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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Democracy and development must coexist

Otherwise progress cannot be sustainable

A statement by a US official at a recent hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific in the US Congress in Washington, has brought to the fore the strange dichotomy Bangladesh faces in accomplishing an impressive growth rate record and yet performing not so well in terms of democratic practices. Alice G Wells, US acting assistant secretary at the Bureau of South and Central Asia, lauded Bangladesh for having the reputation as a secular country, with a female head of state and being an example for many Muslim countries. She also pointed out our seven percent GDP growth over the last decade and our graduation from the Least Developing Country status by 2024. All significant achievements. But she also pointed out some grave realities that have changed the direction of Bangladesh's democratic trajectory.

Such realities are of great concern to the Bangladeshi people as they impinge on all those rights that we consider inalienable for a country born out of such enormous sacrifice and that is based on a democratic model. Such rights include the right to voice dissent, to peaceful assembly, to a fair trial no matter what the crime and so on. But as Wells has mentioned, at present the environment of police suppression, intimidation of the civil society, free media and political opposition are jarring obstacles in the democratic process. The Digital Security Act, for instance, appears as the Sword of Damocles providing a legal instrument to effectively criminalise some forms of free speech. This has led to increasing self-censorship and a shrinking space for civil society to express its concerns.

With the government not too open about acknowledging such critical views, a new narrative has emerged that places democracy and development at opposite poles as if the two concepts are mutually exclusive. But it is a narrative of our own, one that is belied by experiences in other Asian and African countries and one that has made us captive, threatening to retard our path to progress. The truth is that development and democracy can, and must, coexist and even flourish together. Democracy ensures accountability and good governance, which in turn ensure that all development work can be carried out smoothly and efficiently. Development must be participatory and inclusive of the people—only then can it be sustainable and bring forth the heights of progress the country aims to attain.

Farmer-friendly regulations needed

Regulatory changes must be expedited

ACCORDING to the World Bank report titled "Enabling the Business of Agriculture 2019" (EBA), Bangladesh has one of the least favourable regulatory frameworks for farmers. The country ranked 75th out of 101 countries and it scored 44.47 points on a scale of 1-100. This is unfortunate, because we are highly dependent on agriculture to ensure food security, poverty reduction and job creation. The report is based on eight indicators: supplying seeds, registering fertiliser, securing water, registering machinery, sustaining livestock, protecting plant health, trading food, and accessing finance. The EBA indicators assess whether governments are making it easier or harder for farmers to operate their businesses and provide a tangible measure of progress and identify regulatory obstacles to market integration and entrepreneurship.

What the report tells us is that countries that have scored highest are also the ones that have regulations that cater to their farmers; that there is always room to improve laws, regulations and simplify bureaucratic processes that affect local farmers. It was pointed out in the report that Bangladesh has done much to improve its seed certification capacity by enacting a new seed act. However, the country did not do so well in other areas like supplying seed (18.52 points), registering fertiliser (47.08 points), securing water (20 points), etc.—all of which tells us that much work remains to be done which can help improve agricultural productivity.

Regulatory reforms need to be expedited to remove bureaucratic obstacles that stifle business processes, especially since agriculture continues to employ approximately 41 percent of the labour force and plays a pivotal role in poverty alleviation. It is imperative to support farmers by introducing policy measures that will help them with access to inputs like seed, fertiliser, animal feed, veterinary medicinal products and water, promote access to finance, and facilitate market transactions.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Road accidents remain a constant threat

Road accidents have become an everyday occurrence in our country. According to an article published by this daily earlier this year, 2,635 people were killed in 2,609 road accidents in 2018, while 1,920 were injured, based on police reports.

It is a common practice to blame the driver of a vehicle immediately after an accident, but we must also consider the fact that there are other possibilities which could lead to road accidents. Parking cars at random, footpaths being occupied by hawkers which force pedestrians onto the road, and the lack of zebra crossings at all intersections, among others, are factors that can contribute to road accidents.

Every obstacle that poses a threat on the roads must be dealt with immediately in order to eliminate this problem. Only when the surroundings are safe will our journeys be sound.

Mozzammal Hossain Bhuiyan, Mirpur, Dhaka

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IT is one of those rare moments in which you thought visiting Facebook was not a total waste of time. Someone had posted an award-winning short-film in which a young woman was seen alighting from a boat and taking photographs. A boy suddenly snatched her bag and the woman went after him. The chase ended in the courtyard of a school where the visitor found herself surrounded by a group of children, elderly men and women—all holding slates and pencil-chalks. The supposed thief returned the bag, and an old woman greeted the visitor with tea and an imploring glance. The silence was spread against the blank blackboard. The photographer approvingly received the teacup, and everyone erupted in joy. The last shot showed the visitor writing on the board to teach the villagers.

The South Indian film speaks volumes and resonates with our local plights. There is a genuine interest in learning; there is great earning for good teachers. Everyone now knows what value education can add. A hardworking rickshaw-puller would paddle double-shifts to send his children to schools. Education, much to the pride of the nation, is spreading. But does it have the foundational strength as well as the logistics to reach out to every periphery to ensure an equitable spread? Why does a total stranger need to pick up the chalk?

Thanks to the government and its NGO allies, the dream of education has been implanted. Or should I say "an inception" has been performed, after Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* where dreams are shown as the most resilient parasites that reside in the subconscious mind. The movie depicts a dream-heist where "extractors" literally enter people's minds to steal away their dreams. The recent incident at BUET can be deemed as an extraction where an educational dream has become a dystopian nightmare. The dream ends not so happily for those who forgot the very purpose of education. And looking at the victims of false dream, we wake up to a reality: education has become both a site that nurtures and a parasite that ends dream.

As a young country, our national dreams are just beginning to materialise. Our nuclear submarines are diving into the Bay of Bengal; our satellite is sending signals from space; our national grid is soon to be boosted by nuclear energy; our mega-bridge is linking up the shores of the mighty Padma, our metro-rails are all set to eat up traffic-jam, and our development indexes are ticking all the right boxes. Given the demographic dividend on our side, a condition where more than 65 percent of our population is of working age, between 15 and 64, we can dream of becoming a middle income country. But without educating the mass, such dreams will prove barren. There are many "extractors" and "distractors" to end our dream. The individuals who can harvest our dreams and help them grow are our educators. But they need to be given the

right respect, incentives and training to become development partners.

The sooner the government realises it, the better it is for the nation. Unfortunately, we are donning our educators with coloured jerseys, turning them into party goons. The coloured dreams are presented in monochrome as the political bioscope unfolds. We find educators sharing booties with student-leaders; supplying cheat sheets or taking physical or psychological advantages of their students; or pursuing greed by moonlighting, coaching, or compromising duties.

I dare not call the situation "fishy" lest it locates the educators among the proverbial rotten head of things. Our teachers have lost their respected social position that they traditionally enjoyed. Now they are

a cohort of 14 students interviewed was able to introduce themselves properly after 10 years of study of English" (Kirkpatrick, R. 2016). The flurry of GPAs and inflated grades will perhaps overlook such realities and keep on exciting pipedreams. The bloated numbers will hide the fact that our students are not taught well. Still the report cards will make parents think that their dreams can align with their children's results. Those of us who teach at the universities or employ graduates know that our students come to the real world lacking the required skill-sets.

There are nearly four million students in higher education today, attending some 150 plus public and private universities, thousands of colleges and madrasas. It seems everybody wants a degree in business and the like, even though there

to ask why an electrical engineer who studied 24/7 to earn his degree becomes a customs official. There is a huge gap between what our graduates learn and what they want to earn. Then again, earning and employability should not be the only objectives of education. Education is all about opening the mind to become a life-long learner while respecting one's surrounding. The hunger for power and money leads many to adopt short-cuts by plugging into the power-base. The weathercock of dreams changes direction as many students assume political avatars. They become monstrous, brutal, grotesque, cruel, and selfish, clashing with the dreams of their parents and societies. Then again, our leaders need these avatars to strengthen the power structure from which dream messages are rallied. Thus we enter



ILLUSTRATION: BTILOB

at the mercy of a number of political and bureaucratic agencies. Teachers exist at the bottom of the totem pole. They are paid less than garment workers as compliance in the education sector is not an issue. A newspaper ad recently offered Tk 8,000 for an assistant school teacher and Tk 9,000 for a security guard. Administrative and political bosses treat teachers as disposable accessories; hence they can ask them to sit up and down holding their ears in public. Educators with their depleted efficiency and compromised morality are not helping their causes either. Yet we expect these teachers to prepare our nation ready for the future.

Somehow we have failed to make teaching a dream job. Many of our rural English school teachers are "teaching students at higher levels than their own ability in the language," a survey reports, adding, "not a single Grade 10 student in

are not enough jobs in the market to accommodate them. These students could have received voluntary education and become skilled workers or professionals. Instead, they all want a piece of paper that will supposedly help them with their dreams of becoming civil servants or MNC officials. The supply of students and institutions has created a demand for university teachers. The reality is, there are teachers who should not be teaching in the first place. They are doing more disservice to the system than service.

With loaned advice from World Bank, the golden deer of quality has appeared in the quantity forest of higher education. We need to revamp the entire system, but if you ask me, the change must begin with good teachers. Then we need the right curriculum that is on a par with the global standard. Otherwise, students will lose their motivations to learn. We need

a vicious double-loop where the sites of dream are taken over by the parasites.

The video I began with highlights our own responsibilities in bringing changes. Every day we employ our own lenses, filters, and editing tools to craft our versions of reality. It's easy to derive voyeuristic pleasure from seeing other's misfortunes or colouring our surrounding. Time has come to decide what we can do to bring a change. Should we just keep on clicking snapshots to get "Likes" on Facebook or bring our expertise to cause small changes? Education is too serious a matter to be left to the educators. The change will come by educating and becoming educators ourselves.

There is nothing new in my observations. I found them ... blown' in the wind!

Shamsad Mortuza is Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

Strange times call for stranger bedfellows

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

quite a stir.

The end of US' precarious friendship with the Syrian Kurds was long time coming, given the discomfort of Turkey, since it considered the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—a main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), long designated by the US and Turkey as a terrorist organisation. Indeed, the PKK had been fighting hard for the last few decades for their own land—a place they could call their own.

However, in trying to appease Turkey, the US abruptly pulled out its troops from northeast Syria, and the void left by the US' withdrawal enabled Russia to strengthen its position in the region. Case in point—the presence of Russians in an abruptly vacated US facility in Manbij, as showed in videos circulated by Russian media and even the Russia's military news website, ANNA News. The description that came with the ANNA News video was even more interesting: "Manbij is ours!"

A lot of Russia's success in its new-found friendship with Turkey is due to Putin's foresight. At a time when the US was trying to find ways to wash its hands of the situation in Syria, Russia was engaging Turkey in dialogue through the "Astana talks". These talks, going on since 2017, have not only turned sour regional enemies into friends, but they have also helped Russia consolidate its position and acceptability in the region, and gain the confidence of Turkey.

And while Trump had sent his vice president to Turkey to arrange a temporary ceasefire, in the backdrop of the failure of US economic sanctions on Turkey to contain the country's aggression

in northeast Syria, Putin managed to convince Turkey for a lasting peace in the region by inking a deal with the country to stop attacks in Syria, after more than six hours of intense negotiations. The major terms: Turkey will have its desired "safe zone" devoid of the Kurds and control a 32km-wide area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, which covers 120km of the Turkish-Syrian border (although shorter, but a safe zone nonetheless); Russia and Turkey will jointly patrol the area—a task that was once under US jurisdiction.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) meets with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi on October 22, 2019.

PHOTO: AFP

Photos of a sombre Erdogan and a smug Putin shaking hands were all over the media. An unlikely alliance in a troubled region, which made Putin—overnight—the security guarantor of both the Turks and the Kurds!

The US troop withdrawal has resulted in another unlikely friendship—one between Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Kurds, once intransigent enemies. In the face of aggressive Turkish operation in the Kurdish stronghold of northeast Syrian region, including cities of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad, and stabbed in the back by their ally, the US, the Syrian Kurds were left with no other choice but to seek the help of Assad in fighting back the Turkish soldiers. This resulted in the Syrian government forces entering into Kurdish controlled towns and cities in the northeast of the

country, including the flashpoint cities of Manbij and Kobani, after many years, to "liberate areas entered by the Turkish army and its hired mercenaries." Even a few weeks ago, this would have been difficult to imagine, given the historic bad blood between Syria's Ba'athist regime of Hafez al-Assad and now his son Bashar al-Assad, and the Syrian Kurds.

This unlikely friendship between the Kurds and Damascus has created uncertainties on multiple fronts. First of all, the Kurds seeking Assad's help have

to the said cities in Syria live in fear of reprisal by the forces of Assad. According to the 44-page report, this fear has been triggered by "widespread and systematic human rights violations" by the Assad regime and its allies, along with "arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment, extortion and the absence of basic services". The report further suggests that "63 percent of returnees interviewed are actively seeking to flee Syria again."

Another fear factor is that, with access to the heartlands of the already weakened Kurds, Assad can now choose to settle the scores with the Kurds who had defied him in the past, and especially for their role against Assad in the Syrian Civil War. If that comes to pass, one can only assume the upheaval and uncertainty it will plunge the region into. And if Assad's intentions are not noble, how would SDF manage to maintain the various prisons it is currently supervising, full of captured IS fighters—nearly 12,000 (according to estimates before the Turkish operations began earlier this month), with a quarter of them being foreign fighters?

And while it is understandable what forced the Kurds to seek Assad's help, what motivated Assad to join hands with the Kurds is still unclear: is it to appease its long-time ally Russia—who wanted to secure a "win-win" deal with Turkey and emerge as the leader who brought peace in the war-torn Syria—or, does Assad have more layered motives? Only time will tell.

Although fragile, a ceasefire has been reached and perhaps soon a semblance of normalcy will return in Syria—or perhaps not! But for now, the US is lifting its ineffective and cosmetic economic sanctions on Turkey, and Russia has emerged as the greater of all the players involved in this game of power. What the Kurds or the Syrians will gain from this deal remains to be seen: after all, in the words of Sergey Markov, a political science professor and former member of the Russian parliament, it is a "win-win" situation for Turkey and Russia—two strange bedfellows in control of the fate of millions in the region.

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