.

Obviously, climate finance stands at the core of negotiations, always being the most rancorous agenda. Marrakech was no exception. Almost two weeks of intensive negotiations failed to produce an agreed framework on long term finance, which ultimately was salvaged by the Moroccan COP presidency, adopting an innocuous and anodyne text, just urging the developed countries to scale up the pledged mobilisation of USD 100 billion a year by 2020.

Against all these political pitfalls, climate science continues telling us a grimmer tale: 2016 is going to be declared as the hottest year, with 1.2 degree C temperature higher than of the pre-industrial era. Sea ice levels are reaching record lows at both the poles, threatening to cause watery deaths to many small island states and to permanently inundate low-lying coastlands of countries like Bangladesh, a nightmare just waiting in the corner. The Paris Agreement's goal of keeping temperature rise below 2 degree C relative to pre-industrial level could remain just a pipe dream if we fail to take action now!

Let me conclude with a statement that Winston Churchill gave at the House of Commons on November 12, 1936, which remains relevant to this day:

"So they [the Government] go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent ... Owing to past neglect, in the face of the plainest warnings, we have entered upon a period a danger ... The era of procrastination, of half measures, of soothing and baffling expedience of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences ... We cannot avoid this period, we are in it now."

We can only hope that as we already live in a climate-changed world, the global community, including the US, will not procrastinate any longer in taking decisive actions.

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Agreement which will take a total of four years; instead Trump may take a route to leave the UNFCCC in just one year.

Another strand argues that a continuation of the US in the Agreement will be worse for whatever effectiveness the Agreement may have, because of likely and continued obstructions by the Trump team. This strand views that the world sans the constantly balking US could even have a stronger and legally binding deal than this Agreement.

In between these extremes, a third line of thought says that Trump's policies do not matter since many US states, cities and businesses have embraced the

Global investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency attracted a record USD 329 billion in 2015 - most of it for solar and wind power, more than any other energy sector. Meanwhile, installation of new renewable energy sources has now surpassed fossil energy. China as the leader might even be happy to see the US sitting on the sidelines of this clean growth opportunity.

As a citizen from Bangladesh, a country regarded by many as the 'ground zero' of vulnerability, we will expect, though not as my preferred option, that President-elect Trump embraces the third option -- using market principles in

Deadly factory fire

Stringent factory inspections needed

A fire that broke out at a gas lighter factory in Ashulia on November 22 that seriously injured 26 people, mostly women and children, begs some hard questions to be asked. Some of the 21 burn victims were aged below 18 which is a direct violation of the Child Labour Law. How is it that they were employed in the first place and that too in a hazardous work environment? The fact that the factory itself was being operated in structures that were tin-roofed and had semi-concrete walls point to unsafe conditions. With a labour force of about 100 workers working in shifts and handling highly flammable material, where were the fire safety equipment that could have doused out the fire before it reached the critical level.

What the above scenario points to is that there are massive irregularities involved in the running of such a factory and in the absence of authorities' properly monitoring working conditions, we only get to hear about such disasters when they occur. While improvements have taken place in the readymade garments sector over the years, factory and employment conditions in other sectors have not.

It is very easy to simply point the finger at factory owners and the management, but such cutting of corners and breaking of labour laws will continue to occur unless authorities get serious about enforcing the laws that govern functioning of such factories. Factory inspection and bringing unethical factory owners to bear responsibility for breaking laws remain a far cry, but human lives are not cheap and someone must be held responsible for the grievous injuries caused by the fire.

Reign in errant BCL cadres

Impunity breeds criminality

SOME Bangladesh Chhatra League men's continuing heavy handedness, we believe, is a direct result of the impunity being enjoyed by the errant party cadres. Their complete disregard for the rule of law was again on display inside Jahangirnagar University, when they needlessly beat up a campus-based reporter for videotaping the beating they were handing down to an outsider being escorted to the proctor for extortion.

The authorities are yet to take any tangible and effective action against the ruling party lawbreakers, while the party itself has also not done so, even when crimes were of the gravest kind. One of those crimes was the alleged beating and torture of a freedom fighter and philanthropist, who later died, succumbing to the injuries inflicted upon him by the ruling party men.

So much leeway has, in fact, been afforded to them, that their intra party clashes have led to many deaths. From January last year till October this year alone, 52 Awami League men were killed and nearly 3,500 individuals injured in 334 incidents of internal clashes. Meanwhile, individuals affiliated with the AL are heavily lobbying the home ministry to have the criminal cases filed against them withdrawn, reportedly, on political grounds.

If the situation is allowed to continue, lawlessness will increase. We call upon the administration to uphold the rule of law to save any shred of confidence in our justice delivery system and the ruling party to remove the impunity being afforded to its members.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The first-ever district council elections

The news that the first-ever district council elections will be held on December 28, 2016 is a great initiative by AL government for practicing institutional democracy.

However, it is also true that voters of the poll will consist of elected representatives of union parishad, upzila parishad, municipality and city corporation, not the common people. It means that indirect democracy will be practiced in DC polls, which will vitiate the main spirit of real democracy. We expect that the government will internalise the significance of direct voting participated by common people.

Sarfraz Mamun
 University of Dhaka

The PM as Champion of the Earth

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has received the Champion of the Earth Award, the United Nations' highest environmental accolade in recognition of Bangladesh's far reaching initiatives to address climate change. As part of climate change mitigation, the government is giving high priority to clean energy in a major initiative to protect environment, human health and livelihoods. Legislation is being enacted to step up regulation of the coastal polluting from ship-breaking.

However, the impacts of the Rampal Power Plant on the Sundarbans, as well as the ecosystem, are being overlooked. The project is also likely to cause cyclones and tidal bore frequently. We hope that as a recipient of Champion of the Earth award, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will take steps towards mitigating the effects of climate change and stop projects that are harmful for the environment.

Nur Jahan
 Chittagong

ISHAC DIWAN

IT has been five years since Egypt and Tunisia underwent regime change, and both countries are still suffering from low economic growth, large fiscal deficits, high unemployment, and rising public debts. Having failed to institute reforms on their own, both have turned to the International Monetary Fund, which entered into an arrangement with Tunisia in 2013 and has just approved a USD 12 billion loan programme for Egypt - the country's first since 1991, and the largest ever for a Middle Eastern country.

On the face of it, countries moving toward democracy seem as likely to experience poor economic performance as countries moving toward renewed dictatorship, because political instability and uncertainty of any kind naturally hurt investment and growth. But Tunisia has embraced political inclusion, and could soon find itself back on the path toward healthy economic growth, while Egypt's closing society positions its economy for a downward spiral.

Until recently, both countries' governments showed a surprising lack of interest in economic reform. Instead, they engaged with identity issues and security challenges in ways that reflect their diverging political paths. In Tunisia, electoral contests between the Islamist Ennahda Party and the secular Nidaa Tounes Party have allowed for a productive debate about the role of religion in politics and society; in Egypt, by contrast, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's autocratic government has violently repressed the Muslim Brotherhood.

Meanwhile, governments in both countries could not resist increasing public spending. In Egypt, subsidies were still above 10 percent of GDP in mid-

2016, suggesting a return to the old authoritarian bargain whereby citizens abstain from political participation in exchange for government economic support. Now, to qualify for the IMF's assistance, Egypt has committed to reducing its subsidies and instituting a value-added tax.

In Tunisia, labour unions have managed to push civil-servant wages - which now equal 15 percent of GDP, up from 10 percent of GDP in 2011 - well above IMF targets. And macroeconomic instability has impeded growth in both countries. Egypt's low credit rating has forced the government to borrow domestically, which has crowded out other borrowers to the point that private investment amounts to just 11 percent of GDP. Tunisia's external state borrowing has not crowded out the private sector; nonetheless, private investment has fallen to 18 percent of GDP.

Both countries' current-account deficits have widened as a result of falling tourism revenues and disrupted export activities, and neither country has taken measures to improve private-sector competitiveness. Sisi, like former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is wary of allowing private-sector players to gain political clout, and has instead propped up cronies whom he can trust, such as army corporations and some of the firms previously connected to the Mubarak regime. In Tunisia, the state bureaucracy has hindered private-sector activity, and there are reports of increased corruption by politically connected firms since the Nidaa Tounes government assumed power in 2015.

Tunisia has allowed its currency to adjust over time, and the dinar has lost a third of its value against the US dollar since 2014. Egypt, for its part, has disastrously mismanaged its exchange

rate. With the exception of one minor adjustment in 2013, it has stuck to a fixed rate since 2011, even after its currency became massively overvalued and started to create imported-goods shortages. When Egypt complied with IMF conditions and floated its currency on November 1, the exchange rate weakened from 8.5 to 15.5 pounds to the dollar; soon, imported goods will likely cost 40-60 percent more than they do now.

The Egyptian and Tunisian people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their respective countries' economic performance. But over time, this frustration will probably help Tunisia's economy, while hurting Egypt's.

For starters, political inclusiveness in Tunisia fosters healthy dialogue about potential solutions. For example, the new Tunisian cabinet formed in August includes ex-union leaders, who can now shape broad economic policies, not just press for higher wages. This has already made public-policy debates more constructive, because policymakers are focusing on how labour and business can fairly share the burden of economic adjustment.

Egypt's closed political system, by contrast, has left the government constantly in fear of the street. With no channels for constructive political debate, the government's best option has been to postpone necessary economic adjustments until they become unavoidable. This is not only economically inefficient (reflected in the absence of net foreign portfolio investment in Egypt in recent years); it is also politically risky. Egyptian politicians can do little but cross their fingers and hope that the street does not rise up in response to the recent currency devaluation.

Political inclusiveness creates a more

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Egypt and Tunisia's divergent paths

informed - and possibly more forgiving - public. In Tunisia, members of civil society and the media may freely scrutinise the government and call for change. While reforms have been slow in coming, the government cannot ignore growing public criticism forever. In fact, the 2017 draft budget law already includes urgent measures to fight corruption, trim the bureaucracy, and reduce tax evasion.

In Egypt, on the other hand, the currency devaluation has come as a shock to ordinary citizens. There was very little public understanding about the state of the economy, because the mainstream media, having become a regime mouthpiece, has been painting a rosy picture of Egypt's return to glory. At the same time, freedom of expression and association are severely limited; criticising government policies is deemed tantamount to high treason.

Tunisia has made political progress by shoring up its democratic processes, creating institutional space for all stakeholders, and allowing for free expression and assembly. This bodes well for the Tunisian economy's long-term prospects.

Egypt, for its part, may benefit from short-term gains as a result of the IMF package. Its "fierce but weak" rulers, however, cannot hope to make long-term progress by doubling down on despotism. If they do not take the long and winding road toward political inclusion, sooner or later they will face the wrath of those they have excluded.

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