



VISUAL: STAR

In search of a happier Bangladesh



OPEN SKY

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Once, the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great met the great philosopher Diogenes and asked if he could do anything for the sage. Diogenes didn't ask anything of the king; rather he tartly told the commander not to block the sunlight which the philosopher was basking in. The hermit conveyed to the ruler that he shouldn't take away anything from the public which he can't deliver to his citizens.

Enjoying basic natural rights is the first principle of happiness, and that instantly justifies why Afghanistan turned out to be the unhappiest nation on the planet. It also tells us why Finland, Denmark, and Iceland – the three most reputed welfare states – occupied the first three places in the happiness index devised by a pool of experts under the guidelines of the United Nations.

The World Happiness Report 2023 has placed Bangladesh in the 118th position out of 137 countries. Surprisingly, Bangladesh's ranking was 94 in last year's report and has been downgraded by as many as 24 places, sparking both curiosity and concern as to why it happened. Some critics are labelling it as the government's failure, while some others are trashing the report outright as "a Western plot to malign Bangladesh."

Some discard it by arguing that happiness is a personal aspect and it can't be measured as a social indicator. That's not true. The price behaviour, which is measured at the individual level in microeconomics, can also be quantified at the state level in macroeconomics. We measure social psychology while it is initially studied at the individual level.

That is why the UN panel of experts has outlined six criteria to measure happiness at the national level: 1) per capita income; 2) social support; 3) healthy life expectancy; 4) freedom to make life choices; 5) generosity; and 6) corruption. Hence, the yardstick is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative aspects. For example, income and health indicators can be expressed in numbers, while elements like freedom, social connectedness, generosity, and corruption are perception-based, leaving some room for argument. But the UN

social scientists have explained the methodology of how they handled each of the qualitative factors. Yet, blaming the ranking as an act of conspiracy against any nation won't convince the audience by any chance.

Of course, some rankings may seem anomalous to some readers. Seeing Pakistan (108th) ahead of Bangladesh (118th) in the World Happiness Report at a time when Pakistan is grappling with an acute reserve shortage as well as food and fuel crises may seem odd to many. But these recent phenomena are likely to be reflected in the next report. In last year's report, Pakistan ranked much below at 121st, while Bangladesh's position was 94th, creating no doubt to any critics or sceptics. This year's positions for these two countries are not statistically too different. Any position beyond 100 requires the respective governments to address why social happiness scores are so poor. And the single most dominant factor is the level of corruption.

Highly corrupt nations are highly unhappy, a conclusion we can make by comparing the World Happiness Report 2023 and the Corruption Perception Index 2022, where Pakistan ranked 140th and Bangladesh 147th. The happiest countries like Denmark, Finland, and Iceland have the least amount of corruption as they rank 1st, 2nd, and 14th in the Corruption Perception Index. So, it would be a wake-up call for the government to crusade against those public officials involved in rent-seeking tasks, lawmakers engaged in bribes, police members involved in unethical practices, businessmen turned wilful defaulters, high-scale money launderers, and political pollutants. The outgoing president acknowledged corruption as the main obstacle to progress.

The government is engaged in development projects one after another. But the positive sentiment is outweighed when people can sense the presence of massive corruption in most public works. People feel unhappy when they see that no big-scale money launderers and wilful defaulters have even been touched at all. The criminals who victimise children, girls, women

or minorities are sometimes arrested, but rarely followed up with exemplary punishments. The drivers with fake permits and unfit vehicles keep on committing murders on the streets and highways, but are rarely caught or sent behind bars.

The spectacle of the tardiest possible judiciary, the drought of law enforcement, and the culture of massive impunity for the powerful make the helpless majority frustrated, demoralised, and disdainful. In this situation, the enthusiastic claim of a spike in per capita income by the finance ministry can't make the ordinary people cheer at this creditworthy message. That's why economic achievements on the one hand and the ever-growing financial turpitude on the other hand can't make people smile unconditionally. If a UN official approach them by asking, "Are you happy?" they say, "No." Corruption damages any gain in happiness, throwing the country into a lower rung of the ladder, and thus defaming the nation.

Some may argue that Bangladesh's position at 118th seems to be a mistake while Nepal's position in happiness is 78th, because Bangladesh is more prosperous than Nepal. Herein comes the question of rational expectations originally proposed in the early 1960s by the American economist John Muth. Given the differences in historical perspectives, geopolitical settings, and economic advancements between them, the level of expectations by Bangladeshi people are likely to be higher than that in Nepal, whose per capita income is less than half of Bangladesh's. Also, the low level of corruption in Nepal is a factor why it's happier than Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh government has to devise ways to make the country advance on the ladder of happiness because it is the ultimate objective of any ruler serving the country. Bangabandhu embarked on his second revolution in search for a happier Bangladesh. Anyone believing in his ideals must be serious to research on how to make citizens happier. The unemployment rate is now higher than at any time in the past. Megacities like Dhaka and Chattogram are simply unlivable. They are surcharged with sound pollution, toxic air, uncouth landscape cluttered by political posters, and one of the highest levels of congestion in the world. When the residents of these cities are interviewed on happiness by surveyors, saying that "they are happy" would be a parody of truth and travesty of justice. Those in power can do a lot to address these issues towards the task of making a happier Bangladesh.

Trump's arrest adds fuel to fire in hyperpolarised US



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It's not just the Democrats in the US who are looking longingly at former US President Donald Trump's arrest. A substantial number of Republican Party supporters are also hoping Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg will be able to do what everybody else has been unable to do till now: Put the flamboyant former president behind bars and remove his disruptive and destructive presence from US politics once and for all.

Well, good luck with that. Trump's arrest, ironically, has added rocket fuel to his incendiary campaign to win the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential elections. Trump is playing the victim card for all it's worth, and his detractors are beginning to realise that Trump isn't going anywhere soon.

Heavens knows there is a great deal to dislike about arguably one of the most outré political figures in the Western world. Most politicians play fast and loose with facts, but Trump is in a class all by himself. What is far worse, Trump's uninhibited race-baiting, xenophobia and all-round coarse, pugilistic fact-free diatribes have done permanent damage to US political discourse. Racism, meanspirited demonisation of political opponents, once implicit in dog whistles, are now banded about with a bullhorn.

Porn star, hush money payment through thuggish hatchet man and felon Michael Cohen, covering up of salacious stories in the gaudy periodical National Enquirer – the case against Trump has all the hallmarks of a tawdry tabloid scandal. Herein lies the case's weakness.

The arrest and attempted conviction of a prominent political figure is a portentous, serious matter. The case against Trump is sordid, but does it rise to the level of a crime? Some legal analysts – not all of them Trump supporters – are saying the charge should more appropriately be a misdemeanour.

There are several consequences that follow from this. The first, evident from the cries of outrage of Republicans, is that all of this can be presented as a political witch-hunt. The weaker the case, the more emboldened they are. The other development is that the case may taint other, more substantive efforts to bring Trump to book. A grand jury investigation by Fani Willis, the district attorney of Atlanta's Fulton County, accuses Trump of trying to tamper with the 2020 presidential elections where he was caught on phone asking Georgia elections chief Brad Raffensperger to "find" votes to overturn Biden's impending victory in the state.

Trump has forced the US to confront a fraught political dilemma: How to balance the need to go after an ex-president suspected of serious legal malfeasance against the risk of opening up a Pandora's box of frivolous lawsuits against

political enemies. The Republican attempts of congressional investigations against Democratic enemies provide a foretaste of that – though the fact that they are not making much headway provides some measure of assurance that frivolous attempts will often fall by the wayside.

The immediate aftermath of Trump's arrest brings the former president back to the place he likes best – the centre of all attention. Now, doubtless to his utter delight, it's all about Trump.

As the campaign for US presidential elections is about to begin in earnest, we are back to square one. As the US baseball star Yogi Berra once said: "It's déjà vu all over again."

In 2015, when Trump stepped down the escalator of Trump Tower in Manhattan to announce his presidential campaign, Democrats

his star shone brightly for a while. Polls of Republican voters showed him outperforming Trump. Soon, however, Trump's double-digit lead reassessed itself and Trump now rules supreme.

The arrest and the attendant political outrage of Trump partisans is likely to add a fillip to Trump's support. Even Trump detractors in the Republican Party – DeSantis included – have been obliged to castigate Trump's arrest.

Anybody wishing to topple Trump within the Republican Party faces a formidable task. For a Republican there is the daunting math of keeping Trump supporters on his/her side while wooing those tired or disaffected. Now Trump says that he is the target of a political witch-hunt. How do you agree while seeking to topple him? That's a needle that is impossible to thread.

Some have noted the noticeable lack of public outrage of Trump supporters, but I would not read too much into it. The underlying challenge remains. For decades, the Republican Party has championed the politics of white grievance and outrage, casting political differences not so much as matters of policy rather than an existential battle against the evil Democrats



Republicans are locked in a Faustian embrace with Trump, and the arrest is likely to make that embrace tighter. PHOTO: REUTERS

were delighted and the Republican establishment was confident. This preposterous political arriviste, everyone was sure, was about to get his comeuppance. (A mea culpa is in order here: even I had predicted a Hillary Clinton victory.)

Trump, of course, had the last laugh. There is a cautionary tale in all this, as is evident in the media circus that is beginning to surround him following the news of his arrest.

While it remains to be seen if Trump will actually be convicted, there is no question that the arrest has made Trump's candidacy for the Republican nomination virtually unassailable. Before the arrest, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis was the blue-eyed boy of Republicans keen to see the last of Trump. DeSantis hasn't thrown his hat in the ring yet, but his presidential ambition is one of the worst kept secrets in US politics. With an ability to out-Trump in shrill partisanship and a commanding performance in Florida's gubernatorial elections,

– and thrown in the establishment and the media into the same category. The right-wing media industrial complex, led by Fox News and its ilk, merrily fanned the flames and laughed all the way to the bank. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, the eminence grise of parts of right-wing US media, has soured on Trump, but the ratings gods demand he change his mind fast – and signs are that Fox News is doing exactly that.

For decades, the Republicans style of take-no-prisoners, hate-filled partisan politics yielded considerable political dividends. Then Trump came along and made this politics his very own. The result has been an even more toxic brand of partisan politics that has given rise to a party too driven by hatred of the perceived control of the liberal establishment to engage substantively in policy or governance.

Republicans are locked in a Faustian embrace with Trump, and the arrest is likely to make that embrace tighter.

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bring up

5 Hike route

10 Sailors' saint

11 Stable sight

12 Boxer biter

13 Rise up

14 Saharan sight

16 Wrench or hammer

20 Male escort

23 Great Leap Forward leader

24 Saw

25 Circus structures

27 Maui souvenir

28 Biased, in a way

29 Battlefield worry

32 Paul, to John, e.g.

36 Rich fabric

39 Ship's front

40 Chooses

41 Fatigue

42 Flirtatious signals

43 Utters

DOWN

1 Game callers

2 First name in scat

3 Prayer finish

4 Annoying driver

5 Pollster's find

6 Metal fastener

7 Commotion

8 Ailing

9 Rented out

11 "Encanto" character

15 Secluded spot

17 Old Atlanta

arena

18 Stable diet

19 Missing

20 Brazenness

21 Notion

22 Make headway

25 Look after

26 Releases from duty

28 Goes under

30 Arizona player, for short

31 Ship staffs

33 Diva's piece

34 John Major, for one

35 Some sheep

36 Grass coating

37 2001 Will Smith film

38 Chess pieces

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FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

J A D I T A M I S S

A G I T A S A N D A

C O R A L A R D O R

O R E B A N K I N G

B A C K I N G G E E

S T I N G P O D

A P T L O O S E

A C E B A R K I N G

B A S K I N G M A E

S I E G E E V O K E

E A R S D A N E S

N O S E

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

MY REPORT IS "TOP SECRET," SIR

AREN'T YOU GOING TO READ IT?

I CAN'T KEEP A SECRET

9/12

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

WITH WREN BACK AT PRESCHOOL TODAY, YOU'RE FINALLY GOING TO HAVE SOME ME-TIME!

YEAH, BUT...

SHE NEEDS TO BE AROUND OTHER KIDS, WANDA.

WE HAVE OTHER KIDS!

OTHER NON-HAMMIE KIDS.

GOOD POINT

BLAD-A-BLAD-A-BLAAA!