

Have we fulfilled the dreams of our martyrs?

48 years as an independent country

TODAY we celebrate 48 years of our existence as an independent nation, breathing the air of a free country and in a free environment. But it is with a sense of mixed feeling that we celebrate this day. Our joy is constantly laced with sadness. Freedom came but at the cost of three million lives and the sacrifices of thousands of our mothers and sisters. We mourn for the martyrs, for their loss is irreparable.

While our freedom brought relief and respite from the hands of a rapacious marauding occupation military machine, oiled by the minority's hatred for the people of East Bengal, the nine-month war left in its wake a horrid tale of death and destruction. The country literally rose from the ashes like the legendary phoenix. And that was possible only due to the leadership of the Father of the Nation and the guidance of his four trusted lieutenants, who had steered the people in the trying times during the period of the Liberation War, and which saw the successful end of the war in our favour—our Victory. And it was also the credit of the people of a war-ravaged country who displayed the kind of resilience and grit seldom witnessed.

But while we celebrate the day and grieve for those we lost, we cannot but help reflect on the fact that we are in the cusp of the golden jubilee year of our victory, which we will celebrate two years hence. While 50 years is not a long time in a country's history, it is well to remember that we have been an independent nation for twice as long as we have been under Pakistan. And in this nearly half a century, how much of the dream of the martyrs have we been able to fulfil? If the dream that we all fought for was freedom and development which would be inclusive and cover all spheres of the nation's life, how have we fared?

We can justly take pride in the fact that we have done very well as far as the development agenda goes. We have a remarkable growth rate, but that perhaps should be more inclusive. Our human development index is an envy of many and would be worth emulating by all the other countries of the region.

On the other hand, however, if democracy and democratic institutions of a country are the two major underpinnings of freedom, then regrettably, there is a shortfall; some would even say regression from the principles of democracy. After all, it is for democracy and democratic rights that the Bengalis took up arms. And it is, therefore, sad to see a deficit of democracy even today.

A case stranger than fiction

We draw the attention of the court

THAT truth can be stranger than fiction has been nailed home by a report titled: "No strength left to seek justice" printed in this daily on December 15. The report narrates how a woman—whose son had died due to alleged torture sustained while in police custody in 2014—had to give up seeking justice for her dead son in the face of legal troubles of her own. The woman, Shaheda Begum, was arrested by the police earlier this year on charges of dealing drugs, and she had to spend six months in jail, where she suffered stroke twice.

Shaheda Begum claims she had been framed so that she stops pursuing the case filed after her son's death. And the case brought against the woman is not devoid of ambiguities either. According to case, the police—when conducting a drive at the woman's house, acting on a tip-off—arrested Shaheda along with four alleged drug dealers (two men and two teenage boys) and recovered 8,000 yaba pills when searching the males. This apparently the police had seized in front of three witnesses, including the complainant. However, the two civilians who had been cited as witnesses in the case against the 62-year-old woman disclosed to the reporter that they had only signed the documents the police had asked them to sign—they had not seen the yaba pills being recovered from the four. This was refuted by the DB SI who is also the complainant of the case. Shaheda also claimed that the police had taken Tk 7.5 lakh, which she got after selling a plot in the capital's Paikpara area. The police deny taking the money and there is no mention of it in the seizure list.

The case brings into light the inconsistencies—to say the least—that our law enforcing system is riddled with. At worst, the case points to the culture of corruption that is stripping our law enforcement of their integrity. In view of this, we would like to strongly urge the court to look into this case and deliver justice to the persecuted family of the victim. The culpable police officials must be brought to book and made accountable for their misdeeds.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A sight that tells tales about our roads

For a few days after it was announced that the Road Transport Act will come into effect, the roads were relatively better and less congested. Part of the reason was that many public transports had stayed off the road.

This caused a lot of suffering for many people. But what is interesting is the fact that so many buses, lagunas, etc. had to stay off the road. This merely illustrates the huge percentage of these vehicles that are unfit to ply the roads.

This mess could not have happened in a day. It shows the systematic failure that has led to the terrible conditions of our road, and the lack of safety that exists because of it.

The authorities should be ashamed for failing their duties so miserably. Simply passing new laws cannot fix the horrid conditions of our roads. We must adopt a culture of accountability—starting from the very top—if things are to improve in any way.

Jashimuddin, Banani

CANCELLING EVENING DEGREE PROGRAMMES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Was it the right decision?

MIZANUR RAHMAN

THE University Grants Commission (UGC) has circulated a directive to public universities recently to close all evening degree programmes. It is a populist move, made without consultation with stakeholders.

As Bangladesh experienced accelerating economic growth and a deepening integration with the world economy, demand for higher education and relevant skills increased many-fold over time. The mushrooming of private universities is a manifestation of this development. Private provision of higher education, however, proved to be far below standard for a variety of reasons. One key reason is that a private university is often *de facto* a family enterprise and is run to maximise family wealth. Public universities had human and physical capital and excess capacities. They also thus entered into this "market for higher education". We can condemn this term, but it is the reality. If public universities are pushed out of this market, private universities alone will serve this burgeoning demand. Do they have requisite capacities? The answer is no. The outcome is obvious. People who need higher education will end up buying certificates from many weakly-governed private universities. Or they will be denied an opportunity to acquire the relevant skills. Skills-gap in the job market will therefore widen.

The big question is whether this prevalence of evening graduate programmes harmed regular degree programmes of public universities. With a few exceptions, the answer is absolutely no. I can list many benefits of this emerging pattern. Firstly, a rising volume of cashflows helped many academic departments substantially develop their teaching-learning environment. An absence of it would seriously harm their capability to provide and maintain physical infrastructures that are needed for healthy classroom environment. I had the opportunity to design and implement an evening graduate programme for corporate accountants and tax practitioners.

As the founder director of the programme, I will briefly highlight a few financial attributes taken from the audited financial statements of the programme. In the first two years, the programme earned a gross cashflow of Tk 25.8 million. Of this amount, we transferred 30 percent to the central account of the university and another 5 percent to the Faculty Dean's Office for supporting central logistics and facilities. The remainder 65 percent is the net disposable cashflow. About a half of the net cashflow was spent for admission, teaching and learning.

A central element of it was to engage external policymakers and researchers for the conduct of seminars and symposiums on taxation and public finance. Another 15 percent was spent for advertising and promotion and office supplies. About 17.5 percent was spent for programme administration in the form of salaries and honorariums. Payment for fixed assets and taxes accounted for 5 percent each. Miscellaneous items accounted for the remainder. A wide array of professionals including faculty members, senior tax administrators, chartered accountants and tax lawyers comprise the pool of teachers of the programme. It is thus evident that more than 50 percent of the net cashflows are earned by this cross-section of professionals who are at the heart of deepening university-industry linkages. A public university without the incremental cashflows will be forced to

transfer of 30 percent gives the university administration little spending flexibility.

Thirdly, public university teachers until 2015 lived on inadequate salaries and benefits. They used to travel to private universities for a minimum living with humility and uncertainty. They used to waste valuable time while travelling in clogged Dhaka city. Given that they have opportunities at home, many public university teachers refrain from outside engagements. They are more productive and devoted to their teaching and research at their own universities. An exception of a handful of greedy teachers does not render a systemic innovation invalid.

Fourthly, the populist claim that regular programmes have suffered because of this evening programme is generally invalid. For a few cases, this argument is possibly tenable. That doesn't invalidate this evolving pattern of higher

Fifthly, we must remember that public universities often provide better quality higher education in the evening, but at much lower costs than their private counterparts. Closing this window will surely produce huge welfare loss for society. Prospective students will pay more but for inferior education. More importantly, we must think of dwindling government spending on higher education. Government spending is hugely constrained in the face of stagnant tax revenue. A ballooning budget deficit every year is causing a surge in public debt. If we are really committed to improving higher education, the government must require public universities to look for fiscal independence. Dr Mohammed Farashuddin, Chairman of the Pay Commission, made this point in 2015. If the avenues for private cashflows are instead closed, public universities will be more dependent on government budget. With no prospect of this extra government spending, public provision of higher education will further decline and become substandard. This erratic public policy is deeply inconsistent with the goal of fiscal sustainability of public universities.

Finally, the provision of higher education free of cost to everyone in a developing country is neither efficient nor equitable. A careful survey will unequivocally show that a large majority of students of a public university come from middle-income or high-income families. They are the "children of the moneyed elite". Had they not been selected in public universities, their parents would invest for their children's higher education in private universities at home and abroad. The use of taxpayers' money to give everyone higher education free of cost is against equity. The resurgent rise of more than 100 private universities in Bangladesh is a clear manifestation.

We can demand for good governance of public universities. Is it not equitable to charge tuition fees upon the children of the "moneyed elite" and provide scholarships to poor but meritorious students? It will bring about fiscal sustainability. We can call for improving spending efficiency of public universities. We can call for building research capabilities and financing of innovative research in public universities. We can invest more in our human and physical capital. We can invest for increasing internationalisation of higher education. We can think of curtailing campus politics. That would be a good service for the society.

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be inward-looking. It would never be able to offer efficient graduate programmes for meeting job market needs. In a competitive world, an option to offer quality higher education to corporate executives who are "on-the-job and willing to pay for it" is consistent with both equity and efficiency.

Secondly, a share of 30 percent of gross revenues has long provided lifeline to the central budgets of many public universities. Dhaka University is one example. This sharing of cashflows helped Dhaka University support many critical tasks including transfer to other departments and institutes for maintaining their infrastructure. Note that job market produces little demand for higher education in many fields of knowledge. Those disciplines are hugely underfunded in a public university. The

education. For example, it is observed that some newly established public universities, or some newly established academic departments, quickly jumped into this evening provision of higher education. And they have done it without considering their human and physical capabilities. That is clearly bad. It is more a governance failure of the public universities. But the move to ban all evening degree programmes of public universities, and thus denying learning opportunities for those in the job market, is unwarranted.

It will harm the government's vision for skills development. It will further erode competitive edge of local graduates and workforce. Corporate dependence on foreign workers will further worsen when millions of unskilled youth enter into the crowded job market every year.

Certainty over Brexit, yet uncertainty remains in the Kingdom

KAMAL AHMED

ONE would not expect, least of all in western democracies, to see people taking to the streets immediately after a new prime minister takes office with a landslide victory. But it has happened in Britain. On the evening of December 13, barely hours after returning to 10 Downing Street after seeing the Monarch and getting consent to form a new government, PM Johnson had to endure the chanting of hundreds of protesters outside, calling for an end to Tory rule. Most notable was the dominance of the angry youth among those protesters. If pre-election opinion polls are to be believed, which predicted the Tory landslide too well, then the overwhelming majority of the young had not voted for Johnson's premiership.

The December 12 election was a gamble Johnson won with his instinct, that he can exploit the frustrations of a larger populace over Brexit. He made it a single-issue election and campaigned on the message "Get Brexit Done". He therefore chose to keep his manifesto short and not make too many promises on socio-economic issues. Likewise, the Brexit Party also avoided talking about issues including austerity, health, education, crime, foreign policy, etc. All the other opposition parties thought elections for a five-year fixed term parliament should not be about Brexit only and therefore put emphasis on austerity, which has been affecting a large number of working families. But their catchphrase of "ending austerity, ending poverty" did not work.

It is for the third time that the British electorate has voted on the issue of Brexit. The first one was the Brexit referendum, where the margin was 52 percent in favour and 48 percent against. A closer scrutiny of the voting pattern showed there was a generational question. While the overwhelming majority of the "grey voters" (meaning aged over 55) voted for divorce with Europe, the majority of "green voters" (under 25) opted to remain in the European Union. The unusual protest on December 13 outside Downing Street perhaps explains how those young voters feel about their future being put into uncertainty by the grey voters.

In the second election, in which Theresa May lost her majority and clung onto power with the support of the Irish Unionists, every contesting party promised to carry on the verdict of the

referendum as smoothly as possible. But May's weak mandate and bickering within the party made it impossible to find any smooth exit. It was Johnson and a few others who opposed her and quit their ministerial jobs. Had Johnson agreed to endorse May's deal then, Britain would have left the EU as early as last March or at least in May. But Johnson and the other extreme Brexiters had other plans. His ambition was to get the top job in the country. And, following a successful coup within the party against May, Johnson rose to the high office, promising a new deal and exit within October. His promise was to die in a ditch rather than extending the union beyond October. He did neither. Instead, he picked a fight against parliament by misleading the Queen in suspending its sittings, not allowing closer scrutiny despite his renegotiated deal

momentum Johnson enjoyed. Labour and the Liberal Democrats fell into the trap, as without their support, calling an election would not have been possible.

But both these two parties were the least prepared for any election. Labour itself was in turmoil for too long. There were tensions among MPs and grassroots members, Blairites vs trade unionists, pro-Palestinians being labelled as anti-Semitic and so on. This election was a re-enactment of 2017—where instead of the Tories becoming the target of removal from office, it was all about stopping "Too-Radical" Corbyn.

There was an unnatural alliance between rightists, populists, billionaires, media barons and pseudo-liberals against Corbyn. It explains why so many pundits in unison are saying that Labour would have done better if they had ditched

success. Rather, Corbyn in 2017 recouped more than 3 million votes out of the 5 million lost due to the legacy of Blair's highly unpopular Iraq war.

This election outcome is now set to bring an end to the most radical left-wing leadership in the western world. Similarly, Johnson's rise, having lots of similarities with US President Trump's, stokes memories of the Thatcher-Reagan duo. President Trump called Johnson's victory a harbinger of his re-election. Johnson, with his admiration for Trump, has been emphasising on a trade deal with the US for quite some time. Due to uncertainties in its relationship with Europe in a post-Brexit world, a quicker alignment with the US is very much likely for the UK. Whether that will result in a revival of Neo-Conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic is a big question.

Johnson's victory will make the divorce easier though, due to his comfortable majority. It will require quite a complex and lengthy negotiation. Until those are concluded, Britain will have to abide by European rules and it may force him to seek another extension or exit without a deal. It will be painful and costly for businesses and the economy.

Johnson's other challenge is the future of the UK's own unity. The Scottish Leader Nicola Sturgeon, following her party's spectacular electoral success of capturing over 80 percent of Scottish seats, has already issued her challenge by saying she will publish her plan for an independence referendum within a week. Scotland in the 2016 referendum voted to remain in the EU and so Brexit is bound to alienate it further. A similar problem is brewing, up in Northern Ireland, which also voted against Brexit. Nationalists in Northern Ireland have gained Johnson's pre-election ally, the Democratic Unionist Party, who prefer to stay as part of the UK. Johnson's new deal has annoyed them as it imposes a virtual border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. And the nationalists, due to their preference to remain in the EU, have indicated that they too might call for a referendum on unity with the Irish Republic. Johnson's victory might have brought certainty on the question Brexit, however, at the same time, it has raised the prospect of the disintegration of the Kingdom.

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Protesters demonstrate at Downing Street after the Conservatives won the UK's general election in a landslide.

PHOTO: LISI NIESNER/REUTERS

being passed and chose to call an election.

The difference between Brexit at any cost and its opponents has shifted by just a mere four percent. But those opponents were divided in three groups—revoking the referendum result, calling a second referendum and renegotiate a deal plus a confirmatory referendum. The third option proposed by the Labour Party was too complex, time consuming and its leader's neutrality in a confirmatory plebiscite was too confusing for the proponents of the other two options. This division definitely hurt Labour the hardest.

As many experts warned, going to the polls when Johnson wanted it would end in Labour losing because of the

their leader with someone more centrist. The UK has never seen such one-sided media coverage, as well as disinformation campaigns on social media. A good number of experts suggests that Johnson's success, after a decade of unpopular austerity policies pursued by his party, shows that the blame for Labour's loss squarely falls on Marxist Corbyn. However, electoral history over the last three decades show Britain is largely a Conservative country and the only leader who succeeded in bringing Labour to power was Tony Blair, who had to renege on a number of core values of the party and renamed his right-leaning centrist position as New Labour. Neither Gordon Brown, nor Ed Miliband could bring that