

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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## New tax breaks for exporters

Revenue collected will be hit

IT is interesting to note that the government, which had reduced tax-at-source for exporters to 0.60 percent (for all goods except jute) back in September, has now reduced it further to 0.25 percent as the new government is about to be sworn in. It is unclear as to why this further reduction has taken place in the span of four months. This new tax regime is to remain in force till the next budget which is due in June. When we take into consideration the fact that 83 percent of all exports from Bangladesh comes from ready-made garments (RMG), it is easy to deduce that the greatest beneficiaries of such a policy will be the RMG sector. The flipside to this arrangement, according to experts, is that government revenue collection will be adversely affected.

While we are being told that this new short-term policy will encourage more exports from the RMG sector, is there really any need to give greater benefit to an already mature sector? Indeed, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) already had a tax-friendly outlook towards exporters prior to this reduction and the tax rate was a very modest one percent. One could make the argument that if the industry cannot afford to pay a paltry one percent payment as tax on export, precisely how will then revenue coffers be filled? The NBR may face a tax revenue shortfall of Tk 400-500 crore due to this reduction in tax-at-source from RMG export, and we wonder what other sectors will have to bear the brunt of this revenue deficit.

## Illegal stone extraction must stop

Villages in Sylhet under threat of land subsidence

A picture published in this daily yesterday depicts how a vast area of land in the Bichhanakandi village of Sylhet's Gowainghat upazila has been destroyed because of indiscriminate stone extraction. The village and its surrounding areas are now under threat of land subsidence.

According to reports by *The Daily Star*, stone extraction in the area has been going on for long. A previous report revealed that as many as five villages in the same upazila were affected by stone extraction. This daily ran a report in 2017 on illegal extraction in the same village where this picture has been taken. One and a half years later, the situation has become even worse as no substantive steps have been taken to stop this. Clearly, politically powerful people are behind this and in many cases, local government officials are their abettors. This corrupt nexus between the politically powerful and the local administration must stop.

It is most unfortunate that destruction of the environment happens in our country in all possible forms. Our hills are being razed; fertile topsoil of agricultural land is being cut off to be used in brick kilns; trees are being felled indiscriminately; rivers and water bodies are being grabbed and polluted—all without any reaction from the authorities concerned.

Illegal stone extraction is not only having a harmful impact on the area's environment as the topography of the area is fast changing, but workers engaged in stone extraction also face grave dangers from landslides and other accidents. The authorities entrusted with the responsibility to stop such illegal practices must play their role without any fear or favour.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### An election that failed to fulfil expectations

On December 30, 2018 I was peacefully able to exercise my right to vote early on the day. However, everything started to go wrong after that.

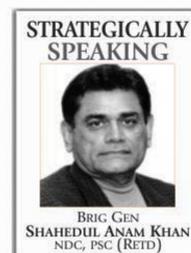
Mass boycott by opposition party candidates and allegations of vote rigging were all very painful for voters who had travelled long ways to participate in a national election for the first time in 10 years. Many of them said they had witnessed first-hand how unfair means were being employed to swing the election in a particular direction. And lives ended up being lost in the violence that ensued as a result.

This was a terrible loss for the nation, its citizens and their democratic right to vote. It was nothing short of an insult to our constitution and what we call the spirit of the Liberation War.

However, since the AL-led Grand Alliance won by a margin that nobody expected them to and will now be forming the next government, we hope to see significant changes being brought to the workings of our state machineries. Corruption, nepotism, etc. that have in the past destroyed any semblance of good governance must be gotten rid of, and we hope to see the new government make good on its election promises.

Congratulations to the AL and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.  
Iqbal Ali Khan, *By-email*

# Boycotting parliament is not the answer



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
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DESPITE all the shenanigans that had been resorted to, to win the election, we will have a new parliament for another five years. It seems as if Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" was written exactly keeping this particular situation in mind. Anybody, the courtiers in particular, who does not want to see the reality only marvels at the finesse of the emperor's dress, and expresses as much (fooled not so much by the two weavers as by their reluctance to displease the emperor). Only the child in the crowd can see the emperor in the state that he is actually in: naked. And that is also the case with our mainstream media and some genuflecting intellectuals and their views of the election. Only a few "children" have seen and uttered the truth.

One can neither wish the new parliament away nor hope for a new election before 2023. Therefore, the nation's eyes will be on the parliament, at least those that have not altogether lost interest in politics and are not willing to leave everything to fate to play its part.

The country's legislative future is in the hands of the new parliament. One is waiting to see what kind of legislation is enacted. Whether they are motivated by the urge to achieve good governance and the greater good for the greater majority, or whether life would be tougher for the public with telescoped space for criticism and dissent and, generally, the freedom of expression. One is waiting also to see the role of the opposition, the JP(E), in the next five years.

Is another rubber-stamp parliament our lot for the next five years? One is not quite sure what the parliament would look like eventually. The current one—it has not been dissolved as yet, although the newly elected members have already taken oath contrary to the rules and norms—is unique. There was an "opposition" in the form of Ershad's Jatiya Party, after it was made to participate in the 2014 elections. This time, after the usual flip-flopping, Ershad has decided—for the time being I say, because there is no guarantee what he will do tomorrow—to sit in the opposition. One hopes that his wisdom emerges from a desire to play the part of the opposition as it should be. Some may consider Ershad's decision, dismissing his brother's desire to be a part of the government, merely a means to wipe out the label of a domesticated opposition that was affixed on his party's forehead over the last five years. For a politician with a modicum of integrity, it could not have been very relishing to be the leader of a party that claims to be the main opposition yet enjoys the perks of a Special Envoy to the PM. One sincerely hopes that he would prove his critics wrong. But that may be a tall order for Ershad, given his past record of susceptibility to persuasion.

Ershad's party being in the opposition would be another first; after having participated under a major

party-led grand alliance to being on the other side of the aisle is perhaps unheard of in the annals of parliamentary democracy. But that is what is likely to happen, provided Ershad doesn't have a brainwave overnight and changes his mind. Therefore, it is not quite clear whether we will have another five years of a very friendly "other side" in the House, pliant and conforming to the ruling party's wishes, or whether he feels obligated to his voters and plays his due part as the opposition.

Under these circumstances, the decision of the BNP MPs-elect regarding their taking oath and sitting in the opposition bench is very significant. It is vital for the party, for parliamentary politics and for democracy in the country. In my view, I think it will be injudicious for the BNP to decide against the MPs-elect to take oath. BNP must realise that their near-political wilder-

opposition got up to speak, she could offer nothing more than hearty endorsement of the government policies.

Boycotting the parliament this time by the five BNP members would be a gross folly and help further consign the BNP to permanent wilderness. At least the five BNP MPs can voice their points of view, or attempt to make their voice heard. They may well be snubbed by the Speaker, but so be it. Even one voice is enough if it is rational and just. If they are prepared and willing, no matter the impediments they might encounter—and they are likely to encounter a lot—they should be able to keep the governing party on their toes. One would like to see more critical discussions on the budget for example, and the BNP parliamentarians can do so if they are prepared to. These five MPs can hold the government to account for its various actions. At least, one



PHOTO: TOUKIR AHMED TANVEE

ness in the last five years was entirely because of the extremely impolitic decision to boycott the 2014 elections. Being the biggest opposition party in the parliament is substantially different from being merely the largest party outside the parliament.

And nobody better than the BNP can say how dearly they have paid for it. The party was cast in the role of a political nonentity. They were divested of all relevance to any political discourse. It was so busy with its effort to redeem its position and that of its leader that it failed to exploit various issues thrown up by government policies by exposing the follies of the policies to the public and creating public opinion against them.

Little worthwhile discussions on important matters, if at all, took place on the floor of the House, because there was no opposition in the real sense in the parliament. Every time the so-called leader of the so-called

hopes, even with a minuscule opposition, issues like extrajudicial killings or policies such as those adopted in the anti-drugs drive, where alleged drug dealers were summarily dealt with, can be brought up for discussion. Just imagine, with a real opposition in the House, would the ruthless manner of suppression of the students' genuine demands, by employing the ruling party ancillary organisations, not have come up for discussion?

The only option for the BNP is to instruct its MPs-elect to join the parliament. Doing so will accord the party more relevance than it has now. And this may be the scope for the BNP leadership to resuscitate the party. Personal ego of some leaders must not stand in the way of political pragmatism.

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## 'Slaves of the sea'

The long-forgotten Jaladas community and their need for policy inclusion

MOHAMMED MAMUN RASHID

EMPLOYMENT in fisheries and aquaculture around the globe has grown faster than the world's population. The sector provides jobs to tens of millions and supports the livelihoods of hundreds of millions.

Bangladesh, the world's largest deltaic zone, is crisscrossed by big rivers and their tributaries and distributaries. Moreover, as a land with an abundance of torrential monsoon rains, most of the plain lands remain inundated during the monsoon season, thus turning the countryside into a big reservoir of freshwater for almost half the year. These huge, inland, sweet water bodies together with the expanse of saline water in the Bay of Bengal provide the basis for a large and diversified fisheries sector. Fisheries have always played an integral role in the lives of the people of Bangladesh. It is more ancient than the profession of agriculture itself.

The fisheries sector of Bangladesh contributes 3.69 percent to the national

people. In most cases, they live in segregated *paras* which are localities within a village. The high-caste Hindu and the Muslim aristocracy and gentry carefully avoid any social mingling with them. Traditional fishing communities, which mainly comprise Hindus, are being put under pressure by incoming Muslims who have taken up fishing as their profession. The newcomers are either self-employed or find employment as labourers. The majority of Muslims opt for fishing due to population pressure, economic constraints in agricultural sector, and adverse effects of climate change.

Many elite rich men entered the fisheries sector in the 1960s. The then aristocratic Bengali word *motshojibi* had been introduced instead of the word *jele*. What is noteworthy is that the word *jele* is not included in fisheries act, rules, ordinance, and policy though *motshojibi* and *mach chashi* are included in such documents. According to the National Fisheries Policy 1998, about 1.2 million people were engaged in full-time work in the fisheries sector and 12 million people were engaged in part-time work. It is

ing, religion, socio-economic conditions and position. But we do get the number of fishermen from different studies, surveys and project reports. But these things are not always consistent or continuous. According to the Coastal District Information 2005 under Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan, the majority of traditional fishermen are Hindus in 19 coastal districts.

The majority of *Jaladas* families are in financial debt and receive short- and long-term loans from relatives, neighbours, and businessmen. Their incomes usually increase during Hilsa fishing season. The scope for savings for this community is limited. Due to their dire situation, they spend mostly on food rather than clothes and other things. It is during the off-season that they face financial crises which occur round the year. The majority of *Jaladas* don't own boats but nets. Some don't own either; they work in others' boats or hire boats for fishing. Many adolescent boys accompany their fathers during fishing. A few of them receive primary education but fail to continue. Fishermen don't get

*Even though the Jaladas have been in the fisheries sector for generations, they do not have a voice when it comes to policy decisions. They're not also well-informed about clauses of the fisheries law although they are punished under it.*

live on khas (government-owned) land, embankments, and accreted *char* land in huts. Due to the depletion of fish, piracy, and lack of capital, these people remain stuck in the vicious cycle of poverty. They do not even have pure drinking water as they live in over-populated areas.

Even though they have been in the fisheries sector for generations, they do not have a voice when it comes to policies and laws. Furthermore, they are not well-informed about clauses of the fisheries law although they are punished under this law.

*Jaladas* believe that it is not easy for them to switch to other professions. This is a socio-psychological barrier. Some even consider themselves to be "sinners" as they earn a living by catching innocent fish. They identify themselves as "slaves of the sea" without hesitation. They also believe they are destined to carry this curse their whole life.

The *Jaladas* community has distinct socio-economic, political, cultural, technological and informational characteristics. Water, nets, boats, rivers and the sea are central to their lives and livelihood. They are socially neglected, economically insolvent, politically pressured, culturally ill-treated, technologically backward, not up-to-date with information, and geographically isolated and vulnerable. The government of Bangladesh should address these issues pertinent to the *Jaladas* community in relevant sectoral policies so that these people can live with dignity and their rights protected.

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SOURCE: PATTAYAUNLIMITED.COM

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and fish accounts for 60 percent of national animal protein consumption. The sector also plays an important role in rural employment generation and poverty alleviation. Traditionally, low-caste Hindus have been engaged in the fishing profession. The *Jaladas* (slaves of the sea) belong to the Hindu fisherfolk community which is made up of caste-bound

important to include the word *jele* in policy documents in order to know their number and their contribution to the national economy. It would also help us to understand their socio-economic conditions and undertake different initiatives for improving the lives and livelihoods of fishing communities. However, there is no updated information on fishermen based on *para*, source of fish-

loan facilities from financial institutions due to a lack of mortgage-free loan provisions in government banks. The average size of many fishermen families is 5 to 7 which is higher than the national average. The rate of early marriage within this community is higher due to abject poverty and social insecurity. And youth delinquency is also a major problem. *Jaladas* don't own lands. They mainly