

We must harness the potential of diaspora

Fostering a conducive environment for expatriate contributions is vital

It is disheartening to see Bangladesh trail behind its South Asian counterparts in terms of harnessing the financial potential of its diaspora, despite the growth in remittance inflow that is expected to reach \$23 billion by the end of 2023. The disparity is evident as Bangladesh, according to a World Bank report, holds a mere \$1.34 billion in deposits from non-resident nationals. By contrast, crisis-hit Pakistan and Sri Lanka boast significantly higher figures of \$3.7 billion and \$7.78 billion, respectively. India leads with a staggering \$143 billion in such deposits. This shows the urgency of revamping our strategies to further engage our expatriates.

There is no denying the importance of greater private capital flows to countries like Bangladesh. As per the WB report, “as debt indicators have worsened in the LMICs [lower-middle-income countries], and sovereign risks increased, countries may benefit from efforts to attract diaspora investors who may view investment opportunities in their countries of origin through a more favourable lens than do institutional investors from the global north.” Bangladesh has initiatives in place to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and remittance through formal channels; non-resident deposits serve as another vital source of external private finance. Although the amount raised by developing countries via diaspora bonds has so far been minuscule compared to the volume of remittance inflows, it only underscores the largely untapped potential of such avenues of capital mobilisation.

Many countries, notably India, have implemented savings programmes to attract foreign currency deposits from non-resident citizens. These schemes offer scopes for tax-exempt, repatriable, and higher-yielding deposits. Bangladesh, too, has several schemes—the US Dollar Investment Bond (USDIB), the US Dollar Premium Bond (USDPB), and the Wage Earner Development Bond (WEDB)—aimed at attracting diaspora investors. However, these initiatives require further enhancement and promotion. Our expatriates are our assets, and if utilised properly and judiciously, we can hugely benefit not just from their remittances and deposits but also from their expertise in policymaking, education, and other areas of public interest.

At a time when we are struggling with a protracted economic crisis, attracting non-resident investments, besides optimising remittance inflows, is paramount. The government, therefore, must review existing savings schemes, enhance their attractiveness, and foster a conducive environment for diaspora contributions. More specifically, it should take steps to enhance financial literacy among non-resident Bangladeshis, ensure competitive rates of return, and transparently communicate the benefits of investing in the nation. Collaborative efforts between financial institutions, policymakers, and the diaspora community are also essential.

A truce just delays the executions

World leaders must enforce a permanent ceasefire in Gaza

Immediately after the weeklong Israel-Hamas truce expired on December 1, bombs started falling on Gaza and ravaging the lives of innocent civilians again. And now, the death toll has crossed 20,000. This proves that the truce was nothing but a farce, an excuse to appease peace-loving people around the world, so that Israel can carry on with its carnage until nothing is left of the strip. If Israel continues along this path, we may witness the destruction of an entire population.

After 76 days of the war, its actions are garnering global disapproval as diplomatic efforts focus on a much-needed ceasefire in Gaza. But even now, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shows no signs of remorse, saying that the bombardment will not stop until the “ Hamas group is destroyed.” His words only bolster the Israeli military, and in their quest to eliminate Hamas soldiers have reportedly killed at least 11 unarmed Palestinian men in front of their families in Gaza, the UN said yesterday. This is the price they have to pay for our inaction.

Since Israel’s attacks began, UN and rights agencies have been raising alarms about the severe need for humanitarian aid, as the assault has destroyed or damaged over 60 percent of Gaza’s infrastructure and displaced more than 90 percent of its 2.3 million population. But aid has repeatedly been blocked leading to outbreaks of diseases and starvation. Only nine out of 36 health facilities are “partially functioning”, meaning that Palestinians are struggling to even tend to their injuries, that is, if they survive the bombings first. Denying an entire population such basic amenities is not war, it is plain genocide.

Yesterday, the UN Security Council was scheduled to vote on a resolution calling for the suspension of hostilities in Gaza. Meanwhile, talks of another truce are ongoing, with goals to exchange more Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. Like before, we must reiterate that the solution to this conflict is a permanent ceasefire, not temporary measures to just delay the destruction. We urge world leaders to unanimously condemn Israel’s assault, and intervene to stop it immediately.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

We need communal spaces

Finding open spaces in Dhaka is becoming increasingly difficult. Other than some restaurants, which are, for most residents, prohibitively expensive, there are few parks or squares—places to chat or enjoy a solitary evening. With an acute lack of communal places, citizens are deprived of amenities for mental and physical well being, which an ideal city, or even smaller towns, should provide. I want to invite the attention of authorities to this issue.

Insaf Islam
Uttar Khan, Dhaka

Of the AL, for the AL, and by the AL



NO STRINGS
ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

From what is unfolding before us, it seems we are set to be in a situation that can be described as “the rule of the AL, for the AL and by the AL.” Campaigning has started, there are random processions on the main streets, a little boat is making the rounds and blaring cacophonous film songs on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, poster printers are relieved that they will not have to fold the business thanks to the dum..., oh sorry, “independent candidates,” 29 registered parties are participating—doesn’t matter if nobody has ever heard of most of them—and relatives of aspirants are rushing to the constituencies to live up the campaign partying. No doubt, in the days to follow, the festivities will be accentuated with mammoth *mejbaan* (feasts) and huge gatherings. These also coincide with *peitha* season; nothing could be sweeter.

That the police have earmarked certain polling centres to be troublesome and may beef up security, and that even the armed forces will be deployed, give an added veneer of authenticity to the whole affair. What’s an election without a few violent clashes between rival candidates and their minions, even if they both belong to the same side of the game?

The stage may look and even feel like that put up for a real election. Yet, somehow, the smell of something rotting just underneath won’t go away.

By eliminating any dialogue with the only real opposition party, BNP, the situation can only be compared to a fixed game—with many being reluctant to go all the way to the stadium. Already, at least 1,000 BNP leaders and activists have reportedly been jailed since August in an unprecedentedly speedy series of trials. The remaining leaders are on the run with some of their family members being detained by the police after not finding the accused individual. Perhaps the most jarring



CARTOON: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

example of clamping down on the opposition was the arrests of BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir and the party’s standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury in a case over assaulting a policeman on October 28. Fakhru has been denied bail three times so far. Before this, BNP’s staunch refusal to join the election under the present government, and the ruling party’s determination to do just that, ensured that there was little ground for a dialogue that could lead to a solution.

Despite all the wheeling and dealing, the EC’s apparent sternness about electoral code and all the

having failed to open Letters of Credit at the banks. The families of opposition leaders and activists are under tremendous pressure, psychologically and financially, having to fight the multiple cases filed against their loved ones. And let’s not forget the forgotten: those who continue to languish in jail under the former Digital Security Act and other draconian laws for the crime of expressing dissent, and also those who have been disappeared without a trace.

There is also the inconvenience of an already severely stressed economy, which will continue to be in crisis mode, under myriad pressures. Due

AL-nominated and AL independent candidates (there are 382 of the latter, contesting 221 seats) will have enough AL supporters to represent a decent percentage. Even Jatiya Party will attract its own followers, especially if given a clear field. The obscure parties fighting for the “eagle” or “truck” signs will at least get a few of their family members to vote for them. “A participatory, free, and fair election,” the EC will gleefully announce.

But while everything on the surface has been fixed and made sparkly, putrid bubbles are brewing under the surface; not likely to be contained at any time. Will the predictable victors be ready to face the blow-up?

Are we stealing youth from the young?



Dr Haseeb Md Irfanullah
is an independent consultant working
on environment, climate change, and
research systems; and is a visiting
research fellow at the University of
Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). Email
him at hmirfanullah@outlook.com

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

Witnessing the recent surge of youth engagement in social activism, especially in the climate change arena, two issues worry me often: Are we robbing youth from our young?

And are we hiding society’s structural failures by using the young as a shield?

Greta Thunberg-inspired Fridays for Future motivated youth from around the world to act as a new pressure group over the last five years. Youth-, student-, and children-led activism has been widely supported by NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) with foreign donors’ money as well as organisational core funds. Youth and child leaders are now getting huge exposure through social media presence, extensive networking, and participation in virtual and in-person events, including the post-Covid annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) on climate change in Scotland, Egypt, and the UAE, respectively.

In today’s world, once you are trusted to perform, others also get hold of you to represent the youth as a “poster person.” This puts extraordinary pressure on young activists to perform and remain relevant. Being invited to various events validates one’s work, and even existence. This rapidly changes young individuals into mini adults with excessive self-awareness and a politically correct vocabulary, making them part of a rat race with fellow activists, caught in the mazes of

politics and bureaucracies. Thus, their youthhood is lost.

My second concern has arisen as government and non-government entities, and development partners seemingly promote youth engagement through tokenism, without any effort to empower the youth. One example of “youth-washing” in climate change discourse in Bangladesh is the exclusion of the Ministry of Youth and Sports from the government agencies receiving climate-relevant budgets. The National Adaptation Plan of Bangladesh 2023-2050 (NAP2050), on the other hand, mentions “youth” numerous times as a part of inclusive adaptation, alongside women, people with diverse gender identities, elderly people, ethnic communities, and persons with disabilities. The Youth-Led Adaptation Plan is identified as a part of the NAP2050’s implementation, but its formulation and execution have a long way to go. The same is true for youth representation in the proposed National Technical Advisory Committee on Climate Change and in the revised structure of the District Development Coordination Committee for the NAP2050.

Given that the revision of the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) 2009 and the finalisation of the Bangladesh Health-National Adaptation Plan have been pending for the last five

years, it makes us wonder—with so many climate change plans on the table, how will the government ever prioritise implementing them, let alone focus on youth empowerment? Praising youth for their activism and giving them a seat at a roundtable—while strongly maintaining the status quo—therefore seem to be jumping on the bandwagon, often promoted by development partners.

One of the rationales behind encouraging youth activism is that climate change is a transgenerational crisis. But we have to simultaneously consider two pathways: 1) ensuring a continuous flow of young people to the system as former youths move on to older cohorts, and 2) making sure that the former youth participants take responsibility as experienced individuals. If we carry on doing what we are doing now, the first pathway would replenish the pool of young minds. But facilitating an effective transition from youth to adults is a big challenge. Should we create space so that the latter continue activism along with their chosen careers? Should they make activism their profession by establishing NGOs, think tanks, or CSO networks? Or should we just wait and watch the survival of the “fittest”?

I believe we need to consider and invest in four urgent issues.

First, we need to make our youth aware of how to take care of their mental and emotional health despite the attention, exposure, stress, and exploitation they will face. We should also help them realise the short- and long-term aspects of being successful, and the difference between participating in altruistic activism versus making a career out of it.

Second, besides delivering emotional pitches, we should build the youth’s capacity and skills in evidence-guided advocacy. Climate change is all about observed and predicted facts and figures; be it the

changing intensity and frequency of our good old natural disasters or the flow of promised money from the developed to the developing countries. The youth should also be trained in ethics as they search for facts while avoiding misinformation, and learn to communicate relevant information to a target audience without being biased.

Third, we should encourage the youth engaged in the climate change space to use their skills and expertise in other important sectors, such as biodiversity conservation and pollution management. In this way, the youth can be made aware of wider opportunities and make themselves useful in dealing with other crises.

Finally, for the above changes, we need to engage NGOs, CSOs, and other agencies working in the youth leadership arena to build a “community of practice” for youth leadership in climate change. These community members shall not only discuss challenges and exchange knowledge and experiences; they shall also work with government and non-government partners to improve the current ineffective and inefficient situation.

To nurture this community of practice and help it to take pragmatic actions, appropriate organisations can design and implement a long-term environmental youth leadership accelerator programme. This programme will facilitate the missing bits in the youth leadership space of Bangladesh, be it capacity building in science communication and leadership, drafting the Youth-Led Adaptation Plan, arranging mentoring on mental health, knowledge mobilisation and career development, or peer-to-peer learning and support systems to overcome persistent challenges. In this way, we can move away from paying lip service to youth activism.