



There are strong reasons for rethinking char development issues with a new set of laws and institutions that can benefit the char dwellers.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

A quiet violence in Bangladesh's chars



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MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

Recently, I read with interest a report on Decree Char published in *The Daily Star*. The report describes how local political operatives have deprived the landless dwellers in Decree Char of their legal rights to *khas* or government land through lease from local administration, and then allowing the people to use and cultivate charlands in exchange for a fixed revenue annually. The *char* or shoal in question is on the Padma River, near Pabna's Ishwardi upazila. The Pabna district administration leased 1,040 acres of charland, which is a huge parcel, for one year to only one individual—the brother-in-law of the local MP—without any provision for sub-lease as per the law. However, the land is already sub-leased at exorbitantly high prices to the char locals for cultivation.

I am not surprised by the details reported, including the violation of laws regulating the distribution of *khas* land in char areas. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, the process of acquiring *khas* land has become more of a political than a legal process, benefiting the local landed and/or political elites, particularly from the mainland. Such land-grabbing, which is acute in char areas, is a form of violence against the poor and the most vulnerable char dwellers. This deprives char people, who already lead a marginal life, from legitimate ownership and access to charlands.

An estimated 20 million people live in chars in the floodplain of the major river systems (i.e. Padma, Jamuna and Meghna) and in the coastal regions of Bangladesh. Char dwellers are by and large poor, isolated and highly vulnerable, both physically and socially, without land rights and sustained sources of living. Thus, chars are also

pockets of extreme poverty in the country. Char people mostly live as tenants/users and are periodically forced out to migrate due to erosion. Erosion, displacement, and migration are also part of the char stories. The new lands that re-emerge are still governed by age-old laws and practices derived from the colonial period to determine charland ownership, use and management in contemporary Bangladesh.

I have lived and worked in Kazipur-Sirajganj chars on the Jamuna River for my research and later for consulting work. For many years, my core research has been on char settlements, their economics and social organisations, and how these have been historically shaped by the colonial and post-colonial land tenure and administration with regard to alluvial and diluvial lands. During the British era, the ever-shifting chars constituted endless agricultural "frontiers" as tax-free lands for cultivation and extension by zamindars, who controlled the reclaimed land and appropriated surpluses from their tenants/users. We find many historical accounts of rivalries and *lathiyali* between powerful landlords or zamindars using their clubmen for control over charlands in the delta. In the post-zamindari period, the local landlords as power-holders took advantage of the unstable riverine situation by maintaining invisible armies of *lathiyals* to extract surpluses from the dependent peasant households and to further control the new charlands.

Now, decades later, the armed *lathiyali* has been replaced by political goons, working in collusion with local administration, to effectively control *khas* land in char areas to maintain and

expand their economic and political interest. The land grabbers in the floodplain work as a mafia group with powerful connections. Indeed, there is an interconnection between local control of charland and changes in the government in Dhaka. In Decree Char, over the past 15 years, the same people of the party in power are getting lease of charlands. Before that, it was the local leaders of the then party in power, who are now unable to wield their influence.

Any observer in contemporary Bangladesh would come across plentiful cases of illegal land-grabbing and violence for control over new char or *khas* land in the country. In view of the erosion and accretion of land in the floodplain, it is entirely possible that such land-grabbing and violence would continue unless the complex set of rules in the current laws, which favour the powerful elites, are replaced by a new set of land laws for char areas. The poor and landless, who deserve to be the beneficiaries of the new land, lose out to the locally powerful elites due to their manipulation and influence over the land revenue and administration. The current laws and practices need a paradigmatic shift in replacing the age-old legal framework and settlement policy by one that is conducive to the welfare of char dwellers today.

There are strong reasons for rethinking char development issues with a new set of laws and institutions that can benefit the char dwellers. The relative physical isolation of chars, lack of connectivity, and periodic displacement and migration by char people remain as major barriers to poverty reduction in the char areas. Several recent programmes such as Chars Livelihood Programmes, Char Development and Settlement Project, Sandbar Cropping, Danida Livelihood Programmes in coastal chars, etc provide models and lessons that may be used in the formulation of a new char development policy and agenda. Such an agenda must rest on the rights of the char people, and anchored to the principles of administrative devolution and local participation.

PAKISTAN ELECTIONS

Almost a century, with no bat



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ABBAS NASIR

One social media user said it was a remarkable victory; it was, after all, almost "a century scored without a bat." It appeared an all-encompassing comment as the snail-paced trickle of Pakistan's February 8 election results started to paint a picture of the PTI voters' anger and defiance at all that the party and its leadership has had to face.

It has been clear since the arrest and jailing of former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan that the "reset to 2016" has been initiated. The party was thrown in the ring with one hand tied behind its back to face the might of its ferocious and powerful adversaries. The most comprehensive plan appeared in place.

A week ago, in these very columns, we also observed that the only outside chance, the slimmest if you like, of it failing will be on

The PML-N campaign did not address that or succeed in selling itself as a viable alternative for the future to a near decisive number of voters. It abandoned its "vote ko izzat do" slogan that had resonated with millions across the country.

That strategy blew up in the PML-N's face. As he made his "victory speech," Nawaz Sharif looked frail, tired, even defeated, despite using brave words. It also marked a sad departure from the Charter of Democracy-transformed democrat who refused to block (despite the numerical possibility) PTI's path to power in KP after it emerged as the single largest party in 2013.

Whether he is also prepared to lead a coalition government already being called PDM 2, or let his younger brother preside over a conglomerate of disparate political entities shepherded by the establishment to strictly implement

this week, that is the beauty of democracy.

And yet, this beauty remained largely away from the grasp of the electorate in not just the remote reaches of Balochistan, but also in the country's biggest metropolis of Karachi. How systematically for two consecutive elections the people in these two places have been largely disenfranchised is mind boggling.

I guess this is your fate when you only count as a tool in the hands of the engineers, to be used at will in order to tilt the balance in someone's way, to propel them to high office or to dethrone them when they have outlived their utility or become too big for their boots.

One can cry oneself hoarse repeating that all such manipulations are pretty high impossible without one or more political parties/entities acquiescing in the best of times, and conspiring actively on other occasions, but nobody who matters pays any attention.

So our reset to 2016 has happened or, in the interest of accuracy, is very nearly there, at this stage. Is that something positive? I think not. The year in question marks the point where uncertainty, bitterness and anger gripped the



Supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), shout slogans during a protest outside a temporary election commission office, demanding free and fair results of the election, in Peshawar, Pakistan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

polling day. What if the rage of the supporters at what they see as injustice to their leader manifests itself in their voting in droves for the candidates endorsed by the party? How many votes can be tossed in the rubbish bin for one reason or another?

The voters turned out in enough numbers to have given the "independents" (read: mostly PTI) almost a century of seats, despite all obstacles in the run-up to polling day, and issues in tabulation and announcement of the results. A number of results are likely to be disputed in election tribunals and courts.

For months and months, PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif demanded a so-called reset to 2016, while placing the onus of doing that wholly on the political engineers. When the time came, it seems he placed way too much faith in them rather than campaign with vigour. The party almost appeared lethargic, disinterested.

The just concluded election in Pakistan was always going to be a vote for and against Imran Khan.

The Special Investment Facilitation Council-led economic revival plan, will become clear over the coming week and a half.

The main takeaway for me from this election is that even normally subdued TV channels were quite openly discussing the elephant in the room, unlike as recently as the 2013 elections. However, the question remains whether this "freedom" will last or the screws will be tightened again.

The failure to contain the PTI and the influence of its leader may well mean that this apparent media freedom will turn out to be temporary and it could well be business as usual before long. Of course, anyone planning such a move must also realise the power of social media and smartphone penetration in the country.

The past may be another country, as the election demonstrated. But we aren't known to learn from our mistakes. It is true that you can "manage" the electoral process—but only to a point and no more. As we discussed last week, and as was demonstrated by the voters

country as a visibly contrived majority was handed over the reins of the country or, more accurately, made a junior partner.

Election year 2024 will also mark the point where the majority or at least the largest single entity in Pakistani politics was excluded from the process by brutal force. Ergo, those junior partners will face a similar crisis of credibility as the system that was put in place in 2018 did. That's real progress!

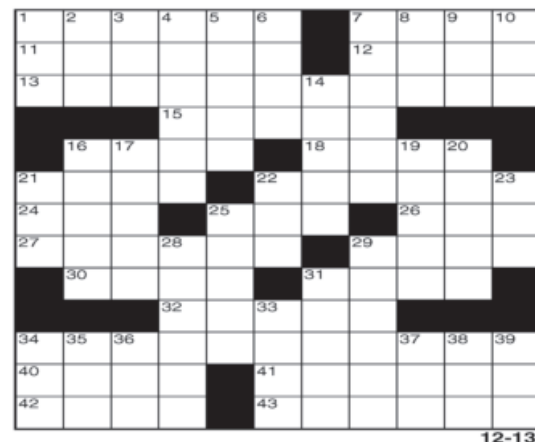
Not sure if the "keep doing the same thing expecting a different result" was Einstein's definition of insanity or someone else's, but it is pretty accurate. Pick your clichés—"turning back the clock" to "back to the future" or another one. And it will be valid.

The only thing I do have the power to do is to tip my hat to those whose bat was taken away and yet they scored, more or less, a century.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Circle spoke
 - 7 Make do
 - 11 Slugger Pete
 - 12 Mystique
 - 13 Tribal healer
 - 15 Body pump
 - 16 Docking site
 - 18 U.S.-owned island
 - 21 Fish
 - 22 Learn completely
 - 24 Sick
 - 25 Skillet
 - 26 Place down
 - 27 Paging device
 - 29 Copenhagen native
 - 30 Mix up
 - 31 Ultimate
 - 32 Dexcendant
- DOWN**
- 1 Bitterly cold
 - 2 Oscar winner
 - 3 Period
 - 4 Ruler
 - 5 Theater worker
 - 6 Bar mixer
 - 7 Prickly plant
 - 8 Unconscious
 - 9 Old hand
 - 10 Lobed organ
 - 14 Heart, for one
 - 16 Heaps
 - 17 Harbor
 - 19 Book of maps
 - 20 Intended
 - 21 Little lie
 - 22 Spoil
 - 23 Reuben bread
 - 25 Bar in a cage
 - 28 Fishy sign
 - 29 "Rats!"
 - 31 River through Nantes
 - 33 Revered one
 - 34 Block up
 - 35 Drink cubes
 - 36 Blasting stuff
 - 37 Sticky stuff
 - 38 Middle-earth resident
 - 39 Game caller



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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