

When does development equal freedom?

We need to take a step back and analyse Bangladesh's development approach through the lens of freedom



NAHOLA NOWSHIN

In the more than four decades since independence, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides on many fronts. It is no longer the "basket case" as Henry Kissinger, former US secretary of state, had dismissively remarked about the newborn country in 1971. Not only has Bangladesh defiantly shed this label but is also looked upon as an emerging economy to watch out for. The country today provides for a puzzling case study of developmental success in political and academic circles the world over.

Bangladesh's achievements in areas such as child and maternal health, increased access to education, reduction in poverty, and of course economic growth cannot be overlooked. More children are going to school, and more women today are financially independent than ever before. The important work being done by both NGOs and governmental organisations in rural areas has had a crucial role to play in much of the empowerment of women we take so much pride in (and rightfully so). Family planning interventions gave rural women decision-making power, and the microfinance revolution of the late 90s busted the myth that banking is only for the privileged. One wonders what Kissinger would have to say now.

However, as "development" takes centre stage in our national policies and discourse, the pathway of the country's development in more recent times has received its fair share of criticism from economists, policymakers, journalists and researchers alike. From the environmental threat of mega projects like Rampal and Rooppur to their financial viability (massive foreign loans at high cost) and scepticism about benefits to the people of the country (whether or not electricity at a



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lower cost will in fact be achieved), experts have consistently expressed their inhibitions about the consequences of these development projects, but in vain. With mega projects such as the metro rail, Payra sea port, Matarbari, etc., increasingly in the public eye, there is a common misconception that development or *umayam* has become synonymous with road or energy infrastructure. But "development" is much more than that.

One of the fundamentals of a country's development trajectory is its *development approach* undergirding the national policies and commitments, budgets, etc. It is this very approach that provides the basis for the "nature" of development taking place and this is what dictates how resources will be allocated, who/what will be prioritised, and whether or not "people-centric development" is being pursued.

To understand what development approach means, it is important to know that the concept of "development" is dynamic—it has evolved over time with theories put forward by different economists since the 1950s. Early development economists first

equated development with growth per capita income and the definition of development was later expanded to include the fulfilment of basic needs.

But one of the most profound explanations of development was put forward by Amartya Sen, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, who went much further than his predecessors to theorise that development is that which entails personal and political freedoms and the capability of individuals to lead the kind of lives they have "reason to value". And thus, poverty is understood as the lack of capability to lead a good life and "development" would mean enhancing this very capability to exercise one's economic and political choices, among other things. To put it simply, Sen's thesis is that "freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development." This very short summary, of course, does not capture the depth of Sen's groundbreaking philosophy in the field of development economics but suffice it to say that in his view, growth in GDP, rise in incomes and technological advancement are simply a means to achieve the most basic

freedoms—and not an end in itself.

Even two decades after Amartya Sen's highly acclaimed book *Development as Freedom* was published, his singular vision of capturing the essence of development through the lens of individual freedoms of the people remains as relevant and important as ever for developing countries like Bangladesh. It begs the questions: Is our development trajectory driven by a narrow view of boosting GDP or personal incomes? Or is our development approach rooted in the ultimate goal of expanding the freedoms of all citizens? Is GDP growth or technological progress simply an end in itself or does it have an overarching objective of removing the "unfreedoms" (as Sen calls them) such as poverty, obstacles to civil liberties, intolerance and systematic social deprivation?

With so much emphasis on "seven-plus GDP growth," one may be forgiven for thinking that GDP is the holy grail of development. But according to Sen's theory, GDP growth or income is not necessarily a good indicator of wellbeing. For instance, he cited the example of Sri Lanka which in 1980 had a higher life expectancy at birth than that of South Korea, although the latter's income per capita was five times higher. This, however, does not mean that economic growth is not important; it is vital only insofar as other non-material benefits are realised in the process of achieving economic growth.

Bangladesh's development pathway, at least on paper, is far from GDP-centric. The government has shown its commitment towards undertaking an inclusive development approach through its ambitious Seventh Five Year Plan which was developed in the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals. The objectives of the 7FYP (whose theme is "accelerating growth, empowering citizens") go to show that ours is not a parochial view of development that focuses on material benefits

alone. But when it comes to translating the objectives of the 7FYP into concrete results—such as making available safe drinking water for all urban and rural populations or targeting expenditure of 2.84 percent of GDP on education (FY2018–19 budgetary allocation of education already falls short of this target) or providing quality education to equip the future generation with critical thinking skills—which is arguably the first step towards giving people the opportunities to realise their freedoms, we still lag behind. "Social opportunities" (arrangements for healthcare, education, etc) are a component of Sen's definition of freedom.

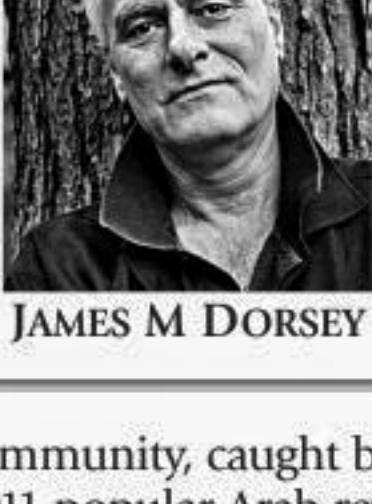
One of the criticisms of Sen's approach was that he did not exactly touch upon how one would measure the progress made in achieving freedom. But "transparency guarantees"—another crucial ingredient in Sen's understanding of what freedom entails—mean "interactions with others, including the government, characterised by a mutual understanding of what is offered and what to expect." So one could argue that elements such as rule of law and corruption greatly impact a people's political and economic freedoms.

At a time when Bangladesh is on the verge of graduating out of the LDC category, our policymakers and political elites ought to ask themselves some hard questions. Does our development approach that promises to provide quality education and healthcare go beyond agreements and commitments signed on paper? Is ours a development approach that is humanistic—one that paves the way for the majority to exercise free agency in all spheres of life? Does it aim to maximise people's political and economic freedoms?

Epictetus, the Greek philosopher, had observed: "Is freedom anything else than the right to live as we wish? Nothing else."

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

The Middle East: History threatens to repeat itself



JAMES M DORSEY

If the notion that history repeats itself is accurate, it is nowhere truer than in the Middle East where the international

community, caught by surprise by the 2011 popular Arab revolts, has reverted to opting for political stability as opposed to sustainability, ignoring the undercurrents of change wracking the Middle East. Major powers do so at their peril.

The failure of the United States, Europe, China and Russia to recognise key drivers of fundamental societal change and revisit the underpinnings of their policies towards the Middle East and beyond threatens to nullify professed aims of wanting to end bloodshed, curb extremism, stabilise the region and protect their interests.

In a just published study, Jose Antonio Sabadell, a former Spanish and European Union diplomat, argues that the narrow focus of the West, and by extension of China and Russia, on countering extremism, stemming the flood of refugees, and securing economic interests, blinds major powers from recognising tectonic social and political shifts that are likely to reshape a region embroiled in volatile, often violent transition.

Without saying so explicitly, Sabadell harks back more than a decade to the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when Western leaders, including then US President George W Bush, recognised that Western support for Middle Eastern autocracy that failed to address widespread popular grievances

and perceptions of Western policy had created the feeding ground for jihadist groups focused on striking at Western targets.

That recognition produced an expectation that the Arab street would assert itself, neutralise breeding grounds of extremism, and counter radicalism by pushing for political and economic change.

When the Arab street did not immediately revolt, government officials, analysts and journalists wrote it off. The widespread discontent continued to simmer at the surface. It was palpable if one put one's ear to the ground and finally exploded a decade later in 2011.

That pattern hasn't changed despite a brutal counterrevolution that reversed the achievements of the revolt in Egypt and produced civil and covert wars and/or overt military interventions in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Just how little has changed is evident in the continued validity of Egyptian-born political scientist Ayubi's assertion 22 years ago that the Arab world is populated by hard rather than strong states whose power is rooted in bureaucracies, militaries and security forces.

Ayubi noted that these states were "lamentably feeble when it comes to collecting taxes, winning wars or forging a really 'hegemonic' power bloc or an ideology that can carry the state beyond the coercive and 'corporate' level and into the moral and intellectual sphere."

Recent protests, often innovative in their manifestations, in Morocco, Egypt and Iran prove the point.

The Arab world is in the middle of a process of deep social and political change... The emergence of Arab peoples as key political actors, in combination with widespread,

profound and mounting popular frustration, is a game-changer. What Arab populations think and crucially how they feel, will determine the future evolution of their countries," Sabadell predicted.

Historical record backs up his assertion that fundamental change is a process rather than an event. The era of the 2011 revolts and their counterrevolutionary aftermath may be reminiscent of the 1789 French revolutionary wave that was countered by powerful conservative forces that ultimately failed to avert the 1848 revolution.

A renewed failure to recognise the psychological, emotional, social, economic and political underpinnings of simmering discontent suggests that the international community's focus on migration and extremism could boomerang by further antagonising significant sectors of societies in a swath of land that stretches from Africa to China.

It is likely to impact stability in a region that borders on Europe, constitutes Russia's backyard and soft underbelly and stretches into China's strategic north-western province of Xinjiang. It also risks fuelling rather than countering extremism that feeds on its understanding and exploitation of the emotions, social psychology and identity politics of deep-seated grievances.

"We are at a crossroads... Vital interests are at stake... These developments will define... interaction with 400 million people living in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, and shape relations with the wider Middle East and North Africa region... This can have profound geopolitical implications, influence the global scenario for the foreseeable future and

maybe change the nature of international politics," Sabadell said.

Demonisation of Islam in the West and major Asian nations as well as political Islam that is encouraged by autocrats in countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates despite the fact that religion is often the only permissible language in public discourse, and Islamophobia, magnify the risk and exacerbate the problem.

The centrality of Islam in Middle Eastern identity coupled with widespread anti-Western sentiment that is reinforced by the Trump

Stopping failed policies from cementing false perceptions in a self-fulfilling prophecy will take more than counter-narratives, political messaging and promotion of "moderate" Islam.

administration's immigration policy and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe strengthens a belief that the West, and eventually China with its repressive policy in Xinjiang, is hostile to Islam. It's a belief that hands opportunity to extremists on a silver platter.

It is also a belief that intrinsically links social and economic grievances with perceived threats to collective national, regional and religious identities, a pillar of populism on both sides of the Atlantic as well as the Mediterranean in what Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra dubbed

"the flourishing international economy of disaffection."

The key popular demand for dignity that characterised the 2011 revolts as well as subsequent protests related as much to calls for clean, non-corrupt governance and efficient delivery of public goods and services as it did for acknowledgement of a proper place for Arab and Muslim states in the international system.

A key issue that world powers turn a blind eye to is the fact that even if religion constitutes the bedrock of autocratic legitimacy and frames public discourse, religiosity is in flux with youth increasingly embracing the notion that faith is a private affair rather than a ritualistic adherence to laws and a set of ironclad beliefs.

Closely related is the failure to realise that the gap between the Middle East and the West and potentially with China and Russia is not one that is rooted in values but in policies.

As a result, anti-immigrant sentiment coupled with Islamophobia, reducing the Middle East to concerns of migration and extremism, support for autocratic regimes, indifference towards the worsening plights of huge population groups, and the lack of even-handed policies towards key conflicts like Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute threatens to turn the fictional value gap into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is a prophecy that is exploited by extremists who unlike world powers understand the power of and beneficial focus on emotions.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is underwritten by decades of failed policy in which military interventions, debilitating attempts at regime change, misconceived notions of nation-building and misconstrued calls for

reform of Islam have fuelled mayhem and crisis.

"What the Arab world may need is not a religious leader but rather a social leader; not someone who wants to reform religion, but who wants to reform society... one who uses the popular legitimacy and the authority of religion to promote social and political change. Islam may need a Martin Luther King Jr. more than a Martin Luther," Sabadell said.

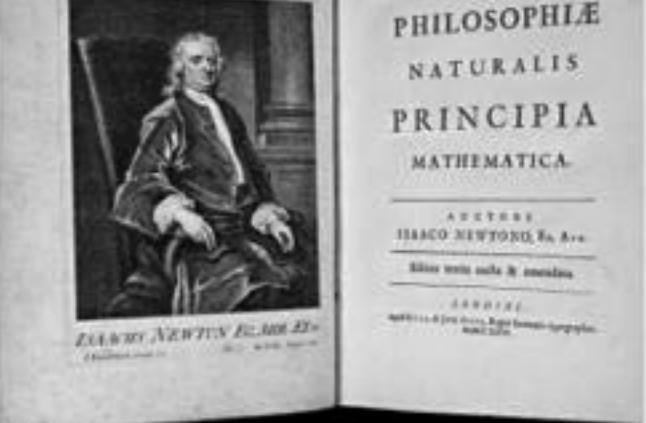
Stopping failed policies from cementing false perceptions in a self-fulfilling prophecy will take more than counter-narratives, political messaging and promotion of "moderate" Islam. It will require fundamentally revisiting the notion that support for self-serving autocrats whose policies contribute to the threat of the prophecy is part of the solution.

The crisis in the Middle East offers the West a historic opportunity in the far larger struggle with China and Russia for a future international order. It is where the West has a strategic advantage that it can exploit if it is capable of dropping its horse traps that allow it to see primarily only the threats of migration and extremism.

Said Sabadell: "The way the West handles its relations with the region can and should make a significant difference. What it does and says will be the key; what it does not do and does not say will be equally important. How it acts, or not, and speaks up or remains silent will define its position and determine its effectiveness."

Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the *New Books in Middle Eastern Studies* podcast. He is the author of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* blog, and a book with the same title among several others.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



JULY 5, 1687

NEWTON'S PRINCIPIA RELEASED

A three-volume book, *Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, often referred to as simply the *Principia*, by Isaac Newton was published by Royal Society in England in Latin, outlining Newton's laws of motion and universal gravitation.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Confined
 - 7 Hangs down
 - 11 Incite
 - 12 Exam for high school jrs.
 - 13 One with pressing business?
 - 14 Trick
 - 15 Solitary sort
 - 16 Social class
 - 17 Iditarod need
 - 18 Reciprocal
 - 19 Composer
 - Stravinsky
 - 21 Some amount of
 - 22 Vaccine pioneer
 - 25 Piper of myth
 - 26 Come together
 - 27 Sights
- DOWN**
- 29 Congress output
 - 33 Glades critter
 - 34 Malia's sister
 - 35 Serengeti sight
 - 36 D'Artagnan, for one
 - 37 Bus. sch. course
 - 38 Ancient
 - 39 "See ya!"
 - 40 Wallops
 - 9 Fill-up target
 - 10 Unwavering
 - 16 Use foul language
 - 18 Exodus figure
 - 20 Joystick wielder
 - 22 Reggae's birthplace
 - 23 Barhopping
 - 24 Map collections
 - 25 Friend of Pooh
 - 28 " — Fly Now" ("Rocky" song)
 - 30 Fancy tie
 - 31 Entire
 - 32 Beach bits
 - 34 Long account
 - 36 Break
 - 38 ("Rocky" song)
 - 39 "See ya!"
 - 40 Wallops



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY



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BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES



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