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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A success story that remains incomplete

Triumphs in agricultural farming contrast with plight of farmers, consumers

The new year has come with some positive news about the country's agriculture sector. According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Bangladesh is one of the top 10 countries in the world in producing at least 18 crops. The success has come despite a number of challenges including the ever-shrinking farmland coverage, increasing extreme weather events, etc. The sector has provided livelihood opportunities to a large number of people and contributed to 13.47 percent of our GDP, says a report by this daily.

Bangladesh produced 961.46 lakh tonnes of 28 major crops in 2022-23—a 44 percent increase in production from the 2012-13 yield of 667.53 tonnes—thanks to farm-friendly policies adopted by the authorities, such as reducing fertiliser prices and facilitating the expansion of agricultural research. We have been earning foreign currency by exporting crops as well. According to the Export Promotion Bureau, Bangladesh made \$843 million from the export of agricultural products in 2022-23. There is no doubt that concerted efforts from the relevant stakeholders have made this possible. However, have all the stakeholders been able to share its benefits equally?

The answer, sadly, is no. On the one end of the supply chain stand farmers, who are routinely deprived of fair prices for their produce. On the other end stand ordinary consumers, who are forced to pay hefty prices despite high food production. Conveniently sitting between them are brokers and middlemen, who manipulate both camps to satisfy their greed. Things have been quite grim as a result. Inflation has spiralled out of control, leading to astronomical prices of essential food items. Often, unscrupulous traders manipulate prices using various tricks adding to the struggle of ordinary consumers, particularly low-income groups whose income has remained stagnant despite higher living costs. This is evidenced by a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in June 2023, which found that one in every five households experienced some level of food insecurity in recent times.

The story of our phenomenal success in agricultural farming will remain incomplete unless vital stakeholders, including farmers and ordinary consumers, are able to enjoy it to the fullest. We, therefore, urge the authorities to prioritise addressing areas of exploitation and manipulation in the agriculture sector, so that fair prices can be ensured on both ends of production and consumption.

We must conserve Dhaka heritage sites

Indifference of relevant authorities is unacceptable

It seems as though we are on a mission to remove all traces of our history in Dhaka as elsewhere in the country. Otherwise, how can we endanger or be so indifferent to the plight of hundreds of heritage sites in Old Dhaka? As per a report by *Prothom Alo*, parts of the century-old Sankhanidhi House in Wari have been demolished by illegal grabbers despite it being listed as a heritage site by the Department of Archaeology. Similar is the situation of the centuries-old Ruplal House in Farashganj, where 30 families currently live, with a part of it turned into a warehouse for spices. Visiting at least 25 such structures aged over a century, the newspaper found that the designs of most have been changed.

The fact that their status as listed heritage sites made no difference to their plight beggars belief. Also, why is the High Court directive to preserve them being violated so blatantly? Reportedly, in 2009, Rajuk published a gazette declaring four areas including Shakhari Bazar and a total of 93 structures of Old Dhaka as heritage sites/buildings. Any kind of alteration, extension, renovation, removal or destruction of such structures or open spaces, roads or alleys situated in those areas are prohibited. But still, the buildings are being renovated and/or their designs are being changed randomly, which also pose a threat to their inhabitants.

True, there have been some citizen-led initiatives to preserve them, but it could hardly make up for the indifference or inaction of the relevant authorities including the Department of Archaeology, Rajuk, law enforcement agencies, etc. In many cases, we have seen how government institutions themselves have opted to demolish heritage buildings, terming them as risky, rather than conserving them. Neelam Ghar, Jahaj Bari, Boro Katra, or Chhoto Katra are some of the sites that were partly or fully demolished in the recent past.

This is totally unacceptable. If the authorities do not take proper measures to preserve them now, one by one, most of our archaeological sites will be gone. We must not let that happen.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop using children in election campaigns

Ensuring the protection of children is paramount for their full development and future prospects. So it is disheartening to observe the use of children in election campaigns. Children are seen participating in election-related activities such as distribution of leaflets, marching at candidate rallies, and giving out voter slips on polling day. I appeal to the authorities concerned to give special attention to upholding the rights of children and ensuring their protection in this regard.

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Could 2024 mark the end of crony economy and captive politics?



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MANZOOR AHMED

Rehman Sobhan, one of the most respected public intellectuals of Bangladesh and ever an optimist, seemed ambivalent in predicting what our future holds while speaking on the theme of the "The Continuing War of Liberation" on December 23 in Bangla Academy. Prof Sobhan said that the political consensus unravelled soon after liberation, and for a second time when democracy was supposed to have been "restored" after public upheaval in 1990, when the common understanding among politicians fell apart. The economy has done better than predicted, belying the epithet of "the basket case," he said. But disparity has increased, with 10 percent of the population owning 40 percent of the national income. Social injustice was on the rise as institutions were undermined. "We won independence, but not freedom," Prof Sobhan said.

A crony economy (or, crony capitalism) is a situation in which businesses profit from a close relationship with state power through an anti-competitive regulatory environment, direct government largesse, and outright corruption. Businesses thrive not as a result of free enterprise, but through collusion between a business class and the political class. Money is made not merely from making a profit in the market, but by profiteering through rent-seeking using one's monopoly or oligopoly power. Crony capitalism spills over into the government, politics, and the media. This nexus then distorts the economy and affects society to an extent that it corrupts economic, political, and social ideals and practices.

Bangladesh has turned into a textbook case of crony capitalism. Two-thirds of the members in the outgoing parliament are businessmen who buy nominations and contest elections as a business investment. The concept of conflict of interest for parliament members and government ministers does not exist. This is evident from the astronomical growth of wealth and income of parliament members and ministers as stated in their declaration of nomination papers. Loan defaulting has increased exponentially during the rule of the present regime. Only a week ago, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) reported that Tk 92,000 crore has been looted via bank scams over the last 15 years. The law named Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provisions) Act, 2010 is even better known as the indemnity act because the law itself states it cannot be challenged in court. It is under this law that Tk 1.05 trillion were paid to 73 independent power plants over the last 14 years as capacity charges only, and not even for the plants to produce or

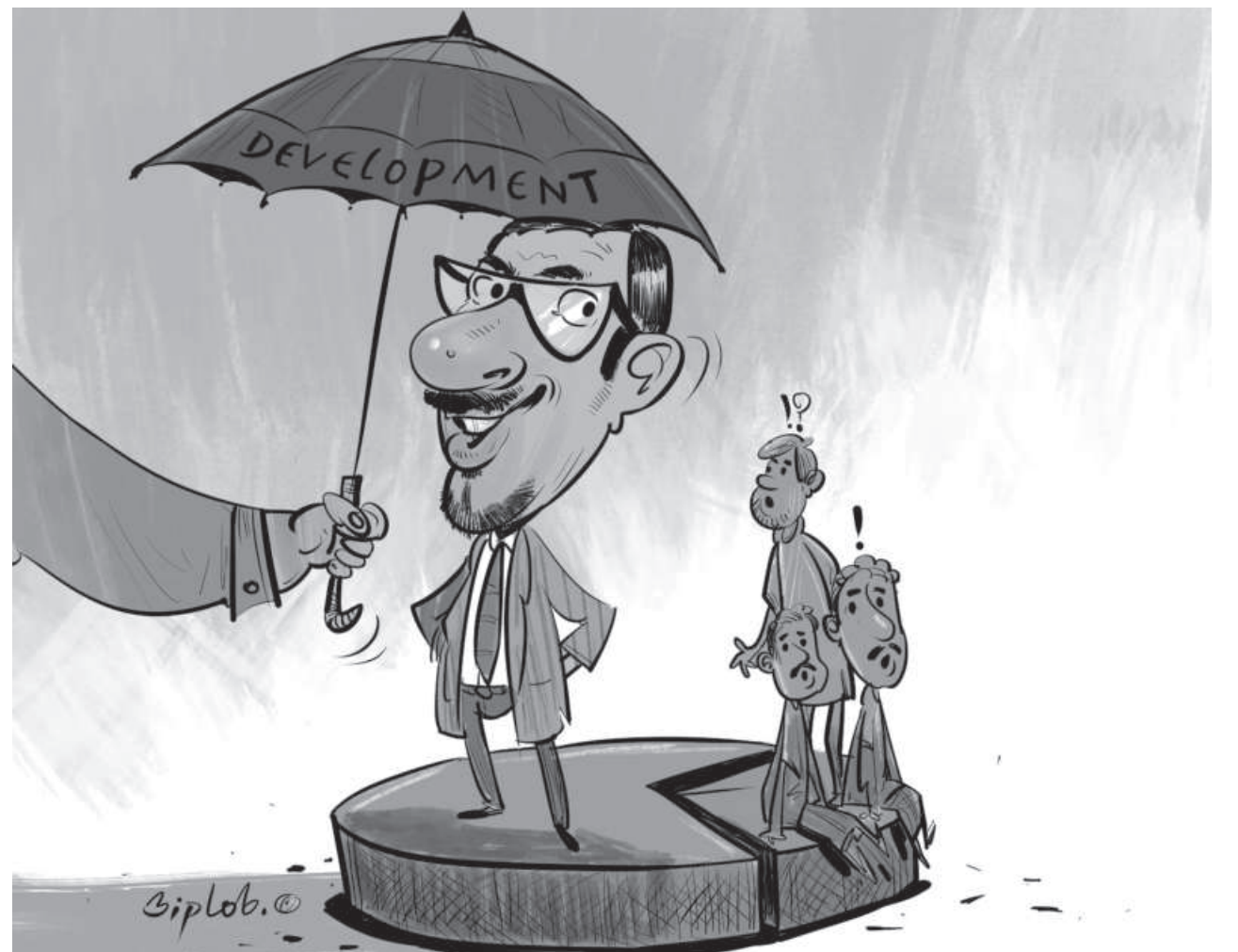


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

supply power.

Five decades after liberation, a credible electoral process allowing citizens to exercise their choice regarding who represents them in the legislative body has not been worked out. Politics has been captured by the nexus of an oligopoly of business interests and the willingly colluding political class. The hijacking of the political process at the local, municipal, and national level has been smoothly accomplished by all stripes of politicians, represented by major parties—Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jatiya Party, and a motley collection of leftist and religious parties. The principal opposition to the regime, led by BNP, being an accomplice of the oligopolic capture of the political process, has not been able to mobilise strong enough public support for challenging the Awami League for the last three parliamentary terms. The demand for the regime stepping down as a condition for participating in elections by BNP has not offered an authentic vision of change from the captive politics that prevails in the country. Nor has it offered an alternative to the degradation and politicisation of major state institutions, such as public administration, law enforcement,

infrastructure projects, and her geopolitical balancing in the region against the postures of global powers has helped garner public support for her. The sentiment among many still seems to be, "If not Sheikh Hasina, then who?"

The 12th parliamentary election set to be held on January 7 is not predicted to bring about a change of government. The character of the contenders from the ruling party, the so-called king's parties, the sundry independents, the announced election manifestos, and the nature of the campaign do not portend a post-election change in the contours of the prevailing captive politics and the crony economy.

The only way the future scenario for the country and the long-suffering common people can change is if Sheikh Hasina concedes the untenability of the course of present politics and the economy. And if she sees the need for genuine change that would lead us back to the vision that inspired the declaration of independence and the principles of the constitution—building a society and a nation guided by democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism.

These generic principles have to be given contemporary interpretation and turned into practical actions

representation, decentralisation of administration (including creation of provinces with their own legislatures), greater balancing of power between the executive and the legislature, and protecting the independence of the judiciary and of the statutory bodies.

Other measures to which the prime minister could commit would be to bring about democracy in their party to allow leadership to emerge from the grassroots (via democratic choices), take the economy back from the clutches of the oligopoly by letting the regulatory and financial institutions function independently (without political interference), allow the educational system and institutions to be led by educationists (free from political influence), promote genuine tolerance of freedom of expression, and not use the law enforcers for political control.

One may ask: why would Sheikh Hasina have such a radical change of heart? She would if she considered the legacy she would wish to leave behind. Should it be a legacy of kleptocracy and oligopoly control over the economy, that lets a small group hold the future of the nation hostage? Or a legacy that puts the true vision of the liberation struggle back on track, perhaps in 2024?

Turning skylines into election wallpapers?



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SHAHRIYER HOSSAIN SHETU

Nowadays, I can barely see the sky due to the multitude of black-and-white election posters arranged diagonally from one end of the road to the other. Is it really necessary to have thousands of them? What exactly does this poster overload achieve? Psychologically speaking, if you keep seeing and hearing a particular thing (whether it's a poster or a song), there's a good chance you might find that thing interesting. The marketing strategy is to consistently present a certain item to a consumer to the extent that, at a certain point, they would want to own it. Essentially, one wishes to try a product simply because it keeps popping up in their line of sight every day. Similarly, these election posters and their accompanying soundtracks are the products that you are forced to see in

order for politicians to secure a vote in the upcoming election.

I do believe, however, that anyone aspiring to be a leader should possess intelligence, modern intellectual prowess, and some digital skills. The strategy for securing votes should be based on a candidate's personality. During my school and university days, earning votes for roles such as class president or course representative was challenging. Imagine that you are running for class representative for your course. Would your initial plan be to print a thousand copies of your face alongside an unrelated object, perhaps an eagle or a toilet brush, instead of trying to earn votes based on your capabilities and merit? Does that sound sensible?

Of course, in reality, I've seen many rooting for different marka

every day. These supporters are given a pickup truck—one that can accommodate around 30 people—along with two big speakers so that they can shout and dance while driving around the entire capital city. And no one seems bothered about it! Plus, these supporters who dance to an offbeat song, wear the headband of the marka you are supporting, and shout their epiglottis out also

These strategies, besides being strange and unethical, also add other problems. Plastering the entire city in posters erodes the natural beauty of our urban surroundings. Already, trees are cut down regularly and fresh air is hard to come by.

get some money and fun out of it. And isn't this what we all want? It's at least better than most of the eight-hour full-time jobs where your boss yells at you for even breathing too loudly, right?

These strategies, besides being

strange and unethical, also add other problems. Plastering the entire city in posters erodes the natural beauty of our urban surroundings. Already, trees are cut down regularly and fresh air is hard to come by. The only remaining source of beauty is the city's architecture—something that these posters are taking away from us. Moreover, once the election is over, the candidates who sought votes will not bother to remove these posters. They will likely linger as is for weeks until they eventually fall to the ground on their own.

The excessive use of campaign posters and loud music during election season has overwhelmed our senses and urban surroundings. While these methods aim to attract attention and influence votes, they also contribute to environmental issues. It is crucial to remember that effective leadership should be based on qualities such as intelligence and merit, and cannot be won with attention-grabbing tactics. As we navigate these unconventional campaign strategies, we should emphasise the need for more thoughtful and substantive approaches to political campaigning, ensuring the preservation of our urban environment and fostering a more informed electorate.