

From inside Barisal, glimpses of the future of leadership?



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FOR all the talk about change, the history of modern-day Bangladesh is a cautionary tale for anyone who thinks that politics is an instrument of change and democracy a deliverer of justice. Bangladesh flirts with the idea of change but seeks accommodation with the status quo. Power changes hands. New players are ushered in; new pledges made. But beyond the sound and fury, nothing really seems to change. The Old Order remains firmly in place, unharmed if not unopposed, taking everything into its sinister embrace. But in recent days, there have been encouraging signs of what could be the start of a real change, as demonstrated by the young students occupying the streets and urging reforms in the transport sector. What makes their voice so inspiring is that they have learned to speak truth to power so early in their life, undeterred by the fact that those in power dislike nothing more than inconvenient truths thrust in their faces.

What will our political leaders be like in the future? There is no doubt that with the society in a state of flux, the political scene will also go through a transformation of its own. The question is, when it does, and today's youth assume the mantle of leadership, will they fall back into

line like so many others did before them, or will they prove to be different? Recently, during the mayoral elections in three city corporations, two incidents have caught our attention as they provided a glimpse of what future leadership trends may look like. One incident involved a candidate who decided to forgo the ritual of issuing an election manifesto—because a “manifesto doesn't solve problems”—and the other was about one who embarked on a “crowd-funded” campaign in what was perhaps the first initiative of its kind in local history. Eloquent, persuasive and willing to break new grounds, these candidates represent the diverse crop of leaders emerging out of Bangladesh's politics.

In a way, Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah from the ruling Awami League and Dr Manisha Chakraborty from Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, both of whom contested in the Barisal City Corporation election, also represent the opposite extremes of politics as we know it.

Take Sadiq, now the mayor-elect of Barisal. He has an impressive pedigree, unlike most of his compatriots, and the backing of a party that seems averse to ever sitting in the opposition bench. Sadiq is the archetypal Awami League Man whose ideological position is wedded to the inviolability of the legacy of his party and its most illustrious member. But to his credit, he also proved to have a mind of his own



Dr Manisha Chakraborty

(ditching the electoral custom of publishing an election manifesto being a case in point). He is quite approachable, speaks in a language understood by the common man, and with everything going for him at the moment, has demonstrated reasonable self-restraint so far.

His win against his much older opponent from BNP in the election would have a symbolic meaning for youth leadership had it not been marred by gross irregularities and allegations of favouritism. For all his achievements, however, he remains untested. In the coming days, the challenge for Sadiq will be to prove that he is not just another foot soldier of the Old Order but has actually something worthwhile to offer to his people.

Manisha Chakraborty, on the other hand, may have been on the losing side but her political career is far from over. She can take comfort



Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah

from the fact that she has fought an impossible election, as did all non-AL candidates in Barisal, but if the promise that she has shown in the past years comes to fruition, she might well be the next face of pro-people politics in Bangladesh. Manisha represents all there is to be hopeful about the future of leadership. As I met with her at her campaign office in Barisal, about a week before the election, I saw a woman unfazed by powerful opponents. She is polite but firm, persuasive, and a champion of the downtrodden. Seeing how she mobilised ordinary folks from schools to mosques to shanties during her campaign, it's not difficult to assume that at the heart of her crowd-funded election campaign was a belief that real power comes through inclusion.

At 28, Manisha doesn't suffer from the indecisiveness typical of young

leaders. She is clearly an idealist—as her decision to run for mayor as the first female candidate to do so in Barisal would also suggest—but one with a pragmatic bent of mind. Her fight against injustices is counterbalanced by a vision to effect change through proactive measures for sustainable development. But there is no doubt that her integrity and political judgement will be put to test once she comes out of the fold of “local politics” and gets sucked into the bigger political orbit where idealism can rather be a hindrance sometimes. How her future will pan out will depend to a large extent on how she responds to her changing reality.

However, despite their vastly different personal and political backgrounds, the emergence of leaders like Manisha and Sadiq can be explained in terms of the reality on the ground. In a way, they are a response to—or a product of—a nation still dismissive of any meaningful change. Unfortunately, this is how the Old Order survives, by promoting conformity and a sense of security only to be had in the status quo. To further protect its interests, it also sustains a culture of mistrust, falsehood, conspiracy, empty rhetoric and vapid sloganeering. And it nurtures and glorifies apathy as if it were a virtue. If young, educated people are losing interest in politics, it is mostly because of that.

Emerging leaders, not just in Barisal, are however mindful of the changing times and the power of

modern tools like social media which, if properly used, can help break through people's apathy and give them something to stand up for. Social media has changed a lot of the old equations. The political costs of not updating oneself in line with the latest trends may be too much, so young leaders are keeping up, and using these tools to reach the furthest corners of their constituency and advance their political agenda. Similarly, a lot of what our civil, academic and military establishments once took for granted may go through a transformation, for better or for worse. This much is obvious from the ongoing agitation of the school-goers which is, frankly, more a response to the overall leadership crisis and lack of political commitment—deemed to be the root cause of all public sufferings—than a mere rejection of one poorly functioning sector.

Emerging leaders might argue that leadership is not about “disappointing people at a rate they can stand,” as the Old Order would have us believe; that it could have a much bigger and more positive impact on life. But whether they will be able to prove it through their action and bring about some actual reforms in the system is something that only time can tell.

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Trump's tariffs and subsidies



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THERE is a popular saying in America, “You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand politics.” However, I have never heard anyone disparage economists in such a fashion except only recently during the Trump Era. When President Trump started threatening China, Europe, and even neighbours Canada and Mexico with tariffs to attain some political or commercial goals, Americans became angry and mocked the Trump Administration for flouting economic principles.

It has been alleged that Donald Trump and his advisors ignored all economic logic when he started a trade war to reduce US trade deficit. All this is old news, but recently, as the trade war escalates and US producers and consumers start to see the painful effects of the ongoing trade war, or skirmish if you like, the Trump Administration appears to be paying some attention to economics. It was announced in end-July that the US government would offer USD 12 billion in subsidies to the agriculture sector to mitigate the harmful effect of reduced exports and disrupted trade relations following three months of open warfare. But, as they say, “Don't put good money into bad causes!”

For my readers who must have by now got bored by endless bickering about “trade war” on TV talk shows and felt that the World Cup Soccer

on Masranga was more fun to watch, let me bring you up to date. US tariffs on some Chinese imports kicked in last month. And after a few months of “feint, bluster and desultory attempts at compromise,” China retaliated by slapping tariffs on US imports of agriculture goods, particularly soya bean, pork, and grains. China has also allowed the yuan to fall against USD to boost exports, and imposed non-tariff measures such as stricter inspections



PHOTO: REUTERS/THOMAS WHITE

on US agricultural products at Chinese ports.

China imported about USD 24.1 billion in agricultural products from the US last year, accounting for about a fifth of total farm imports in 2017, according to Chinese data. China now buys roughly 30 percent

of all the soya beans produced in the US, and a recent Purdue University study predicts that Chinese tariffs would result in a 65 percent cut in US exports. The US agriculture sector is a big exporter and ships overseas USD 150bn in agricultural products each year. The trade war has already started to hurt the farmers, and Trump and the Republicans are nervous about its political ramifications just before the mid-term elections in November.

When the Trump Administration initially launched the idea of a trade war, Democrats and academicians advised caution and the US media was taken over by outraged columnists baffled by Trump's total disregard for economic principles. World media went full-throttle and

pronounced how tariffs by the US would harm global trade, and headlines such as “Trade war hurts everyone” were everywhere. Some economists working with the White House, notably Gary Cohn, resigned and Congress warned of the dire consequences of a full-blown trade war with US allies, who were threatening a tit-for-tat response.

It now appears that the economists who were silenced by the “pro-tariff” group have now been brought in by more cool-headed advisers in the White House to formulate a plan to minimise the cost on farmers. Even before the trade war broke out, there were accounts of farmers struggling to stay afloat. Prices of farm products were on a downward slide and farm property values have declined in the last four years. Usually, the farm sector and rural America strongly support Trump and his policies, but they signalled that they can't be with him in the coming elections should they suffer financially as a consequence of the trade war.

At this point, Trump's advisers finally opened their economic textbooks and found a simple economic solution: subsidies. Last week, it was announced that farmers who are hurt by the trade war would receive cash compensation from the US government. US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and other US Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials said that the aid will be available in three forms: direct payment to producers of soya bean, sorghum, wheat, cotton, dairy and hogs; government purchases of

fruit, nuts, legumes, and some meats for distribution to food banks; and development of new export markets. The emergency bailout from taxpayers will become available in September, and does not need approval from Congress.

But here is the catch. While some farmers will get direct payments, part of the money will also go to fund a programme already in place to purchase surplus farm products distributing them to food banks. Marketing efforts to promote US agricultural products overseas may also get more funding. Therefore, administering the subsidy will involve various government departments to hand out the money, procure and distribute the surplus farm products, and to boost exports by finding new markets for US agricultural products.

Many critics of this “bailout” or subsidy have opined that it will temporarily silence the farm sector and secure the votes that the Republicans need in the November elections, but subsidies have been considered a nightmare by economists. According to them, while subsidy is the right economic tool to use, the US agriculture sector might depend on it for years to come. Taxpayers for Common Sense, a US advocacy group, called the announcement by the USDA “a recipe for disaster that would undo decades of progress toward weaning agriculture from financial dependence on federal subsidies.”

Unfortunately, there is no end in sight to the “trade war”. China

understands that Trump is hostage to the farm lobby and there is no easier target than the US farmers to reverse his trade policy. While Trump has threatened to put tariffs on all of the USD 500 billion Chinese exports to the US, China has vowed to hit back with “qualitative and quantitative” measures. It has allowed the yuan to fall, to the tune of 6 percent against the dollar since May 30 to USD 1=7 yuan on August 3.

Trump has some hawkish advisers in his team who are now asking him to raise the tariffs to 25 percent for USD 200 billion of imports from China, up from the original proposal of 10 percent. They are counting on this threat to force Chinese officials to the negotiating table, and justify this escalation with the argument that the higher rate will compensate for the depreciation of yuan which made Chinese goods cheaper even in the face of tariffs.

The White House won't make a final decision until late August on those tariffs which are likely to target consumer goods and food as well as machinery components. It also appears that Chinese policymakers, many of whom are graduates of American universities, are using a very potent combination of economics and politics to beat a powerful adversary in this strategic game of “Trade War”. So, stay tuned.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist, and Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA. His new book *Economic Crosscurrents* will be published later this year.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1964 Civil Rights Act as Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, look on.

AUGUST 6, 1965

US LAW PROHIBITING VOTING DISCRIMINATION SIGNED

US President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act prohibiting voting discrimination against minorities

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Allude to

5 Fit for all viewers

11 Smell

12 Slow tempo

13 Cabinet part

14 Veered sharply

15 Caribou's cousin

16 Perp pursuers

17 Match setting

19 Lazy fellow

22 Skiing spot

24 Emporium

26 Workers' home

27 Trough eaters

28 Some signs

30 Imitations

31 For every

32 Song snippet

34 Young kangaroo

35 Switch setting

38 Canadian capital

41 Track shape

42 Library patron

43 Singer Seeger

44 Pickled buds

45 "Jurassic Park" beast, for short

DOWN

1 App makeup

2 Pop star

3 Ducked down

4 Blunder

5 Shaving need

6 Conforms

7 Gift attachments

8 Easter find

9 Fade out

10 Mercury or Mars

16 Pool need

18 Ready for business

19 Title setting

20 Spur on

21 Base meal

22 Emporium

23 Citrus flavor

25 Asian language

29 Less speedy

30 Saute

33 Decade parts

34 Green stone

36 Destiny

37 Bend

38 Middle-earth baddie

39 Scone

40 Phone bug

41 Make a choice

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

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