

Combating the new dengue strain

We need more effective awareness campaigns

ACCORDING to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the number of people affected by dengue has hit 9,531, the highest in 18 years with 24 casualties so far this year. Health practitioners tell us that what is new this year is that dengue-infected children are not just from the city, but are coming from out of Dhaka. That means the dengue virus has evolved a new strain. Until last year, most patients were diagnosed with Den-1 and Den-2, this year we have the Den-3 strain. The problem with the Aedes egg of course is its ability to remain active for about 2-3 years in a dry place and that it can hatch if it comes into contact with a single drop of water. While Dhaka South City Corporation claims to have destroyed 50,000 risky containers, that effort is a spit in the ocean when we consider the population of Dhaka city. And now that disease has spread beyond the periphery of the city, the dangers have multiplied significantly. It is obvious that much more needs to be done in terms of raising public awareness. Since we know that the Aedes mosquito breeds in clean, stagnant water found in people's homes, city residents need to be rallied into action. They need to regularly check and remove any stagnant water on their premises. The public should also be informed on the steps to take in terms of testing for dengue and getting proper treatment. Public health campaigns on radio and television form one aspect of the process, but we need to explore other mediums too. These need to involve community leaders and local administration which must organise live demonstrations at every ward about how households and establishments can be kept clear so that the aedes mosquito cannot gain a foothold. Unless we can involve city residents in the clean-up operation on a large scale, we cannot tackle the dengue menace.

ACC drives against extra SSC fees laudable

Schools must comply with the HC's directive

IN December 2017, the High Court declared charging of additional fees beyond that set by the government for SSC and HSC exams illegal. However, despite this, schools in Dhaka have continued charging students extra according to newspaper reports. This has been the practice for years now, and despite drives by Anti-Corruption Commission teams, the practice of taking additional fees has become the norm in these schools. Some schools even charge students exorbitant amounts for sitting for re-tests. In a recently published story, we reported how despite a drive by the Anti-Corruption Commission on November 11, authorities of Jatrabari High School and College are yet to return the extra Tk 25 lakh they collected from SSC candidates. Though assurances were made by the school that the money would be returned to parents, the amount was instead deposited to the joint bank account of the acting principal and two assistant headmasters. Guardians have also alleged that the school had asked students who failed the test examination as much as Tk 30,000-Tk 40,000 for re-tests. This is beyond absurd, and a clear violation of the law. Now the authorities have said that the money would be returned within the next few days. Why the delay? And this is not one isolated case: similar stories from other schools in the capital have also been reported recently and in past years. In this regard, the vigilance of the ACC this year has been exemplary. That even then the practice continues shows how our educational institutions seem to think they could potentially get away with it. This is extortion plain and simple, and we ask that alongside ACC efforts, strict instructions with clear provisions for holding the institutions accountable are communicated to schools from the relevant ministries. There is no reason a student should have to pay beyond the amount set by the government for sitting for a public exam.

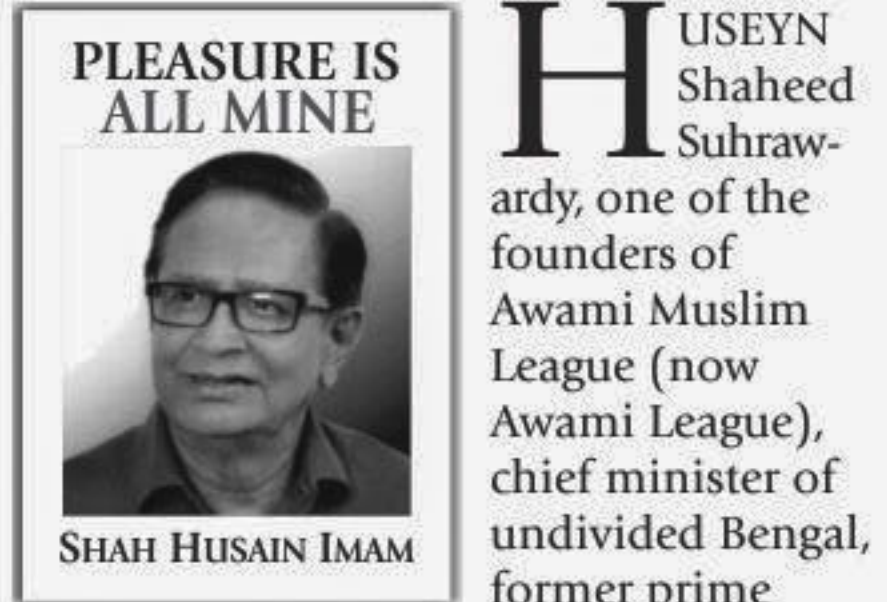
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cold chain deserves more attention in Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh has a high annual average temperature, a well-structured temperature controlled supply chain is missing here. The delivery of perishable food items and vaccines which have to be stored frozen has been getting exceedingly disrupted due to the paucity. Once a crop leaves the farm on its journey to the consumer's table, estimated food waste, due to deficient post-harvest practices, can be as much as 40 percent. The current practices of vaccine transportation violate WHO standards frequently. Monetary loss and health hazards are the detrimental consequences of the lack of awareness. Apart from perishable food items and vaccines, ice-cream and dairy products too require flawless refrigerated transportation and repository. An integrated cold chain with necessary cold storage facilities at major locations can address all the issues to ensure non-decayed food and vaccine availability. We have estimated that the cold chain market size of Bangladesh may be around USD 1.3 Billion. The government should be more attentive towards this case, and as per our study (conducted by me and a group of my classmates at Dhaka University's IBA) there are monumental prospects for private investors in this industry. Rafsan Siddiqui, IBA, Dhaka University

Feeling the pulse of the people



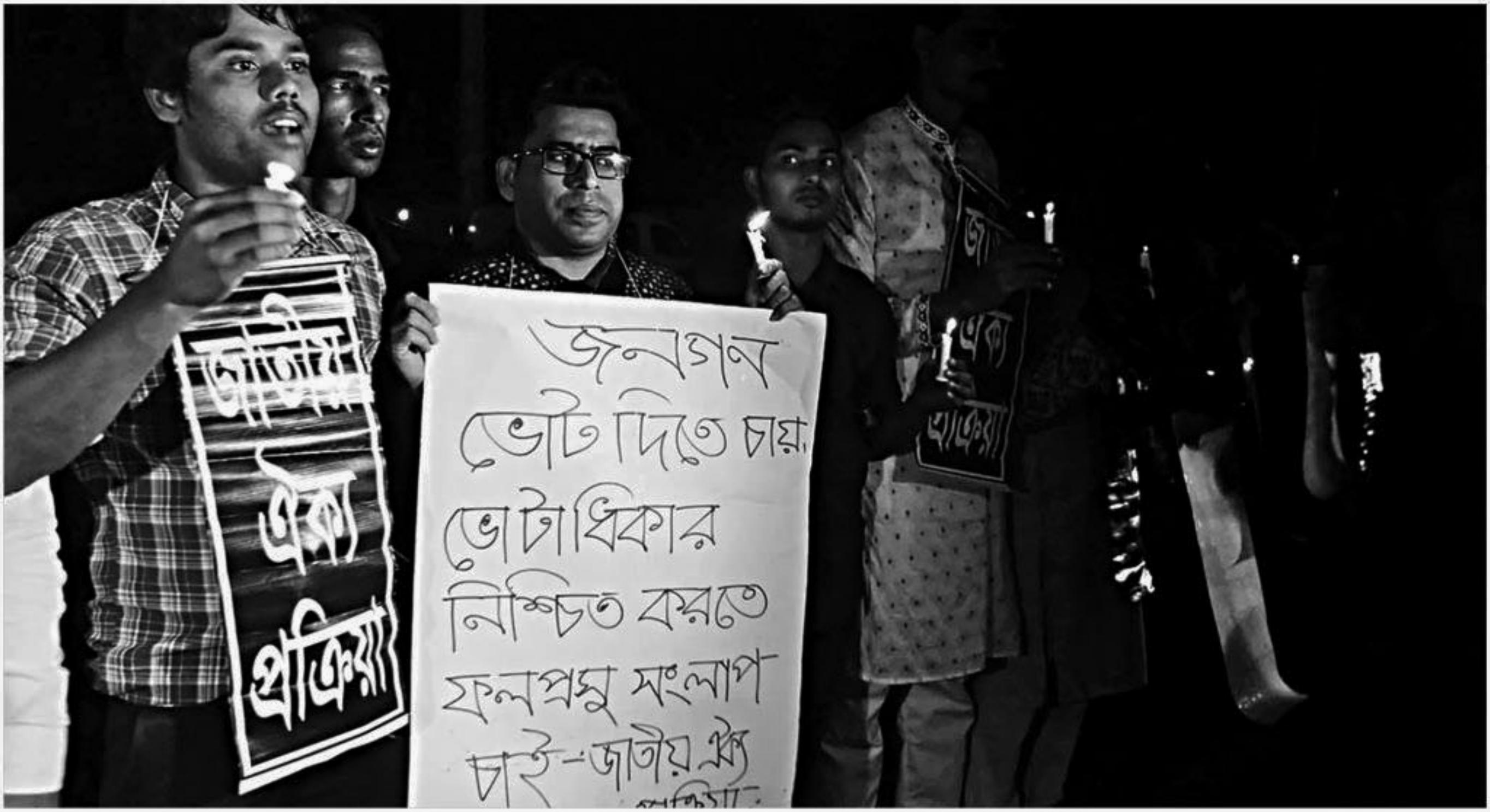
PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM
Pakistan and one in our pantheon of "National Leaders" was once quoted as saying, "Bad election is better than no election." This, he had said, in the thick of Ayub Khan's military rule in Pakistan. By expressing his unqualified preference for election even under a military regime, Suhrawardy perhaps intended to highlight two points: First, the importance of an election as a measure of bona fides of those who held it so as to subject them to public scrutiny, if need be. Secondly, an election yields a verdict on the winner or the loser indicating at the same time the rate of turnout or level of public participation in the process. In independent Bangladesh, we have come a long way not to settle for just any election but a qualitative one—a free, fair, participatory and credible election. While this has proved elusive; it may not in future. The conditions prevailing prior to the one-sided January 5, 2014 election, what with the BNP's naïve boycott and the AL's hell-bent persistence to hold it, have transformed into a scenario of engagement, interaction and exchanges between all political classes. Yes, the major demands of the opposition parties and alliances have not been met but the series of dialogues that the prime minister held with different

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combinations have helped close the ranks of polarised parties, at least with the election in mind. What has jelled as a result is an unwritten consensus on an "inclusive" election. One head-turner of an outcome of the realignment process is this: Of the 70 Islamic parties, 90 percent have joined the ruling AL-led alliance—riding on Qaumi Madrasah or Hefazat-e-Islam crest. Political Islam's vote bank has shrunk from election to election, for all one knows. Whether they will reverse the pattern back up again, one will be curious to know!

facilitating the contests: First and foremost, the EC is empowered, both constitutionally and RPO-wise, to enforce standards of non-partisanship and complete neutrality. That is why all the major functional and operational authorities of the state have been placed at the disposal and under the charge of the Election Commission. Secondly, the different platforms including the catalytic Dr Kamal Hossain led Oikko Front and the BNP as a party have publicly eschewed any possibility of boycotting the election. By doing so they have, on the one hand, eased the EC's

the Election Commission to perform. This is usually done by the electoral authority of major democracies within days of declaring the election schedules. In this context, it has been reported in a prominent Bangla daily that panels have been created of presiding, assistant presiding and polling officers to be placed on election duties. Police are said to be probing their credentials, one would assume, as a routine and fool-proof necessity. It is important to note that altogether 40,000 election observers, of local and international origins, are expected to



A group of activists formed a human chain in front of Gono Bhavan ahead of the dialogue between Jatiya Oikyafront and ruling Awami League-led 14-party alliance on November 1, 2018. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/STAR

At any rate, all are going ahead with their firm plans to participate in the polls but have ceaselessly demanded a level playing field denied them through arrests and cases filed against their leaders and workers. They say that despite the government's assurances to the contrary and submission of lists of the affected, remedial action was still awaited. The job is cut out for the Election Commission to follow up on the government's commitment in this respect. Three factors make it obligatory for the EC to meet the legitimate demands of the electoral alliances in terms of

task of assiduously drawing all the major parties in to the election, and on the other increased the responsibility of the EC to prove itself equal to the challenge. Last but not least, the candidates outside the ruling alliance will be at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the government party candidates, so they will be needing traction! Since most in the ruling party are sitting MPs, they will have entitlements rendering their electioneering that much easier. Placing new sets of field officials and police administrators with good reputation and professional integrity across the country is a necessary drill for

operate in Bangladesh. If it comes to that the figure will be much more than that attending the controversy-tainted 2014 election but half the number of attendees in the 2008-09 general election. Therefore, the monitoring would be fairly substantial. In the end, all concerned would do well to remember an Abraham Lincoln quote: "With public sentiments nothing will fail and without it nothing can succeed."

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Inequality undermines democracy

JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM and ANIS CHOWDHURY

ECONOMIC inequality—involving both income and wealth concentration—has risen in nearly all world regions since the 1980s. Gross economic inequalities moderated for much of the 20th century, especially after World War Two until the 1970s, but has now reached levels never before seen in human history.

No more inclusive prosperity
The "World Inequality Report 2018" found that the richest 1 percent of humanity captured 27 percent of world income between 1980 and 2016. By contrast, the bottom half got only 12 percent. In Europe, the top one percent got 18 percent, while the bottom half got 14 percent.

OXFAM's "Reward Work, Not Wealth" reported that 82 percent of the wealth created in 2016 went to the richest 1 percent of the world population, while the 3.7 billion people in the poorer half of humanity got next to nothing.

2016 saw the biggest increase in billionaires in history, with a new one every two days. Billionaire wealth increased by USD 762 billion between March 2016 and March 2017, with OXFAM noting, "This huge increase could have ended global extreme poverty seven times over".

The latest "World Inequality Report" warns, "if rising inequality is not properly monitored and addressed, it can lead to various sorts of political, economic, and social catastrophes".

"The Global State of Democracy 2017: Exploring Democracy's Resilience" had anticipated this concern: "Inequality undermines democratic resilience. Inequality increases political polarisation disrupts social cohesion and undermines trust in and support for democracy".

Growing inequality undermining progress
Alexis de Tocqueville believed that democracies with severe economic inequality are unstable as it is difficult for democratic institutions to function properly in societies sharply divided by income and wealth, especially if little is done to redress the situation, or if it worsens.

De Tocqueville also maintained that there cannot be real political equality without some measure of economic equality. Poor citizens would not enjoy the same access to political and policy influence as the wealthy enjoy much more influence. For Amartya Sen, the poor's "substantive freedom" or "capability" to

pursue goals and objectives is circumscribed. Those with more power not only block progressive redistribution, but also shape rules and policy to their own advantage.

For Robert Putnam, economic inequality also impacts civic norms, such as "trust", critical for political legitimacy. Growing inequality exacerbates the sense of unfairness about a status quo run by and for wealthy plutocrats.

For Joseph Stiglitz, rising inequality weakens social cohesion. Declining trust increases apathy and acrimony, in turn discouraging civic participation. Economic inequality thus worsens

Populism threatens multilateralism
Thus, de Tocqueville was concerned that growing inequality would gradually erode the "quality" of democracy, even in high-income societies. The rise of "plutocratic populism" has contributed to the latest identity politics in the US and Europe.

Public discourses and the media have blamed the "other"—immigrants and the culturally different—for growing social ills. Thus, plutocrats often succeed in satisfying "their people" with privileges and "rights" in contemporary modes of "divide and rule".



ILLUSTRATION: DAVIDE ARMINIO/BEHANCE

"political anomie", eroding community bonds besides contributing to anti-social behaviour.

Meaningful democracy needs active citizens' participation in community affairs, typically greatest among the "middle class". Growing economic polarisation has hollowed out the middle class, reducing civic engagement, exacerbating the "democratic deficit".

Exclusion and deprivation exacerbate alienation, causing greater abandonment of prevailing social norms. Meanwhile, the privileged indignantly see others as undeserving of "social transfers".

With the media, they often obscure plutocracy's rule, sometimes even justifying its worst features, e.g., legitimising high executive remuneration as "just rewards" as tycoons secure generous tax breaks and investment incentives, at the expense of social spending and public services for all.

In today's "winner-take-all" economy, those on top successfully lobby for and secure lower taxes. Nonetheless, they indignantly denounce budget deficits as irresponsible and inflationary,

The bottom half of Americans has captured only 3 percent of total growth since 1980. Disparities are reaching levels never before seen in the modern period.

threatening the value of all financial assets.

America divided
In the United States, the income share of the top 1 percent is now at its highest level since the Gilded Age, on the eve of the Great Depression. Meanwhile, the bottom half of Americans has captured only 3 percent of total growth since 1980. Disparities are reaching levels never before seen in the modern period.

Thus, around 2013, the top 0.01 percent, or 14,000 American families, owned 22.2 percent of US wealth, while the bottom 90 percent—over 133 million families—owned a meagre 4 percent! The richest 1 percent tripled their share of US income within a generation, with 95 percent of income gains since the 2008-2009 financial crisis going to the top 1 percent!

Meanwhile, legislative and other reforms as well as judicial appointments have stacked the legal system even more heavily against those with little power or influence. A recent survey found more than 70 percent of low-income American households had been involved in civil legal disputes in the previous year, such as eviction and employment law cases, with more than 80 percent lacking effective legal representation.

Lack of attention to those down and out has worsened the sense of abandonment and exclusion. Many Americans, especially in depressed regions, have become disillusioned and alienated, but also more susceptible to chauvinist politicians promising protection against "the other", imports and immigrants.

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