

How the economy performed in 2018

Stability in the financial sector main worry

THIS paper recently carried out an opinion poll to get a sense of what went right and what didn't in 2018. Respondents included some 37 prominent businessmen, the presidents of four leading trade bodies, CEOs of banks, non-financial banking institutions, insurance companies; economists and researchers. The positives included some major growth drivers: exports, public spending on infrastructure, remittance and agriculture. Sixty-two percent of respondents pointed out that robust export (62.8 percent) propelled the economy forward in 2018. Inward remittance grew a healthy 32.43 percent and increase in public spending on infrastructure was significant at 54.05 percent. The overall political stability in the country helped move the economy forward, but it could have done much better if nagging bottlenecks could be addressed.

Principal among these are a lack of good governance, the high cost of doing business, low domestic investment, and container congestion at Chittagong port. Bangladesh has, unfortunately, been consistently scoring low scores in the cost of doing business and this situation has to be addressed if we want more businesses (both local and foreign) to register companies. The bottleneck at Chittagong port has proved to be very stubborn because of a lack of policy initiative and the situation will pose a major challenge for the incoming government in 2019, especially in light of the fact that neighbouring India has been granted transit rights at Chittagong port and the volume of container movement is set to rise significantly in the coming year.

Business community leaders hope that stability will remain in the post-election period and there is much concern about whether the next government will take concrete steps to bring back stability in the financial sector. Nearly 46 percent respondents are looking forward to a better business environment. Fewer respondents hoped for a stable energy supply, timely completion of mega projects that would help alleviate traffic congestion—both of which could help put the economy on a much firmer footing in 2019.

Children's example should be emulated

Changing attitudes in Teesta char

WHEN it comes to combating the scourge of child marriage, we do not usually envision the fight being fought by school children themselves, and that too happening at a remote char land like the Char Sinduma on the banks of the Teesta River in Hatibandha upazila. There, a group of 25 schoolgirls (Grades 7-10) took it upon themselves to form an association that would go door to door to spread the message that child marriage is bad for children and that getting an education is just as important for a girl as it is for a boy. A report in this newspaper on December 27 tells us of their extraordinary tale. That these children chose to do something so unheard of and manage to get the ear of parents in this remote and backward area is testament to what can be done by children where we adults have failed to do.

Changing attitudes is perhaps the most difficult of tasks anywhere in the world. It is especially hard in communities that suffer from longstanding poverty and where social customs dictate for children to be married off at an early age. The Teesta Shishu Dal (TSD) is part of a larger platform funded by Plan International Bangladesh. These girls are conducting the campaign and attitudes are slowly beginning to change in the community. Although three girls of the TSD were secretly married off by their parents, incidences of child marriage have begun to decrease in Char Sinduma.

Though child marriage is illegal, the practice is widely prevalent in rural areas, particularly areas that are remote like the char lands. What TSD has shown us is that change must be initiated from within the community and age-old attitudes can be changed gradually. This is certainly a practice that can and should be replicated on a bigger scale to help fight child marriage nationwide.

What kind of an election will it be?

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



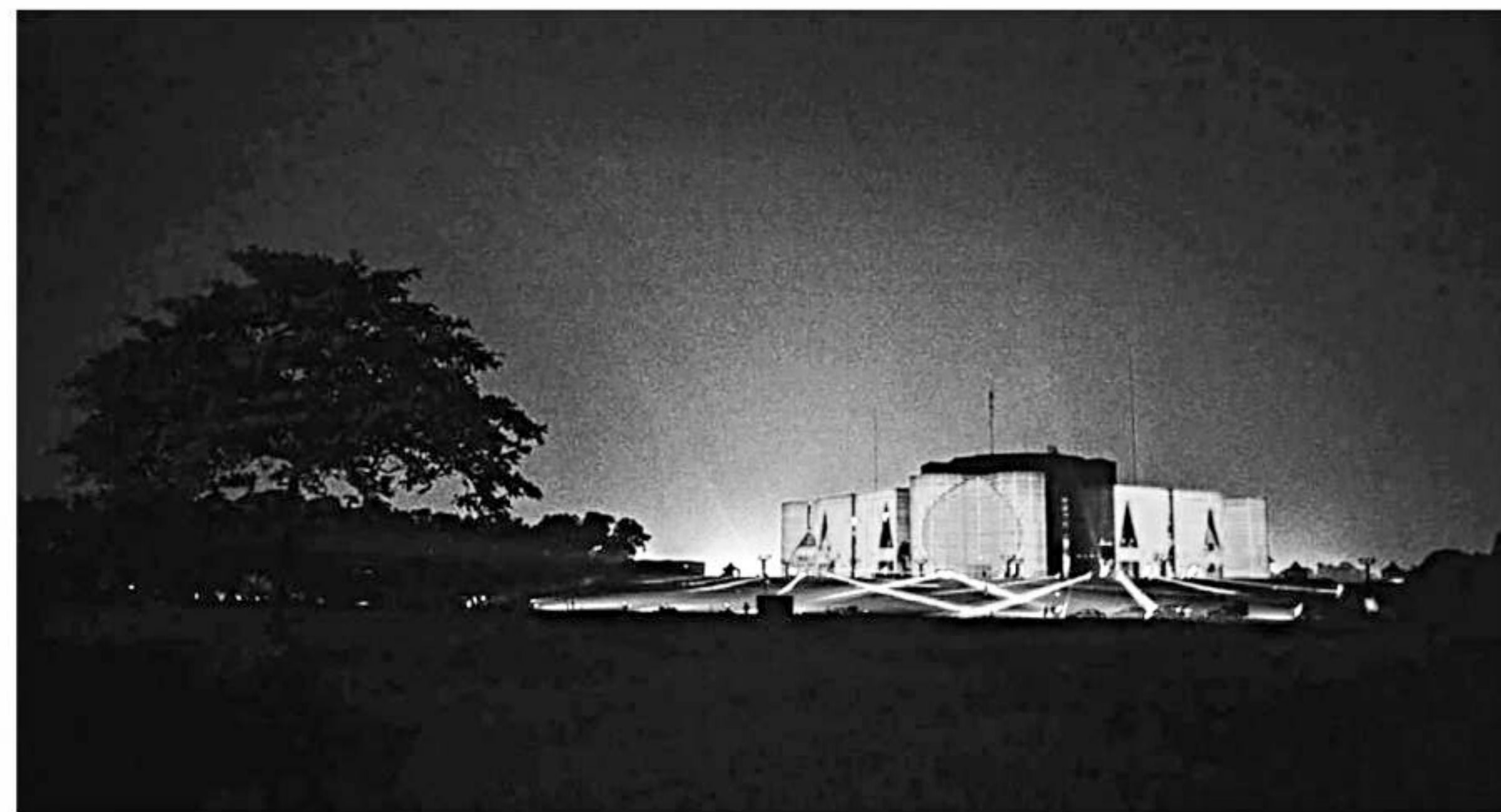
ALI RIAZ

IN the next 24 hours Bangladesh will have a national election. The question is what kind of an election will it be?

It has already become unprecedented on many counts: the incumbent is seeking a third term, an election is being held under an incumbent government which is being participated in by all political parties, and it is taking place at a time when fear has permeated society and there are questions whether voters will be able to exercise their fundamental right which is considered paramount when a country calls itself democratic. There are other unique features too: various alliances have emerged which defied all conventional wisdom, it has eclipsed some political actors, at least for the moment, and the voters' roll has the largest number of first-time voters. Above and beyond these, it is marked by the relentless violence faced by the opposition candidates and activists since the election process began.

The history of Bangladesh is replete with various kinds of elections, participatory and non-participatory; rigged and fair; state managed and spontaneous. Results in some cases were forgone conclusions, while at times, given a fair opportunity the voters had proved the predictions wrong. Although this is the eleventh parliamentary election since 1973, extant discussions have frequently referred to the elections held since the fifth parliamentary election in 1991, a clear recognition that the previous four elections were not something of which Bangladeshis are proud. Because they have failed to meet the fundamental criterion of credible and acceptable elections, whether participated in by major political parties or not. Some call these elections a sham, while others insist, they were mockery. This is merely a semantic difference. These elections, like any election anywhere in the world, have delivered winners and vanquished; these elections have created governments, who subsequently ruled the country—for a short period or relatively longer. But we know, not only in hindsight, not only because historians or political scientists have told us so, that they lacked the moral legitimacy which is an essential element of governance. Elections are supposed to deliver a mandate to govern, not an open-ended license to rule, a distinction often forgotten by those who emerged victorious in these elections.

It is not that all elections since 1991 passed the litmus test of credibility and acceptability; the February 1996 and the December 2013 elections fell far short. But four other elections, 1991, 1996 (June), 2001 and



It is upon the voters, 100 million of them, to step up and make the election inclusive and credible and deliver their verdict.

PHOTO: STAR

2008, have succeeded in crossing the threshold of credible and acceptable elections. Although vanquished parties alleged various anomalies—from blatant rigging to fine-tuned machination, the voters at large have viewed these results as legitimate. Constitutional and legal legitimacy are necessary for any election to be considered acceptable, but these are not enough; it's the moral legitimacy which rallies people around an elected government and makes the ruling party their true representative. Moral legitimacy can neither be gained through an election which lacks integrity, nor can it be achieved through coercion.

Political scientists, for long, have described democracy as a system where the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the people who will govern, via competitive elections. As such, an election is the way to select who will represent them and who will make the laws. But it is well to bear in mind that, election is not only about who wins, but also how the victory is secured. The means of the victory determines the depth and breadth of legitimacy or lack thereof. That's why some victories become hollow, a cursory glance at recent elections all around the world provide ample evidence in this regard, as is the history of elections in Bangladesh. Prior to 1991, almost all elections in Bangladesh suffered from the crisis of moral legitimacy; and in post 1991, elections held in February 1996 and December 2013, fall within

the same category. This was the past.

We are now standing at the cusp of the future. As the nation faces another election, the questions are what kind of an election will it be? What kind of an election do the Election Commission and the incumbent intend to deliver? Despite the events of the past weeks, which have put a big question mark on the integrity of the ensuing election and diminished the possibility of an acceptable election, the die is yet to be cast. The opportunity is still there to make it an historic election, through creating an environment which will allow the voters to come out in droves. After missing the opportunity five years ago, the voters are eager to cast their votes as we have seen before. In 2008, after an election was delayed for only two years, voter turnout increased by almost 10 percent compared to 2001. Let the people speak, let their voices be heard. Let an election be held which cannot be questioned, whatever the result may be. It is also upon the voters, 100 million of them, to step up and make the election inclusive and credible and deliver their verdict. The future is not predetermined, they are shaped in many ways by what one does today.

Lest we forget, history bears witness to all things that happen, and it also judges the actors. These judgments are contemporaneous as well.

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Relationship between MPs and local public representatives

ZAHIR AHMED

WHEN it comes to winning support, politicians are selective about how they represent themselves, their views or decisions, their projects or policies, and their opponents, supporters or alliances. Politicians in Bangladesh claim to represent multiple, changeable and complex interests but what does that mean in practice? Let us hear the experiences of some ordinary citizens in different constituencies in this regard.

To introduce the relationship between MPs and the local public representatives, I will begin with a Union Parishod (UP) chairman, not because he is typical in a totalising sense, but due to what he reveals about the commonality of some aspects of MP-local elected representative relations centred around particular events.

because MPs are constructing and reconstructing pavements around their own houses, or in places from which s/he will get votes during elections. The places that were in dire need of repair were being neglected; the problems in need of immediate attention weren't being solved. Even at the Union level, the MPs interfere.

Here the barrier between the MP and a local public representative is revealed; a mix of political interests, bureaucratic rule and myopic party affiliation restrict the implementation of development in response to need. The UP Chairman was not critical of a particular MP. The weak linkages between the MP and ordinary citizens shown in his testimony were evident in nearly every one of the interviews I conducted in different constituencies.

If politics is about a struggle of power, resources and ideas, then social relations are a necessary part of democratic politics, that is, to win support and make engagements.

most organise people-centred activities. Due to the social enclosure system nowadays, there are a few sycophants circling the representatives at all times to grab all the facilities. One has to ensure their responsibility and accountability to the people. I asked what accountability means in this context. He explained, "Let's ponder on what happens in Bangladesh. You buy a nomination from your party, symbolised by 'Sheaf of Paddy' (*Dhaner Sheesh* for BNP) or 'Boat' (*Nouka* for Awami League), and you get elected because nobody bothers about who you are but what symbol you are representing."

As he further elaborates, "Actually, you don't need the citizens to vote for you; thus, you surround yourself with the muscles required to obtain and hold on to power; you rear a few loyal political party supporters who would get you the votes and silence any voice of dissent. The situation is becoming worse with time and might reach endemic proportions during the next government, be it Awami League or BNP forming the cabinet."

The majority of local constituents also believed that they have to destroy this shadowy, symbolic politics in order to ensure nomination by the public, rather than the parliament. According to them, people must be allowed to form the parliament adhering to the constitutional protocol and not vice versa. In your opinion, what should an MP's activities be? I asked groups of citizens in many constituencies. The answer was that the same as the MPs in developed countries. The MP should only propose new plans and laws on the basis of analytical

research. Is his/her any special background not taken into account? I further asked the councillor.

The answer was: Not only that, but much more. The MPs are handed infinite power over the administration. Firstly, the absolute power that the party heads enjoy must be revoked or limited with principles. The party head shouldn't be allowed to exercise unbridled authority. Secondly, one shouldn't be granted nomination merely on account of possessing Tk 1 billion. If you want to see potent and effective parliamentary democracy, this aspect must be reformed. Thirdly, the constituents are happy if the MP has fulfilled his/her task of notifying the parliament about the central predicament of the constituency.

Shifting gaze to other actors in a constituency, some Union Parishad chairmen told me that in deciding what is urgently needed, and which tasks should be given priority, the MP consult with them and take decisions. They appreciate this. In response to the question what an MP should do in his constituency, the chairmen told me that the primary duty should be to enact law. As they narrate, "The MP should play his/her role with dignity and should contribute to establishing good governance. But in our country MPs stay out of the parliament. His or her concentration is more on development activities rather than framing laws."

Ordinary female citizens claim that not even the Members of the Ward or Union/Upazilla call on them, let alone the Chairman or the MP. When they were told that the MP visits the area twice a month, they maintained that they do not have the opportunity or time to make their way over there.

The relationships between the elected and the elector are both political and social in the sense that I have noted. If politics is about a struggle of power, resources and ideas, then social relations are a necessary part of democratic politics, that is, to win support and make engagements. Thus we need to distinguish different acts of representation in a particular democratic setting, taking developments that stress the importance of relationships, context and representation into account.

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A grassroots local public representative narrates his pain in working with the hierarchies of bureaucracy.

In a conversation with the researchers he narrated his perspective about whether an MP possesses absolute power. He explained that in a few places, the MP is tantamount to the local equivalent of the prime minister. He elaborates by saying, "Well, not quite, since the prime minister remains within the constitutional restraints; whereas, the MPs exercise their authority to exceed their limitations almost whenever and however they please, beyond law, beyond protocol, beyond all decency. They impose their self-made rules at will." The conversation continued: "Who exercises power like this and how?" I asked. He says that it is

Let us look at the way one interview preceded as I tried to get a local Union Councillor to explain the relations between the MP and the constituents and the nature of public engagement in the area. When I asked him how an MP engages with public representatives at the grassroots level, such as himself, he explained that to encourage effective interaction, the government passes ordinances to allocate authority to several sectors included in the government such as the Department for Women's Affairs, Public Health, Local Government, and so on. What is their task? I wanted to know from him.

The answer was straightforward: to ensure public participation in the locality in order to solve various problems, they

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improving the Shahbagh footbridges

Like many other roads in the capital, the Shahbagh road has three footbridges. They are particularly important because two of the largest hospitals of our country, the National Museum, Independence Museum, Shishu Park and many other important institutions are located near its junction.

Normally, pedestrians refuse to use footbridges to cross the road. But in the interest of safety, there is no other alternative to using footbridges. Since Shahbagh is a busy intersection, the authorities should encourage people to use the footbridges located there. In some areas of the city, escalators have been added so that people are encouraged to do so. In many other places, roofs were added over the footbridges.

However, the footbridges in Shahbagh do not have these. It will be helpful for patients and other pedestrians if these were added.

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