

A wishlist for 2019

May it be a peaceful year

THE country saw a general election on the penultimate day of 2018 that resulted in a landslide result for the AL-led alliance. People left the capital city in droves to cast their votes since the chance to exercise their franchise had arrived after a decade. The capital wore a deserted and somewhat eerie look.

Now that there will be a new government in power, albeit the old alliance at the helm, it is time to look forward to the commitments made during the campaign. The people have been promised unprecedented development of the economy through the many megaprojects already underway, a relentless war on drugs and against corruption. While that is all very good, a leash must be put on the time and cost overruns in megaprojects.

We look forward to a lessening of violence in society and take heart from a recent statement made by Awami League's general secretary that political revenge will not be tolerated. That is the right attitude because Bangladesh belongs to all its 18 crore people and although there will always be divergence of opinion in politics, it can only be hoped that the winning party will show the way through magnanimous behaviour. It is our hope that there would be more tolerance for dissent and space for the opposition would be opened up.

There is much to look forward to in other fields too. The economic gains of the past decade cannot be denied. The GDP growth rate today stands at 7.8 percent and Bangladesh has emerged as the second largest exporter of readymade apparels in the world. Other sectors of the economy like pharmaceuticals are coming of age and only if peace is ensured can we look forward to further economic progress. But progress and development must find equitable distribution, and the rich-poor gap should be brought down further.

A victim of a venomous mindset

Woman gang-raped for voting for her choice

WE are horrified at the incident of a gang-rape in Noakhali's Subarnachar last Monday. A 35-year-old woman was victimised for voting for the BNP. Going by the report of this daily, during Sunday's voting, Ruhul, the publicity affairs secretary of Subarnachar AL, insisted that the woman vote for the party, but as she didn't oblige, he threatened her at the voting centre. She was allegedly gang-raped later that night by Ruhul's accomplices who are also local Awami League activists.

This is a rare incident and just goes to show how poisonous our political culture has become over the years and how women are always the worst victims of this political culture. Our major political parties, particularly the ruling Awami League, always take credit for their success in women's empowerment, but when it comes to ensuring safety of women, the story is not the same. The fact that a woman was gang-raped just because she had an opinion of her own is beyond appalling.

As women rights activists have put it, the basic characteristics of our politics are still patriarchal in nature and the issue of women's safety is never addressed in party meetings. Moreover, many women members of major political parties often face harassment by their fellow male party members. If women's safety cannot be ensured within the political parties, how will women's safety be ensured in the remote corners of the country? Therefore, our political parties must change their mindset and give priority to gender issues. They must stop victimising women for their petty political interests. Several recent studies have found that violence against women is on the rise in the country. And ruling party members should not be a reason for this rise.

In this particular case, we are astonished at the comment of a superintendent of police in Noakhali who said that the rape took place but claimed it was not related to voting. How could a policeman make such a claim even before holding any investigation? We hope the police will play its own neutral role and do more than just "try" to arrest the alleged culprits.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Improving cab and auto-rickshaw service

The regular refusal by cab and CNG-run auto-rickshaw drivers to drop customers off at their desired destination and to charge them appropriately and according to the taximeter has been a serious issue in most cities across Bangladesh. Strict laws have been enacted, but with little impact and customers continue to suffer as a result. However, I would also like to highlight that not all cab drivers are devoid of moral ethics and have often extended exemplary services to many customers in need of help and immediate support.

The problem that I highlighted is a unique South Asian phenomenon that ordinary citizens have encountered for decades.

The Bangladesh government must take proper action to solve this problem. To allow positive changes to take place, the administration also needs to provide security to cab drivers as well as protect them from exploitation by the police and others. I sincerely believe that both sides have a role to play here in order to bring about the necessary changes.

Saikat Kumar Basu, Canada



MANZOOR AHMED

THE Awami League and partners led by Sheikh Hasina won a stunning victory in the 11th parliamentary election on December 30 bagging over 95 percent of the seats. Is it a victory for the people also? If not, can it still be turned into a people's victory?

An expatriate polling expert assisting in the ruling party's internal poll about election prospects spoke to this writer a week before the polls, choosing to remain anonymous. It was a nationwide sample survey of constituencies, both urban and rural. The pollster's prediction was a 60:40 split among the voters in favour of the ruling coalition.

Asked about how the voting split might translate into numbers of parliamentary seats, the prediction was that the ruling alliance would win a comfortable majority to form the government and there would be a sizable opposition presence.

Our conversation turned to media reports and opposition complaints about the police and administration's harassment of opposition leaders and workers, the spate of arrests and a flood of court cases, and even intimidation of opposition sympathisers during the run-up to the polls.

The statistician, who is also an economist well-acquainted with Bangladesh's development and politics, wondered why the regime felt the compulsion to resort to questionable steps to tilt the playing field in its favour. Was it a lack of self-confidence and fear of defeat in a fair election or an authoritarian desire to wrest absolute control of politics in the country?

We will never know. As it turned out, the polls were marrred by violence, with 18 people on both sides killed. The absence of polling agents of the opposition in polling centres, reportedly intimidated by arrests and even death threats, voters kept waiting in queues, ruling party supporters chasing away the opposition from the vicinity of polling centres, and cases of ballot-stuffing were reported by the media.

The large margins of difference in votes for winners and the next highest number were unprecedented. There is a

general belief borne out by past experiences that the two major contending parties had a loyal support base of around one-third of the electorate, and the poll outcome depended on the swing among the undecided one-third.

This pattern did not apply this time. The ruling coalition received 82 percent of the votes and 15 percent went to the Oikyafront. Why? Are we witnessing a shift in the loyalties and mindset of the electorate—perhaps with a quarter of the voters comprising of the youth aged under 28 and almost half of them first-time voters? Again, we will never know, because we don't know to what degree the voting was a genuine expression of



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

their views.

We will also not know how much public support the Islamist political parties can claim. Some 25 members of the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami fought under the opposition coalition Oikyafront insignia of the sheaf of paddy, but withdrew from the election, when they saw the voting trend.

Eleven other Islamist parties or groups fielded 568 candidates in the election. Only one won a seat with others pushed aside by the ruling party's cavalcade of victory.

Impartial observers agree that the Election Commission before and during the election failed to do what it was

duty-bound to do to create a level playing field for all contenders and prevent the excesses of police, officials and the ruling party's muscle men. Ordinary people, when entrusted a great responsibility, sometimes rise to the occasion. As Shakespeare said, "Some are born great...and some have greatness thrust upon them." This was clearly not the case with this Election Commission.

It is imperative for the nation to look ahead. With greater self-confidence and an overwhelming majority in parliament, the government can adopt laws, policies and programmes that can serve the country well, not just the self-interest of the parliament members. The new tenure of Sheikh Hasina gives her

A shift in mindset is needed about how the executive branch of the government relates to the Commissions for human rights, freedom of information, anti-corruption and the election body. The servants of the republic cannot be just partisans who serve their political masters; their action and discretion must be guided by a code of conduct to serve the public.

MP Saber Hussain Chowdhury had tabled a draft of a Code of Conduct Act for Parliamentarians in 2010, but it languished for lack of interest in the government and among parliamentarians. Badiul Alam Majumdar of Shujan pleads for a National Charter to strengthen democracy. He advocates steps for making the parliament effective, strengthening statutory institutions, making political parties democratic and transparent, safeguarding human rights, and investing in the youth. He also suggests consideration of constitutional reforms to this end based on recommendations of an expert committee (*The Daily Star*, August 30, 2018). Is it too much to expect that these ideas would be taken seriously?

Investing in the youth was a common item in the pledges of the major parties including development of education and skills and creation of employment opportunities for at least a crore young people in the next five years. To live up to the promise, apart from re-examining systematically the policies and strategies, the partisan and political expedience-based governance decisions and placement in key positions of responsibility have to be abandoned.

Finally, however strong and justified the grievances of the opposition coalition are, they also need to be self-critical. The political programme and activities of BNP have been confined to the election and replacing the regime rather than a continuous political programme that addressed the concerns of ordinary citizens. Short-term electoral calculation appears to have prevented their severance of ties with Jamaat.

Sheikh Hasina's legacy need not be that she was the prime minister for four terms. For the daughter of Bangabandhu, it should be how strongly she would lay the building blocks of a prosperous, inclusive and democratic Bangladesh.

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Changing the climate narrative

Time for transformational adaptation for a climate resilient Bangladesh

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

AS we start the new year of 2019, we have 11 years to 2030 which is an important year to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the climate

change goals of mitigation as well as adaptation under the Paris Agreement.

The issue of adaptation to climate change is still subject to controversy as it is difficult to measure accurately what is adaptation to climate change and how it is different from normal development.

The science of adaptation has identified three phases of adaptation to climate change. The first phase is to assess possible future adverse impacts of climate change and see if we are doing things that are making us more vulnerable to those impacts. If so, then we need to stop making ourselves more vulnerable. A good example is building houses on floodplains.

The second phase, which we are now in, is to examine all major new investments in long-term infrastructure, such as bridges, roads, airports and harbours, to see if they will be resilient under future climate change. This is now being done for all major infrastructure investments in Bangladesh and around the world.

The third phase of adaptation is called transformational adaptation which is still somewhat theoretical and does not have any good examples yet. It is not just about managing the risk of climate change impacts but becoming better off as a result of the adaptation measures.

Bangladesh can become climate change resilient by 2030 by adopting transformational adaptation over the next decade.

I will draw on some lessons we have

already learned about making adaptation to climate change more effective and transitioning to achieve truly

transformational adaptation.

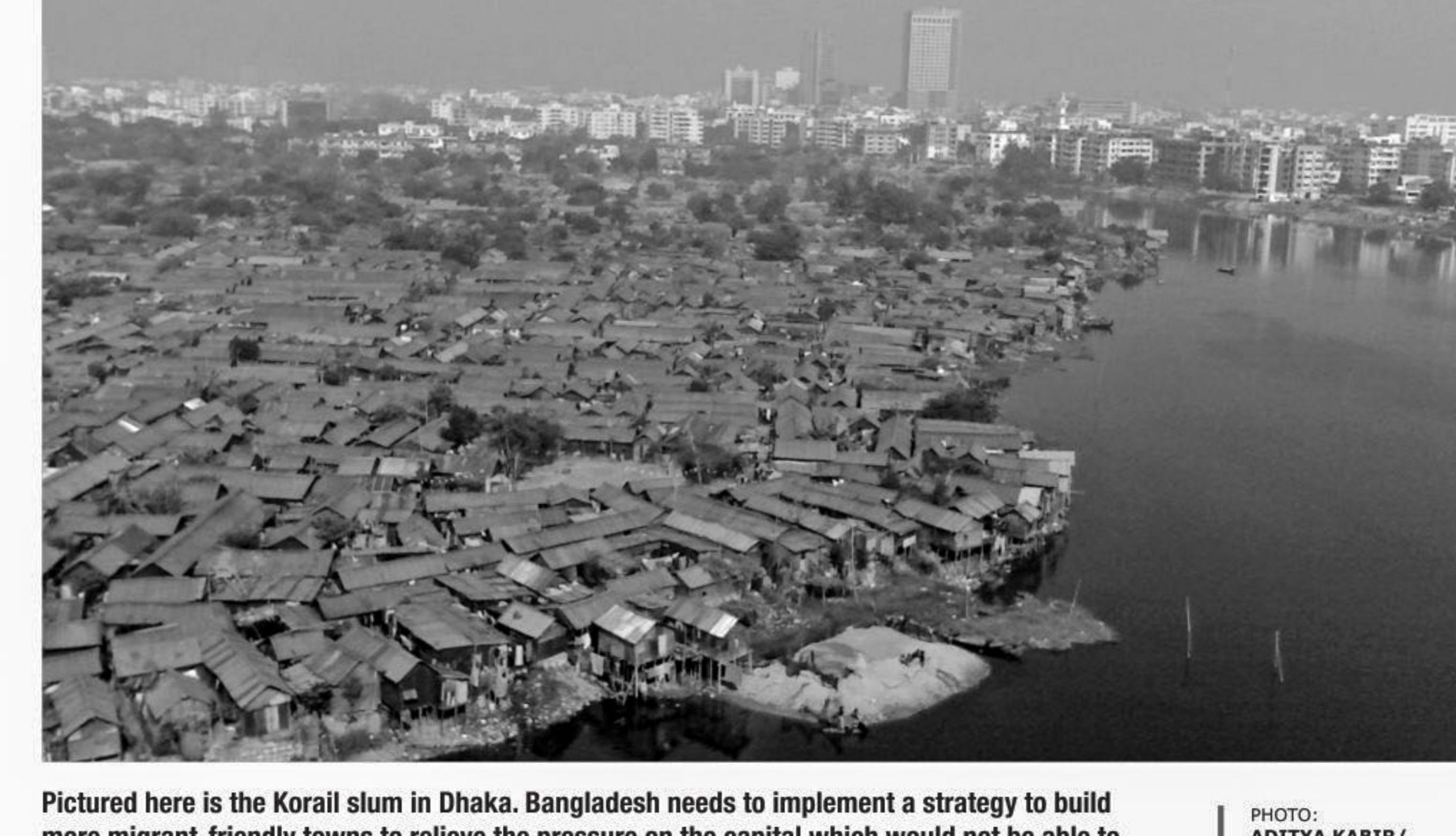
The first lesson is that it will take time on the scale of a decade or more to achieve truly transformational

adaptation. Hence the use of short- to medium-term project-based investments will not be fit for purpose. This is a

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia made an important decision to try to graduate out of LDC status through achieving transformational adaptation to climate change and achieving climate resilience.

In the context of Bangladesh, 2019 will see a very important revision of the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) which will now be extended to 2030 and will emphasise the need to mainstream climate change in to all national planning. It will include an important goal for Bangladesh to achieve transformational

from the coast to make them both climate resilient and migrant-friendly towns that are able to absorb up to a million migrants each so that young girls and boys from coastal areas can be educated and skilled up to get better paying jobs in towns rather than becoming farmers and fishers like their parents. This strategy will also relieve the pressure on Dhaka which would not be able to absorb another 10 million climate migrants over the next decade. It also speaks to the most important part of making Bangladesh an example of



Pictured here is the Korail slum in Dhaka. Bangladesh needs to implement a strategy to build more migrant-friendly towns to relieve the pressure on the capital which would not be able to absorb another 10 million climate migrants over the next decade.

PHOTO: ADITYA KABIR/ WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

that is going to be truly transformational will need to include all relevant stakeholders in each country.

The third and final important lesson is that the scale of transformation needs to be nationwide and not just within a small region or sector only. Hence

countries need to be thinking and planning to achieve transformational

adaptation at a national scale and not just at sectoral levels only. A recent

meeting of the ministers of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) held in

adaptation to make it into a climate resilient country. This will be achieved by a whole-of-society approach linking climate

change adaptation with the SDGs as well as with the Delta Plan and the 8th, and 9th Five Year Plans of the country.

Let me end with an example of what one aspect of transformational

adaptation might look like. In order to

anticipate and prepare for the inevitable

displacement of millions of citizens in the low-lying coastal districts, we will

need to invest in a dozen towns away

transformational adaptation, namely building the adaptive capacity of all our young and future citizens.

Bangladesh can thus change its narrative in 2019, from being one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change impacts to one of the most resilient through achieving transformational adaptation.

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