



Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris delivers a speech conceding 2024 US Presidential Election to President-elect Trump at Howard University in Washington, November 6, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Inflation drags down Kamala Harris



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works for Change Healthcare, Inc., an information technology company. He also serves as senior research fellow at the US-based International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI).

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Former President Donald Trump won the race again defeating the Democratic Party nominee Kamala Harris by a convincing margin, both in the Electoral College count and share of popular votes. The election platform offered by Harris had its strengths, particularly in the area of healthcare and abortion rights. So why did Kamala Harris lose in such a big way? The post-mortem of the Harris debacle is just beginning, and the list of her failures is long but I will focus only on one area: inflation and the economy.

It was clear from the beginning of this presidential race that the biggest thorn in Harris's side was the poor economic record of the Biden-Harris administration. The last four years saw unprecedented inflation compounding the post-pandemic misery for poor and lower-middle-class families. Kamala Harris, who claimed she was a successful public prosecutor, failed to convince the American voters that she could handle either the country's economic or the immigration crises that were supreme in the minds of the majority. She never mentioned inflation nor the complications brought on by the "open border" immigration policy pursued by the Biden-Harris administration.

Harris lost for two reasons: the first one is that the voters, regardless of their party affiliation, harboured the perception that the Biden-Harris regime caused a lot of damage to the economy during the last four years.

Secondly, even her supporters acknowledge that Kamala Harris was unwilling to consider the working class's sorry plight or place economic policy at the forefront of the democratic agenda.

The Trump and Harris campaigns offered two very sharp views of the US economy. Two days before the election, *The New York Times*, which supported Harris, ran a story with the headline, "Trump and Harris Offer Night-and-Day Views of the Economy" contrasting the two candidates' positions. It acknowledged that the voters were asking who was addressing inflation and lamented that Kamala Harris and her allies had finally concentrated their spending on addressing the economy. But it was too late and too little.

The Democratic platform received several endorsements from the country's top economists, including 23 Nobel Prize-winning economists. But, the candidate did not address the pocketbook issues during her campaign or ever bring up the key concerns that pollsters identified, including inflation, the rising cost of mortgages, and declining real wages. One might also mention immigration, and law and order problems.

In early October, Kamala Harris was asked by the co-hosts of the show *The View* whether she would have done anything differently than President Biden, and she responded, "Not a thing comes to mind," before coming back to the question later, adding that she plans to appoint a Republican to her cabinet if elected. She did mention during the interview, "Now our biggest challenge is to lower costs, costs that were rising even before the pandemic, and that are still too high."

Undoubtedly, the US economy saw some bad times after Biden-Harris took charge in 2021, but during the last few months, the economy has been moving in the right direction. Inflationary pressures were controlled, thanks to the policies adopted by the Federal Reserve Bank (Fed). The macroeconomic indicators showed that the Fed had achieved its "soft-landing" goal with lower inflation and decent GDP growth. The labour market showed signs of cooling, and while the unemployment rate was inching up, it was low. And the Fed just started to cut interest rates. So, things were getting better on the economic front. The US government said on October 24 that the US economy grew at a

healthy 2.8 percent annual rate in the third quarter. Consumer confidence has been improving, though it has yet to recover to the levels that prevailed before the pandemic fully.

Many economists say Vice President Kamala Harris's economic proposals would do more to help everyday Americans than the agenda put forward by former President Donald J Trump. One model suggests that her package would boost post-tax income for the poorest Americans by 18 percent by 2026, much more than the 1.4 percent bump Mr Trump's ideas would offer.

The 23 Nobel Prize-winning economists called Trump's economic agenda "counterproductive" and warned that it "will lead to higher prices, larger deficits, and greater inequality."

The puzzle is, even if we agree that the economy is the number one factor and that inflation is going down, how did Kamala Harris get defeated with a booming economy?

The answer is that the Harris campaign never understood the American concerns about their pocketbook nor did it demonstrate she understood the harm done by the Biden administration. Loyalty is good but you need to be smart enough to recognise your limitations and part ways with your mentor. Harris just could not figure out how to overcome the public distrust generated by inflation which rightly or wrongly blamed their administration and economic policies. The Biden-Harris administration embarked on some misguided economic policy with \$1.9 trillion allocated to the American Rescue Plan and later another \$891 million to the Inflation Reduction Act. Back in 2021, at the beginning of the

Kamala Harris, who claimed she was a successful public prosecutor, failed to convince the American voters that she could handle either the country's economic or the immigration crises that were supreme in the minds of the majority. She never mentioned inflation nor the complications brought on by the "open border" immigration policy pursued by the Biden-Harris administration.

Biden-Harris administration, Lawrence Summers, a former secretary of the Treasury under Clinton, warned that his party was behaving irresponsibly.

A final word. What economists think of inflation in abstract terms and how it affects people are very different. Inflation is closely tied to the cost of living, and while inflation may come down, the cost of living seldom does.

We all know that concerns and uncertainty affect economic perception. And they are vented through votes and by seeking change. "Concrete, specific political promises are often not as powerful in the electorate as emotional appeals that tap into fears and anxieties," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of political history at Princeton University.

A paper by Nobel-prize-winning economist Robert J Shiller, entitled "Why Do People Dislike Inflation?" provides a clue why people hate inflation. Also, even though inflation is low now, people are nervous that Biden ignored it in 2021 and trust Trump more. That is because inflation was low during the first Trump presidency.

Dr Shafiq Islam, a former chief economist with Credit Suisse and division chief of the New York Fed, concedes that the high cost of living and unchecked illegal immigration tanked the Harris campaign. He adds, "The spike in inflation didn't result from Biden's policies. Inflation was even higher in Europe." According to him, the culprit was the rapid rise in food, commodity, and energy prices; plus the supply chain bottlenecks throughout the world. It was not Biden's bad karma, "but Republicans repeated the false narrative."

One can hope that President Trump will get the economy in shape and confront and solve the cost-of-living problems.

A tribute to Jowshan Ara Rahman Not an unknown woman



Niaz Zaman is a retired academic, writer and translator.

NIAZ ZAMAN

It was through a Facebook post on July 11 that I learned that Jowshan Ara Rahman had passed away that day at 1pm. Unfortunately, I got the news too late and could not go to see her for the last time. Earlier, in the years before Covid, when she had been well enough to come to Dhanmondi from Uttara where she lived, she would attend the meetings of Gantha, a women writers' group to which I belong.

Three years ago, I had called her about a book on women writers that Gantha was putting together. I told her that Gantha was interested in including a brief biography of hers in the volume along with an excerpt from her autobiography: *Smritikatha Ekti Ajana Meye* (2005). She was delighted to learn this and sent me a copy of the English translation of her book, *An Unknown Woman*, edited by Marianne Scholte (2016). *Ateet Theke Adhuna* has been published, containing an extract from her book as well as a brief biography. Sadly, she passed away only two months before its publication and could not see it.

Before I met Jowshan Ara Rahman as poet Mahbub ul Alam Chowdhury's wife, I had known her chiefly as involved with the publication of *Situation of Women in Bangladesh* (1979), edited and published by Women for Women at the request of Women's Development Programme, UNICEF, Dhaka. Although Jowshan is not mentioned anywhere in the book—except in the references of one chapter as the writer of a report on the Social Welfare Mothers' Clubs, we, at Women for Women, were well aware that she supported the book through its publication.

I got to know Jowshan Ara better when I visited her home to interview her husband, Mahbub ul Alam Chowdhury, the poet who wrote the first poem on Ekushey. Jowshan was a perfect helpmeet, supporting her politically active husband, accepting his long absences, even allowing him to take a precious piece of jewellery from her to support his cause.

In the English translation of her autobiography, Jowshan Ara mentions how her life and her husband's were so entwined that, when she was telling her story, she often told his: "In course of writing my story, I have talked a great deal about my husband...In course of telling my own story, I have at

times been obliterated in the shadow of my husband's distinct greatness. That is why my tales from time to time have turned out to be the tales of both of us." On his part, her husband often regretted that he had become so well known for that one poem that no one thought of reading his other poems.

Jowshan Ara was born on October 19, 1936 at Chunati, on the way to Cox's Bazaar. Initially, Jowshan lived with her mother and three of her other siblings in their village home. She went to Gul-E-Zar Begum Girls' School and later in Class 9, she was admitted to Dr Khastagir Girls' School.

In 1952, while Jowshan was preparing for her matriculation examination, her family received a proposal for her from Mahbub



PHOTO: COURTESY

Jowshan Ara Rahman

ul Alam Chowdhury, the editor of the Chattogram monthly magazine *Shimanto*. When they met, Mahbub explained to her that he was politically active and might be arrested at any time. However, he promised that, whatever happened to him, her studies would not be hampered. Jowshan was charmed by the outspoken young man and accepted his proposal. As she notes in her autobiography, at that moment, she understood the meaning of love.

She describes how Mahbub ul Alam was ill with chicken pox when he learned about the police firing on the student procession in Dhaka on February 21, 1952. He immediately wrote a poem, "*Kandte ashini, phashir dabi niye eshechhi*" (I have not come to weep but to demand they be hanged). The poem was banned and

all copies were confiscated. A warrant was also issued for Mahbub ul Alam's arrest. Things, however, calmed down, and Jowshan and he were married on October 10, 1952.

The day after their wedding, Jowshan was to learn how committed her husband was to his party. Without any explanation, he took her heaviest gold necklace and left. It was only 15 years later that she learned that he had contributed it to his political party fund.

Life with Mahbub was fraught with difficulties. However, that did not prevent her from continuing her studies. She completed her Intermediate and BA from Chittagong Government College in 1956 and 1958, respectively. In 1960 Jowshan started working as a community development officer in the Urban Community Development Programme. However, she was told that she would have to get an MA in Social Welfare if she wished to continue working there. This would mean that she would have to leave her family and go to Dhaka. Though initially reluctant, she finally got admitted to the Social Welfare Institute under the University of Dhaka. Jowshan completed the two-year MA in 1966. Meanwhile, she also went abroad for various courses, including one at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand under a Colombo Plan scholarship during 1964-1965.

In 1975, while Jowshan was working as the assistant director of Social Welfare, Chittagong, she was informed of her imminent transfer to Dhaka to work with the Social Welfare Mothers' Club Project. Jowshan didn't want to be separated from her husband and daughter again. Fortunately, her husband decided to move to Dhaka with the family.

In May 1979, Jowshan joined UNICEF, Bangladesh, as the chief of the Women's Development Programme. She worked there for seventeen and a half years. She was also instrumental in the incorporation of the macro chapter on women's development in the national Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-1995).

Jowshan Ara Rahman's autobiography provides details of her private and professional life, describing how a woman from a village near Cox's Bazaar rose to become the first Bangladeshi woman to head the UNICEF Women's Development Programme. However, while telling her own story, she also describes the social conditions prevailing during her time. Though she terms herself *Ekti Ajana Meye/An Unknown Woman* and though she kept very much to herself especially during the last two decades of her life, she should be better known—and in her own right.

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Director
Institute of Business Administration
University of Dhaka