

Cultivating a politically-diverse generation of leaders



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THE absence of healthy democratic exercises often results in society tending to sideline endemic structural concerns within political parties and governance structures. The case is no different in Bangladesh. The focus of analysis tends to be on the leadership due to the top-down nature of how the two major parties have established themselves as dominant electoral machines over the past four decades. Yet, it is equally important to perhaps take a deeper look at the demographic composition of those holding top political posts across these organisations. At the end of the day, politicians and parliamentary representatives frame public policies, which shape the lives of the future generation. And without understanding and critiquing what perspectives they represent, it is impossible to cultivate a state-society relationship that moulds inclusive, pro-people and needs-based policymaking.

Let's dive into some numbers for context. The Central Working Committee (CWC) of the Awami League is the highest policymaking body of the ruling party; merely three of the 17 active members of the CWC are aged under 70 years. On the other side of the aisle, the Standing Committee of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – which apparently acts as the de facto collective leadership-based decision-making body in the absence of the ailing and judicially convicted party chief Khaleda Zia – does not have a single member who is aged under 70. Therefore the most prominent policymakers of the two major political parties comprise senior citizens representing the war-time generation. And while our debt to them remains absolute and timeless, how can we solely expect a generation that represents a minority in the context of a younger

demographic, which is characteristic of the majority population in Bangladesh, to respond to the wills and wishes of this generation?

Every major demographic indicator suggests that Bangladesh has an extremely young population. About 18.56 percent of its citizens fall in the 15-24 age group. A whopping 40.72

individuals cultivate and narrate the future of an entire nation, then we will remain at an impasse; the lack of demographic diversity is deeply concerning. However, the one core foundational aptitude of the older generation of political leaders who continue being in leadership roles today stems from their experience and

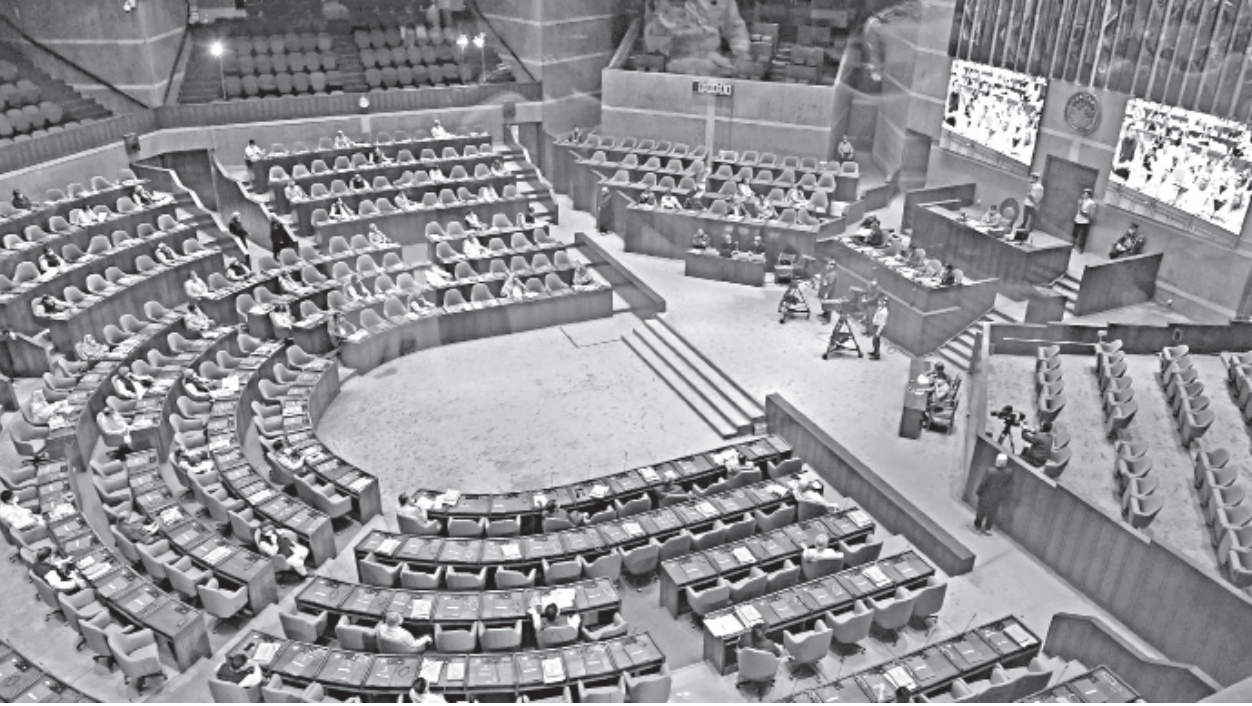
forces. Therefore, with an ageing political leadership and a growing youth population, this decade may very well represent a crucial and critical transition point in Bangladesh's history – the passing of the political baton from the war-time generation of leaders to those whose focus must be on peace, unity, accountability, democracy, social

Therefore, while there is an immediate need to bring forth the younger generation into positions of political influence and authority – particularly within the internal ranks of the two major parties – it is equally important for individuals outside the purview of entrepreneurship to be provided with the opportunity to be active political actors.

The older generation of political leaders were traditionally backed by business elites. From general elections to party funding mechanisms, there is no doubt that money has historically played a pivotal role in ensuring the sustenance of the two-party system in Bangladesh. However, today we are witnessing the direct integration of entrepreneurial interests into the political landscape and parliamentary politics. And the motive of enhancing financial capital, while sidelining concerns regarding conflicts of interests by using politics as an uninterrupted money-making vehicle, could not be clearer to the naked eye.

In summary, demographic indicators and political data suggest that Bangladesh is at a unique crossroads when it comes to a political system developed under the leadership of the war-time generation. On the one hand, our two major parties and parliament fail to represent the modern demography of Bangladesh; add to this the business elites who exclusively dominate the political system. On the other hand, given that the sun is setting on the careers of the war-time generation of political leaders, the nation has the opportunity to induct a new generation of fresher, competent and more relatable leaders into the political landscape. The principal challenge of institutionalising democratic exercises and the practice of free, fair, credible, and inclusive elections remains absolute as well.

Therefore, keeping these concerns in mind, it is time to ensure demographic and occupational diversity across our political system. And this can only be done with the active decision of the veteran generation to slowly but surely start grooming and handing the reins to a new generation of competent political leaders.



It is time to ensure demographic and occupational diversity across our political system.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

percent of the population fall in the 25-54 age group. Whereas a mere 6.82 percent of the population is aged 65 and above. And yet, it is this specific demographic of senior citizens that is representative of the status quo when it comes to policymaking and political leadership in the country. The average age of the national parliament elected in 2018 is 59.48 years, as per data provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), with only 10.57 percent of MPs aged 45 and under. As harsh as this may sound, political veterans of the yesteryears continue having undisputed authority in governing and framing the future of the nation.

If a single generation of like-minded

expertise in grassroots politics. From the 1970s to the 2000s, this particular segment of political leadership who stood by Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia developed themselves into astute and capable political actors based on their experience in student politics and activism-based undertakings. Nevertheless, the politics of the 21st century is widely different; more policy and less politics is perhaps the demand of time. More so than street movements or traditional picketing, politics has shifted towards outreach across social media and a general need to portray party politics as vehicles of transformational policy changes, rather than being mere partisan ideological

development, and human rights.

This brings with it a unique opportunity to induct fresher and intellectually competent faces from a diverse range of professions and grassroots systems into the political landscape. But when it comes to diversity of professional backgrounds in politics, the data is even more concerning. The current parliament, for example, boasts an enormous 61 percent of businesspersons as elected MPs. The increasing dominance of business elites indicates the power of wealth in defining political decisions in the country, with over 82 percent of MPs registered formally as *kotipoti* (millionaires), according to SHUJAN.

Less flooding, more liveability



DEBRA EFROYMSON

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“NOTHING is inevitable but death and flooding” might be our new motto as vast tracts of Bangladesh regularly go under water. So do Miami and other cities around the world. There are a couple of simple reasons why flooding is now inevitable. One is the climate crisis, which guarantees ever more epic climate events, including forest fires, droughts, storms, and flooding. Another is our inability, as modern humans, to accept the simple fact that water requires an outlet.

With burgeoning populations and increasing wealth, there are ever greater demands for construction. Our craze to build and pave has led us to create cities of concrete and asphalt. Canals

and wetlands are paved over. Patches of dirt and green space in cities are victims of the construction boom. As a result, even a fairly normal rainfall can result in flooding; the unprecedented rains due to climate change can only spell disaster. We can build high rise buildings, elevated expressways, and grand monuments, but we can't build our way out of the climate crisis.

We must act dramatically and rapidly to reduce our greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. But the climate crisis is already here; we can only prevent its worst consequences. In the meantime, we also need to accept that fires, droughts, and flooding are part of the “new abnormal.”

But that doesn't mean that we are helpless in the face of the disasters that we human beings have wrought due to our mindless construction and consumerism. At least in terms of flooding, there are some relatively simple activities that would reduce the problem. If we eliminate drains and water bodies while entirely paving over our cities, our cities will get

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flooded. In the past, the primary aim of municipal storm water management was drainage. More recently, localities have shifted to a focus on minimising run-off by returning rain to natural pathways, such as soil, vegetation, and the atmosphere. If we allow water to seep into canals, rivers, and soil, then flooding will be lessened, as will the pollution of our water bodies by all the chemicals that floodwaters carry with them.

And hence, the idea of green infrastructure and depaving. Green

infrastructure can include rain gardens, permeable pavement, green roofs, urban trees, and rainwater harvest and reuse. Green infrastructure means preserving and maintaining canals and rivers in their natural state, rather than encroaching on them or paving them over. Depaving is one of the steps to achieve green infrastructure in an overly built-up city. It is a multi-step process: Stop covering your city in asphalt and cement, start implementing green infrastructure in new projects, and depave where possible. Restore canals and other water bodies. Policies and financial incentives are a necessary adjunct to achieve the needed results.

It may all seem like a lot of work, but consider the benefits. We already know about the losses incurred by flooding: Economic losses of property and ability to work, and personal losses of property, land and lives. By beginning to reverse the damage, other significant benefits would also accrue. First, of course, is flood risk reduction and climate change adaptation. With more natural filtration of water, there

would be less sewer overflow, thus some measure of water quality protection. Green infrastructure combined with grey (cement and asphalt) is cheaper than grey infrastructure on its own; it is also more labour-intensive in its maintenance, creating new green jobs. Green infrastructure is vastly more aesthetic, increasing opportunities for tourism, recreation, and urban liveability. More trees are good for mental health; more shade and urban heat island mitigation would also make it easier for people to use active transport (walking and cycling), which improves health and reduces deadly pollution and road crashes.

Joni Mitchell's song *Big Yellow Taxi* includes the line, “Don't it always seem to go/That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone/They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.” It's time to depave the parking lot and return some paradise to our cities. And, as a not-unimportant result, also decrease urban flooding. Despite appearances, not all our urban problems are inevitable.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Touches down

6 Tex-Mex treats

11 Once more

12 Texas mission

13 Watch a second time

14 Farm machine

15 Shoe part

17 Pub pint

18 Sports drink suffix

19 More piquant

22 Road sealer

23 Writer Hemingway

24 Loaded around

25 Generic

27 Fall behind

30 Fanzine subject

31 Mess up

32 Pindar poem

35 Cruise vessel

38 Feasted

39 Biting

40 Without aid

41 Settle, as a debt

42 Scout shelters

DOWN

1 Rodeo rope

2 Meeting slate

3 Sadat's predecessor

4 Losing scheme

5 Scorned

6 Bar bill

7 Imitating

8 French port

9 Eggy dish

10 More tender

16 Rhea of "Cheers"

20 Showed disdain for

21 Poet Hughes

24 They hold power

25 "Forget it!"

26 "Let me in!"

27 Use for support

28 Impassioned

29 Report-card data

30 Antithetical

34 Despicable

36 Greek vowel

37 Spanish king

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BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT