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What worked before won't in the future

Bangladesh must embrace change for a sustainable development

Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture in its development journey. Recent decades have seen the country make laudable progress in various socio-economic indicators but also falter, equally spectacularly, in various others—with laurels and censure coming in equal measure. Against this backdrop, it's critical that we plan the next phase of our journey based on the lessons we've learned so far. The 10 tasks recommended by a former chief of development research at the United Nations give us an overview of where the focus should be for sustainable development.

Prof Nazrul Islam's proposals—put forward during the Abdul Ghafur Memorial Lecture organised by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)—include reduction of economic disparities, attainment of good governance, promotion of democracy and proportional representation, environmental protection and climate change mitigation, elimination of geographical disparities, promotion of social cohesion, and so on. Each of these recommendations require separate discussion, but overall, they underscore the enormity of the challenges that lie ahead. Nazrul Islam and other experts in attendance have rightly emphasised the need for a paradigm shift in our approach to development. Past strategies, while yielding some progress, have left undesirable legacies such as heightened inequality and environmental degradation. To avoid a future marred by these pitfalls, we must embrace transformative reforms today.

The rise in economic disparities highlights the urgency of structural reforms. Over the years, we have seen how the erosion of state institutions and lack of pro-poor policies have resulted in the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer. A protracted economic crisis, thanks to both external and internal issues, has left citizens struggling in the face of a cost-of-living crisis. Lack of good governance has also allowed frequent irregularities in various sectors. Good governance, it must be acknowledged, comes from a democratic mandate which is sorely missing in today's Bangladesh. This needs to be addressed through proper electoral reforms. We also need to address the challenge of rising socio-political polarisation which is hurting us as a nation. Another critical concern that needs to be addressed is environmental degradation resulting from unchecked urbanisation and industrialisation.

A transformative development journey requires our willingness to adapt to the changing realities and embrace inclusive, sustainable growth strategies. The amplification of the above challenges, which have been discussed many times before, serves as a clarion call for action. It is vital that our policymakers, civil society, and citizens alike understand the importance of change, and chart a course towards a better future for Bangladesh.

Cultivate skilled, not cheap, labour

Time to focus on improving efficiency of migrant workers

As Bangladesh experiences the growing pains of development, we are getting to see how misplaced our pride has been in cheap labour. According to a report published by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), out of the record 13.05 lakh workers who migrated abroad in 2023, half were in the "less-skilled" category. While the number of "less-skilled" workers last year reduced by 23 percent compared to 2022, the numbers of professional and skilled workers increased marginally by 3.8 percent and 2.04 percent, respectively. The still-high proportion of low-skilled labour export represents, among other things, missed opportunities in terms of earning remittances.

Of course, there are other factors—such as dollar price fluctuation, money laundering, and the prevalence of hundi—that can impact annual remittance figures. But the need for skilling up (both domestic and migrant workers) must be recognised if the country's development is to be sustainable in the long run. The first step towards this would be making efficient use of the existent training centres and also adding to them. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) primarily oversees the training of migrant workers. As of July 2023, according to Bonik Barta, the BMET was running 110 technical training centres. According to one official, these centres train about 80,000 workers against their capacity of 40,000. But that is nowhere near enough, as many more workers leave the country each year in search of a better livelihood. Meanwhile, officials also cite the unwillingness of workers themselves to undergo training. All this needs to be addressed.

Bangladesh cannot have a prosperous future if we keep relying on low-skilled workers. The country's migrant workers also deserve better than to be considered a group easy to exploit, which has been the reality in many cases. What else does "cheap" labour imply, after all? We want to see all those in the "less-skilled" category being trained so that the numbers of semi-skilled and skilled workers make up more and more of our exported labour in the coming years.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Construction too disruptive

Bangladesh has taken on multiple megaprojects in the last decade or so. We know that these projects, when completed, will benefit citizens in numerous ways. However, does their construction phase need to cause such prolonged public inconvenience? Even after causing severe air pollution, unbearable traffic congestion, and several accidents—we see no meaningful reformation. I hope future megaprojects will be carried out under safer, cleaner, and responsible practices.

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Death of the opposition in parliament



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

Of the political ideas that Bangladesh can take credit for giving to the world—like the caretaker government and an opposition with three MPs in the cabinet—the latest is a parliament without any opposition. As our new parliament convened on Tuesday, it had the dubious distinction of being perhaps the only parliament in the world, under the Westminster system, without any genuine opposition. The Jatiya Party (JP), with 11 seats, has been named the opposition, but the truth is all its seats are courtesy of the ruling party.

From Bangladesh's birth, our opposition bench in parliament has never been strong. The first parliament, as expected, was totally dominated by Bangabandhu's towering presence and there was no question of any opposition. The BAKSAL experiment eliminated opposition officially as Bangladesh became a one-party state. At that moment, our constitution was changed from parliamentary to presidential form. Then tragedy struck with the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu, and the military entered our politics. Till the fall of Gen Ershad and the restoration of democracy in 1991, the history of "opposition" in parliament was one of a highly "domesticated" one.

The 1991 election, for the fifth parliament, gave us a new beginning, with democracy and the parliamentary form restored. The results showed a wide spectrum of representation in the House with BNP getting 140 seats, Awami League getting 88, JP 35 and Jamaat-e-Islami 18. Khaleda Zia formed a coalition government taking the 18 Jamaat MPs, making for a total of 158 in a House of 300, a political alliance directly contradicting the spirit of our Liberation War and for which she had to pay heavily.

This election was a magnificent opportunity to not only develop parliamentary politics, but also bring to fruition the essential role of the opposition in the whole governance process. With 88 MPs, AL, which was at the forefront of demanding the restoration of the parliamentary form of government, could have really set a tradition of powerful opposition. As a watchdog on the government, it could have practically demonstrated the vital role that opposition could play. It had the experience and the power to do so,



A parliament without an opposition is nothing more than an extension of the Treasury bench spread over the whole House.

FILE PHOTO: PTI

but sadly not the maturity.

Regrettably, AL chose the path of frequent walkouts, followed by short-term boycott of the House. The boycott became longer and longer with resignation at the final stage. The whole of five years as the opposition, AL spent on its struggle to oust the BNP government under the demand for a neutral caretaker government to hold the next elections. The synergistic role between the ruling party and the opposition, which is fundamental to the functioning of the parliamentary system, never developed.

This, in a sense, set the tone for all subsequent opposition parties. In the seventh parliamentary election (1996), held under a caretaker government, the AL got 146 seats, the BNP 116, JP 32, and Jamaat 3. This was again a parliament with a very strong opposition. Once again, we lost the chance of developing a mature parliamentary system with the opposition playing its watchdog role over the government, as BNP took the same path as AL and spent its full tenure obstructing the government in all its work, reinforcing the practice of "opposition for opposition's sake."

In the eighth parliament (2001), BNP returned to power and AL to the opposition with 62 seats, far fewer than before but big and strong enough to form a formidable opposition. But it was only interested in repeating the past—of acrimony and destructive rivalry. We once again saw endless walkouts, boycotts and resignation and no attempt to strengthen the

parliamentary system.

In the ninth parliament, created under the army-backed caretaker government, AL returned to power with an overwhelming majority of 230 seats, giving BNP a meagre 30 seats. The AL took the advantage of its absolute majority and abolished the caretaker system for future elections under the pretext of implementing a shorter text

implications for the whole governance process, not to mention the future of democracy.

When the executive reigns supreme over the legislature, the judiciary cannot remain unaffected. As it is, the government exerts tremendous power over the judiciary through the process of appointment. Now it will further increase.

of a High Court judgment, which, in its complete version—released much later—had suggested its continuation for two more terms.

This triggered BNP's decision to boycott the 10th parliamentary election in 2014 and demand the restoration of caretaker government system of caretaker government system. BNP's boycott initiated the most destructive era in our parliamentary history. With its boycott of the election, for the first time, our parliament became totally devoid of any genuine opposition, giving the ruling party a free play to do whatever it wanted.

If earlier parliaments marked its gradual diminution, the present 12th parliament marks the virtual death of the opposition. The "right hand, left hand" metaphor used by the PM is the most appropriate description of what we now have as Jatiya Sangsad. The parliament's fundamental function of questioning the actions of the government will now be fully absent. The accountability process, in whatever weakened form it existed, will now disappear.

The complete takeover of the legislature by the executive branch shatters the scheme of check and balance among the judiciary, legislative and executive, as provided for in our constitution, one of whose basic task is to prevent the type of sweeping concentration of state power that we see now, though the process started much earlier. This will have serious

The power balance between the bureaucracy and public representatives is likely to tilt more than ever before in favour of the former. This will be so because the ultimate dependency of both the MPs and the bureaucrats is on the head of the government. The outcome of the latest election will make MPs more dependent on the bureaucrats than ever before.

A parliament without an opposition is nothing more than an extension of the Treasury bench spread over the whole House. Such a parliament cannot deliver, especially the accountability, for which taxpayers spend so much money which, according to a TIB survey of the 11th parliament, amounted to Tk 272,000 per minute for only running its sessions.

Such a one-sided parliament is also dangerous for the government itself, as it will never get the critical feedback that only a genuine opposition could provide. Prof Rehman Sobhan spoke for us all when he said, at the Abdul Ghafur Memorial Lecture 2024 delivered on Wednesday, "Unless you actually have a system of governance, which is contingent on the freely given vote of its citizens and is then accountable to them at all times, then there is always, in each of these areas [environment, education and governance], a scope for malfunctions..."

Will the new government be aware of the dangers that a "no-opposition" parliament presents for its own functioning?

The conviction and after



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In what many would describe as a predetermined verdict, a special court has sentenced former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and his erstwhile foreign minister to a decade behind bars for violating the Official Secrets Act. The court decision announced just a week before the general elections is a reminder of the trial and convictions of previous prime ministers.

Imran Khan has met the same fate as many of his predecessors, following the country's shameful political tradition of removing political leaders from the scene through dubious trials. He was being tried along with Shah Mahmood Qureshi inside prison in the cipher case.

It is the first time a Pakistani leader has been convicted for the disclosure of official secrets. Khan has been accused of using a diplomatic document for his political objectives and misplacing the secret communication. He has long held that the document contained a threat from the US and that it provided proof that his government was being ousted by a conspiracy involving Washington and the then army leadership.

There is no doubt that Khan wrongfully used the cipher message sent by Pakistan's ambassador to Washington at that time, for concocting a case that his government was being removed through an external conspiracy. He waved the so-called

document at a political rally, whipping up public sentiments weeks before his government was removed through a vote of no-confidence. The narrative worked and galvanised his supporters.

It is evident that the allegation of conspiracy also brought him into confrontation with the military leadership, which had once propped up his government. Indeed, such irresponsible action by the former prime minister cannot be justified.

But it is also apparent that charging him under Section 5 of the act was driven by a desire for retribution. The allegation of a mistrial was reinforced by the way the court proceedings were conducted inside the prison. The very fact that the verdict was delivered just days before the elections makes the situation murkier.

It is the former prime minister's second conviction as he was previously held guilty in the Toshakhana case in August, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment, barring him from standing in the elections. Meanwhile, the unprecedented crackdown against the PTI has demolished the party's structure.

It was meant to keep one of the country's largest political parties out of the electoral race. The Election Commission of Pakistan's decision, upheld by the apex court, to strip

the party of its electoral symbol—the cricket bat—has dealt the most serious blow to the PTI's electoral prospects.

Yet, despite all the state repression, the PTI has remained a formidable force, challenging its rivals in what is being perceived as managed elections.

In such a situation, it would be extremely hard for the security establishment to stop the tide. The sentencing of arguably Pakistan's most popular political leader could change the entire political environment. If past lessons are any indicator, such actions, taken in the attempt to condemn popular political leaders to a state of isolation, can never succeed.

That could also spoil the ongoing power game being played by the security establishment with the support of other mainstream political parties. The increasing disillusionment of the people in the electoral process is demonstrated by the lacklustre election campaign by political parties in the field.

What is most worrisome is that Khan's conviction could widen the existing political polarisation and fuel instability in the country, threatening the entire democratic process. With the credibility of the elections already questionable, prospects of the country moving towards stability look dim.

A weak civilian government coming to power through a dubious election is not likely to govern well and deliver on the economic and national security fronts. The weakening of the democratic political process has already resulted in the lengthening of the security establishment's shadow over the power structure. Some reports quoting recent comments made by the army chief at a public gathering illustrates the

establishment's critical assessment of the existing political system.

It is not unusual in this country for army chiefs to speak on subjects outside the establishment's domain. So, it didn't come as a surprise when the incumbent, speaking to students, spoke on issues ranging from politics to the economy, foreign policy and religion.

It appeared that he had his own vision—some have referred to it as the "Gen Asim Munir doctrine"—of how the country could achieve its promised destiny. It is certainly not the first time similar remarks have been attributed to military heads.

Curiously, this public interaction with students took place with elections just around the corner. It may not be coincidental that the public appearance came days before Imran Khan's latest conviction. It was certainly not an apolitical conversation and has wider connotations for the country's future course. While the chief's views about politics mostly reflected an institutional distrust of civilian political leaders, his outlook on the social and cultural issues sounded more portentous.

While there is no indication that the military seeks to take over, it is apparent that it does not want to give a free hand to civilians either. Distrust of the politicians remains palpable, though there is no reason to doubt that elections will be held. However, it remains to be seen how the political landscape is shaped after Khan's conviction.

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