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Bangladesh charts a cleaner, fairer way forward

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Bangladesh is a promising country in terms of the economic progress seen in the past 11 years under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. However, combatting corruption has become a burning issue in every sector.

To ensure that economic progress can continue, the ruling Bangladesh Awami League, in its manifesto in the 2018 general election, promised to protect the country against terrorism, militancy, drugs, communalism and corruption, while maintaining the institutions of democracy and the rule of law. The drive against corruption is now helping Bangladesh pursue its goal of a balance between economic progress while ensuring social Justice.

All over the world, the very idea of a free, vibrant society seems to be founded on the assumption of achieving consistent economic growth. The reality, however, is often somewhat different. We have witnessed that greater economic growth does not always lead to the emergence of greater social justice in developing nations.

Social justice is defined as "... promoting a just society by challenging injustice and valuing diversity". It exists when "all people share a common humanity and therefore have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community [resources]".

In a socially just society, there exists, in addition to basic human rights, equal access to opportunities for realisation of human potential, social benefits, an equitable distribution of resources, equal social duties or obligations, and security.

Yet across the globe, tens of millions of people are victims of social injustice. It can take the form of repression, discrimination, harassment, poverty, or simply the failure to redress inequity.

Bangladesh has made some positive strides on the social front during the past decade of very high economic growth, which has averaged 6.3% a year. The proportion of those living in poverty has fallen to 12% from 25%, helped by the pragmatic programmes and policies adopted by Awami League-led government.

Once the region's poorest big country, Bangladesh now boasts a GDP per head that is higher than Pakistan's. Better yet, it boasts lower infant mortality, higher school enrolment and longer life expectancy than its peers.

With 165 million citizens, it is the world's eighth most populous country. But its fertility rate is lower than that of the region's other giants. Furthermore, Sheikh Hasina has been applauded for hosting nearly one million Rohingya refugees who took shelter in Bangladesh after fleeing a brutal military offensive in neighbouring Myanmar.

The Awami League recognises that people are at the centre of sustainable development and in this regard it has promised to strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive, with economic growth, social development and environmental protection for the benefit of all Bangladeshi citizens.

Its election manifesto included a pledge that all villages would have amenities hitherto available only in urban areas. Power will be connected to every household in the country within five years. All villages will be connected to district and upazila (subdistrict) population centres by proper roads. Youth training centres will be established in each upazila, with an integrated database at the national level to provide information for young people from all education levels.

The progress made in different development indicators over the last 10 years and the improvement in people's lives and livelihoods have made people more confident that the country can be transformed into a developed and prosperous one by 2041 as envisioned.

With the promises made in the election manifesto in mind, Sheikh Hasina started acting on them immediately on beginning her fourth term early this year. Bangladesh has made significant progress on combating terrorism and illegal drugs. The government has articulated a "zero-tolerance" policy toward terrorism and remained committed to counterterrorism cooperation. Terrorism and violent extremism are major challenges to global peace, security and development.

A counter-terrorism and transnational crime unit has been established within the police structure to deal with any form of cybercrime and transnational crimes such as making fake currency notes, drug trafficking and smuggling firearms. A high-powered working group has also been formed with representatives from all intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

The next big challenge is to eradicate corruption from Bangladesh, and this is the toughest one. The country ranked 143rd out of 180 countries in the 2017 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with a score of 28 out of 100, with zero denoting the highest perception of corruption. Bangladesh also scores poorly in several governance-related indicators surveyed by the World Bank.

A 2014 study identified a number of enabling factors for corruption that include weak oversight functions, politicisation of institutions, nepotism and an absence of exemplary punishment for corruption, which has led to a culture of impunity and denial.

To underscore the seriousness of her zero-tolerance message, Sheikh Hasina on July 14 this year said that if necessary, an integrity drive would even be conducted inside the Awami League, and no one would be spared.

In an unprecedented move, the president and general secretary of the Chhatra League, the student wing of the Awami League, were removed from their posts in September for allegedly demanding commissions on a 10-billion-taka (US\$122 million) development project at a public university.

A few days later, a drive against casinos found leaders of the ruling party's youth front, the Jubo League, operating gambling venues under the coverage of some popular sports clubs.

One of those detained was AG Shamim, who moved about with private bodyguards, and allegedly had 18 million taka (\$213,000) in cash and documents for bank deposits worth 1.65 billion taka (\$19.5 million) in his possession during a raid at his house. The drive against corruption is now continuing with very positive results.

Sheikh Hasina recently explained her decision in an interview with Voice of America in New York: "I'm not bothered by political affiliations, family connections or social status," she said. "The drive will continue against corruption and irregularity, against those who seek to make gains at the country's expense."

This is a big message for the country.

Accountability is the key to zero tolerance against corruption. This is easier pledged than practised, especially in a context where conventional processes and institutions of checks and balances are absent. However, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh is making the impossible possible.

In order to ensure accountable governance, she is forcing a paradigm shift in the political culture, whereby being in or near power will not be treated as a mandate for self-enrichment. Corruption now is being indeed treated as a punishable offence for all, irrespective of identity and status -- political or otherwise.

Now it can be expected that grabbers of land, forests, rivers and water bodies, loan defaulters and other swindlers in the banking sector will no longer enjoy political patronage, high positions and impunity.

Bribery will not continue to be treated anymore as "speed money" and encouraged "within certain limits". Unauthorised payments for public services will not cease to be a way of life. Those behind illicit financial outflows will be arrested and those involved brought to justice.

This is being made possible by a prime minister who is larger than her own political party. She may lose the support among some corrupt leaders of her own political party, but she is definitely gaining a lot of confidence from the masses of Bangladesh.

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