

Employing the youth, key to achieving SDGs

The education we're providing is not enough

At a discussion on SDG implementation, speakers said it will be difficult for Bangladesh to achieve the set goals without creating jobs for the unemployed youth, and we agree with this assessment. Growing unemployment among the young has become a major cause for concern in recent years, as according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey 2016-2017, youth unemployment was more than double the overall unemployment rate, recording a double-digit figure of 10.6 percent. On top of that, what is especially concerning is that unemployment seems to be increasing even more rapidly among the more educated segments of our population. The same BBS survey revealed that unemployment among young individuals who had received secondary level education was as high as 29.8 percent, while it was 13.4 percent among those who had received tertiary level education.

At a time when we're trying to modernise our economy with the infusion of more advanced technologies, this trend runs contrary to what is expected. One would think that young people, who find it easier to adopt new technologies, would be in high demand in the job market. However, the fact that it is not the case shows that there is something seriously wrong.

One explanation is the lack of quality education and training that is being given at our educational institutions. And, as speakers suggested, given the increasingly competitive nature of the job market, young people have to be more versatile in the knowledge and skills they possess. Our educational institutions must be made to function in accordance with that, and our young people need to be encouraged to develop more technical skills besides receiving their general education.

We call on the government to take their advice and to bring about the necessary changes in our education sector. Additionally, it should draw up a long-term strategy to ensure that the country can benefit maximally from the productive and creative potentials of our young people.

Dismal state of project implementation

Poor management

It is astonishing that the Sylhet-Tamabil- Jafalong road project used less than four percent of the budget in the two years since it was started. It is a four-year project taken up in 2017 and is supposed to be completed in 2021. And this road happens to be a part of the Asian Highway running through Bangladesh. Although on record the rate of ADP implementation has seen a spike in recent years, many of our large projects have suffered from both time and consequently cost overrun.

Planning inefficiency has been a major factor but the overall situation is compounded by the fact that these projects do not get done as per plan. We are informed also that what is true of this project is true of the more than nearly 60 development projects taken up in the Sylhet division.

That managing a project is as important as often lost on those responsible for the implementation and completion of the projects. We wonder how one person can look after six projects, as is the situation obtaining in this instance—the gentleman in charge of this project also heads five other large projects.

What is also lost on the planners, too, is the fact that money on projects not spent timely is money wasted. And as the report shows, apart from implementation inefficiency, there is also allocational inefficiency in the project like setting aside Tk 2 crore for consultancy fee for constructing culverts!

If the planners are serious about getting the jobs done on time, such shoddy performance cannot be brooked. Works must proceed as per flow chart. And progress must be assessed more often than once a year to avoid such poor output. Project directors must not be overburdened and resources allotted for overseeing the projects must be utilised for that purpose only.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Prevent the possible extinction of Bengal tigers

According to a report citing a study titled "Combined effects of climate change and sea-level rise project dramatic habitat loss of the globally endangered Bengal tiger in the Bangladesh Sundarbans," the remaining tigers in the Sundarbans may become extinct within 50 years. The rise of sea level due to climate change and global warming may inundate the habitats of tigers in the forest. Reports say poaching by hunters and construction of factories within the forest are some of the factors that threaten the endangered species of the Royal Bengal Tiger. It is also forecasted that climate change will hamper the growth of the famous Sundari trees, which the Sundarbans are known for. Something should be done to protect the tigers' habitats and save these animals from possible extinction.

Zabed Wali, Chattogram



Politics Gone Missing

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

election for the mayor of a part of the capital city is only a few days away, elections to the Upazila councils—staggered over a few phases—begins in March, and the historic Ducsu election will be held after 28 years on March 11.

As for the parliamentary election held on December 30, 2018, despite the fact that all political parties participated in it, it was anything but participatory on the part of the voters. Notwithstanding the persecution of the opposition, the absence of a level playing field, and thousands of "ghost" cases filed against innocent citizens, the defining feature of that election was the blurring of lines among the state, the government, and the ruling party. As Professor MM Akash has recently said, "If the DCs (deputy commissioners) and the SPs (superintendents of police) had not helped the Awami League, it would not have been able to win the election." (The Daily Star, February 18) In a similar vein, a faction of the JSD concluded that "an over-enthusiastic section of the administration stuffed the ballot boxes with fake votes on the night before the polling day and indulged in many related irregularities." Although this was not a revelation to those who were in Bangladesh on the Election Day or followed the election closely, it was a reaffirmation of sorts. The so-called "overenthusiasm" of the administration and police had driven out politics from the electoral arena and put the members of the administration and law enforcement agencies in the driver's seat.

One reason for the lack of interest about the upcoming elections at the Upazila level is the absence of the major opposition parties. Their decision to boycott has been prompted by the experience of the recent national election and the elections of the city corporations. But it is not only the opposition which is missing here, but

also the public confidence in the Election Commission's ability to hold a fair election. Did the 2018 national election shatter the citizens' faith in the electoral system? If that was the objective of the entire machination, it is succeeding. The gradual dismantling of institutions like the electoral system is the way to depoliticise a society.

It is in this context that the Ducsu election is expected to assume greater significance. Of course, the Ducsu election, on all the previous occasions, had attracted national attention as it served as a barometer of national politics. The fact that the ruling party's student wing never succeeded in winning the Ducsu election is telling in this

large. The university administration seems to be pretending that it is unaware of the fact that these halls have been under the absolute control of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling party, for almost a decade.

These provide an impression that the Election Commission and the Dhaka University authorities are more inclined to have an electoral exercise devoid of the spirit of politics. It is interesting to see that the presence of the student wing of BNP, Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), on campus, particularly at the Madhur Canteen, after nine years has made headlines. Several newspapers reported how many hours JCD leaders spent at the Madhur Canteen on a particular day.

The JOF alleged that they couldn't get an auditorium for the purpose because "they [the government] have asked the authorities of different institutions not to allow us to hold our programme," said a JOF leader. How can one explain that an alliance that participated in the election is not being allowed to hold a gathering to hear the experiences of its candidates? Even the military regimes allowed "indoor politics".

These pale in comparison to some of the actions of the new government. Take, for example, the appointment of Shajahan Khan as the head of an advisory committee on road safety. Khan's smirk after the death of two students in an accident sparked outrage last year. Besides, on previous occasions, Khan had undermined government efforts to bring discipline to the road transport sector. Any consideration of political repercussions would have precluded the government from taking such a step. It is not only a slap in the face of those student demonstrators who demanded road safety, but also all the citizens—the message is loud and clear: you don't matter. Similarly, Abdur Rahman Bodi, widely known as a "godfather" of yaba trading, was given the responsibility to coordinate the surrender of the yaba traders. Merely calling these developments "ironic" fails to explain them. The sheer number of made-up cases, generally referred to as "ghost cases", filed against innocent citizens before the election and the utter disregard for their plight as they are dragged through the judicial system are another example that politics, support and sympathy of the citizens have no value.

Politics, above all, is about the citizens' right to speak freely, without fear. The freedom of expression, enshrined in the Constitution of the country, has now become elusive. The Digital Security Act is hanging over the head like the Sword of Damocles. On the one hand, the mainstream media are either domesticated or exercising "self-censorship"; on the other hand, the cyberspace is surveilled to the extent that one can be victimised for trifling matters. The whispering voices are the only ones left. But for how long is the question.

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There seems to be an ongoing campaign to have the electoral exercise devoid of the spirit of politics.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

regard. But increasingly, it appears that March 11 will be a mere replication of all recent elections. The students' demand to have the polling centres placed in academic buildings, instead of the student halls, has been rejected by the university administration citing the Ducsu constitution. Doesn't the constitution also stipulate an election every year? While the administration conveniently flouted this provision for the past 28 years, it is now clinging to another provision to nullify the legitimate concerns of almost all student organisations. Evidently, having polling centres at the halls will not be conducive to the participation of the students at

Understandably, the oddity element has prompted the media to cover the news. But wasn't Madhur Canteen supposed to be the "home" of student activists? The quota reform activists who plan to contest in the Ducsu election have faced and continue to face the wrath of the ruling party's student activists. With the deadline for collecting nomination papers ending today, there is no sign of an environment in which different organisations can coexist without fear.

These elections, however, are not only signs of the absence of politics; there are others too. The Jatiya Oikya Front had a hard time finding a venue to hold a public hearing on the national election.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

What's left of the populist left?



JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

populism is nearing a low ebb.

But such assessments conflate political phenomena that have little to do with each other. The only programme that has claimed to represent "the people" exclusively, while declaring illegitimate all opposition to "twenty-first-century socialism," is Chavismo, which does indeed pose a clear threat to democracy. But Chavismo is a particular left-wing ideology that has been inserted into a framework that all populists share.

After all, populists of both the left and the right present themselves as the sole representatives of a homogeneous, virtuous, and hard-working people. They depict all other contenders for power as corrupt, and all citizens who do not support them as traitors. Their politics is not just anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist.

By contrast, other contemporary forms of so-called left populism should be understood as attempts to reinvent social democracy. These efforts operate within the confines of democratic pluralism (though some have, worryingly, also strained against them: Syriza has been guilty of trying to undermine the independence of courts and free media). Where they have succeeded and respected the rules of the democratic game, they have created new choices for citizens, thereby restoring a sense of political representation that had been lost.

The kneejerk response to these parties has been to dismiss them automatically as "anti-system," and thus part of the problem. But this lazy view gets things backwards, as does the view that "the people" everywhere are clamouring for more polarising and emotional forms of politics. These parties and movements have made political and electoral gains not because they are "populist," let alone because they want to undermine democracy, but because they offer something decidedly leftist.

Today's leading thinkers of populist leftism make two claims about their political strategy. The first is that populism is filling the void vacated by the traditional left when it converged with the right to produce a form of politics that the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, an adviser to Podemos and La France Insoumise ("France Unbound"), described in the 2000s as "post-democratic." As social democrats across the West adopted Third Way centrism—or "Thatcherism with a human face"—citizens no longer had a real choice. The difference between mainstream political parties, Mouffe observed, was no greater than that between Pepsi and Coke.

In Mouffe's view, the right-wing populism of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France and Jörg Haider in Austria was a "cry of the people" against a lack of choice. The French sociologist Didier Eribon's deeply moving 2009 memoir, Returning to Reims, has been a surprise bestseller in Europe partly because it perfectly illustrates the dynamic Mouffe and others were diagnosing. Whereas Eribon's mother once supported the Communists, she now votes for Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (formerly the National Front) as a protest against today's socialists-turned-neoliberals.



Senator Bernie Sanders at a campaign rally in Colorado on February 28, 2016. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER

Still, one can agree with populist leftists' diagnosis without accepting their second major claim: that the best response to today's crisis of representation is to frame politics as a conflict between citizens of all persuasions and a narrow cohort of oligarchs, or "la casta." Implicit in this framing is the idea that citizens—like Eribon's mother—are tired of anything associated with the traditional left and are looking for a fresh approach. Or, as Podemos puts it, "If you want to get it right, don't do what the left would do."

During the euro crisis, populist leftists thus developed a "transversal strategy" of cutting across traditional ideological divisions, on the assumption that citizens would be open to blaming a financial oligarchy for their woes. The idea was to attract not just leftists, but also supporters of right-wing populist parties, by carving out a position that was on the left in practice, if not so much in name. Voters, so the hope went, would stop blaming their problems on immigrants if finance capitalism was identified as the real culprit.

However justified criticism of finance capitalism may be, are today's populist leftists correct to think that invoking "the people" will mobilise citizens, particularly workers, whereas a reinvented leftist language will not? Accepting that more than one or two elections are needed to test this question empirically, the data so far do not support a populist/nationalist approach.

For example, in the 2017 French presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise abandoned his typically universalist, class-centred rhetoric and adopted the language of "the people." At his rallies, red flags gave way to the Tricolore; and "L'Internationale" was replaced by "La Marseillaise." Yet while Mélenchon did well at the polls and almost made it to the second round, the French sociologist Éric Fassin notes that La France Insoumise peeled away only around 3 percent of National Front voters.

Mélenchon is hardly the only European leftist to have

concluded that the "transversal strategy" requires veering toward nationalism. Sahra Wagenknecht of Germany's Die Linke (The Left) has formed a movement to unite followers from various left-wing parties while also luring voters from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland. But, so far, the only distinctive feature of her "Stand Up!" campaign is its opposition to "open borders."

Such a strategy could easily backfire. If anything, it seems more likely to strengthen the position of right-wing populists by accepting the premise of their immigration policies, while alienating the internationalist left. That seems to be the outcome in Italy, where the far-right League, rather than its senior coalition partner, the Five Star Movement, is steering the government's agenda.

As Fassin has pointed out, rather than targeting workers whose attraction to right-wing populists may or may not be driven by opposition to untamed capitalism, leftists should concentrate on non-voters who could be brought back to the polls. The latter may well be looking for policies inspired by ideals of social solidarity, not recrudescing nationalism.

The left has succeeded when it has offered clear alternatives on questions such as housing policy and financial regulation, not when it has invoked "the people" (let alone "the nation"). As a case in point, consider Jeremy Corbyn, the British Labour Party leader, and Bernie Sanders, the independent senator who led an upstart Democratic primary campaign against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election and is running again in the 2020 race. What these figures propose is not "socialism," but a social-democratic brew that can appeal to anyone who is tired of Pepsi, Coke, and all of the other neoliberal fizz on offer.

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