

## New textbooks to begin the New Year

Let there be qualitative change in education

THERE can be no better way for schoolchildren to start a year than getting their textbooks delivered to them as soon as the year starts. It's a moment of joy and celebration for them, and of relief for their parents. The nationwide free textbook distribution scheme, which was officially inaugurated on December 1, will provide 35.21 crore copies of textbooks to 4.26 crore students, from pre-primary grades to the 10th grade, over the next few weeks. The scheme has provided books to students for the last nine years, and has proved to be immensely beneficial. While we celebrate the continuation of this initiative, we hope that this momentum will be used for a sombre reflection on the quality of school education in Bangladesh.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has invested heavily in school education which greatly increased enrolment. But it could not bring its success in numbers up to par with the quality of education noticed in some other developing countries. While our school enrolment is still high, the dropout rate is even higher, according to a report by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS). The alarming dropout rate is in part linked to the undue pressure exerted on children through unnecessary initiatives like the Primary Education Completion (PEC) and Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams. These exams, experts say, subvert the learning process and should therefore be discontinued. There is no doubt that the school system needs reforms, not just in its testing mechanisms, but also in the curricula and teaching conventions which should be updated and modernised in light of the needs of the time.

## Reckless driving kills two in city

Hold bus operators accountable

THE incident of a Gazipur-bound bus hitting two teenage girls near the Abul Hotel in Malibagh Rail crossing area on January 1 turned the entire area into a warzone for four hours. Eyewitness accounts tell us that the two girls, Poly, aged 19, who worked at a readymade garment factory and Meem who was only 13 years old, were hit by a running bus. Within an hour hundreds of garments worked had descended on to the streets where they blockaded the Malibagh-Rampura road and ran pitched battles with the police leaving a dozen people injured and vandalised about 40 vehicles.

While we fully sympathise with the families of the bereaved, the latest incident of reckless driving and its aftermath is predictable for many reasons. For years, people have borne the brunt of the complete absurdity that exists on our roads where bus operators have been free to act as they please, ranging from flouting traffic rules to racing with one another in the unhealthy competition for picking up maximum number of passengers. Then there is the hiring of unskilled drivers and operating unfit vehicles.

It is tragic that after the country had witnessed a major movement for safer roads last July that had taken the lives of two students on airport road, we are still dealing with bus drivers who operate with an air of impunity when it comes to driving on city roads. While we are informed by Hatirjheel police that a case has been filed against the driver of the bus for reckless driving, these incidents will keep happening unless the bus operators are held accountable for putting unskilled drivers at the steering wheels of unfit vehicles on our roads.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Encourage blood donation

Every time a celebrity posts a picture of winning some award or a romantic photo, everyone seems to go crazy about it. People share such posts numerous times. A romantic photo of celebrities takes social media by storm with many people re-sharing it along with captions like, "I wish I could have someone like this", or "Future Goal".

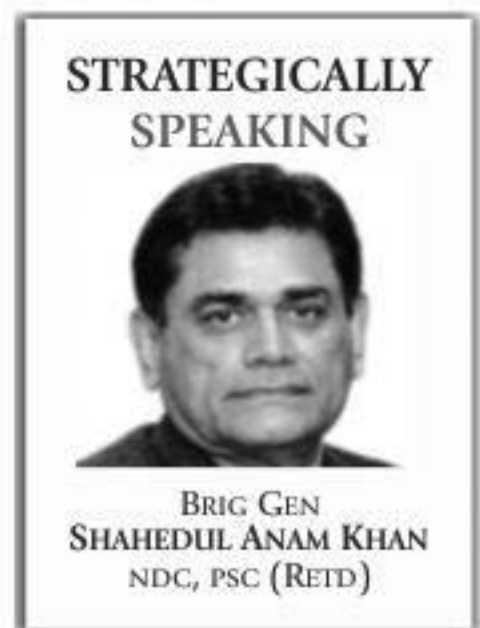
But when someone puts up a picture of him or her donating blood, it receives criticism. Many wrongly interpret that he or she is bragging about it—not raising awareness as she or he claims. For some strange reason, a romantic photo or a picture of some celebrity winning an award seems to be more important than saving someone's life.

Such a mentality needs to be changed. And the change should come from young people. Imagine a scenario when someone post about donating blood and it is applauded. Many others will be motivated to donate blood and one can only wonder how many lives will eventually be saved. Praise people who donate blood, their actions are helping to save lives.

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# It may amount to a pyrrhic victory



highest number of seats so that it could not lay claim to being the opposition in the parliament. And that is exactly what has happened. But despite the huge popularity of the AL, does the result truly reflect the ground reality?

The election has been given a clean chit by a group of foreign observers who were given "a guided tour" of some polling centres in the capital only. One had not heard much of this group before, and some of them had no credentials as international election monitors. Interestingly, this observer group is a part of a larger organisation headed by an AL MP, and at least three of its members belong to the same party, according to its (SAARC Human Rights Foundation) website. It is relevant to remind ourselves that the EC had barred many well-reputed election monitor groups of Bangladesh with established credentials, ostensibly on the grounds that some of their members had political links. So much for fairness and transparency.

The monitors were obviously immensely impressed by how well the election was going that one of the observers, without any previous experience of election monitoring, could hardly hold back herself and announced her verdict before noon. As many newspaper reports suggest many of the voters in the 40,000 polling centres may not necessarily concur with the monitors' impression. The results have generated a debate, not so much in the media as between various groups of people, about the extent or otherwise of rigging in this election. It will go on for a long time one suspects.

AL is very sure that the BNP will not be in position to generate a countrywide public protest protracted enough to cause any concern for the government as was possible in 1996. And this has been amply demonstrated in the last five years in particular. This confidence was demonstrated with unbound gusto in the comments of a senior leader of the AL while talking to a foreign radio the morning after the election. This self-assurance about the capability of a neutered opposition, coupled with the threat of any critique of the government being construed as anti-state, public expression of the real nature of the election has been restricted to plaudits and platitudes by most of the media, and the exceptional few who ventured to

be objective and depicted the real picture did so defying the risk of wrath, and perhaps also under the pale of official reprisal, motivated only by their obligation to the readers and to posterity to serve truth and truth only.

Our media has not quite been the acme of objective journalism, and for many journalists, who had openly canvassed for the ruling party, (this was perhaps the first time that we saw such blatant display of partisanship by the journalist community) it was not possible to report any transgressions even if they witnessed those. But there were wrongdoings aplenty, visible to only reporters and journalists who were willing or prepared to notice them.

The Awami League may well bask in the glory of an election which returned it to power for another five years. It has done even better than 2014, when the

election strategy under these circumstances, particularly when most of their mid and grassroot level workers were constantly on the run, was a tall order.

But how much comfort can or should the AL take in the results that perhaps came as a tsunami to all but the hardcore Awami League members? It certainly was a shocking surprise to 30 or 40 percent of the swing voters. But it was not surprising to those that had studied the political goings on in the last several months and assessed the approach to the vote "war" of the ruling party.

The margin of victory defies even the concept of probability. But in Bangladesh nothing is beyond the realm of possibility; similar margin of victory was witnessed before too. Not only the number of seats but also the difference in the percentage of votes received by the

process and of the election commission. "Peaceful" and "participatory" has no correlation with fairness of the process. The common refrain of "sporadic incident" cannot wash. Widespread irregularities were observed but there was no means to record those because photography inside those "secret" rooms were barred. It was quite inexplicable why, when there were thousands lined up outside the centre, were the booths nearly empty, and why the line hardly moved, and why many returned without being able to cast their vote.

The ground was prepared well before the election day, in fact well before even the announcement of the election date. The difference between the ruling party and the administrations was blurred completely, and there was a concerted effort to create as much impediment as possible for the opposition through a



The main gate of Shahidnagar Primary School in Keraniganj remained closed to voters for more than one hour because of a "lunch break".

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

election was uncontested and the scanty participation was stretched by the imagination of a pliant election commission. And not since the election of 1973 will a party occupy nearly almost all the 300 seats (including those of its coalition partners), in the Jatiyo Sangsad.

It is difficult to take issue with the remarks of the PM that BNP owes its loss to its own follies. She is right, but only partly. Indeed, BNP failed to see through the well-crafted AL strategy. It was taken up with only one issue—release of Khaleda Zia. And one can't expect much from a party that is being backseat-driven by an absentee landlord sitting a thousand kilometres away; and the party continued to carry a political deadweight like Jamaat with it. But how well can a party fare when the entire state machinery is arrayed against it. To carve out an

two parties, as well as the turnout percentage in high voltage constituencies, have surpassed some of the controlled elections held under military rulers in Bangladesh.

But I owe it to my readers to justify my warning that the AL victory could prove to be pyrrhic. King Pyrrhus in his war against the Romans between 280-275 BC, referred to in Plutarch's poem, gained victory after an arduous battle and at a very high cost to his own forces. I feel The AL victory has been attained at a great cost. And I am not talking of the 18 lives lost on election day. Painful those deaths are, but equally painful is the potential of a long-lasting adverse consequence on the country's elections and its institutions.

The biggest casualty, regrettably, is the possible loss of integrity of the election

combined effort of the administration and the ruling party cadres. And that culminated into what we saw on December 30. Even EVM's failed to perform properly. There was total absence of the opposition except for their electoral symbol on the ballot paper.

Unfortunately, human beings suffer from a misplaced euphoria of permanence. And we also often forget that victory is transient, short lived, but institutions outlive governments. It is difficult to retrieve their credibility or restore their character once lost. And thus, it may be apt to end this piece by reminding ourselves of what King Pyrrhus had said after the "victory" ... that another similar victory would ruin him.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# The new old populism



Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In the last few years, however, populism has gone global, upending the politics of countries as diverse as Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, and the United States. Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's president-elect, is the latest example of a larger trend.

Populist politicians gain traction when workers and middle-class citizens feel wronged by their countries' elites. In their unhappiness, voters turn to strong, charismatic personalities whose rhetoric often focuses on the causes and consequences of inequality. Moreover, populist leaders are nationalistic, and their currency is confrontation. Hence, "the people" must be pitted against the political establishment, large corporations, banks, multinationals, immigrants, and other foreign institutions.

Once in power, populist governments tend to implement policies aimed at redistributing income. More often than not, this entails unsustainable fiscal deficits and monetary expansion. Populist policies—which also include protectionism, discriminatory regulation, and capital controls—violate most of the core principles of traditional economics. But heterodoxy implies a break from the status quo. And according to populists, because the status quo is the source of their countries' ills, breaking with it is the only solution.

Venezuela offers a textbook example of how populism can take hold. The initial event that lent momentum to the country's populist movement occurred almost ten years before Hugo Chávez came to power. On February 27, 1989, riots erupted in the capital, Caracas, following an announcement that public transportation fares would rise by 30

percent. To reestablish order, the government was forced to call in the military. After five days of violence, more than 300 people had been killed.

This episode set the stage for Chávez's failed coup in February 1992. During the two years he spent in prison, Chávez prepared to run for the presidency, and when he was released, he visited town after town to present his populist programme. The economy was struggling, and the poor adored him. In the December 1998 presidential election, he won by a landslide.

Similar deep-seated crises are behind the surge of right-wing populism today. In Brazil, Bolsonaro owes his sudden

fire. There are many similarities between Latin America's experience with populism and that of the advanced economies today. Fiscal deficits in the US and some European countries are reaching new heights, and borrowing has risen to dangerous levels. The lesson from history is that a debt crisis could be in the offing.

There are also remarkable similarities with respect to how populist leaders actually conduct politics, particularly their emphasis on mobilising public demonstrations of popular support. To be sure, US President Donald Trump's "MAGA" rallies are not the same as

Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa threatened to reform the country's stable monetary regime; and former Peruvian President Alan García launched scathing attacks against the International Monetary Fund.

Similarly, Trump has disparaged the US Federal Reserve as "crazy" and "loco" for its pursuit of monetary-policy normalisation. And in Italy, where the government has proposed a budget that violates the European Union's deficit rules, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has had harsh words for the European Central Bank and the European Commission.

Of course, there are also differences. Most important, many of the advanced economies where populist forces have made headway still have restrictions on monetary policy. Unlike in Latin America, the Fed and the ECB cannot be forced to finance governments' fiscal expenditures. Though Italy belongs to the eurozone, it has very little influence on how the ECB operates. So long as this remains the case, Italy's populist moment is unlikely to end with a major inflationary flare-up, as has traditionally been the case in Latin America. Argentina, for example, had 41 percent inflation immediately following the back-to-back presidencies of Néstor Kirchner and his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

That said, there has been talk of a possible "Italeave," whereby Italy would exit the eurozone and reintroduce the lira. But Italians should understand that when other countries (for example, Liberia) have reintroduced a domestic currency, it has not ended well. Indeed, the most important lesson to take from Latin America's populist experiences is that they have invariably ended badly. Ultimately, lower- and middle-income households typically find themselves worse off than they were when the populist experiment was launched.

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