

AL's third consecutive term

Victory should not obscure the challenges ahead

THE verdict of the 11th parliamentary polls is clear: Awami League has secured a decisive victory with two-thirds majority. Sheikh Hasina, who is set to become prime minister for a third consecutive term, made history on Sunday as this is a wholly unprecedented feat.

Notwithstanding the reservations about the election process, we would like to reiterate that for the new government, there are many challenges that lie ahead which ought to be prioritised because that is what will dictate the future trajectory of the country. The AL, in the last 10 years, has made significant strides in terms of economic development, poverty reduction, food security, combating militancy, and universal primary education, among others. It was under the AL government that Bangladesh reached the milestone of becoming eligible for graduation out of the Least Developed Country group into the developing countries' group. There are many such notable achievements that the AL must be proud of.

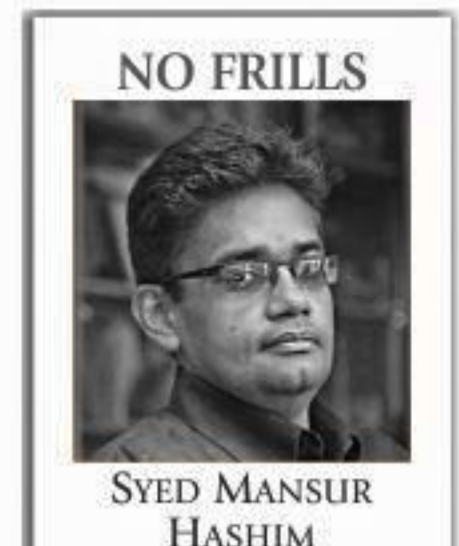
However, during its tenure, we have also witnessed human rights abuses and a lack of good governance and rule of law. This has eroded the confidence of many citizens and created a climate of fear as freedom of expression and assembly remains under threat. The AL government, despite concerns by rights bodies and civil society, has not been able to shrug off the spectre of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Furthermore, the fact that it failed to rein in vested groups who conducted themselves with absolute impunity and indulged in rampant corruption is something that continues to be an overriding concern for citizens. This was perhaps most visibly manifested in the banking sector where a toxic loan default culture led to nonperforming loans reaching a massive Tk 1 lakh crore as of September 2018—the highest in Bangladesh's history. Other longstanding problems include land grabbing, corruption in the public sector, and an overall lack of transparency and accountability in public institutions. For example, the AL government has taken up a bold initiative of jumpstarting many megaprojects, but many of these projects have been plagued with massive cost overruns and delays and a lack of monitoring and evaluation which is a primary component for evaluating project efficiency. What must also be mentioned is that the AL has failed to put a stop to the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) flexing its muscle now and then.

As the AL steps into its third consecutive term in office, it cannot continue to ignore these thorny issues because they have only served to hold back the pace of the country's progress. The AL must recognise that these issues that have long remained unaddressed are major impediments that put a dampener on the innumerable achievements of the nation as a whole.

We wish we could say that Sunday's election was completely free of allegations of irregularities and violence. But that is unfortunately not the case. The election process, as news reports and media coverage suggest, lends itself to question. It is not the victory of the AL that is to be doubted but the overwhelming nature of the victory itself. The number of seats that the AL has already won is the highest the party has ever secured, only second to the number of seats it won in the country's first election held in March 1973. Thus, the scale of the AL's victory, and the statistical rarity as one can gauge by looking at the election results, is something that analysts have cast doubt on. To put it simply, the more we examine the nature of the victory, the more incredulous it seems.

Having said that, the fact of the matter is that the AL is set to govern the country for the next five years. And we hope that the maturity with which the AL chief reacted to the party's victory, by forbidding holding of victory rallies, prevails in its sincere assessment of the victory at large—that is to say that the AL should not simply take the resulting figures at face value but subject them to honest evaluation and good judgment. Such an evaluation will not affect their secured position in power but only help them assess the reality better and thus govern the country more judiciously.

RMG in 2018 and what lies ahead



NO FRILLS
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

ACCORDING to a research study published by Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI), the ready-made garments (RMG) sector has the potential to earn Bangladesh an additional USD 17.4 billion using its existing export capacity. The study, titled "LDC Graduation and Apparel Exports to EU", which was unveiled last Thursday, tells us that there is an urgent need to recognise the constraints that are holding back our exports; principal among them are low productivity, poor infrastructure, and low price-negotiation capacity by the manufacturers.



The RMG sector will have to negotiate better prices from buyers, without which, the expensive upgrades are not going to pan out.

Getting rid of infrastructure problems, improving productivity, ensuring safety compliance, etc, all fall under the aegis of development.

Yes, the country is in the midst of upgrading its physical infrastructure, but the mega-projects now underway are years behind schedule. Getting them on fast track should be the first priority of the incoming government. Then there is the big question looming over Bangladesh moving closer to graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status to that of a developing nation in 2027—a major achievement that will be accompanied by the loss of preferential treatment that we get from the European Union (EU) as an LDC, a loss of business up to USD 1.6 billion per annum,

because once Bangladesh graduates to the developing country status, our RMG products will be subject to 8.0-10.0 percent duty on export to the EU.

These are the hard facts of life. For our RMG products to enjoy zero-tariff status in the EU, our policymakers would have to obtain the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Plus status. For us to get to that stage, experts and industry leaders believe that Bangladesh will have to overhaul its image as a labour-friendly country. Sadly, the mere ratification of EU conventions will not cut the ice. As pointed out by the managing director of a major RMG manufacturer, eight of the 27 EU conventions are labour-related, and that compliance must be taken seriously because the RMG industry will have a hard time competing in the EU market if Bangladeshi apparels are subject to 8-9 percent duty.

Although the RMG sector has taken big strides in ensuring workers' safety after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, IndustriALL (which is one of the two internally backed efforts to improve safety standards) stated recently that "over 50 percent of the factories still lack adequate fire alarm and detection systems and 40 percent are still completing structural renovations." Needless to say, RMG is the one sector that dominates our economy, and with good reason. Not only is it the largest industrial employer, it also gener-

ates 92 percent of our exports; our total export in 2018 was USD 21 billion (USD 19.6 billion came from RMG). As pointed out by industry insiders, safety cannot be treated as an afterthought; rather it should be embedded in the business model as one of the major compliance factors for guaranteed entry into foreign markets like the EU, and whilst many RMG factory owners are unhappy about the continued presence of IndustriALL and Accord and what they deem to be unrealistic demands for safety, can we really afford to step back from the work (albeit expensive in nature) and risk the backlash from big buyers?

We really need to get a move on at the policy level on a host of pressing issues. At policy level, there has to be a commitment to negotiate the possibility of a free trade agreement with the EU. That's the job of the government. We need policy initiatives and directives that will help expedite infrastructure development, product diversification and transfer of technology. The RMG sector will have to negotiate better prices from the buyers, without which all those expensive upgrades that come under safety, as advocated by the bodies working for better safety standards, are not going to bring dividends. Since adherence to safety standards is a core pillar of the EU conventions, the government, which is a part of the tripartite regime on improving

safety in the RMG sector, will have to play its role on this issue.

As things stand now, all the hype has been around the country graduating from the LDC status. The loss of duty-free access will have a direct impact on loss of business which will inevitably be picked up by other countries like Cambodia, India, Turkey and Vietnam. The Bangladeshi RMG sector currently holds the no. 2 position globally and that was possible because the industry was able to deliver large volumes of apparels at competitive prices. But with the LDC graduation and the potential loss of EU preference, our competitive edge will be hit. We need to take cognizance of these realities, and as pointed out in the study, the time to start negotiating a bilateral trade deal with the EU is now, and not when we graduate.

Getting rid of the nagging infrastructure problems, improving productivity, ensuring safety compliance, upgrading technology, streamlining customs, improving port management efficiency, upgrading the transportation sector—all fall under the aegis of development, the benefits of which would be reaped by the exporters, particularly the RMG sector. All these areas of improvement must be priority areas for the government that starts a new term in office after the recently concluded polls.

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COP24: All noise, no signals

QUAMRUL HAIDER

CLIMATE change has become a political football in the last 20 years. The "un"-stable American genius once mocked climate change as a Chinese hoax. Now he believes "something's changing," but it is "not man-made." Other heads of state and government talk and act as if climate change will follow whatever is agreed upon by them at various conferences. However, they do not realise that the Earth's climate system is highly complex, and complex systems do not respond to whims.

Since 1995, when the first Conference of Parties (COP) took place in Berlin, world leaders or their representatives met 24 times to address the burning issue of global climate change. At these conferences, they debated about steps that

weather-related events that would create, in a very short order, a new planet, still recognisable, but violently out of balance.

The recently concluded COP24 held at Katowice, the coal capital of Poland, was attended by thousands of negotiators representing different countries as well as scientists, students, environmental activists, business groups, non-governmental organisations and journalists. Conspicuously absent were heads of state of some of the countries, most notably the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, China and India, which emit carbon dioxide in copious amounts. Many activists from developing nations hardest hit by the impacts of climate change were denied visas to attend the conference. Some attendees deemed undesirable by the Polish authorities were either deported or forc-

all temperature rise below two degrees Celsius before the end of this century.

After two weeks of acrimonious debate, it was déjà vu—failure to produce a substantive framework for policy which would offer coherence and consistency as to how the global community should cope with the long-term challenges of climate change. The only noteworthy piece of document that COP24 produced is a Rulebook for putting the 2015 Paris Climate Accord into practice. Suffice it to say, the guidelines outlined in the Rulebook could be portrayed as stopgap measures, for they only treat the symptoms and neglect the underlying root causes of climate change. Therefore, they won't be enough to stop global warming from reaching critical levels.

There are other takeaways from the conference, too. For the umpteenth time we were reminded—this time by the UN

United States "noted", but did not "welcome", the scientific evidences related to climate change. Supported by the host country, where almost 85 percent of electricity is produced from coal, they expressed reluctance to phase out the use of fossil fuels.

The only heartening takeaway from COP24 was the participation of the new generation including school-going children. In particular, Greta Thunberg, a 15-year-old Swedish girl and one of the speakers, castigated the world leaders accusing them of abdicating their responsibility to address adequately the problems arising from climate change. She did not mince words in pointing out that "our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury."

Greta's speech should motivate us to set aside zero-sum game thinking, and think more about how to work together to achieve a greener world. Specifically, we have to fully transition to renewable energy, draw down carbon dioxide, relocate the displaced millions, farm and grow more sustainably, and rejuvenate Earth's ecosystems. Most importantly, we have to build a society that seeks balance between human and ecological needs, thereby ensuring that we, our future generations, and other species can survive and live well. Failure to do so would result in a disaster of epic proportions.

Achieving the above-mentioned goals would require cooperation between nations on a much grander scale than envisioned at COP24. The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June, 1992 is a good example, although not an ideal one. Nevertheless, the summit produced several agreements on climate change, deforestation, species protection and sustainable development. Participants also published a massive document called Agenda 21, which outlines thousands of ways to solve many of the world's environmental problems caused by climate change.

Finally, in physics, there is a phenomenon known as "resonance" that is produced by sympathetic vibration. For example, when we turn the knob of a radio to tune to a station, we are changing the frequency of the electrical circuit of the receiver to make it equal to the transmission frequency of the radio station. When the two frequencies match, there is resonance and we can hear clearly broadcasts from the station. If the frequencies do not match, we hear only noise. At COP24, there were nearly 200 participating nations operating at discordant frequencies. Hence, there was no resonance, only noise without any discernible signal.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Everybody deserves an equal chance

Getting a government job involves a good amount of effort but no matter one's educational background, they can be called for interviews. In this case, not getting a job can be attributed to a dearth of knowledge and sagacity.

However, the experience is different when it comes to getting a job in a private enterprise. We often hear employers talk about not finding candidates who are talented, tech-savvy, skillful, and enterprising. In quest of competent candidates, they tend to limit their search within a certain domain. We are progressively endorsing the perception that talented candidates are only from the top few universities.

We circumscribe our pursuit of candidates to a handful of universities and we fail to look far beyond this sphere. Not only does it lead to potential candidates being deprived of opportunities to attend interviews but it also blatantly shows that discrimination at the workplace begins from the ground up. This could be a reason why many graduates, after concluding their tertiary education from a university other than the most reputed, mostly fail to get jobs in renowned private organisations. It is imperative that the government body and concerned authorities be aware of this fact and pay due attention to this issue before the situation gets worse.

Abu Hasnat Evna Mostafa
 Corporate HR Executive
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Climate change activists gather in Berlin, Germany on December 1, 2018 to protest against the use of coal.

should be taken to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, ignoring other greenhouse gases, some of which are more potent than carbon dioxide. Some of them argued that atmospheric data is incomplete and computer models used by climate scientists are only as reliable as the data fed into them. Others contended that we are trying to measure small changes in a large, complex system and extrapolating those changes into the future is always tricky. The conferences usually ended without any unified strategies to mitigate the dangerous impacts of climate change. In the meantime, our planet is heating up, causing extreme

ly kept away from the conference site.

As expected, disagreements at the conference weren't really about climate change and global warming. Rather, they were about protecting the national interests of the industrialised countries. To that end, they interpreted scientific results in a way that would bolster, instead of undermine, the support of their political base. Others, including delegates from Bangladesh and small island nations that are least responsible for causing global warming but most vulnerable to its devastating effects, urged the participating nations to adopt a collective action plan to keep the over-

Secretary General—that "climate change is the defining issue of our time, and we are at a defining moment." His statement was rephrased by Poland's President who said that "climate change constitutes one of the gravest threats of our time." British environmentalist Sir David Attenborough was one of the few moral voices who mentioned that besides human activity, human inaction is also responsible for climate change. He warned that our inaction would lead to "the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world."

Kuwait, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the