

## Sweeping change to primary, secondary schooling

*NCTB must engage experts and allow their opinion to shape its policies*

**I**n a major policy shift in school education, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has recommended holding the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent exams on just five subjects, based on the syllabus of class X only, and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams in two phases (in classes XI and XII). If implemented, this will mark a departure from the tradition of holding the exams at the end of their two-year periods. In another major shift, the NCTB has sought to move away from the highly unpopular Primary Education Completion (PEC) and Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams, respectively held at the end of class V and class VIII. NCTB officials said instead of holding the PEC and JSC exams, emphasis will be given on continuous student performance assessment at schools. Among other major suggestions are ending the practice of having separate "groups" for students of science, humanities and business studies at the school level, and having a two-day weekend in place instead of just one.

These reforms, if implemented even partially from January 2022, will change the face of school education as we know it. We are told that the NCTB is seeking opinion from all stakeholders, after which it will revise its draft curriculum outline and send it to the National Curriculum Coordination Committee. While the sweeping nature of the changes sought raises questions about the practicality of our education policies, there can be no question about two of the recommendations: the end of PEC and JSC exams, and the need for a two-day weekend starting Friday. Why the government introduced the PEC and JSC exams in the first place remains a mystery even 10 years after their implementation. Not having to worry about public exams at such an early age will no doubt be a big relief for the students, and will make learning significantly more fun and stress-free. Students should also have enough time to relax and play and acquire social skills, which is not possible with the present one-day weekend.

Ideally, we also agree with the logic for the elimination of the month-long, ritualistic and often emotionally draining exams taking place at the end of school and college years. It's nothing but a waste of time and energy. Any policymaking at this stage should focus on reducing unnecessary pressure on the students and finding quicker, more effective and flexible methods of performance assessment, but whether the course suggested by the NCTB is the way to go can be the subject of a healthy debate. We can begin with the questions: will holding the HSC exams in two phases increase their pressure rather than decreasing it? Will it be more cumbersome for the students and perhaps a logistical nightmare for the authorities? Again, any strategy in which the students have less exams to worry about is welcome, but it will be self-defeating if the time and energy saved in the process cannot be dedicated to improving the quality of their education.

The best course of action for the NCTB right now would be to engage the experts and NGOs working on school education and allow their opinion to be reflected in its final policy suggestions. The pandemic has laid bare the grim underbelly of our school education system. We must, therefore, be simultaneously practical and innovative as we chart our next path. The government should also stress more on improving the quality of education through more engaged and creative teaching and learning methods.

## Rohingya repatriation under the new Myanmar govt

*UK minister has hit the nail on the head*

**W**e endorse the comments of the British government on the issue of the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees, calling on the new government in Myanmar to take steps towards safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Rohingyas to their place of origin in Rakhine State. Lord Tariq Ahmad, the UK Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth has hit the nail on the head by flagging the main issue—the solution is in Myanmar and with the Myanmar government; we believe it lies with Aung Sun Suu Kyi particularly.

Much depends on Suu Kyi and how she handles the Rohingya and the Rakhine issue. With only the second election held in Myanmar since the end of military rule in the country in 2011, her NLD is expected to win and indeed she has already claimed victory. But how much can we depend on her for a solution? The Rohingyas have been disenfranchised along with other minority groups and election in the Rakhine was postponed on the excuse of unrest and security concern in the region. The disposition of Suu Kyi towards the Rohingyas, her pandering to the military and her stubborn unwillingness to uphold the principles of human rights and justice have denigrated not only her credentials as a Nobel Peace Laureate but demeaned the status and dignity of the prize too.

Thus the moot point is will the new government in Myanmar rise above the ingrained parochial and prejudiced attitude that have infused the psyche of the government of Myanmar, which have also afflicted Suu Kyi, and accord due recognition to the Rohingyas and give them their due rights? We also have been calling for the fulfilment of the Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations, including recognising the Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar, giving them freedom of movement, and ensuring their access to essential services. We thank the minister for reiterating it. But while we are heartened by his affirmation of providing the political support needed to resolve this crisis in the long-term, we restate that the political support cannot lack teeth. Given that the rulers in Naypyidaw have become so inured to international criticism, only a very strong and substantive pressure can work. Otherwise, all that is being said will be merely sound and fury signifying little.



MAHFUIZ ANAM

**"E**LECTION is free and fair if I win it and rigged if I lose". I wrote this sentence many times during our period of contested elections under the caretaker government system. I never imagined that I would have to write this about a US election. After having raised the bogey of possible massive election fraud during a re-election campaign, President Trump is now refusing to accept its result. He is opting for litigation to ascertain "legal" votes, implying that there were "illegal" ones, without any shred of evidence so far. Even the Republican controlled states have stood by the accuracy of the election process.

Trump is doing what he does best—disrupt. He did it all through his tenure and he is doing so as he departs, not, of course, if he can help it. But it is a dangerous game he is playing. If he really follows through with his threat of not "conceding" the election, he will cause serious problems in smooth transfer of power and push American politics towards uncharted waters, not to mention making his country subject of ridicule all over the world.

So much of democracy depends on following norms, precedence, procedures, decency and a willingness to play by the rules. Democracy is as much a system as it is a mindset, a collection of values fundamentally rooted on the respect for the "public will" and conceding to it when voted out. If a major actor of this process—in this case Trump—refuses to play by the rules and norms then the whole edifice of democracy risks being seriously dented. Trump's refusal to accept the electoral verdict will create all sorts of problems for a smooth transfer of power, a cornerstone of democracy. After all, politics is about gaining power and democracy is about its smooth and peaceful transfer reflective of people's choice. The more sober section of the Republican Party leadership must rise to the occasion and see that the choice of the majority is honoured.

A seriously vulnerable point of the US presidential election is the practice of "conceding" the election when one is defeated. Since its founding days in

every election the defeated candidates had "conceded" to the winner. Normally presidents complete two terms and the election, held at the end of the second term, has two new contestants, neither of whom are in power. However, if the defeated candidate is the incumbent, as is in this instance (Trump being one of four one-term presidents) then the case is radically different. The sitting president, who is in power, has to "concede" to allow the process of transition to the new leadership to take place in a smooth manner.

So, what happens if Trump does not concede as he has announced he would not? Courts will come into the picture and their verdicts will set the course. We do not know how long it will pan

"widespread election fraud" is being raised and the president himself is talking about "election being stolen" is a reality that US voters have never faced before. It shows that the political divide between the two parties—considered to be two pillars on which the functioning of the American democratic process depends—has come down to such a level that they do not hesitate to question each other's integrity. The suspicion has become so deep, so entrenched, so all-consuming that they do not think twice before accusing each other of such vile crime as "stealing an election". Imagine how the Senate, the House, the various committees, the caucuses, the bipartisan groupings will function with such mutual questioning of political ethics. Differing

that a good part of his supporters are extremists, believing in narratives that are neither fact based nor logical, prone to provocations—and many are armed—and ready to take to the streets if called upon. We may soon understand the true meaning of Trump's earlier directive of "stand back and stand-by" to followers.

Thanks to Trump, I had almost forgotten that US presidents could be eloquent. For four years "nobody did as much for America as I did, nobody created as many jobs in the US history as I did, nobody did (this or that)... as much as I did..." repeated ad infinitum and also using a vocabulary of limited words half of which consisted of "I", "great" and "never before" made listening to the US president—as a journalist I had to—a strain on the ears, the brain, and finer sensibilities. I used to be filled with sadness at what the US presidency had been reduced to—a pulpit for unabashed self-praise.

However, one speech by the president-elect, Joe Biden, refreshingly changed it all. Suddenly the speech was making sense, the words made an impact, one point led to another, it addressed the urgent issues at hand and the listener was eager to hear the finish of what the speaker had started to say. There was substance, meaning, vision, and the future in what Biden was saying. The presidency seemed on its way to getting its sheen back. Obviously, Joe Biden is no Barack Obama but what he lacked in eloquence he made up for by substance.

It is definitely the understatement of the moment to say president-elect Biden has a huge task in hand. Bringing together a divided nation is obviously his first priority and he appears to be best suited for this challenge. Forty-seven years in politics and numerous instances of bi-partisan work will give him personal links with many ranking members of the Republican Party that will facilitate his task.

*Post script*

It may be asked why I, as a Bangladeshi journalist, am so bothered about who becomes the next US president. The answer is simple. I care about democracy as the best political system and elections as a best process of expressing people's choice. Its success or failure anywhere, especially in the US, will greatly determine the prospect of its success elsewhere.

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# Trump is playing a dangerous game



US President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: AFP

out but we can be sure that it will make the relations between the winning and defeated parties—between the democrats and the republicans—bitter. The "time to lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other" appeal by Biden may fall on deaf ears making the "healing" difficult if not well-nigh impossible, definitely in the short run. People expect Biden to remain patient and he, perhaps, will. But much will depend on how elaborate, protracted and time consuming the legal process ends up being. Thankfully there is a time limit till January 20, 2021 when the new president is set to take oath. It is hoped by then some solution will emerge and power will be transferred without fracturing the time honoured process.

The fact that accusations of

on policies or party ideology is one thing but accusing an opponent of a criminal act is something quite different. Seldom, if ever, in nearly two and half centuries since it gained its independence had US politics stooped as low as this.

As we see, from the outside, the US post-election scene unfolding, we are horrified at what President Trump is dragging the US politics into. The fact that he got 71 million votes to Biden's 74 million is a testimony to the support he enjoys. It is to his considerable credit that in spite of his unbridled narcissism and the fact that hidden within his message of "America First" was another message of "Trump First", he still managed to gain the confidence of 48 percent of the American voters. No mean feat in any democracy. It is a matter of great concern

## Can Biden fix the economy and kill the virus at the same time?



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

**W**HILE the recent US Presidential Election has left a number of issues unresolved, one thing is clear. The US electorate which vaulted Joe Biden into power want him to be a magician: to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and accelerate economic growth at the same time. It is not clear whether Biden will be able to do that since it is a tough call. His predecessor Donald Trump could not do it and lost his re-election bid. Not only are the two goals apparently at loggerheads with each other, they have not worked anywhere in the world except for in New Zealand. Biden has been espousing lockdown from the get-go and his opponent Donald Trump has even coined a new sobriquet, "Lockdown Joe"! The country can't expect otherwise from the Biden presidency. The important question now is, can Biden deliver on his promises to fight the pandemic, listen to the "pro-lockdown" camp, and still keep the economic recovery going?

There are clear signs the economic recovery is in full swing. Last quarter, the GDP registered a whopping 33.3 percent growth rate and the unemployment rate dropped to 6.9 percent in October. Businesses are gradually learning to keep chugging along in the face of a second wave, and Pfizer has announced its vaccine is over 90 percent effective, though it is not known how soon it will be available. Clearly the new president can use the bully pulpit to promote the safety of the vaccine and also to boost public faith in its efficacy. But, in the meantime, Biden has to fight the virus and coax Congress to provide an additional stimulus package for the economy. Whether the Republicans retain their majority in the Senate is still up in the air, but they have been very reluctant to go with the House and pass a second stimulus bill before the elections.

Joe Biden will face other challenges from his own party as he tries to balance the various factions, particularly the group of liberals led by Bernie Sanders and the conservatives and moderates

from the South. Before the 2020 elections, the Democrats had a solid majority in the House but in this recent elections, many of the "New Age" liberals lost their seats. This will make it harder for Biden to get some of the key items in the Election Manifesto passed by the House, let alone by the Senate which is still controlled by Mitch McConnell, the nemesis of Obama.

The Democrat's Election Manifesto has a number of economic measures that will also trigger some anxieties. First of all, higher taxes will soon follow if US

Department of Justice (DOJ). The regulatory body is to be tasked with enforcing new rules governing the relationship between industry and environment.

Thirdly, Biden has promised to take the US back to the Paris Climate Agreement, ban fracking, and come down hard on carbon emissions. The Department of Justice and the Environmental Protection Agency is likely to once again enforce the Clean Air Act, the Clean Power Plan, and other executive orders to regulate coal-fired power plants and fossil fuels.



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PHOTO: AFP

Congress is willing to oblige the new president. Biden has repeatedly declared his intention to roll back the Trump-era tax cuts. During a fund-raiser last summer, he said, "I'm going to get rid of the bulk of Trump's USD 2 trillion tax cut. And a lot of you may not like that but I'm going to close loopholes like capital gains and stepped-up basis."

Secondly, Biden will probably strengthen regulation on big business and like his mentor, Barack Obama, revive the institutions that he and Obama built during 2009-2017, and were weakened or decimated by Donald Trump. The practices and infractions committed by Wall Street, the big conglomerates and the energy sector will come under increased scrutiny. Biden plans to create a Climate Justice Division within the

Whether this will have a negative impact on growth and employment in the energy sector is an open question. However, Biden's commitment toward "net-zero carbon emissions by 2050" will impact several markets. Some states, including Pennsylvania, Texas, and New Mexico can expect to see job losses in excess of 500,000.

It is unlikely that there will be a major impact on the economy in the first year of Biden's presidency. He is likely to tread waters very carefully given the reality of the situation, the sky-rocketing budget deficit, and the multiple crises the country is facing. But, once the pandemic has been contained, either due to enhanced lockdown policies or the widespread availability of a vaccine, the challenges and the hard choices is

likely to rise to the surface of the national discourse.

David Gergen, Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and former White House adviser to four presidents including Clinton, summarises well the dilemma Biden will eventually be confronted with. He wrote, "Biden campaigned with bold pledges to strengthen health care, contain the coronavirus pandemic, pump trillions into the economy, address racial and social inequities, and save the planet from climate disaster." Gergen then wonders how "Biden will navigate the cross-pressures within his own party, where squabbles are already breaking out."

Let us now consider the other major leftover from the Trump era, the tariffs on Chinese imports to correct the US balance of trade. It is obvious that China would love to see the USA take a more conciliatory approach towards the multitude of issues that bedevilled the relationship of these two countries during the last four years. There is no doubt that Biden will take a second look at the trade relations with China, and may even lower tariffs on some imports. During an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) in August when asked "Would you keep the tariffs?", Biden said, "No. Hey, look, who said Trump's idea's a good one? Manufacturing has gone into a recession. Agriculture lost billions of dollars that taxpayers had to pay. We're going after China in the wrong way."

In short, the contrasts between the policies of the incumbent Donald Trump and the incoming Joe Biden could not be any sharper. The former was for deregulation and a minimalist tax structure while the latter favours higher corporate tax rates and stricter environmental protections. We will see the net changes in three main areas: taxes, foreign trade, and the regulatory regime.

As for the next president's economic priorities, fortunately, his must-do list is very short. Invest in infrastructure, get to work on a new stimulus bill, and strengthen the healthcare services. And the rest of the economy will take care of itself.

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