

# The eternal Ekushey

## Preserve all mother tongues

TODAY we pay homage to those who had laid down their lives on this very same day, back in 1952, in defence of our mother tongue, setting an example the likes of which the world has never witnessed. Their great sacrifice did not go in vain, as it was their call to the Bangalis to stand up for their right to speak their own language that had, in essence, inspired a whole series of events, including the education movement of 1962, the Six-Point movement for political and economic autonomy in 1966, the mass uprising against the autocratic Ayub regime in 1969 and, ultimately, to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh by way of a nine-month long Liberation War. And its uniqueness has even been recognised by the rest of the world through the UNESCO's declaration of Amar Ekushey as the International Mother Language Day.

To truly uphold the essence of what “Ekushey” stands for, however, we must continue to strive towards instilling the spirit of our martyrs in the task of establishing the cultural dispositions and democratic values that they had stood for. We must also strive to preserve the dignity of the Bangla language, as well as all other languages of this land, some of which are now in danger of extinction, making the need for the state and society in general to facilitate and encourage ethnic communities to read and write in their own language greater than ever before.

As we mourn our martyrs, let us remember that the best way to pay them their due respect is by establishing a society based on freedom, equality and rule of law, in the country borne out of their blood and sacrifice.

# Inclusive elections

## Government's role equally important

WE agree with the prime minister that it is up to a political party to take part in the polls and that nothing can be done if it chooses not to do so. However, we feel that the matter is more intricate than the prime minister's remarks suggest. It is our belief that as the ruling party, and one that is running the government, AL has also some responsibilities in ensuring a participatory and fair election.

We would like to stress that there is a distinction between the ruling party and the government—that the government represents everybody, irrespective of party affiliation. So what the AL may do in respect of the election is for it to determine, but as a government there are certain obligations that devolve on the government of the day. Neutrality being one, and ensuring that there is a level playing field for everyone in an election is another. And neutrality, like justice, must be demonstrated in all the actions and activities of the government and the administration.

As for the EC, its mandated tasks notwithstanding, it must ensure that its role and actions create confidence amongst all stakeholders. We all want an inclusive election and the prime minister has expressed her desire to see that the next election is participated in by all political parties. To that end the opposition should be allowed more political space than is the case now.

The BNP secretary general's statement that the party would not participate in the upcoming elections without its chairperson does not seem like a well-thought-out decision. Boycotting elections is not the answer, which the BNP should have learnt by now.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Decayed commemorative plaques

February 12 this year marked the 13th death anniversary of Monem Munna, one of the finest footballers Bangladesh has ever seen. He played for Abahani for most of his career. In 2008, Dhaka City Corporation installed a commemorative plaque beside the bridge over Dhanmondi Road 8, and named the bridge after him.

However, the words inscribed on the plaque are almost blurred because the authorities concerned did not bother with any kind of maintenance.

There is another such plaque installed nearby in memory of Mohammad Hanif, the former mayor of Dhaka, who laid the foundation of this bridge in 1999. It is also in very bad shape due to negligence of city corporation authorities.

**Tabibul Islam Babu, Dhanmondi**



# What's limiting our potential?

## The obstacles Bangladesh has to overcome to boost exports



WHENEVER there is a discussion about trade, investments, exports and economic growth, quite often much focus is placed upon infrastructure as the core challenge of our export growth. But is it the only hurdle?

There is no denying that we have a number of challenges in the area of infrastructure and trade logistics. Since the middle of last year the Chittagong port has been facing a tough situation as its activities were crippled by congestion and lack of handling equipment. Dhaka airport is also confronted with many challenges such as excessive delay in clearing the samples from customs and embargo by the European Union and a few other countries on direct cargo flights from Dhaka airport.

Lack of gas supply, industrial land for investment and deep sea port are some of the major tailbacks at the moment. The government is trying hard to overcome the infrastructural gap, but there is clearly no quick fix to these problems.

The good news is that there are a number of areas within our reach which can be explored to enhance our competitiveness and capability. Investing in human resources is one such area which is still largely untapped, particularly in mid-level management of our apparel industry which accounts for about 82 percent of the country's total export earnings. Bangladesh is living in an era of demographic dividend. Our literacy rate and access to information technology are increasing rapidly. And we have a huge pool of talented youth as well.

Industrialisation is the major platform to utilise our human resources. It's very unfortunate that we still lack in certain areas of professionalism—limiting our potential. The impact of such deficiencies will be felt severely by the industry in the near future when key factors like sustainability, innovation and automation will be playing a major role. The growing need for sustainability and optimisation in meeting customer demands will continue to drive our garment factories to become more adaptive and environment-friendly.

It's true that the apparel industry of Bangladesh has come a long way and we are now the second largest apparel-exporting country in the world with 6.36 percent of global market share. However, the industry still has a lot more potential to grow and thrive. Taking the apparel industry of Bangladesh to the next level greatly hinges upon ensuring qualified and skilled human resources in the middle managements of the factories. The following are some suggestions.

**Fast reaction**  
One of the biggest challenges of the industry is the delay in



To boost our competitiveness on the global stage, we should make use of our demographic dividend.

response by factories as buyers raise queries. When a buyer places a query to Hong Kong, Tunisia and Bangladesh, they usually get complete feedback within one day from Hong Kong; for Tunisia it may take 2-3 days; whereas in the case of Bangladesh, the common scenario is that the merchandising team ends up with 5-10 new questions of their own. This results in immediate loss of opportunities and a poor impression in the long run. Time is perhaps the most important factor in the global fashion business and there is no scope to waste time through back-and-forth communication.

**Better services**  
We can learn from the nations who have done well in the first phase of industrialisation and set examples of progress in terms of advanced sectors. For example, Hong Kong was one of the major global manufacturers and suppliers of apparel in the 70s and now it is the global hub of fashion business. Its gradual transformation in every aspect of professionalism—starting from technical skills to all other professional skills—sets them apart. So even though apparel is not one of the primary products made in Hong Kong anymore, they are still a major player in the fashion market. Bangladesh should be able to take inspiration from such success stories, take advantage of its human resources and transform the industry.

**Soft skills**  
There is a serious lack in soft skills in presentation, negotiation, communication, etc., in our mid-level management, especially merchants. A confidence gap always prevails due to difficulties in communication between parties—which is why we often see expatriate professionals in our factories and in buyers' liaison offices. Expat professionals may be good for the transfer of knowledge to the local workforce. And we need them to bridge the cultural divide as well. But the important question to ask is, do the locals have the attitude to learn from them? Hong Kong too had expats; and it still does but to a lesser extent.

There is no doubt that the export sector, especially the garment industry, will be the key driver of our economic growth towards becoming a middle-income country by 2021. If we want our apparel industry to play its due role in Bangladesh's journey towards prosperity, there is no alternative but to equip our people with the best knowledge and skills. Our education system needs a complete overhaul, especially in the area of behavioural skills, to produce some of the best graduates who are going to play a vital role in global business and international trade.

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# Trump puts America back in Asia

## The Trump administration may not have proclaimed a pivot to Asia but its actions on the ground are effectively shifting the power dynamics in the region



THE 37th annual Cobra Gold military exercise among 29 nations, now under way in Thailand, reflects the United States' nuanced geostrategic playbook under the Trump administration.

It was thought in many quarters that the administration of US President Donald Trump would take an isolationist turn and be aloof from Asian affairs, given its “America First” mantra. But this has not been the case after its first year in office.

Indeed, the Trump administration is putting America back in Asia's power

It has taken Trump a year to reboot the US contribution to Cobra Gold, which is designed to boost interoperability of the US armed forces and their counterparts among allies and partners.

**Interests over values**  
The Trump administration has made it clear that its geopolitical strategy privileges interests over values. As a result, Thailand's military government has more latitude in its dealings with Washington. Trump, in fact, hosted Thai Prime Minister and coup leader Prayuth Chan-o-cha at the White House last October. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, another leader seen as of an authoritarian bent, also received more attention from Trump.

Beyond a willingness to engage with Southeast Asian leaders of different stripes, the Trump administration has, for guid-

The NSS was reinforced by the US' latest National Defence Strategy, which posits “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism” as the “primary concern in US national security”.

After a year in office, the Trump administration, which includes more former top brass compared with recent US Cabinets, has come up with an Indo-Pacific geostrategic framework that prioritises US interests on a transactional basis when it can do so, but also relies on regional platforms when it has to.

This outlook is evident in Trump's dealings on trade and investment, with the US being hard-nosed in seeking to redress trade imbalances, even with friendly countries such as South Korea and Thailand.

**China's growing dominance**  
At the same time, Trump himself has not

2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that went against its actions, one that was backed by provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Beijing has kept what it took.

In mainland Southeast Asia, China has built a chain of dams in the upper reaches of the Mekong River to the detriment of downstream communities in Cambodia and Vietnam in disregard of the Mekong River Commission, a sub-regional body tasked with overseeing river management.

China insists on its own framework, known as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, which held its second summit meeting last month.

Regional responses to China's disregard for competing claims and interests have been tepid in the absence of a major counterweight. China was able to build its weaponised islets in the South China Sea and upstream Mekong dams fairly uncontested despite complaints from the Philippines and Vietnam.

With the US more visibly back in the mix, these regional dynamics are likely to shift again. This time, in the contest with China, the Trump administration will have greater geopolitical space to manoeuvre because it is not fixated on human rights and democracy, as was the case with Obama's presidency.

**New regional balance?**  
While Trump is seen as a deeply polarising leader at home, the picture is rather more mixed and harder to pin down in Asia.

He brings a different kind of carrot-and-stick approach, and is able to match China's penchant for transactional deal-making.

He is certainly commercially focused in living up to the “America First” pledge to his voter base. But he is also equally inclined to rebuild America's military presence abroad, rather than withdraw into isolation.

When Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in Bangkok in July 2009 that “the United States is back,” it was meant to be a return to the region, breaking away from the neglect of Southeast Asia that characterised the preceding administration of George W Bush. But despite good intentions and much rhetorical flourish, the Obama pivot did not go very far. The Trump administration has not announced any sort of being “back”, but the results on the ground are going in that direction, to the benefit of a new geopolitical balance in the region.

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South Korean troops, who were given a front and centre role in mock beach-landing exercise at this year's Cobra Gold, participate in an amphibious assault exercise.

equation in a counter-intuitive fashion.

Southeast Asia, in particular, should encourage this Trump turn to Asia in favour of a more balanced neighbourhood, less dominated by and less beholden to China.

In Cobra Gold's current iteration, the US has raised the number of military personnel to 6,800, nearly double the figure in 2015–2017.

The smaller US military presence in Asia's largest military exercise in recent years largely stemmed from Thailand's military coup in May 2014. Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, imposed a range of sanctions against Thailand's military regime, including a ban on high-level official visits as well as reduced participation in Cobra Gold operations.

ance, a broader geopolitical game plan centred on the Indo-Pacific, which Trump has trumpeted as a major global arena of contest and cooperation.

At this year's Cobra Gold, South Korean troops were given a front and centre role in mock beach-landing exercises, in view of persistent tensions on the Korean peninsula. Trump has repeatedly pointed to North Korea as America's most existential threat.

And while he talked up Chinese President Xi Jinping as a “very special man” during the Asean-led summit season last November, the US National Security Strategy (NSS) announced a month later flagged both China and Russia as “rival powers” that aim to “challenge American power, influence, and interests”.

abandoned broader vehicles of cooperation and dialogue, such as the recent Asean-US summit and leaders' meetings at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the East Asia Summit.

The Trump geostrategic reorientation has ironically been more assertive than Obama's much publicised “pivot” and “rebalance”.

Widely respected for his intellect, integrity and internationalism, Obama had staunchly supported the rules-based liberal global order that was constructed more than seven decades ago. Yet during the Obama years, Southeast Asia can be said to have been “lost” to China.

From 2012, China took over a string of artificial islands, building military installations and other assets on them. Despite a

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