

What our 'political masters' need to realise

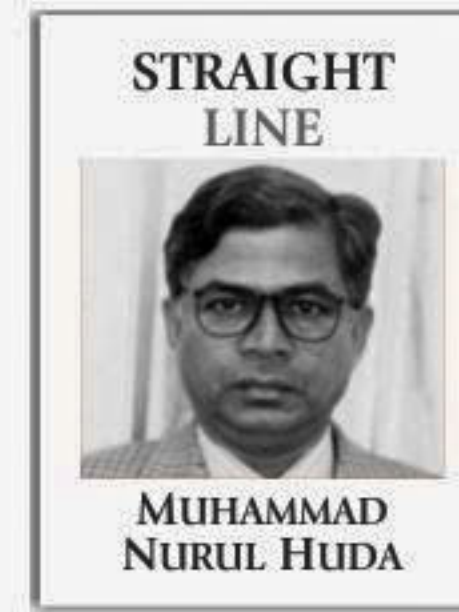
Critical points raised by House of Commons Serious questions on elections need answers

THE report presented in the UK House of Commons recently had a lot to say about the "level playing field" that our Election Commission (EC) keeps touting. Given the way we have treated reports published abroad in the past, the ruling party will surely claim it is a conspiracy, while the party in opposition will hail it as the truth. Our position is that it has a lot of merit.

What we gather from the "research briefing" is that the harassment of political opponents is ongoing in Bangladesh. While the ruling alliance is free to break EC rules, the opposition is finding more and more of its electoral candidates in jail, with cases against some, not to talk about ordinary party activists. There is a massive dearth of trust between the government and the opposition parties about whether the December 30 polls will be free, fair and inclusive.

That questions have been raised about the jail term of former PM and leader of the biggest opposition party Khaleda Zia being extended to 10 years from five as being a ploy to keep her from participating in the election is not going to find favour with the ruling party. The brief goes on to raise alarm about human rights violations in the country, with emphasis on the misuse of criminal charges, unlawful killings and the culture of enforced disappearances. Even more alarming is that the threat of jihadist terrorism is apparently far from being extinguished.

This paper has repeatedly highlighted the dangers of the vacuum created by an opposition-less political arena and how that space is increasingly being filled up by fringe parties espousing religious extremism. It would be wise to take heed of this very real threat and strive towards an inclusive election so that politics in our country remains within the grasp of legitimate parties who answer to the people. At the risk of repetition, we say that in making the election credible and participatory, the ruling party's role and responsibility are far greater than others', save perhaps only that of the EC.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE staggering number of nomination seekers, more than 4,000 for the 300 seats in the National Parliament, from the two major political parties that have ruled the country for the better part of our independent existence, gives rise to hope and concern. Decades ago George Orwell said, "In our age there is no such thing as 'Keeping out of politics'. All issues are political issues." It would not be an exaggeration to say that Bangalees are obsessed with politics and politics indeed is too much with them.

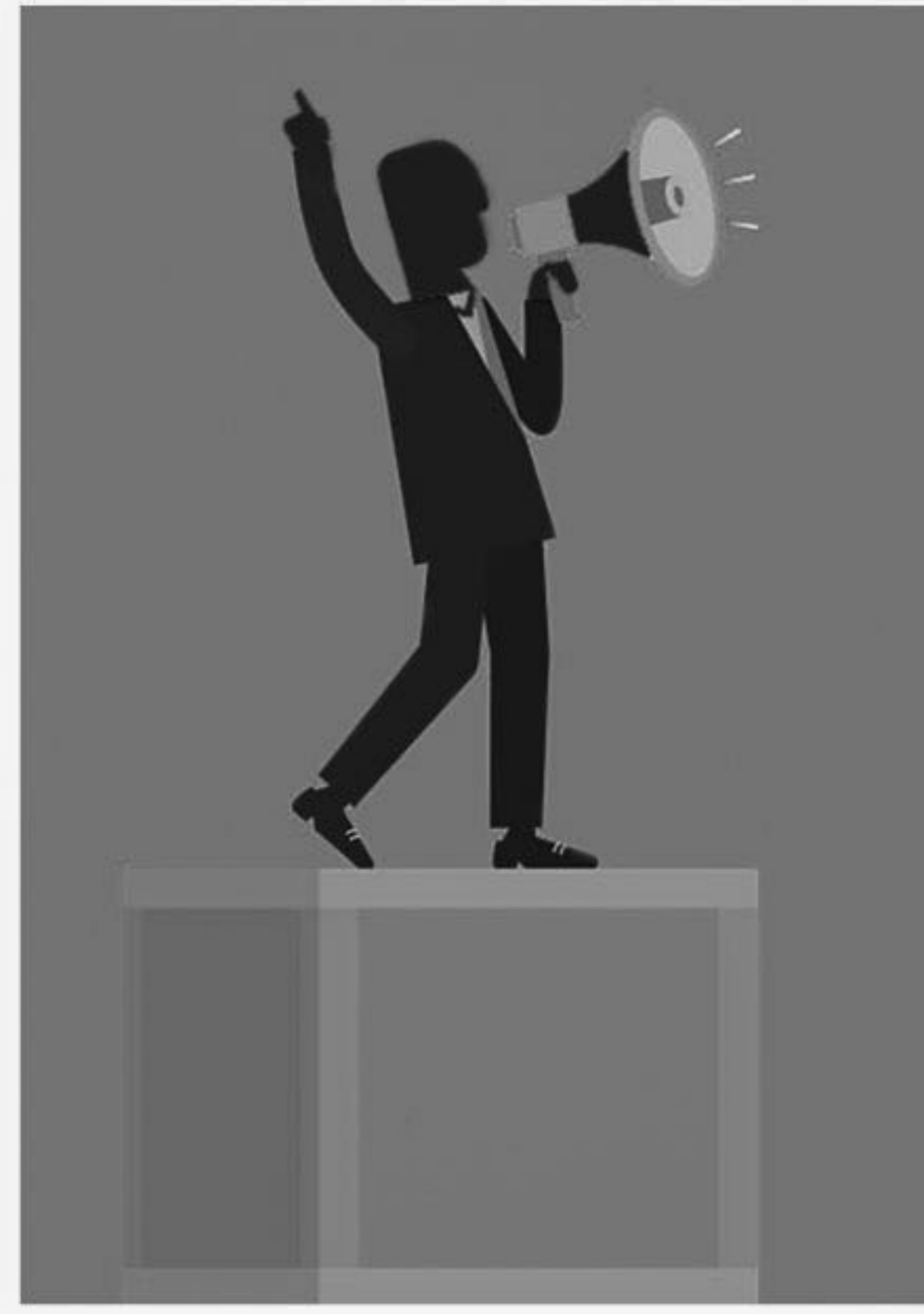
Let us admit that we cannot get rid of our obsession with politics. But should politics be restricted to formation of governments, their dismissals, press conferences, statements of political leaders of all hues and colours, representing parties of all sizes—big, medium, small, and even those that are known as "drawing room" parties?

The above premonition creeps in when one sees the near-final list of prospective candidates of both the political alliances for the ensuing national election. In this list, amongst others, one can quite clearly see that neither party, in nominating individuals, has given much importance to past records of corruption or links with militancy.

Every nation has its obsessions, every individual his idiosyncrasies. But the intriguing part is the narrow view we take of our favourite subject. Politics in Bangladesh mostly means the comings and goings of governments and the indiscretions connected with politicians.

One can clearly see that almost all our leaders are rhetorical to the core and their politics is largely based on worn-out clichés and inanities. They hardly talk in terms of issues, blueprints, action plans and targets. Issues which affect the day-to-day life of ordinary Bangladeshis rarely get any attention even from our educated classes.

Pessimists would say that politics has never been a particularly edifying activity. Daniel Webster said that the unvarying tendency of the mad strife of politics "is to belittle greatness and corrupt goodness. It contracts the mind and hardens the heart." John Dewey observed that "while saints are engaged in introspection burly sinners run the world." As of now, pessimists in Bangladesh perhaps could not be blamed for



holding a view as above because there is an unpalatable feeling that the politicians have not risen to the occasion.

Our civil society activists and other public-spirited folks would say that at this critical juncture, right-minded citizens cannot afford to stand frozen in disgust and dismay. The do-gooders would insist that we cannot merely look upon the political developments in sorrow and upon our politicians in anger. Their premonition is that the crisis, if not mastered, can turn into a disaster further down the road.

Whatever maybe the state of politics and the deficits of our politicians, a dispassionate look and balanced view would suggest that politics should not be reviled in the manner it is being done now. Perhaps it is a natural weakness to revile that which we cannot do without. However, what is disheartening is that in political exchanges we are witnessing a temper that is pressing a partisan advantage to its bitter end. This temper cannot understand and respect the other side

and does not feel a unity between all citizens.

Cynical observers of the current Bangladeshi political scene entertain grave doubts about a real change in the style and substance of politics insofar as desirable democratic governance scenario is concerned. Their continued pessimism is not without ground as hapless Bangladeshis sadly watch their guardians unmoved despite the combined onslaught of logic and reason, law and fact.

In a democracy based on adult suffrage—which means the head-counting method—the only way to achieve progress is to "educate our masters," to borrow the historic phrase of Disraeli. There must be a nationwide campaign to disseminate correct facts and right ideas among the public at large. The best charity which one can do in Bangladesh today is to carry knowledge to the people.

The duty of the citizen is not merely to vote but to vote wisely. He must be guided by reason, and by reason alone. He must vote for the best man, irrespective of any other consideration and irrespective of the party label. The right man in the wrong party is any day preferable to the wrong man in the right party.

It seems doubtful whether in the immediate future we shall attain stability and rapid progress through the democratic setup. However, what is more valuable and easier to save is the more distant future of this resilient nation. Years of intensive mass education will be needed if the standards of rationality and fair dealing, of social justice and individual freedom, which are enshrined in our Constitution, are to be bred in the bones of our young men and women who are in their formative years and to whom the future belongs.

Politics should touch our daily lives. For residents of urban centres, the issues of law and order, shortage of water and electricity, lack of a public transportation system, and unemployment should be the focal points of our politics. Issues which concern citizens' lives are political issues.

The colonial masters introduced the concepts, if not the perfect practice, of modern governance: a neutral civil service selected on the basis of a competitive examination, codification of laws, delegation of powers, local self-government and an independent judiciary, and, of course, modern universities and colleges for social science, medicine and engineering. If we succeed in rejuvenating all these, we will have excelled in the art of politics.

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Myanmar's anti-Rohingya campaign was genocide World powers must recognise it as such

A human rights group contracted by the US State Department reportedly found that there is "reasonable basis to conclude" that genocide did take place in Myanmar's Rakhine State against the Rohingya people. Another US State Department report released in September based on research of the same group came nearly a month after UN investigators issued a report accusing Myanmar's military of acting with "genocidal intent."

With a consensus growing among human rights groups and other organisations that genocide was indeed committed against the Rohingya people, the US and other world powers must now recognise Myanmar's anti-Rohingya military operation for what it really was: a deliberate extermination campaign.

While the US and several global powers have denounced the crackdown, they have fallen short of calling it genocide. The US position is reportedly based on worries that the administration will be somewhat legally bound to act harshly against Myanmar, should it choose to call it genocide. But harsh actions are precisely what the world needs to take against Myanmar.

We understand that the international community is wary of taking any action that may undermine Myanmar's civilian government. But at the same time, when it comes to such a grave crisis, the world must prioritise its moral duty over realpolitik.

The world's failure to act strongly against the campaign initially was partly to blame for the atrocities committed against the Rohingya. Now that fact-finding missions have repeatedly laid bare the facts about what happened in Rakhine—especially from August 2017 onwards—it's high time the international community corrected its previous mistakes and took stern actions against the perpetrators of some of the most heinous crimes against humanity of our time.

How can the private sector position Bangladesh for hypergrowth and long-term success?

VIJAY RAJU and SHEIKH TANJEB ISLAM

UNLIKE in many other countries, the private sector in Bangladesh was a crucial player in helping the country move up the development trajectory. By employing close to four million women across the 4,000 garments factories in Bangladesh or through providing basic banking services through microcredit and mobile financial services, the private sector in Bangladesh has played a significant role.

Over the coming years, this role must become more prominent as the world has been going through an unprecedented change over the last few years powered by digital interconnectedness and the rise of new technologies like Blockchain, AI and Internet of Things (IoT). This fourth industrial revolution is altering countries, industries, organisations, and even individuals, in unprecedented ways. The advent of platform business models like Uber led to the evolution of similar models globally including Pathao in Bangladesh and Oyo Rooms in India. There is a rising entrepreneurship movement riding on easy access to capital along with low capital requirements that enable companies to be created by any talented individual.

Social media usage is at an all-time high. But technology is also bringing in several unintended consequences and when used by the wrong actors or by the common person in wrong ways, it could have destabilising effects on the economy. In many countries, the economy rests on few industries and in some cases, few companies. Increasingly, countries are proactively shaping their policies to make it relevant to the new reality at the intersection of technology and society. Many countries are realising the importance of adapting to this new context. The private sector needs to rethink its role in Bangladesh to position itself for hypergrowth and long-term success.

With the emergence of new technologies like robotics and the pressure to create local jobs, many countries are increasingly moving their operations back home. Adidas recently announced that it will launch mass production of running shoes at a German factory operated largely by robots next year. These new technologies allow companies to lower their cost of operations and countries that are operating on cost arbitrage need to be ready to deal with these changes. The answer to these kinds of developments is not to reduce the wages of the employees to maintain low costs, but exploring ways to add more value either through high value-added services or leveraging technology to enhance productivity.

Poland, which doubled its GDP in the

last 25 years, recently became the first country from the former Soviet bloc to be ranked a "developed market." It could be an interesting role model when it comes to enterprise development. In Poland, an agency called Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) was launched to enable the creation and effective implementation of the state policy related to enterprise, innovation and staff adaptability in their quest to become an innovation-driven economy.

One of the things that the IT industry in India did was to bring predictability into the outcomes through efficient processes. The Software Engineering Institute Capability Maturity Model (SEI CMM) Level 5 certifies that an IT services company can deliver a risk-free performance during the entire course of a project. When project owners get assurance on how the risks are managed, it improves trust and sets the industry for long-term success.

The private sector needs to gain confidence in adopting new technologies using a test-and-learn mindset. An Indian supplier of the automotive industry recently integrated 3D printing for one small segment of their production pipeline with the full awareness that this may work or fail. Such experimentation helps to build new capabilities within the organisation and, most importantly, shapes organisational mindsets for change.

In the popular readymade garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh, technologies like Artificial Intelligence could be used to improve quality in a big way. Algorithms could be trained to evaluate textile grades, eliminate repetitive defects and even do colour evaluation. Already retailers like Amazon are using AI to understand consumer preferences. If the RMG sector can help their customers translate these preferences, it will not just build new capabilities but also help

move up into high value-added, technology services. The country's dense population could be a source for creating and leveraging large datasets that make AI successful. All of the above can happen only when the basic foundations are strong. It is essential for private sector to promote safe working conditions, compliance with regulations and transparency. In the absence of a strong foundation, the world will continue to evaluate the country and the industry on incidents like Rana Plaza.

Another area where private sector can contribute is around responsible digital and social media engagement. In a digital world, every citizen needs to be a responsible statesman. What we say and what we do online creates an image about ourselves, our network and our country. One wrong action in the online

and virtual worlds.

In addition to community development programmes already initiated by the private sector, some of the CSR programmes could aim at instilling responsible online behaviour, teaching social media ethics and eliminating fake news. In addition, leaders from the private sector need to systematically capture their innovations and responsibility initiatives. Most importantly, they need to be shared in local and global platforms which could lead to effective brand-building in the minds of not just global decision-makers but also among the general public.

The public sector alone cannot help the case for Bangladesh at a global level. It needs the help and support of the private sector. The country grew 7.28 percent in the last fiscal year and is pro-



There is a rising entrepreneurship movement around the world and the role of the private sector, powered by digital interconnectedness and new technologies, has to become more prominent.

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world by one random individual could lead to instant negative generalisations about a whole community or a whole country. It takes years to undo a negative perception and responsible engagement online is the cornerstone of a powerful national brand. We all remember how videos of Japanese fans cleaning the stadium, after watching a football match during the World Cup, went viral globally. It created global respect and a very positive perception towards Japan. Small acts of kindness and responsible behaviour can create huge positive outcomes for our respective organisations, communities, and countries. In addition to their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes on development and sustainability, the private sector can design CSR programmes to foster responsible citizenship both in the real

jected to grow at 7.5 percent for FY2018-19. As a result, this will be the eighth year in a row that its GDP has exceeded six percent. Private sector played a crucial role in this growth and to transcend to the next level of growth, the private sector needs to move beyond their organisations and help to catalyse systemic change. They need to support ecosystem development, enhance the scope of their CSR efforts, adopt an experimental mindset to build new capabilities riding on new technologies and, most importantly, shape the industry and national agenda locally as well as globally.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Bangladesh's agricultural potential

Bangladesh is a lower middle income, predominantly agricultural nation with a large and substantial section of the population still living under poverty. It is difficult for poor local farmers residing in remote areas to get bank loans or financial support to buy expensive farm equipment or necessary agricultural chemicals for boosting crop production.

Bangladesh practices a low input agricultural system. There is huge potential of developing extensive, low cost organic production system in different suitable parts of the country.

The country needs to first educate and train local farmers in organic production. Traditional agricultural production system in developing countries like Bangladesh is in line with modern organic production system. With a little help and some economic and technological support of the government, organic production system can indeed be a promising reality for Bangladesh.

Once slowly established, this will free poor marginal farmers from the socio-economic pressures of money lenders as they will need less input in the form of expensive synthetic fertilisers and agro-chemicals. Furthermore, due to the increasing popularity of organic products around the globe, farmers from Bangladesh will be able to export their organic products to international markets where there is high demand for organic products among health conscious customers.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada