

A roller-coaster year comes to an end

Let us forge ahead with the lessons taught by 2022

Some years feel slower or faster than other years. As the year that saw a raging pandemic finally tamed in Bangladesh – after two years of various Covid-related emergencies, curbs, and closures – 2022 feels like one of the faster ones. The full reopening of economy, border and vital institutions, along with that of the physical, political and cultural spaces, brought not only a renewed cycle of activity but also a renewed sense of hope. Out of the depth of despair emerged a belief that if we can survive a once-in-a-lifetime civilizational challenge, we can certainly survive whatever else life throws in our way.

That belief, frequently tested throughout the year, is still with us as we prepare to turn a new page now.

How should we remember 2022? As a quick review will show, it has had its fair share of highs and lows – across all sectors. On the economic front, we must admit, while post-Covid recovery wasn't expected to be quick or easy, additional challenges coming in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war have made it more difficult. The war has had wide-ranging economic implications, exacerbated by pre-existing "legacy issues" as well as lack of proper policy and enforcement at home. Some of the effects have been more painful than others: the forex reserve sinking from a historic peak of USD 48 billion in August 2021 to under USD 34 billion now, because of skyrocketing import costs; the local currency depreciating against the US dollar since mid-year; inflation hitting a 10-year high in August; default loans hitting a historic high at the end of September; the overall living cost rising uncontrollably thanks to unusual hikes in the prices of almost all essentials, etc.

If we don't find a way to stop this downward trend, 2023 may be as horrendous as this year for people of limited means. It's easy to be frustrated, but an honest review of this year will also show determined, if not always successful, pushback against the economic disruptions and uncertainties. There have also been positive signs of rebounds and changes. The country's per capita income increased to reach USD 2,824 thanks to the rise in economic activities. There has been a phenomenal growth in our export earnings, with the garment shipment registering a 35.47 percent year-on-year growth in FY22. Two mega infrastructure projects – Padma Bridge and Dhaka metro rail – have been finally opened, fully or partially, to the public, which can impact our future tremendously. The whole population is now under the electricity coverage which, despite the load-shedding trends of late, will likely be equally impactful.

Economic struggles or rebounds alone do not represent the time that we're going through, however. There are important civic issues that we have had to deal with, which will continue to impact our life going forward. We have a national election coming at the end of 2023. Considering all this, we must plan and forge ahead with the lessons we learned this year. We must keep that belief in our resilience – and our ability to effect changes – intact. We need to be hopeful, now more than ever, because change is, and has been, possible. We wish our readers all the best.

Ruling party affiliates grabbing govt land!

Can local officials really be so clueless about what's happening right under their noses?

It is no secret that land-grabbing is continuing unabated in all corners of the country. Over the last few years, we have seen multiple instances including that of local influentials forcefully evicting minority communities from their land, neighbours taking advantage of the vulnerable and pushing into their property, and even rivers being filled up and grabbed by opportunists. In almost all of the cases, the local administration and other bodies in charge of stopping these crimes have either looked the other way, or seemed completely oblivious to what was happening.

But how can you be so oblivious as to not notice a five-storey building being constructed on government-owned land?

Yet, that is exactly what happened in Patuakhali's Rangabali upazila, where a small piece of land owned by the Water Development Board (WDB), next to a flood-control embankment at Charmontaj Bazar area, is being built on for over a year now. The space in that area had already been limited, and has now shrunk further due to the construction, creating huge problems for commuters in that bustling locality.

Predictably, the joint owners of said building are affiliated with the ruling party – one owner, Wahid Khan Raj, is deputy public education affairs secretary of the central committee of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), while the other, Shahidul Khan, is president of the Charmontaj Union unit of Swechhahasebak League. However, these gentlemen, despite their political associations, seem completely unaware of how the laws of a country work, and seem to be under the impression that they are the legal owners of this government land.

What is more surprising is their claim of "legally" buying the land from a civilian, who reportedly has no associations with WDB, the local administration, or any section of the government. But perhaps the most shocking of all revelations are statements from a WDB official and the local administration saying how they were not "aware" of this grabbing of government land, and that "actions" and "measures" will be taken after inquiry. As if that is supposed to reassure us.

Is it believable that two storeys of a building can be constructed on government land by men with political affiliations – who dubiously "buy" it from a civilian – with no one in local government being aware that this was taking place? And if it is possible to do, right under the noses of state officials, what does that say about the latter's ability to carry out their responsibilities?

This latest incident is a perfect example of the audacity of land grabbers, who are confident of being able to carry out their crimes with impunity, and may even expect the support of local administration in doing so because of their political affiliations. Will they continue to be proved right? Or will the relevant actors and law enforcement officials finally decide to do something about these crimes?

Parting thoughts for 2022



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Can you define 2022 in one word? A word that captures the mood and the mode of a year that's passed? What captured your imagination the most: the Ukraine-Russia War, the Fifa World Cup, the inflation, the UK's loss of a Queen and its gain of three PMs in one calendar year, the Climate talks in Egypt, a failed Red Wave in the US, the hair-cutting protests in Iran, the ban on women's higher education in Afghanistan, the resurgence of Covid in China? How about things close at home: the bridge over the river Padma, life in a Metro with a sky-train, or the underwater tunnel in the Karnaphuli River?

While Oxford Dictionary notes that the trendiest term in 2022 was "goblin mode," Collins Dictionary has identified "splooting." The first word means "a type of behaviour which is unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations." We all have a goblin inside of us which needs a little bit of indulgence.

In 2022, after the Covid-19 inflicted hiatus, our inner goblins demanded to be fed, and we obliged.

You can call it a celebration of life, or a spirit of the age (zeitgeist) that has just had a near-death experience. Then again, the pressure of the overwhelming experience is contained in the verb "splooting," meaning "the act of lying flat on the stomach with the legs stretched out." 2022 made us all feel like a 2D cardboard figure that has just given in (or up).

The fascination for a word to express our reality is also evident in the sudden rise of a word game's popularity in 2022. Yes, the most-searched word on Google for 2022 was "Wordle." In February, *The New York Times* purchased the word-game app created by Welsh software engineer Jonathan Wardle, and the challenge to guess a five-letter word in six attempts became addictive. The feeling of starting a day with a little bit of self-indulgence became popular.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

But is it possible for words to capture reality? Philosophers, writers, and artists have always debated this issue.

For some, words limit our expressions. For others, words can be the launching pad for limitless ideas. You can bring home those ideas, or you can use words to set out for new possibilities. 2022 has also been very big for this issue of home and homelessness. The threat of a nuclear Armageddon is more real than ever. We temporarily distracted ourselves by looking for a messiah in Messi. But there remains a sense of uneasiness in all of us. The political, social, and economic crises are creating the push and pull factors that are making people leave their homes.

Quite fittingly, Dhaka is currently hosting the 19th edition of the Asian Art Biennale, where a total of 649 artworks from 113 countries are being displayed. The theme this year is home and homelessness. Artists creatively articulated their desire of coming together in a place of comfort and their fear of being dislodged and displaced from one's comfort zone. Three main concerns have emerged:

poverty, fear, and meaninglessness.

The event coincided with the 2022 Fifa World Cup, where the notion of one nation was harped. Morgan Freeman, in his powerful plea at the opening ceremony, called for oneness, inclusion, diversity, and mutual understanding during the greatest show on earth, saying, "We gather here as one big tribe, and Earth is the tent we all live in." The

professionals and intellectuals. Our media often reports how money is flying out of the country to support those who are looking for a home outside their home.

There is also the movement of less-fortunate refugees and mercenary armed forces, hinting at the troubled territories in different parts of the world. People flee their homes in fear of being persecuted. When

western media, which never liked Qatar being a desert rose, stung back for Freeman's "paid lip service," referring to his earlier comment on his favourite acting role where the veteran actor had quipped, "The most fun are the ones that pay the most."

The round leather orb, with its aura of money, had us all under its thrall for an entire month. The glitz and glamour of the Petrodollar made us forget the inflation that has peaked in many parts of the world. Now that winter is here, the pains return like seasonal gout. The dollar price has soared, and the supply chain of fuel is snapped due to war-related sanctions. Even a rich country such as the UK now runs food banks for six in ten people whose income cannot get them the bare essentials. Even our prime minister has repeatedly urged us to maintain austerity, fearing that there could be a worldwide recession and food shortage.

Hunger has been the main cause of dislocations. In 2022, we noticed unprecedented mass movements. Any visit to a visa service centre will tell you about the movement of skilled and unskilled workers,

they shore up on new shores, they bring new concerns for their hosts. Sometimes they are welcomed, at other times they are not. Politicians and policymakers try their best to bring order through various schemes of control, manoeuvring, and monitoring of the movement. They use big data to control human mobility.

The apps we had downloaded to acquire vaccine information are now used by the governments to track us. Human mobility data, based on our cellular network locations, helps corporations and government entities to discover population patterns at a micro level. Even when we are away from home, or displaced – we are never away from their governmentality.

In 2022, we have become more used to the idea that our private life is no longer private. We all walk wearing the proverbial emperor's new clothes.

Maybe in 2023, we will stop splooting and switch out of our goblin mode to find a word that is positive and energetic. The mobility next year will be smart and meaningful. Happy new year!

Dalia's defeat: What really failed AL in Rangpur City?



Mohammad Al-Masum Molla is deputy chief reporter at The Daily Star.

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In the recently concluded Rangpur City Corporation (RpCC) election, Awami League's mayor candidate, Hosne Ara Lutfa Dalia, lost her security deposit as she failed to secure the minimum number of votes required for saving the deposit.

Defeat of the ruling party candidate was expected, though, as Rangpur is popularly known as a stronghold of the main opposition in the parliament, Jatiya Party (JP), and also the hometown of its founder, the autocratic former ruler HM Ershad. In fact, the AL's top leadership might also have been aware of the possible result and had an intention of giving a walkover to the JP candidate.

But did anyone expect that the ruling party candidate would lose her security deposit or manage to bag only eight percent of the votes? Or that she would place fourth in the race?

Obviously not. In fact, this is a nightmare for the AL and something it would surely try to shake off as soon as possible.

Although during the election campaign, the AL candidate had highlighted the development activities of the government, none of that seems to have mattered when voting came around.

Despite it being a stronghold of the Jatiya Party, the ruling AL has a very good position in Rangpur. The first mayor of the city corporation, in

2012-2016, was AL-backed Sarfuddin Ahmed, who had defeated Mostafizar Rahman Mostafa. In the second polls, Mostafizar won, defeating the AL candidate. But this time, the defeat of the ruling party candidate was a shameful one.

So, what was different this year? One factor is that the party possibly failed to pick the right candidate for the RpCC polls. Dalia is a lawyer by profession and a loyal and seasoned politician. But things changed when she became a lawmaker through a reserved women's seat in the last parliament. Since then she got disconnected with the people at the grassroots level as she mostly lived in Dhaka. Hence, other ruling party aspirants getting ahead in that regard and intra-party feuds also contributed to AL's defeat.

That's why we saw an Awami League leader, Latifur Rahman, rebelling against the party's decision to contest the election, and subsequently getting more votes than the party-nominated candidate herself. But he, too, lost his security deposit.

Still, it is evident that the party's selection of a candidate was not right.

But the AL general secretary, Obaidul Quader, told journalists that the choice of candidate was correct, and that there were some internal issues.

"We have some intra-party problems

there [in Rangpur] ...We are looking into those. We are going to take major organisational action in Rangpur within a week."

But intra-party problems are not the only reason behind the defeat of Dalia.

The other, and to me the most significant point, is that the ruling party's influence over the JP is an open secret to all. And something that the people of Rangpur did not take positively. Whenever the national election comes around, the AL tries to put pressure on the JP. They say that the JP has played a very crucial role for the ruling party in every election since 2009.

This time, the defeat of the AL candidate was a shameful one. Did anyone expect that the ruling party candidate would lose her security deposit or manage to bag only eight percent of the votes? Or that she would place fourth in the race?

But Jatiya Party leaders were not properly or duly treated by the ruling party members. Many believe that if JP had not sided with the ruling party, it would have been tough for the Awami League to continue in office for as long as it has done.

This other point to note is that Ershad's home is located in the RpCC area, whose inhabitants are known to be very close with and loyal to the late former president. In recent months, the drama over JP leadership – between GM Quader and Rowshan Ershad – also angered Ershad supporters. So they showed their maximum strength

voting for Mostafizar.

A stunning detail from the RpCC polls is that Amiruzzaman Pial of Islami Andolan Bangladesh secured the second position, defeating both the AL and its rebel candidate. Many said that Amiruzzaman got votes from BNP supporters, who only wanted to ensure a humiliating defeat for the ruling party. Of course, the BNP's position in this northern district is very poor and its election results in recent history have been dismal.

Besides all this, the RpCC polls also proved that Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) will be a big challenge in countryside polling stations. Media reports show that voting was slowed down due to the use of EVMs. The situation was worse in recent times as voting continued in a few centres till 8pm. Chief election commissioner, Kazi Habibul Awal, said, "Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) are slow. Besides this, voter turnout is also high. For this reason, voting can be done till 8pm in the night."

So before taking any final decisions on using EVMs in the next polls, the Election Commission will hopefully think carefully. Otherwise, disaster may ensue as the national election will be held for 300 seats in a single day.

Elections are like a festival for the people of Bangladesh. People want to take part in the festivities, and it is the responsibility of the Election Commission to create an atmosphere that people feel welcome to join.

The lesson to learn for the ruling party is that its activists and supporters are its heart, as they hoisted party flags in the remotest parts of the country defying all odds. So, the AL must think of what those at the grassroots want before picking any candidate. Otherwise, humiliating defeats will occur in free and fair polls.