

In praise of Angela Merkel



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Wcriticise more than praise. Good news is no news. Sensationalising everything to attract attention for revenue, modern media

spins everything just to prove the point that free speech is an end in itself. But words have no meaning if there is no action. Fiery or flowery rhetoric cannot disguise the fact that most politicians have not delivered what they promised. Hence, we should praise those leaders who look dull but have performed spectacularly, and achieved all that they have quietly and without fuss.

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Angela Merkel steps down as Chancellor of Germany after 16 years at the helm. If she leaves office at the end of this year, she will have beaten the service of her mentor, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who served from 1982 to 1998. Kohl seized the historical opportunity to reunite Germany, but Angela Merkel would be recognised in history as the centrist, no-nonsense builder on that foundation. Lesser leaders would have fumbled or wasted that opportunity.

This is no mean feat for the only woman leader of G7, if not G20. Other than Russian President Putin, who has

been de facto leader since 1999, no one has served longer or dealt with more crises that have tripped up many of her male compatriots. Under her stewardship, Germany consolidated its position as the fourth largest economy in the world, compared with Japan slipping from second to third, UK from fourth to fifth, France from sixth to seventh, and Italy from seventh to eighth.

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Born in West Germany but raised in East Germany, she was the first woman Chancellor, first to be born after the Second World War and first from East

Germany. Her centrist, no-nonsense, prudent and low-key leadership was exactly what was needed by Germany during a tough period of integration between the socialist East and advanced Western parts. The previous Chancellor, Gerhard Schroder (1998-2005), led the Social Democrat-Green Party coalition that refused to sign off on the Iraq invasion. That period experienced very tough economic restructuring and German economic integration in the face of high labour costs and severe manufacturing competition from Japan and the Asian global supply chain. But by the end of the Schroder period, the



German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

PHOTO: AFP

country needed healing—which Merkel provided.

The first major crisis was the 2008 global financial crisis, which hit Germany badly in terms of exports, but also through the huge damage to the European banking system because of excessive investments in US financial derivatives, as well as non-performing loans to South European countries. The 2008/2009 European debt crisis split the European Union into weak debtors and strong creditors. Unlike the 1997/Asian crisis economies, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain could not devalue their way out, although the Euro's weakening and exports to China helped. The austerity drive demanded by the European surplus economies alienated many Southern debtors, forced into humiliating and painful belt-tightening. Merkel had to balance domestic right wing conservatives who demanded austerity, with the reality that European unity remained fundamental to German peace and stability. The Euro and European Union survived the crisis, but the internal fractures became more open, with Brexit and right-wing populism as

major consequences.

The second crisis that Merkel survived was the 2015 influx of refugees. That year the number of migrant arrivals into Europe was nearly one million, of which the number of asylum applicants to Germany alone was half a million, with 750,000 the next year. Whilst the rising migrants worried many in Europe, Merkel famously said, "We can do this". This sent a humane message that Germany welcomed the refugees, half of whom were from Syria. That courageous statement unfortunately did not sit well with some of Merkel's supporters and her party lost many seats in the next election.

It was Merkel's foreign policy that impressed Asians, in particular, more. The key tenets were an avowed European and North Atlantic alliance, a strong belief in multilateralism and trade, and firm conviction that global solutions are resolved best through negotiations, rather than military intervention. Over time, this reflected a more independent line than that of the United States.

In 2013, *Der Spiegel* magazine

made the startling claim that the US had been bugging Merkel's phone since 2002, which sparked outrage in Germany. But it was President Donald Trump's election in 2016 that triggered a review of US-European relations. In May 2017, after the contentious G7 and NATO meetings, Merkel stated pointedly that Europe could no longer rely on the US and Britain and that it was time "to take our fate in our own hands."

Merkel's philosophy is best summed up by her brilliant 2019 Harvard Commencement Speech. Her six lessons were: "Take joint action in the interest of the moderate lateral global world. Keep asking yourselves, "Am I doing something because it is right, or simply because it's possible?" Don't forget that freedom is never something that can be taken for granted. Surprise yourself with what is possible. Remember that openness always involves risks. Letting go of the old is part of the new beginning. Above all, nothing can be taken for granted. Everything is possible."

The quantum scientist in Angela Merkel enabled her to understand the new era of "quantum politics" where, given massive uncertainty, the politician has to recognise that everything is possible and nothing can be taken for granted. But she had the moral conviction that peace is best achieved by working together, to heal and transit to a better beginning. She had the common sense to seek the truth, knowing "not to describe lies as truth and truth as lies."

At a time when the West seemed adrift, the East admires Germany and Europe precisely because Merkel projected the virtues of humility, balance, stability and simple common sense. Asia especially will need these qualities to survive the coming turmoil.

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Introduction of Turnitin in public universities: A software to catch plagiarists

FARAJI R KHAN

THE recent announcement by the University Grants Commission (UGC) on its plan to introduce Turnitin software in public universities has come as a sigh of relief for the research community in Bangladesh. The move is commendable and has been applauded by people from all walks of life. The implementation of this software will significantly reduce plagiarism in research papers, since teachers and students will be held accountable if they resort to any wrongdoings. It will also ensure superior standards in writing research papers, which in turn, will boost the country's image in the international arena.

The academic landscape in Bangladesh has come under intense scrutiny in the last few years after several cases of plagiarism surfaced in the research work of teachers from higher educational institutions across the country.

Two researchers from the country's most prestigious university faced heavy criticism after their research grants were scrapped due to allegations of plagiarism in their research papers. A non-profit research institution, which provided the research grant, launched an internal investigation and found that the researchers had submitted work of questionable quality and ethical standards. One of the teachers admitted to resorting to such an unethical practice, and another researcher claimed the allegations to be unjustified and politically biased. None of the researchers apologised to the relevant authorities and could not

provide justifiable explanations for such a grievous offence.

This is only one of the cases that came to light after the authorities of a public university used Turnitin to detect plagiarism in their research papers. In universities and colleges around the world, plagiarism is considered a serious crime that falls under the umbrella of academic misconduct. It is high time for the education policymakers in Bangladesh to formulate a policy that would help higher educational institutions employ this software nationwide and make

people aware of the repercussions for wrongdoings in the academic field.

The concept of academic integrity must be instilled in the minds of young people from a very early stage so that they are accountable for their actions. Many students in Bangladesh do not understand the meaning of plagiarism and end up reproducing other people's work, without realising the harm done to that individual, or worse, to themselves. Duplicating other people's work has become rampant in the country—one can pay a visit to Dhaka's Nilkhet and see for themselves what

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is happening in the name of printing assignments. An entire generation of people are growing up thinking copying other people's work is morally and ethically justified. These so-called researchers learn the truth the hard way, once they go abroad for further studies.

Several private universities have already implemented this software for students and academic staff, on a limited scale, using their own technological infrastructure. This initiative has made people associated with these organisations more aware of such malpractices. Among the public institutions across the country, Dhaka University is leading the way by making it compulsory for academic professionals and students to use Turnitin in order to check potential plagiarism before submitting their thesis papers. As people are starting to become aware of such a foolproof system, more people are coming forward and requesting permission from the university to use this software to check their work.

However, Turnitin also has its limitations. In Bangladesh, many research papers are written in Bangla,

and Turnitin can only detect plagiarism if the papers are written in English. Furthermore, there is a lack of a national policy regarding plagiarism, which further aggravates the situation.

It is high time for UGC officials to formulate a national policy that will outline the operations of the plagiarism-checking software and the legal consequences for academic misconduct. This policy should be implemented across the country and must be strictly followed by all educational institutions. Renowned private universities in Bangladesh have already introduced policies to keep plagiarism in check using their own resources, which is an honourable initiative and deserves respect. In a similar manner, the UGC officials and eminent citizens of our country can work together to come up with a comprehensive policy that would address issues related to plagiarism. Teachers and students also need to cooperate with each other in order to understand the importance of academic integrity in their work.

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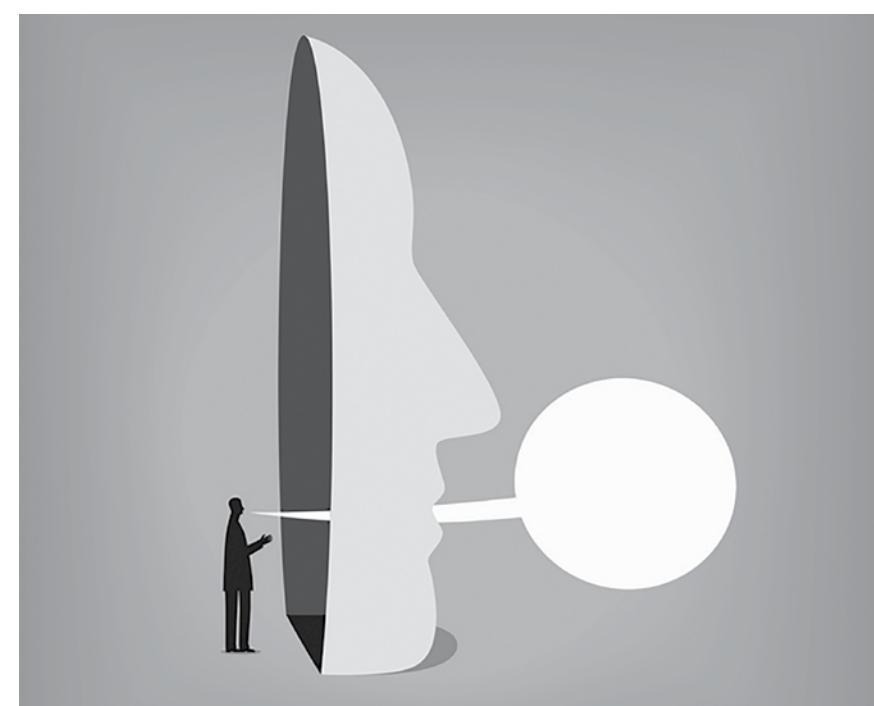


PHOTO: COLLECTED

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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