

# The city and its next generations

## THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN MORSHED

IT is easy to be stressed out quickly in Dhaka. Roads are insanely congested. Footpaths are far from walkable. The air is unbearably and the city is often a "smellscape." Life is not a piece of cake in Dhaka.

Yet there is magic in the city, if you can find it. There are unexpected oases of urban pleasure, if you look for them a bit hard. These are not just sites of joy, but also moments to critically reflect on issues that affect our lives in the capital city.

A few weeks ago, I was fortunate to be able to attend an intriguing art show, *Art for Cause*, at Drik Gallery in Dhanmondi. Even though the title sounded a bit clichéd, I was curious to know more about it. It was an art show organised by teenage students of some of Dhaka's English-medium schools to raise awareness of, and funds for, the

distressed Rohingya children. Among these schools were Greendale International School, Green Herald International School, DPS STS School, Sir John Wilson School, Mastermind School, Scholastica, Wordbridge School, and Hurdco International School.

The show featured some really talented young painters. Ayman Omiyo Zahir's *Contemplating Chaos*—a pencil sketch of an enigmatic many-handed figure, as if trying to figure out our conflict-ridden world—was an apt metaphor for the refugee crisis that we are in now. Nowshaba Ali captured the endearing innocence of a Rohingya boy having a bath, his face gleaming with an inchoate happiness. Inspired by Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), Emma Angela Gomes repositioned the haunted, screaming face with that of a frightened but calm Rohingya boy. Nuzhat Tasnim Mahbub's extraordinary portrayal of an elderly Rohingya woman, her wrinkled face suggesting a desperate wish to find final refuge, could actually be included in a world-class art exhibition. And, there were many perceptive paintings, chronicling the Rohingya exodus. All in all, it was a great show.

Yet the magic of the show was not in the heart-breaking beauty and social consciousness of the featured paintings. The show was both tragic and magical because it showcased how the young artists sought to shoulder an unfortunate burden of having to demonstrate their patriotism, their sense of social justice, and, most intriguingly, their loyalty to their motherland.

As I spoke with the energetic young organisers, it seemed that in *Art for Cause* they were battling on two fronts. First, they appeared to be genuinely interested in bringing the plight of the Rohingya children to the national spotlight. And, second, they were eager to shatter what they thought was a pervasive myth that afflicted them socially—the alleged apathy of English-medium students toward Bangladeshi issues. This entrenched myth has long propelled the popular binary imagination that Bangla-medium students tend to be patriotic and English-medium students are generally elitist and foreign-bound. Bangla-

medium students celebrate *Pohela Boishakh* or 16th December and don patriotic outfits, whereas English-medium students gather at high-end coffee shops and discuss latest arrivals on Netflix.

The politics of linguistic patriotism received a huge boost in Bangladesh when UNESCO declared 21st February as the International Mother Language Day on November 17 in 1997. It was arguably the best homage to the very idea of the mother tongue. Earlier, in 1987, the then President HM Ershad enacted *Bangla Procholon Ain* (Bengali Language Implementation Act 1987), formally establishing Bangla as the official language in all administrative activities of the government.

The unfortunate and unnecessary politics of Bangla-English divide continued to plague public life in Bangladesh. However, the demand and appeal of English in the white-collar job market, particularly in the private sector, including multinational companies, UN projects, NGOs, and private banks, have been strongly felt.

The rapid proliferation of English-medium schools in Bangladesh since the 1990s epitomised two issues at the heart of the language debate: first, the lingering history of colonial patronage of English in creating a native elite and its post-independence reincarnation as a prop for upper-class status and, second, English as a marketable linguistic skill and a propeller of career success. Consider the typical advertisement of an English-medium school for student enrolment. As you would notice, it is often a misguided cocktail of the abovementioned issues and the social anxieties they cause.

Whether English-medium schools and universities tend to serve the needs of the wealthy and the elite, the myth of social exclusivity (and the affiliated prestige) has long defined them in the popular perception.

When I attended the art show at Drik Gallery I felt compelled to weigh in on the old Bangla-English debate that continues to complicate the Bengali self-image. As I spoke with Mohammad Naveed and Ayman Zahir, key organisers of *Art for Cause*, about their thinking behind the show and,

in general, their vision for a future Bangladesh, I began to feel, even if prematurely, that the longstanding Bangla-English social divide was at a crossroads.

I felt tempted to think that we are witnessing the rise of a new generation of young Bangladeshis, who would like to voice their concern for environmental damage in Bangladesh, while at the same time demanding justice for the homeless Palestinians. They seem to have diminishing anxiety over seeing themselves both as Bangalis and global citizens. They seem at ease to love Jibanananda Das and Robert Frost concurrently.

Yet, the organisers of *Art for Cause* seemed to have been overburdened with the unnecessary task of having to defend themselves as conscious Bangladeshi citizens. The young students appeared too self-conscious of their purported complicity with the false elitism that English as a social tool promised. They don't need to defend themselves against the artificial binary of Bangla and English. The teenagers deserved better. They should be encouraged to master multiple languages, not just Bangla and English.

As they contemplate the future of Bangladesh, policymakers must consider and analyse the nature of new generations of Bangladeshis, who also view themselves as global citizens. How we foster them, nourish them, will determine the kind of Bangladesh we can build in the future. We must tap into this new, not-yet-fully-understood opportunity: the changing nature of our young demography.

Congratulations to the organisers of *Art for Cause*. It is another example of why we shouldn't give up on our city, our country. Dhaka may feel infernal but there is also hope.

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Nowshaba Ali captured the endearing innocence of a Rohingya boy having a bath, his face gleaming with an inchoate happiness.

## PAKISTAN ELECTION

# The future of 'Naya Pakistan'



SMRUTI S PATTANAİK

THE "second democratic transition" in Pakistan was marred with pre-poll suicide attacks which killed three contestants as well as scores of their supporters especially in Quetta. Though the election day didn't see much violence, the electoral exercise itself was mired in controversy for alleged pre-poll rigging. A number of political parties including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians (PPP), as well as Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM-P) have united in censuring the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) for conducting an election that they say wasn't free and fair. Each of the political parties alleged that their polling agents were thrown out of the booths and they were not given the Form 45 which provides details of the valid and invalid votes polled, party position, and have the signatures of the polling agent as well as election officers. The request made by the parties to extend the polling time by an hour beyond the fixed deadline of 6 o'clock had also been rejected by the ECP. However, what led to the fears that the election would not be free and fair and would be rigged in favour of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) were as follows:

Before the July 25 election, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave several decisions intended to cripple the then ruling PML-N which was perceived as a main obstacle in the way of Imran's political ascendancy. While the judiciary did not find any evidence of corruption in the Panama investigation that could nail Nawaz Sharif, it disqualified him from prime ministership by invoking articles 62 and 63 for not being "sadiq" and "ameen" evidenced by his failure to disclose his

earnings from a Dubai-based company owned by his son in the nomination paper for the 2013 election. This is a salary he never received.

The Avenfield case, in which he and his daughter Maryam were finally convicted and sent to jail, also has several legal loopholes. These factors notwithstanding, what seems to have influenced the voters was the charges of corruption against the Sharif family. This tarnished the image of the PML-N as well while portraying Imran Khan as "sadiq" and "ameen". This worked well in the election as far as the perception of the people is concerned. This is despite the fact that Imran Khan did not hesitate to welcome the "electables" with questionable integrity and equally corrupt individuals into the party fold to improve his chances of becoming the prime minister of Pakistan.

It is important to note that after the 2011 impressive rally in Minar-e-Pakistan failed to deliver the "tsunami" in 2013, Imran started preparations for the 2018 election. He raised the issue of rigging in 2013 and took to the streets. The deft street politics or *dharna* politics that PTI demonstrated by seizing Islamabad in 2014, with the much-vaunted "Freedom March" with the help of Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), crippled Islamabad for four months and raised the prospect of a military takeover. He successfully exploited the Panama leaks to start another *dharna* in November 2016 before the Supreme Court assured that it would look into the issue of corruption.

Earlier, Nawaz Sharif's offer to appoint a commission under a retired justice of Supreme Court was rejected by the opposition and finally the Supreme Court constituted a commission to look into the cases of corruption. The interesting part is, two members of the commission were from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Military Intelligence (MI) and the manner in which the investigation was conducted, and the resultant verdict delivered, made it clear



Child supporters of Imran Khan, Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician and chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), gesture as they wave party flags during a rally on the last day of the election campaign in Karachi.

PHOTO: REUTERS

that the Sharif exit is choreographed by the powerful military establishment supported by the judiciary and facilitated by the PTI. The rest is history.

The military's finger prints became more visible after the Panama case and even more so after the "Dawn Leaks". The Geo TV was blocked in 2014 after Hamid Mir pointed the finger at the ISI for orchestrating a near-fatal attack on him for his views, and in 2018, it was pulled off the air after it broadcast programmes critical of the "Bajwa doctrine". Similarly, Pakistan's largest circulated newspaper Dawn complained that its circulation was being interrupted after Sharif gave an interview to the newspaper, accusing the army of not taking action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack and holding it responsible for the poor international

image of the country. The electronic media along with the vernacular media launched a systematic campaign against Sharif. Many think that Sharif's interview was the final nail in the coffin and resulted in his losing the chairmanship of his party and disqualification from the election for life. The statement of Justice Shaukat Aziz of Islamabad High Court, who openly said that the country's premier intelligence agency pressurised the judiciary to convict the former prime minister and his daughter in a highly questionable corruption case just before the election, proved what was feared all along.

The defection of PML "electables" in South Punjab to PTI and forcing of some PML-N legislators to stand as independents only heightened the apprehension about the fairness of the election. Nawaz Sharif, who

had managed to draw people to his vastly-attended election rallies on the slogan of "vote ko izzat do", was finally convicted in the corruption case and sentenced to jail, thus eliminating him from the campaigning process. The PTI's electoral success in Karachi is also attributed to the systematic decimation of the MQM and division within the party—allegedly a handiwork of the military establishment.

The July 25 election has some interesting results. Though the PTI does not have a clear majority in the National Assembly and has to depend on small parties for support, the tussle will be for controlling Punjab where the PML-N has received 127 seats and the PTI has 122. Controlling Punjab will be crucial for the party which is going to form a government in Islamabad. The PML-N has chosen to take the parliamentary route to oppose the PTI rather than taking to the street. In spite of losing power, the PML-N will emerge as a formidable opposition if it is not able to form the government in Punjab.

The main challenge would be whether the PTI can deliver a "Naya Pakistan"—one that is corruption-free and sensitive to the expectations of the people. With questionable "electables" within its rank, it will not be easy for it to do so. Its performance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is evidence enough that good governance would pay electorally. The PTI is going to inherit a stagnant economy and a mounting debt burden which will force the government to approach the IMF. While surely there will be questions raised on PTI's dramatic swelling of electoral fortune which saw the party from winning 1 seat in 2002 and 28 in 2013 to 115 in this year's National Assembly election, the real test of stability would be to what extent it would be able to influence foreign policy and tackle the problem of terrorism at home. That is where the seeds of discord between the civil and the military lie.

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## QUOTABLE Quote



STEPHEN COVEY

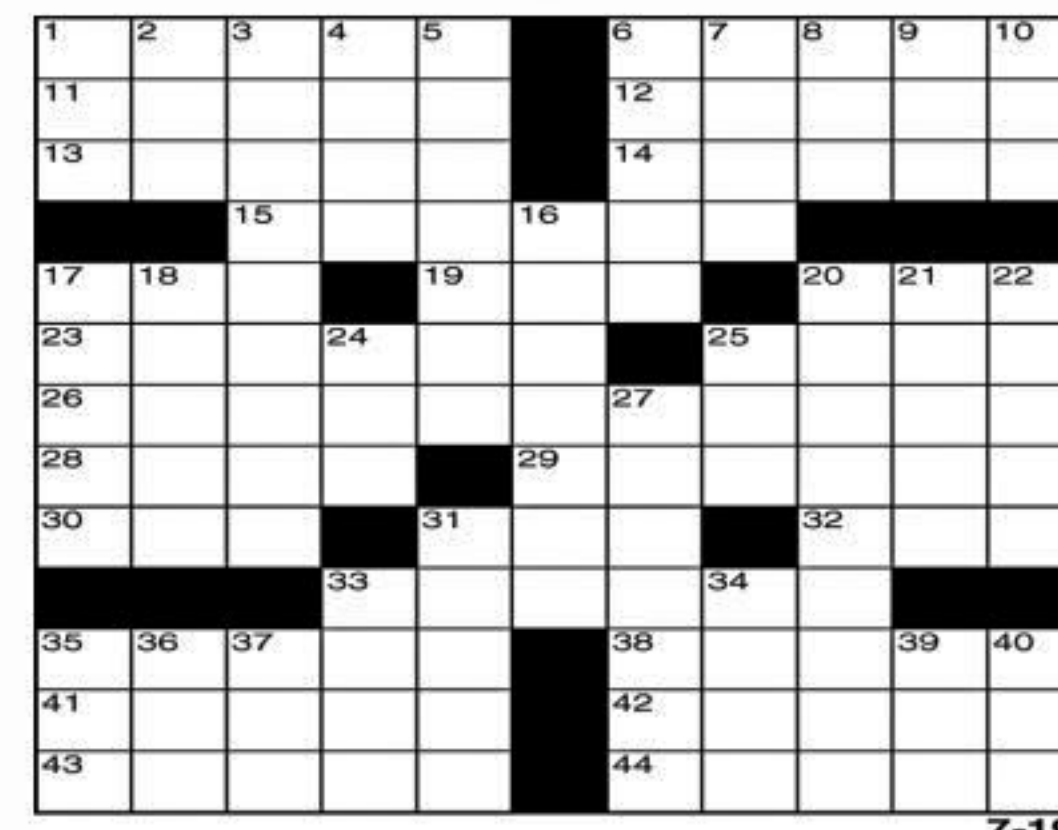
(1932-2012)

American educator, author, businessman

Every human has four endowments—self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom ... The power to choose, to respond, to change.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Stirs up
  - 6 Colorful flowers, for short
  - 11 Writer Puzo
  - 12 Circle spokes
  - 13 Be frugal
  - 14 Concluded
  - 15 Put into piles
  - 17 "Well, that's obvious!"
  - 19 Diving bird
  - 20 Lingerie item
  - 23 Obliquely
  - 25 Salon offering
  - 26 "Ben-Hur" highlight
  - 28 "Darn!"
  - 29 Keanu of "Speed"
  - 30 Common verb
  - 31 Hair goo
  - 32 Slalom maneuver
  - 33 Lose one's hearing
  - 35 Unspoken
  - 38 Team leader
  - 41 Be real
  - 42 Promptly
  - 43 "Swell!"
  - 44 Track events
- DOWN**
- 1 Apt. ad abbr.
  - 2 Furniture wood
  - 3 Sought-after needle-work
  - 4 Prom transport
  - 5 High singers
  - 6 Athenian, e.g.
  - 7 Touch down
  - 8 Say further
  - 9 Game piece
  - 10 "Ice Age" sloth
  - 16 Gave lessons to
  - 17 Russian country
  - 18 Theater worker
  - 20 Feigned courage
  - 21 Paddy crops
  - 22 In -- (disordered)
  - 24 Torah cabinet
  - 25 Uno plus due
  - 27 Fiber optics field
  - 31 Affected
  - 33 Basic idea
  - 34 First-rate
  - 35 Kayo count
  - 36 Lumber tool
  - 37 "Spy Game" org.
  - 39 Director's cry
  - 40 "-- a Rebel!"



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S T A T E T O P E  
T O W N T E R R A  
A R E N A H A B I T  
R E S T B E S I D E  
T O O V I M T E N  
S U M M E D U P  
T E E N M O A T  
G U M M E D U P  
B O W S A Y D R E  
I N A F I X P E N S  
B E R R A M I D S T  
L A D E N A C U T E  
E L S E V A P O R

## BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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