

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY DECEMBER 30, 2019, POUH 15, 1426 BS

Another road crash, another family destroyed

Reckless driving continues to kill

There are no words to express our sorrow and sympathies for the bereaved of the victims of the terrible road crash between a lorry and a private car at a roundabout on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Faujdarhat that has taken the lives of a father and two daughters, with the mother and a son barely alive. Reckless driving was possibly the reason behind this tragedy as the lorry had rammed into the private car at high speed. Over just the past week, there has been continuous news of such devastating road crashes. We ask in exasperation, why has the Road Transport Act 2018 not been enforced even after a year of its being passed? Why do reckless driving and other traffic violations continue to be tolerated despite the high number of casualties?

According to transport experts and road safety campaigners, plying of unfit vehicles is a key reason for road accidents. At least 3,488 people were killed and 5,863 others injured in 3,131 road crashes till October 18 this year, according to the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Buet. ARI has found a steady rise in the number of deaths and road crashes over the years. This is despite the intense road safety campaigns by students, the vigorous traffic weeks, High Court directives to stop unfit vehicles from plying the streets, and innumerable meetings, probe committees and recommendations. We are mystified as to why the "high level" task force formed by the government still has not started its work to implement the recommendations of the committee aimed at reducing the number of road crashes.

According to experts and road safety campaigners, one of the biggest stumbling blocks was the lack of necessary infrastructure and manpower required to enforce the law. Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), for instance, does not have sufficient manpower and infrastructure to check fitness of the huge number of vehicles plying on roads and provide licences to drivers.

The government must now make an accelerated effort to enforce the transport safety act; for starters, it must make sure that not a single unfit vehicle is allowed on the streets. Reckless driving must be dealt with a heavy hand despite the intense lobbying by the transport sector and its patrons to reduce the punishment meted out to drivers who end up killing people because of their carelessness, confidence that they will get away with it, substance abuse or sleep deprivation due to excessive number of back-to-back trips. More people have to be hired to check unfit vehicles and ensure that all drivers properly pass their driving tests. The practice of paying a "toll" to traffic police to get away with a traffic violation has to be completely stopped. We are tired of waiting for some change while this tragedy of families being destroyed by road crashes keeps playing out over and over again.

NRCC's just recommendation to save rivers

It should be enshrined in law

The National River Conservation Commission's recommendation to hand jail terms to river-polluters should come as no surprise given the rampant encroachment of our rivers. From big corporations to government institutions, everyone seems to have taken our rivers for granted and claimed their share of the pie.

A report published by this daily on December 29 revealed that a government textile institute had been set up by illegally occupying land in the middle of the Arial Kha in Madaripur Sadar Upazila. What is even worse, the river has also been encroached upon to build a maritime institute. If this is how the state treats our rivers—an essential but fast-disappearing natural resource—what else can we expect from the other illegal grabbers?

No wonder industries are freely dumping their waste into our rivers with impunity; no wonder that vast streams of our rivers and canals have been claimed and filled up by business houses to turn them into commercial and residential areas. According to the report published by this daily, thanks to waste and sewage dumping in the Balu River in Gazipur's Kaliganj, the colour of the river has changed and led to it emitting a stench. The river lacks fish or aquatic biodiversity. The waters of Dhaleshwari and Balu have been polluted to an extent that it cannot be used by people anymore—those who are using the waters of these rivers are contracting various kinds of skin and gastrointestinal diseases.

It is high time our policymakers incorporated the recommendation of the National River Conservation Commission to slap prison terms on river polluters, made in the draft amendment to National River Conservation Commission Act, 2013, and enshrined it in a law. River polluters—be it commercial entities or government bodies—should be handed just and timely punishment to save our rivers from dying untimely deaths.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Doing the needful

Recently, upon my return from an overseas trip, I noticed that a number of flights had also arrived from the Middle East at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. In no time, the immigration area was crowded. I was curious to see that along with the existing counters for diplomats and airline crew, there was an "Official" counter for government officials. As the regular counter was packed, mostly with migrant workers, some of them moved to the special counter but they were shooed away by the immigration officials. I was annoyed that the so-called "public servants" get preferential treatment while migrant workers, whose remittances make up the second-highest foreign currency income of the country, are ignored. Could we not be a little lenient to these workers?

ABM Nurul Islam, by email

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

The most appropriate description of the year 2019, particularly of Bangladeshi politics, is perhaps a dialogue in Act 3, Scene 4, of the *Twelfth Night* of William Shakespeare: "If this were play'd upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction." But we are aware, they were not improbable fictions. The events that marked the year were real, but they were full of paradoxes; the incongruity between what seemingly appeared and what was the essence was palpable; differences between official narrative and reality were stark. The most conspicuous of all these paradoxes was the claim that the country has continued democracy through a controversial election on December 30, 2018, while throughout the year, the opposition has been repeatedly denied permission to hold public rallies, BNP leaders were charged with frivolous cases, gagging media has become the norm, any effort to organise protests were dealt with force, and seldom dissent was tolerated.

It is not only the *de facto* one-party parliament created through the "2018 election" which indicates the state of democracy, but most importantly the absence of politics as well. The citizens' right to speak freely, without fear, and freedom of expression, two fundamental elements of politics, have become almost non-existent. The Digital Security Act which came into existence just before the election of 2018 has achieved success as the entire cyberspace has become either an echo-chamber or puerile. Dissent has now been criminalised. The hollowing out of democracy is not by accident, but rather by design. This is the defining feature of an electoral authoritarianism, a particular form of hybrid regime. The electoral exercise is the only façade of democracy left standing; but bruised, battered and perhaps irreparably damaged. Elections are held to offer a veneer of legitimacy and nothing more. As such, in 2019, the paradox lies in the fact that the ruling party and the government claims to have democracy, while politics remain absent.

The 2018 election, in which the law enforcement agencies, civil service, election commission, and the party delivered the victory to the incumbent, has shattered the citizen's faith of the electoral system. More elections have been held in 2019—the Dhaka (North) City Corporation (DNCC) mayoral election, Upazilla elections in five stages—but very few voters showed up. Most voters had spoken, by remaining silent; they voted by not showing up at the polling stations. Yet neither the Election Commission nor the government listened

to the message; they were happy to see that the election day has passed and gleefully claimed that they had done their "duty". Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, the design to damage the electoral system was not limited to the national level. The Ducus election, held after 28 years, was tainted by the ruling party student activists. Anyone who cares enough to investigate elections of the professional organisations and trade unions would find that elections are rarely held—usually a set of candidates are chosen as "consensus" candidates, a system akin to one-party states. Even the ritual of an election is now being shunned.

The absence of a formidable opposition and political activities have established the ruling party's complete control over state and politics, yet the ruling party seems to be jittery at every turn of events. Each instance of popular agitation or expression of discontent is described by the ruling party leaders and their supporters as a



Students demand a fresh election to Ducus, March 12, 2019. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

"conspiracy" to destabilise the country. Periodic outbursts of social movements and movements within the universities against the university administration revealed the simmering discontent. But the government remained unmoved and viewed them as a challenge to its authority. Consequently, the government resorted to coercion and imparting fear. These have become primary modes of governance. The number of extrajudicial killings—456, and the number of victims of enforced disappearances, 83—between January and November demonstrate the tendency. The unwillingness to act against corruption and abuse of power by different vice chancellors is a reflection on the mindset of the ruling party. Often, like previous years, violence against lawful protest, gagging the media, silencing the critics are

franchised to the ruling party activists.

Despite the apparent political stability, a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among citizens is easily palpable. These arise from the lack of confidence on the government's narratives. This is what created the opportunity for "rumours". Often the air became thick with rumours and citizens panicked, not because someone conspired, but because the citizens have little confidence on what was said by the officials and ruling party leaders.

There is no doubt that the opposition, particularly the BNP, is in its weakest form. BNP has been constantly mocked by ruling party leaders for its inability to mount a movement to free its leader Khaleda Zia. But that did not preclude the ruling party to find the BNP's hand in anything that went wrong. For example, the mistakes in the flawed list of collaborators published by the Ministry of Liberation War at the end of the year were blamed on the BNP.

leaders and activists had any role in selecting the leadership. It was nothing surprising because ahead of the party conference, leadership of various associate organisations such as the Jubo League and Krishak League, were selected in similar fashion.

Those who prefer to be optimistic had their moments when the government launched the anti-casino drive in mid-September. The drive, at the heel of expelling the president and general secretary of the Chhatra League, was portrayed as a "historic" and "unprecedented" anti-corruption drive. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet members made promises that "no one will be spared", but the bigwigs remained untouched. Notwithstanding the arrests of the few mid-ranking leaders of the Jubo League and Krishak League, the drive fizzled out in a few months. While it started with a big bang, the anti-corruption drive seems to have ended as a whimper.

The rhetoric of the government and the growing sentiment about Bangladesh's relationship with India lay bare another paradox of 2019. While the ruling Awami League insists on "a golden era of relationship", Sheikh Hasina received a lukewarm reception during her visits to India in October and November and the Indian government paid little attention to the concerns of Bangladesh regarding the fallout of the National Registry of Citizenship (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). A perception among Bangladeshis is all pervasive that Bangladesh's gestures have not been reciprocated fully. Such perception has engendered an undercurrent of anti-Indian sentiment. But the ruling party activists have taken it upon themselves to violently suppress any criticisms of Indian policies. The brutal killings of the Buet student, Abrar Fahad, in October, after he posted a critical comment about the Indo-Bangladesh treaty on Facebook, and the attack on Ducus VP Nurul Huq Nur in December after his organisation tried to organise a rally against the NRC/CAA, testify to this approach.

The questions, then are—what is the way out? What can be done to reverse the course of the paradoxes and stop spiralling downward into the rabbit hole in the coming year? The past may be immutable and the politics uncertain, but the future is not predetermined. It is erroneous to think that the future cannot be made; instead history is made by people. Perhaps it is well to remember Cassius' dialogue in the drama "Julius Caesar" by Shakespeare: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings" (Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2).

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Toward a New Social Contract



MINOUCHE SHAFIK

Every society rests on a web of norms, institutions, policies, laws, and commitments to those in need of support. In traditional societies, such obligations are borne mostly by families and kin groups. In advanced economies, there is a greater burden placed on the state and markets (through health insurance and pensions). Yet even in the latter case, much of the social contract is still upheld by families (through unpaid care work), civil society (voluntary and charitable organisations), and employers, who often must provide health insurance or contributions to unemployment insurance.

The social contract is not synonymous with the welfare state. Rather, the welfare state refers to the dimensions of a social contract that are mediated through the political process and subsequent state action, either directly through taxation and public services or indirectly through laws requiring the private sector to provide certain benefits. As such, the welfare state is best understood not as a redistribution mechanism, but as a source of productivity and protection over the course of one's life cycle. As John Hills of the London School of Economics has shown, most people contribute as much to the state as they receive in return.

Nonetheless, much of the anger that has come to define politics in the developed world is rooted in people's sense of having not received what they are owed. Those born into disadvantage feel as though they never had a chance. Those living in rural areas believe that policymakers have overwhelmingly favoured cities. Native-born populations fear that immigrants are receiving benefits before they have paid their due. Men sense that their historic privileges are eroding. Older people regard the young as ungrateful for past sacrifices, and the young increasingly resent the elderly for straining social-security programmes and leaving a legacy of environmental destruction. All of this distrust and animosity is fodder for populists.

So, too, are the effects of technological change and globalisation. As research shows, the integration of global supply chains has delivered huge gains to the middle classes in emerging economies and to the top 1 percent globally; but it has hollowed out the middle and working classes in advanced economies.

The conventional wisdom is that workers in advanced economies have had to sacrifice wages or social protections to compete with emerging-market labour, and that these pressures have intensified as capital has become more mobile. Worse, the social mobility that once made

women have fewer children, are more likely to be in paid work, and will increasingly feel tensions between their participation in the labour market and their traditional caring responsibilities. Yet recent research from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows that closing the gender gap has significant benefits for growth. The challenge, then, is to redefine the social contract so that women can make full use of their talents without any loss of social cohesion.

In advanced economies, this tension is at the centre of debates about childcare and declining birth-rates. Societal aging means



PHOTO: TOBIAS SCHWARZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Climate change represents a breakdown of the intergenerational social contract.

inequity politically tolerable has stalled or declined.

In principle, the provision of adequate insurance against economic displacement should make the pressures from technological change and globalisation manageable. But many aspects of today's welfare states are still designed for the old economy, where male breadwinners paid into reliable pensions over the course of a lifetime, while women stayed at home to raise children and care for the young and the old.

For the first time in history, there are now more women in higher education than men around the world. Educated

that a shrinking working-age population must cover rapidly rising health-care and pension costs. Worse, today's working-age population already has less security than previous generations, owing to the decline of defined-benefit pensions and a lack of access to many employment benefits or training opportunities.

Likewise, climate change represents a breakdown of the intergenerational social contract. This year, young people staged massive protests against an economic model that does not take adequate account of the environment. As the evidence of an impending climate disaster mounts, so, too, has support for alternative economic

models that would enable more sustainable development.

Once we have acknowledged these global challenges, we can begin to envision what a new social contract might look like. For example, education will need to occur earlier in life, when the foundation for subsequent learning is established, as well as later, to meet the demand for reskilling. It also will need to focus on tasks that complement what robots can do. Serious investments in reskilling—on the order of 1-2 percent of GDP, as in Denmark—must be central to any modernised social contract.

A new social contract also may need to provide a minimum income for all, but structured in a way that preserves the incentive to work and retrain. Earned income tax credits, mandatory training and work placements, and employment guarantees should all be considered. And to tap into the world's growing pool of female talent, large investments will be needed to expand childcare and eldercare, provide shared parental leave, and counter the effects of formal and informal biases that place women at a disadvantage. For example, if benefits were made portable and provided *pro rata*, more workers would be able to rely on part-time work to balance other commitments.

As for sustainability, we need to adopt an entirely different way of thinking about aging and the environment. If a shrinking labour force is going to have any chance of supporting an aging population, the investments needed to boost future productivity must be made now. In the meantime, aging populations may have to commit to working longer—with retirement ages pegged to life expectancy—and demanding less medicalised health care at the end of life. Finally, current and future environmental costs will have to be incorporated into economic decisions. We need massive investments in green technologies to transform cities, transportation, and energy systems. Considered together, such a new social contract has the potential to restore a sense of hope and optimism about the future.

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