

## Mayhem in Rangpur

Could this not be prevented?

**W**e vehemently condemn the shameful attacks committed on the innocent Hindu villagers of Horkoli Thakurpara, Rangpur. The latest incident reminds us of the similar synchronised events that occurred in Ramu and Nasirang.

Religious extremists burned down at least 30 Hindu houses because a Hindu youth allegedly posted objectionable content relating to Islam on Facebook.

We saw in the past that such allegations against minority people turned out to be false. Subsequent investigations found that someone either hacked the alleged Facebook account of a minority or manipulated images to flare up tensions. In this case, it was not yet verified whether it was indeed the alleged perpetrator who posted incendiary contents, or otherwise.

Even if he did, there are now legal avenues for one to address the issue. Instead of pursuing the legal path, why would one resort to indiscriminate violence against villagers who had no role whatsoever in the alleged misdeed?

Like the previous such incidents, the local police in Rangpur failed to anticipate what was coming and assuage tensions, while a group of radicals were inciting locals for days. Such repetition of negligence is utterly unacceptable. If the police had been proactive before tension burst into violence, the tragic incident could have been averted, and they would not have needed to exercise force in the aftermath that caused at least one death.

We cannot mitigate the psychological damages already caused to the villagers. However, if like the previous incidents, we can identify and bring the perpetrators and their sponsors to justice, we will further entrench the culture of impunity. We cannot risk doing so if we want to live in a country where the minorities do not feel insecure.

## Comments of IGP!

Who do we look to then?

**T**HE Inspector General of Police's comments on November 10 about abductions and enforced disappearances leave us at a loss for words. We are told that crimes were "being taken place" since the ancient period. Does it mean that we have to take this as *fait accompli*? If this is the response from the top man in law enforcement, precisely where do people turn to when a loved one disappears without a trace? He did however state that the police were hard at work to trace the disappeared and that his force has been lauded for exemplary work by many foreigners for doing a marvellous job in preserving law and order. Leading human rights organisations however present a different view. According to Ain-o-Salish Kendra, some 524 people have fallen victim to enforced disappearances since 2010 with some 334 of them remaining missing.

Such comments do little to garner people's confidence in the law enforcement agencies. People are looking for assurances that law enforcers are doing all they can to trace the missing individuals. We cannot even begin to comprehend what it is like for victims' families to live years on end without knowing the fate of their relatives—whether they are alive or dead. Even confirmation of death would be a relief, because then they can have some sort of closure. The police claim to solve 75 percent of their cases. If enforced disappearances fall into the other 25 percent, then it is their duty to unearth what happened to these people and not give excuses about crimes being part-and-parcel of human history.

## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR

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#### Are intersections causing congestion?

Though we have a number of flyovers now, they have brought no remarkable results in lessening the sufferings of the commuters in Dhaka. If you drive through Gulistan in North Dhaka, you will come across an intersection every half a mile or so. These intersections are responsible for severe congestions.

I think our policymakers should commission researchers to find out a lasting solution to overcome congestions at the intersections as well as other gridlock-prone areas in the city. Turning some intersections into two-way crossings and creating detours (loops) may help lessen traffic jam.

Ziauddin Ahmed, Gulshan, Dhaka

#### Air pollution posing danger to health

Bangladesh and Somalia are the top air pollution affected countries in the world, according to a recent report by the US-based medical journal *The Lancet*. It is a matter of great concern that the report linked a huge number of deaths in Bangladesh to air pollution.

Black smoke from industrial units, brick kilns, vehicles, etc. are contributing to the deteriorating air quality in Bangladesh. Above all, improper waste management and dumping waste in the rivers and other water bodies are also responsible for polluting the environment.

It is time for the government to seriously look into the problem that has been dragging on for so long and take practical measures so that we can breathe unpolluted air. I urge the government to consider air pollution as a grave danger to public health.

Shafkat Rahman, By email

# Organising the calendar and advancing the clock

## OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

**E**CONOMIST William Nordhaus found a political business cycle for the United States. He showed how the behaviour of the US economic cycle depends on which party, Democrat or Republican, comes to power. Whether our economic cycle significantly varies based on any political party remains a subject of study. But it is obvious that every parliamentary election dampens our business cycle. And this pattern has been evident since 1991 when civilian rule was reinstated in the country.

Bangladesh's economy remains slightly depressed in the years before and after the election. The simplest answer comes from the investors who suddenly turn cautious and resort to saving money or transferring it abroad during that restive period. Businessmen do expect the election to come, but they do not want to see any melodrama in fixing the date of an election, which has been unfortunately the case in the past years. We create unnecessary tensions and widespread speculations surrounding the task of deciding an election date, contributing to systematic instability in investment that hurts employment and growth. After four and a half decades of independence, can't we change this culture for the greater interest of our economy?

If we can fix the date or week for the election quickly, as many countries do, it will be a great leap forward in institutional reform, adding stability to growth. We usually allow the election fever to take over us during the winter so that campaign activities can add to the festivities, especially in the countryside. We don't mind being treated by the "benevolent" candidates to biriyani, polao, meat, sweets, cookies, and sugary drinks. Fixing a date in the winter, for example on December 24, may be a good idea since December 25 is a holiday, which can give us enough time to know the results and spend some time at our ancestral homes at the same time.

The second step in organising our calendar can be making our fiscal year run from January to December. This change is needed for faster development and growth. In addition, it can reduce the unnecessary hassle involved with planning our activities for the calendar year and the fiscal year separately. Calendar years provide the easiest way for data compilation and accounting, without creating any confusion to the policymakers and economic agents.

We can start this process immediately. My suggestion will be to prepare the next budget for one and a half years starting from July 2018 to December 2019. The first calendar-year based budget will commence in January 2019—the start of a newly elected government that will celebrate the golden jubilee of the independence. As history suggests, there is no scientific justification to start a fiscal year from July, and actually,



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it started from a whimsical wish of the donors and has turned into a pain in the neck by now. Resetting the fiscal year is the need of the hour.

The non-implementation of the annual development programmes has been a recurrent feature of our national life. A substantial reduction in resource damage can be achieved by merging the fiscal year into the calendar year that includes two periods of strong activity at both ends—January-April and October-December. In contrast, the current fiscal year system has two less productive periods characterised by rain, flood, and heatwave at both ends. Therefore, a good start with the dry month of January and a decent end with December will be crucially beneficial for a successful completion of the projects.

And switching to a calendar year for the budget and annual planning will make that achievement more feasible and practical, contributing to faster infrastructure building.

The third proposal for time-related reform is to advance our clock by just 30 minutes. Many countries enjoy the social and economic benefits of daylight saving by changing their clocks twice a year. It would be better for our economy if we could do the same. Since the information gap in this society is huge, and the society in general is resistant to change, daylight saving earlier implemented by the current administration created chaos and discontent. Many of us became impatient since we failed to see the long-term benefits of such a change. The government backed down from the clock reform quickly.

So instead of advancing the clock by one hour

during the non-winter seasons, and then changing it back to the original time in the winter, can't we just advance the clock by for 30 minutes permanently? This will likely be accepted by the general public and add to growth by increasing the worktime in the sunlight. It will also help reduce our power consumption—a much needed improvement for an energy-hungry nation like ours. It was a wrong move to make the banks and commercial offices start at ten o'clock—a time by which half the stamina of an employee is gone, a time by which people in many nations finish at least one-third of their tasks and have more time for themselves in the afternoon. The ten-to-six working hour, as prevalent in the banking industry, cannot be a productive culture for health and building the human capital.

A permanent time advancement will partly rectify the delayed placement of the current working hours. Since Bangladesh is a country of abundant sunshine and a shorter winter, advancing our clock permanently by half-an-hour is not only a possibility; it should be viewed as an opportunity. Thanks to the education sector for showing some reform in time management and also for creating a greater degree of certainty with exam dates. It helps the parents with making better-informed decisions for travel, treatment and so on. The economy requires further certainty for the sake of investment and employment. And disciplining our calendar as well as advancing our clock will be a commendable step to achieving that objective.

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# Asean and the 4th Industrial Revolution

When the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations gather for their 31st Summit in the Philippines this week, they will also celebrate "Asean@50"—making it the longest-running regional grouping of developing countries in the world.



JAY MENON and ANNA FINK

**H**IGH on the agenda will be regional security amid the rising tide of terrorism. This takes Asean back to its roots, having been born as a politico-security pact during the Vietnam War in 1967.

Indeed, Asean's role in sustaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia is often undervalued. It's easy to see why. War cannot go unnoticed but peace can, easily. Asean deserves its share of the credit for delivering the peace dividend. Moving forward, its economic success may depend on a different kind of revolution.

**Inclusive, innovation-led growth** The 49th Asean Economic Ministers Meeting in September noted that the overall priority of this year's summit would be "Inclusive, Innovation-led Growth". This would be supported by three strategic measures: increasing trade and investment; integrating micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) into global value chains; and developing

an innovation-driven economy.

The trade slowdown appears to have bottomed out, and there are early indications that both domestic private investment and foreign direct investment are showing signs of recovery in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, and continue to increase impressively in the Mekong countries. To sustain this growth, reforms will need to continue. Achievements on tariff liberalisation have been partially offset by a rise in non-tariff measures which are a more significant barrier to trade.

A new and growing trend in cross-border investment involves MSMEs, much so that the last Asean Investment Report took this as its theme. And an innovation-driven economy has to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

All three strategic items are linked, especially the last two, as discussed in a joint Asian Development Bank-World Economic Forum report titled "What does the 4IR mean for Asean Regional

Economic Integration?" to be presented to leaders at the summit. The report notes the differing level of preparedness of member countries, negatively correlated to their level of development, and how this may widen rather than narrow development gaps if not addressed.

One of the major challenges of the 4IR will be the loss of jobs caused by automation and increasingly advanced robotics and artificial intelligence. Job losses will affect some countries more than others. Low-skilled, repetitive jobs (such as assembly line workers) are most at risk, but increasingly service jobs (such as business process outsourcing) will be threatened.

As an immediate response, enabling greater mobility of unskilled workers would curtail unemployment in sending countries and help sustain growth in receiving countries, while also helping counter growing economic inequality within and between countries.

In the mid-term, new industries will grow and workers will need new skills. Investing in human capital must start

now. The skills needed extend beyond technical capabilities to include innovative problem solving. What's more, the accelerating pace of change calls for adult training and life-long learning not just early life education. In addition, mutual recognition agreements must expand to cover new occupations, while expediting the harmonising and streamlining of employment visas.

**MSMEs' entry to global value chains** One of the major opportunities of the 4IR, as highlighted in the report, is the potential of "disruptive technologies" to empower MSMEs. More than 90 percent of enterprises within Asean are MSMEs and they provide most of the employment in member states.

MSMEs are often constrained by lack of access to business and financial services. Blockchain technology has the potential to increase the security of cross-border financial transactions and logistics even in countries where these services are relatively underdeveloped. This technology has the potential to benefit the smallest firms in the poorest countries of Asean.

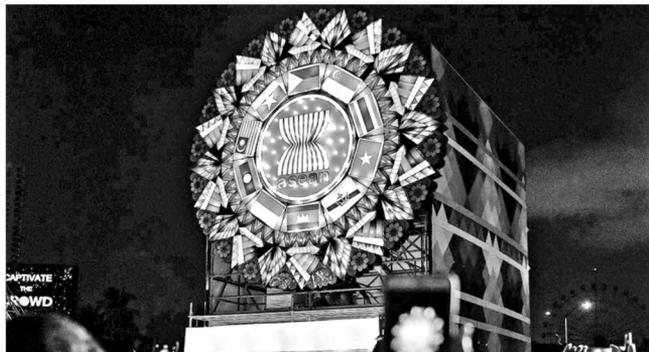
The rise of online marketplaces also provides platforms for MSMEs to access regional and global markets.

The 4IR, therefore, provides an opportunity for Asean to meet its goal of greater inclusion by integrating MSMEs into global value chains. But it also presents a challenge to the region to invest in human capital to continue to trade and attract investment, and to enable innovation-driven economies.

Given the unequal impact of new technologies in the region, the promotion of inclusive growth must also be seen as a key pillar in underpinning peace in the region. Growing economic inequality could quickly contribute to social unrest and political instability.

Embracing the 4IR, and inclusive, innovation-led growth will be essential to securing another 50 years of peace in Asean.

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