



THE FUTURE

OCTOBER 2023

ISSN 2753-3670



The Future is a newsletter periodically published by The Future Institute from Marlyon Road, Ilford, United Kingdom.

This newsletter aims to chronicle the major events and developments in the societies of the emerging nations with the potential of impacting their future. This publication offers snippets of news analysis that might be advantageous to the academics, policymakers, social and political workers, students and various organisations.

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SPECIAL ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Bangladesh in 21st Century: A Call for an All-inclusive National Revival

- Dr M Abdul Bari¹

Abstract:

Bangladesh, a historical land of over 170 million people compacted into a small landmass, was paralysed by 190 years of British colonial humiliation. Sadly, after a brief period of post-colonial Pakistani political-economic domination, the country has entered a new phase of Indian intellectual-cultural domination. While the country has recently made good economic progress, its otherwise resilient population is experiencing despondency due to its deeply divided politics and a litany of corruption and moral breakdown. It is now time for Bangladeshis to stand on their own feet with an all-round intellectual, cultural, moral and spiritual revival or 'Renaissance'. The country desperately needs leaders of positive change from all sectors of life to restore its dignified position in the global community.

Image attribute: @Francisco Anzola from Flickr under Creative Commons.

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1. Introduction

Bangladesh, a land of over 170 million people with a glorious history, especially through the 14th to 17th century, needs an all-inclusive and wide-ranging national overhaul. Since its independence in 1947, following 190 years of brutal British colonialism, Bangladeshis are going through an insecure and unstable socio-political-cultural life with a crisis of identity and confidence. The ongoing educational mismanagement, impact of climate change² and political volatility have compounded the issues. However, its people have often demonstrated an innate resilience in withstanding difficult odds.

This paper seeks to remind Bangladeshis, particularly its conscious and conscientious sections spread throughout the world, of their historic accomplishments, colonial humiliation and current cultural-intellectual predicament, to knock at their conscience so that they feel they should stand on their own feet and build a better future. This can only be done by remedying their own internal deficiencies, challenging the external obstacles creatively and harnessing their potential to determinedly work together with a long-term vision, plan and action. Bangladeshis can no longer afford to keep doing the same, blame others or expect things to be done for them.

It is time Bangladeshis everywhere re-examine their own history, learn from it and - like other confident nations that have succeeded in recent times - take control of their affairs into their own hands. In the end, it is the people - particularly the educated, confident and dedicated sections - that can only truly drive any material change.

This paper puts forward a strategic vision for national revival. It highlights the brief story of Bangladesh and its current reality, how best to sow the seeds of revival through an intellectual shake up and concludes with an effective change agenda and action plan which the Bangladeshi diaspora abroad can follow to play a significant role in its economic and intellectual regeneration.

This message is addressed to well-intentioned, determined and pragmatic transformational vanguards, pioneers or **changemakers** amongst self-driven, patriotic and confident Bangladeshis everywhere and from all sectors of life. As the majority Bangladeshis are Muslims, the universal lesson from their Holy Book is a timeless reminder.

Surely, Allah does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves (Qur'an 13:11)

2. The brief story of Bangladesh

Bangladesh, meaning 'land of Bengal', has historically been part of a bigger region that consists of present-day independent Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. The current Bangladesh borders were established following the partition of India by Britain in 1947.

The history of greater Bengal goes back 4,000 years when the region was settled by mainly Dravidian people. Various dynasties have since ruled greater Bengal until Islam was introduced by Arab Muslim merchants and Sufi missionaries, with Muslim rule officially starting a few centuries later in 1203 by Bakhtiyar Khilji.

The Bengal Sultanate was a dominant power in the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta for much of the 14th to 17th centuries. It controlled a number of vassal states including parts of Odisha in the southwest, Tripura in the east and Arakan in southeast. The Sultanate also controlled large parts of the north, east and northeast Indian subcontinent during its peak under the Hussain Shahi dynasty. As a thriving trading nation, it was one of Asia's strongest states.

The Sultanate was described by contemporary European and Chinese visitors as a prosperous kingdom with a strong cultural and architectural legacy. During his global tour in the 14th century the legendary Muslim scholar and explorer Ibn Battuta met Shah Jalal in 1345 in Sylhet, which was part of Bengal Sultanate. The Chinese Muslim Admiral of the Ming dynasty, Zheng He, visited Bengal in early 15th century as part of a number of 'Treasure Voyages'.

However, by the time the Nawabs became the de facto independent rulers of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in the early 18th-century, the Bengal Sultanate had been so weakened politically, intellectually and morally that it fell under the corporate greed of the English based East India Company (EIC). The culmination of humiliation came in 1757 when

² <https://www.icccad.net/the-business-standard/climate-change-impacts-adaptation-and-vulnerability-of-bangladesh-ipcc-assessment-in-the-previous-reports-and-situation-on-the-groundbangladesh-ranks-as-the-7th-most-vulnerable-country-to-climate-c/>

the last Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah lost in the so-called 'Battle of Plassey' as a result of the EIC's deception and Mir Jafar's treachery.

Bengali Muslims fought against British colonial rule in many ways at various times to regain their independence, but they were no match against British power. Amongst some great Bengali Muslims, Nawab Abdul Latif's pan-Islamic solidarity with the Ottomans against the Russian Czarist onslaught and Syed Ameer Ali's effort in raising political consciousness towards the end of 19th century are noteworthy.

Britain's disingenuous 'divide and rule' policy of favouring Hindus over Muslims was instrumental in disadvantaging Muslims intellectually and socio-economically - to the extent that the upper-caste Hindu elites started treating Muslims as inferior foreigners who were not Bengali enough. Sir W.W. Hunter, a Scottish historian and member of the Indian Civil Service, wrote "A hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for a well-born Musalman (Muslim) in Bengal to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich."³

By the 1870s, the Great Bengal Famine of 1770 had already killed 7-10 million people or up to a third of the entire population. A later famine in 1943, under British Prime Minister Churchill's watch, killed up to 3.8 million out of the population of 60 million.

Besides the economic colonialism that resulted in large scale poverty, famine and deplorable loss of human life, the intellectual assault in the form of Orientalism impacted heavily on the Bengali Muslim educated class and continues to this day. Whilst Christian Missionary activities did not have any meaningful success in attempts at religious conversion, the psychological impact on many Muslims has left a mark.

The brutal British colonialism ended in 1947 with an unfair distribution of territories to Muslims. Bengal was divided and East Bengal became East Pakistan. During 24 years of Pakistani political-economic domination, East Pakistanis were treated as if they were 'inferior Muslims' by many of Pakistan's ruling elites. This condescending 'othering' of Bengali Muslims by both Bengali upper-caste Hindus and later Pakistani rulers, based on arrogance and ignorance, has had a profound effect on Bengali Muslim grievances.

With East Pakistan emerging as Bangladesh in 1971 following a bloody 9-month long war and with India's direct military intervention, Bangladeshis entered a new phase of an intellectual-cultural domination by its bigger neighbour.

3. The current reality

Whilst many nations that were once colonised or humiliated by European powers have been progressing enormously, Bangladeshis have so far decided to remain impotent and turn inwards with short-sightedness and often internecine quarrels. China unshackled itself from its 'century of humiliation' and is now a global superpower. India is vying with China to improve its own global position. Japan and Germany were destroyed in WWII, but soon stood up and became global economic powers.

On the other hand, Bangladesh remains one of the weakest countries in the world, due to decades of post-independence mismanagement in its education, economy and politics. A weaker educational upbringing, both in schools and religious madrasas, and limited emphasis on the social and life skills of its people have hampered the country's progress.

Under a pseudo-democracy, termed as *mastanocracy* by some political experts, Bangladesh's already frail civil society has become much weaker in recent times. A small coterie of openly pro-Indian hardcore secular intellectual elites dominates the country's media and cultural life and hold a strong lobbying power over the government. Whilst most of them may have been born in Islam, they have made a career being Islam-bashing.

The relatively inept and weak nationalist and Islamic opposition has been ruthlessly driven out of Bangladesh's public life. Elections are becoming farce. Respectable and honest scholars are side-lined. Although Islamic rituals, mosques and madrasas are abundant, the nation is on the way to losing its moral anchor. The unpopular government relies on the police, paramilitary forces and political mastans from the top brass and all the way down to the village level, to keep its grip on people.

³ William Wilson Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (London: Trübner & Co, 1872), p.163.

In contrast, the story of upper-caste Bengali Hindus, now in India's West Bengal since 1947, is drastically different, having taken advantage of colonial rule and going through a 'Bengali Renaissance' in the 19th century when the majority Muslims were being punished and marginalised with malice by the colonial rulers. By the time Bengali Muslims had adjusted to their political reality, they had already fallen far behind their Hindu counterparts.

Although Bangladeshis are essentially a mono-ethnic people, with a very small section of tribal groups, its politics has been violently divided on nationalist, secularist and Islamic lines. In a country where most people struggle to make ends meet, the number of super-rich is excessively high, with many living extravagant lives abroad without any sense of guilt thanks to an unimpeded litany of corruption.

The Bangladesh economy, particularly its private sector, is growing faster than many of its neighbours. Whilst this is a vast improvement compared to recent years, the long-term sustainability remains questionable given the fragile political state and poor economic infrastructure. A less talked about statistic is the black economy⁴, which is now 33% of nominal GDP. The proportion of people struggling to simply survive remains shamefully high, with 20% of Bangladeshis⁵ living below the national poverty line in 2019.

Millions of Bangladeshis, mostly less skilled or semi-skilled⁶, work abroad and send their hard-earned cash as remittance⁷ to maintain their families back home. The educational system still follows the colonial legacy with university campuses essentially under political mastans and public sector employment politicised. Millions are unemployed and desperate to leave the country and many are witnessing despondency and impotence gripping the population. The old adage, you reap what you sow, comes to mind.

In the midst of the menacing rise of the Hindutva supremacist agenda, who are spurring on violence against the 200 million strong Muslims in neighbouring India and publicly seeking the erasure of mosques and Muslim history, Bangladesh needs stronger socio-political and intellectual leadership. However, under an openly pro-India regime and weakened opposition, people feel vulnerable. Bangladeshis everywhere and at all levels must wake up and rise above their internal and external challenges.

4. Seeding Bangladesh's regeneration

A nation's dignity and political clout in the international community depends on its cultural, economic, and intellectual capital as well as its people's group character. Sadly, Bangladesh's political-intellectual feebleness has become too visible to the regional and global powers.

In a world dominated by those who have little moral scruple or self-restraint; maintaining sovereignty of a country needs people of quality, hard work and dynamic patriotic leadership.

On a positive note, many Bangladeshis are sincere in practicing their religion, giving hope that, with good moral and intellectual leadership, the country has much potential to change for good.

The reality is nation-building can only be possible if citizens collectively decide to reshape their conduct with better individual and group qualities. This must be driven by both knowledge improvement and character building, which are integrally linked.

Knowledge is the essence of Adam's (AS) superiority over the angels. The first word that Archangel Jibril (AS) brought to Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) was "Iqra" (read or recite). Islam is a pure monotheistic religion with a pristine concept of Tawhid (oneness of God) grounded in knowledge. Without sufficient understanding a Muslim's belief and practice as well as values and teachings can be defective. For people of intellect, Islam is simple, in harmony with nature and loving.

Knowledge is also the main criterion of worldly superiority amongst individuals and nations. Those who have more knowledge are superior to those who have less, even though the latter may possess more material strength. The

⁴ <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/black-money-crosses-tk-10-trillion-in-fy21-1625813105>

⁵ <https://www.adb.org/countries/bangladesh/poverty#:~:text=Poverty%20Data%3A%20Bangladesh&text=In%20Bangladesh%2C%2020.5%25%20of%20the,national%20poverty%20line%20in%202019>

⁶ <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/resources/Static%20PDF%20and%20DOC/publication/Remittance%20and%20its%20impact.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.bb.org.bd/en/index.php/econdata/wageremittance>

Mongols destroyed much of the civilised world, but later they succumbed to the Islamic faith because Muslims were superior in knowledge. Muslims defeated the European Crusaders, but a post-Renaissance Europe brimming with knowledge colonised much of the Muslim world.

Knowledge and character are incubated from the moment of birth. When newborn babies first open their eyes, they start to learn from their parents and those at home. The core task of parenting, beyond nurturing, is educating. Ali (RA) said: The mind of the newborn is like a vacant land which accepts every seed that is sown in it; be careful of what you sow.

The foremost task for Muslim parents is to raise children as a 'trust' and as God's 'stewards' (or representative) on Earth (Qur'an 2:30). By nurturing children's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, parents play the primary role as their protectors, educators and spiritual guides or allies. Raising children to be better humans and citizens through knowledge is vital. Educational institutions such as mosques, schools or religious madrassas must prepare them from the very beginning of their lives for this weighty task. Teachers, with their skill and commitment, need to work side by side with parents to impart children with the needed self-esteem, ambition and empathy for others.

Children are the metaphorical fruits of their parents and teachers. If they are bestowed with both social and life skills and a rounded education, they will inevitably grow the confidence to develop better human character (Adab) and virtue (Akhlaq) to become a force for good in society.

5. Decolonising the mind

The pre-modern Renaissance unshackled European minds from their long intellectual-cultural stupor, enabling Europe to achieve an unparalleled material success. But bereft of moral or spiritual restraint, their arrogance led to some of the worst ethnic cleansing and genocides in history with the settler colonialism of the two Americas, Australia and other parts of the world. The modern West, an expansion of old Europe, has successfully controlled the global agenda and occupied people's minds with its money, military and media. Until recently, no other non-European country was strong enough to challenge the West and create a multipolar world. History is now repeating itself – the West has been in decline for some time. However, given its extensive dominance over the rest of the world and the sluggish socio-economic-political situations in developing countries, the decline is slow.

In this state of affairs, non-western nations that want to survive as sovereign countries with prosperity and dignity must work tirelessly to decolonise the minds of its own people whilst simultaneously improving its economy and political situation. Its education system, including people's civic and political awareness, should be united in purpose and common goal. Any failings, particularly amongst the educated and active sections of society, can bring unpredictable disasters that can only be avoided by ethical politics guided by human values.

With the world becoming even more divided, due to the politics of arrogance and greed, conscientious and confident Bangladeshis should prepare themselves for their own historic revival through realistic and planned action, not mere rhetoric or emotion. Individuals and groups, motivated by the ethos of serving the whole of society and not just favoured or select groups, should wisely sow the seeds of nation building in as many areas of life as possible. These works should then be complemented or connected together for a bigger and better outcome.

Bangladesh desperately needs some vanguards of positive changes from every sector of life. They should be action-oriented and wise enough to set positive examples of excellence in their own work. They should also keep abreast of the external or internal challenges that may arise from the most unsuspecting of places. Sadly, the world has many devilish people of power and wealth who care little for poorer and weaker people.

Thankfully, the vast majority of ordinary human beings are more empathetic than hard-hearted. In spite of the diversity in race, religion, politics and lifestyles, people are generally peace-loving and justice seeking. Although nationalism, secularism and religion have divided people for millennia, civilised nations and communities have managed these differences in their midst. Agreeing to disagree or live and let live has been the essence of their success. Countries that fail this basic concept of social or public life gradually fall into oblivion in the history books, even if they possess individuals who are genius or super-rich amongst them.

The fundamental question is, if other successful people can manage their differences, why can't Bangladeshis?

Public interest (Maslaha) is Islam's utmost priority in collective life. It is time conscious Bangladeshis come to terms with their current predicament, become more proactive as citizens and bring a better understanding and working relationships amongst the following two groups:

- a) **Patriotic and moderate or middle way nationalists, secularists and Islamic groups** who must work together to bring a civilised politics with an ethos of serving the country and its people. The country desperately needs exemplars in its political arena;
- b) **Scholars and religious leaders of diverse backgrounds** who must set an example in providing moral guidance to ordinary people on cooperative living. People with knowledge, particularly those who are religious, have a moral and national obligation to provide social and ethical leadership.

6. The need for an intellectual shake up

Nothing less than a knowledge revival or an all-inclusive intellectual restoration across the majority of Bangladesh's population can bring about the needed change to lift them up from their long slumber and amnesia. An all-inclusive approach means avoiding bias or discrimination and guaranteeing that the viewpoints and experiences of different groups are valued and integrated into relevant discussions, policies and decisions.

Whatever the name – revitalisation, regeneration or renaissance – this intellectual upsurge must be different from those driven by mainly secular materialistic worldviews. Bangladesh's revival should reflect its people's deep centuries-old traditions, where faith, spirituality and cultural norms have been enmeshed with Islam's pure concept of Tawhid (Oneness of Allah) and rich Muslim cultural heritage. The revival should initiate from people-oriented selfless and competent individuals rather than the elitists who may be more opportunistic.

Successful Bangladeshis are found in various places and walks of life but are often unrecognised and socially weak due to the absence of their 'group solidarity' or Asabiyya, a term used by Ibn Khaldun who is known as the father of sociology and historiography. Asabiyya is the concept of social solidarity with an emphasis on unity, group consciousness, and a sense of shared purpose and social cohesion. Ibn Khaldun described this as the fundamental bond of human society and the basic motive force of history. Asabiyya can also be a double-edged sword. Unchecked and without moral constraint, it can give rise to the dangerous nationalism the world is experiencing. However, with people and their leaders rooted to Islamic values and spiritual guidance, it can prove a blessing. Group solidarity with positive energy raises a nation and sustains its progress for as long as people don't succumb to social or moral ills.

Bangladeshis - be they secular nationalists, Islamists⁸ or politically leftist – have a rich history of maintaining traditional qualities, such as deeply held family values, giving preference to others or living simple lifestyles, at both individual and community levels. Whilst the long intellectual stagnation and socio-political instability have given rise to some undesirable personal traits and habits, including falling to impulsive emotions, short-termism leading to 'quick fix' attitudes or having malicious envy on others' success, this can be turned into positive strengths in a constructive and encouraging environment.

Conscientious individuals and groups should carry out systematic research on relevant societal issues to take the necessary steps to build better individual and group characters to serve the nation. There is a dire need for an inter-generational transformation agenda to identify and execute effective and pragmatic strategies for short, medium and long-term changes in all important areas of life.

Bangladesh might be constrained with a large population squeezed into a relatively small land space, but this challenge can be addressed head-on. What is needed is making the population a great asset through positive parenting, providing quality education, social and life skills through well-planned training and imparting social and Islamic values. With competent and better moral leadership, Bangladesh can shine much brighter than smaller but more successful countries such as Singapore.

7. Fortifying spiritual anchor

Muslims believe that spirituality is rooted to their unyielding conviction in pure monotheism, or the Oneness of our Creator, and righteous actions flowered with moral and ethical behaviour. This is a lifelong journey that involves the

⁸ Used here as politicians who are guided by Islamic ethos, not those who misuse Islam.

honest practice of faith on one hand and following introspection, self-awareness and a commitment to upholding its values on the other. Mere religious rituals without spirit can easily become mechanical. Sincere Muslims will seek the deeper spirituality behind the prescribed rituals to develop their personal relationship with Allah. This then becomes their moral compass to act with honesty, justice and empathy for the common good of all people.

Spirituality, like belief or Iman, can fluctuate and believers will always have to remain on guard and be self-accountable. Like any continuous learning or ongoing education, spirituality needs constant replenishment. It often starts with the performance of stipulated religious rituals, but the end goal is holding divine love for the Creator. Religious rituals go beyond the physical movements – they should protect individuals from any corruption, material or spiritual. If spirituality is lacking, the evils of laziness, greed or incompetence may find their way in and encourage people to the pitfalls of this world. Spirituality thus needs to be enhanced through a consistent effort of purification of one's soul, repentance, performing good deeds and avoiding evil.

Another dimension of spirituality, termed spiritual intelligence, has been a matter of huge interest in the academic and business world for some time. One of the most influential American authors, Stephen Covey, noted that spiritual intelligence to be “the central and most fundamental of all the intelligences, because it becomes the source of guidance for the others”⁹.

Religion and its practices are embedded in Bangladesh's overwhelming majority population. What is needed for Bangladeshis, and for all Muslim everywhere, is their moral and ethical upliftment through constantly learning the essence and teachings of Islam and by bringing spirituality or Ruhaniyyat in their acts of worship to gain Allah's favour.

8. The change agenda

In the end, what catapults a people to punch far above their weight is their prevalence in intellectual, cultural and political clout. A country with quality institutions in education and research has a huge advantage. Neighbouring India has 23 central government funded Institutes (Indian Institute of Technology or IITs), run on merit and without political interference. They have successfully produced high quality tech leaders of multi-national firms for decades.

In Bangladesh's current socio-political climate, this may seem a pipedream. But the Qur'an and historical realities teach us that a determined people who are steadfast in adversity most often win, even if their number is small. With this in mind, self-driven pioneers have the following tasks to manage:

- a) Investing in children's quality education, secular and religious, through positive engagement with parents everywhere and teachers in schools, mosques and madrassahs.
- b) Working creatively with relevant bodies to improve young people's social and life skills on one hand and develop their personal and group character on the other.
- c) Creating consciousness amongst people to positively engage in the country's civic and political life with the ethos of 'agreeing to disagree' and 'serving people'.
- d) Establishing, where possible, high-quality projects or institutions on educational, social or scientific research with a view to excelling nationally and globally.
- e) Investing in a national renewal to promote a deeper understanding and learning of Islam, so that people's core ritual practices fit with the values, teachings and vision of human life as Allah's stewards or vicegerents on Earth.

Nations have always been in competition in the arenas where certain professions and areas of life wielded a disproportionate bearing on their material progress or intellectual supremacy. While Bangladeshis should compete to gain material supremacy, their spiritual uprightness warrants more importance to break free from the moral decadence seen in recent times.

On a positive note, Bangladeshis are doing well in certain professions especially in medicine and the charity sector. While these service-oriented jobs are always needed, other areas need to be given similar, if not more, importance. This includes other mainstream traditional fields such as teaching, journalism, public relations, policy making and

⁹ Covey, Stephen, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (Simon and Schuster, 2004, p.53).

politics as well as more creative and innovative fields such as research, robotics, artificial intelligence, art and literature.

Further discussions amongst the changemakers are needed for better sowing the seeds of achievement and mastery in these areas and others. The maxim, *'Good is the enemy of the best'* and *'Mediocrity is the enemy of excellence'*, should be instilled into the collective psyche with the ambition set as high as possible to strive for excellence across each area.

Excellence itself is ordained in every walk of a believer's life. All that is entrusted upon them is required to be carried out in the best possible manner. The pursuit of excellence, or 'Ihsan' in the Qur'an, is linked with perfection, righteousness and willpower. Ihsan is a dominant trait of believers and mediocrity is not an accepted state. The prophetic hadith, *"Verily, Allah has prescribed excellence in all things. ..."* (Muslim) teaches us that Allah loves those who strive towards Ihsan, known as Muhsinun.

9. Diaspora Bangladeshi role

Diaspora Bangladeshis can be categorised into two dominant groups:

- a) **Those who work in Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and in the Gulf.** This group mainly provides economic support for their families in Bangladesh through remittances and return back when their contracts end.
- b) **Those who are in western countries, mainly in the Anglo-world,** where many of them are settled as residents or citizens through immigration or birth. Most first-generation Bangladeshis abroad are conscious of their ethnic roots and have a passion to contribute towards Bangladesh.

It is heartening to see diaspora Bangladeshis in the West doing significantly well in education and other professions or business. The Bangladeshi-American, Fazlur Rahman Khan (1929 - 1982), regarded as the 'Father of tubular designs'¹⁰ for his role in developing high-rise buildings, was an example of an exceptionally talented structural engineer and architect in his time. British Bangladeshis are now also doing 'astonishingly well at school'¹¹, dispelling previous inhibitions.

The hard reality is that while Bangladeshi talents are often inhibited in their homeland, they shine through when better opportunities are provided in developed countries.

Despite the positive successes, many amongst the younger generation born and raised in the West, are sadly losing the connections and affinity with their parental and ancestral land due to a host of reasons such as wider cultural gaps, Bangladesh's poorer image in the West or even direct experiences of corruption and incompetence on their occasional visits. If these issues can be addressed or seen to be addressed, younger diaspora generations can be of invaluable help for Bangladesh's overall progress.

The post-9/11 Islamophobia and particularly the rise of far-right political and media discourse and prejudice in many western countries against the non-indigenous population has exposed vulnerability of Bangladeshis and other immigrant groups as well. As a result, many ordinary Bangladeshis, including those who are secular or non-religious, are turning towards and identifying with their ethnic and religious roots.

A conscious section of diaspora Bangladeshis is needed to address racism and Islamophobia through engaging and partnering with mainstream civic or social activism. This will only be truly effective and sustainable if they succeed in convincing their younger generation, who have the energy and better knowhow of society, of the necessity to take a lead in this engagement to avoid further or future predicaments. Once sizeable numbers from the community become more active in securing their rights, they will not only improve their own social mobility within their country of residence but can also be a better asset for Bangladesh's future revival.

The involvement of the younger generations' civic activism can have a knock-on effect in sharpening their excellence in educational, professional and financial achievements and improve their presence in those important industry sectors aforementioned.

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fazlur-R-Khan>

¹¹ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/11/24/british-bangladeshis-are-doing-astonishingly-well-at-school>

10. Action planning for the key steps

From history we know that challenging times often creates more resolute leadership. As a national revival is a long-term strategic project that requires a sustained effort by self-driven patriotic Bangladeshis, greater entrepreneurial skills and coordinated works amongst people from many walks of life is needed.

Detractors will argue that this project will only ever be a fanciful wish list or a fool's idea, especially if the Bangladesh government, its political elite or the deep state actors that have a controlling influence on the country feel threatened and create barriers against any attempts that are being proposed in this paper. In a political culture of envy and revenge, bereft of principles and run by an ethos of 'individuals and party above country or people', this is always a risk. However, in the absence of better political leadership or an effective opposition, there is no alternative but to start from the grassroots level. National revival has to be initiated by people of courage and innovation. This is not an easy or simple project to start and sustain, but nothing is impossible. Where there is a will there is a way.

The reality is that the leaders of a country are a reflection of their own people. If a good proportion of national talent in various fields, with fortitude and without any destructive political agenda, work selflessly and wisely for Bangladesh's revival, many others will join the campaign. There will be challenges and difficulties, some may even be personally penalised, but history teaches us this is how things move in a nation that wants to rise up. It is time for the noble and courageous amongst us to come forward and play their role. Once this visionary project starts, it will create a national debate that cannot be tucked under the carpet.

History also shows us nations that have been through dark and dangerous phases in the past but emerged victorious. By being morally upright and standing firm on their principles, determined individuals from nations as far apart as South Africa and Turkey, made serious efforts to change the status quo and succeeded in the end.

One optimistic outcome could be that some influential individuals within the establishment or the private sector buy into this project and support the allocation of resources in the key areas discussed, such as educational and research institutions or other innovation hubs.

The roadmap to change should incorporate the follow targets:

- a) **Finding role models:** Existing role models and successful Bangladeshis who have made positive contributions to society or achieved intellectual heights should be engaged by changemakers to support the project.
- b) **Highlighting success stories:** Bangladeshis that have already made valuable contributions to the intellectual landscape, whether home or abroad, should have their achievements and impact showcased through word of mouth, social or other media or relevant events to inspire and motivate others.
- c) **Networking and collaborating:** Efforts should be made to create networks for collaborative works among individuals, groups and institutions, with the purpose of exchanging ideas, sharing best practices and providing mentoring and skills development which will gradually stimulate practical partnerships.
- d) **Engaging with stakeholders:** Meaningful engagement with different sections of Bangladeshis everywhere is the key to success for any bottom-up project. Where possible, effective workshops, seminars, and discussion programs should be organised to raise awareness about Bangladesh's intellectual revival. This will foster a sense of ownership and encourage participation in developing the collective intellectual capital.
- e) **Providing incentives and rewards:** To demonstrate a commitment to Bangladesh's intellectual revival, achievements should be celebrated with incentives and rewards, such as bursaries, research grants, recognition programs and opportunities for professional advancement.
- f) **Establishing strong media and public relations:** To keep the changemakers and various informal networks updated, effective communication channels such as websites, social media or professional networks should be utilised to maintain momentum.
- g) **Seeking innovation through technology:** The success of Bangladeshis in innovative technology-driven industries or entrepreneurship should be highlighted to inspire future generations in the new digital age.
- h) **Expanding further into art and culture:** Alongside traditional academic or research pursuits, arts and culture are indicators of a civilisation's maturity and intellectual development. Initiatives that encourage creativity, critical thinking and the exploration of diverse perspectives should be promoted and supported.

Whilst the ambition may sound idealistic or even nationalistic, history teaches us that people around the world are primarily driven by their national, racial or religious interests. There is nothing wrong with this, provided progress is achieved through ethical means and not at the detriment of others. The goal is to shape Bangladesh into a sovereign land of prosperity with the universal human values of empathy, tolerance and respect.

Ultimately, Bangladesh needs a positive vision for its future that build upon the nation's previously rich history and emphasises the importance of cultivating its intellectual capital to drive economic growth, innovation, and societal well-being. This vision should be complimented by ethical politics and accountable governance to serve people and guarantee their equality, human rights and freedom of choice.

11. Conclusion

Human beings can be distinguished through multiple identities, including ethnic, nationalistic or religious. Like other successful confident people, Bangladeshis have many reasons to feel positive about their multiple identities – a national identity of being Bangladeshi, an ethnic identity of being Bengali and a religious identity of being Muslim. If Bangladeshi people are confident, value themselves and see others as equal partners, they will not feel inferior or fear any adversity, no matter how big or powerful the opposition is.

It is time for Bangladeshis from around the world to reclaim their previous glory, aim high and secure a better future for themselves and the future generations. Bangladeshi changemakers have to think globally, plan strategically and act locally whilst simultaneously working hard with exceptional ingenuity and resilience.

At the grassroots level, parents, teachers and religious scholars must take up the task of raising their future generations as confident adults, patriotic citizens and better humans through effective parenting and a rounded education. The improving literacy rate should drive forward a growth in reading habits that can help expand horizons and improve critical thinking and communication skills with confidence. This will not only help them learn, adapt, engage and contribute more, but also foster positive pride and unity as a people. Seeing these positive changes will undoubtedly energise the young diaspora Bangladeshis in the West, and encourage them to bring their skills, knowledge and professionalism to the cause instead of remaining uninterested.

Whilst there may be individuals or groups in the educated class who are already doing this quietly, piecemeal and disjointed works need better coordination, even if informal, and joining up to produce visibly successful and sustainable outcomes. Once the seeds are sown with care, a growing number of similar-minded people can then take them to new heights. The main challenge will be how to transform Bangladesh's people number into people power.

Bangladesh must stand on its own feet. It is time its people, from within and across the world, initiate an intellectual, cultural, moral and spiritual 'Renaissance' by investing in their own people, particularly the youth. The country now desperately needs thought-leaders and changemakers to start this process by reconnecting their past successes and failures with their current reality to plot the course forward.

Bangladeshis can only rise from their current socio-political-intellectual slumber if they aim for success in this world and the hereafter. For this, they must exert maximum effort with pure intentions to get the best possible results. Only then can they walk tall with their heads high as a nation and only then can they become a nation of givers, not receivers.

The upper hand is better than the lower hand. The upper hand is one that gives and the lower hand is one that takes (Bukhari, Muslim)

How to initiate this national revival process is another important issue that needs wider discussion. Whilst change from the top, from the government or existing agencies, is easier to implement, given the nature of the current political leadership it is unlikely this will come in the short term.

However, if a growing number of passionate, committed and confident Bangladeshis with a sense of conscientiousness and obligation start the process and connect with similar minded people, the ball will definitely start rolling, God willing.

And that man will only have what he strives for (Qur'an 53:39)



Major Hamas operation in Israel shows changing dynamics of Israel-Palestine conflict

A surprise attack by Palestinian armed resistance group Hamas on Israel was launched at dawn during the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah on Saturday, October 8, 2023. The brazen operation combined gunmen breaching security barriers through land and air and a barrage of rockets fired from Gaza. Saturday's attack is symbolically significant as it came 50 years and a day after the Yom Kippur War, where Egyptian and Syrian forces launched an almost successful assault in an effort to retrieve territory Israel had taken during a brief conflict in 1967. Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was initiated by Al-Qassam Brigades, the military arm of Hamas, with a barrage of around 5000 rockets targeting Israeli positions, airports, and military fortifications, which served as cover for an unprecedented multi-pronged infiltration of Palestinian fighters via separation fences, motorcycles, motor-powered boats and paragliders beginning at dawn. In this manner, hundreds of Palestinian fighters attacked Israeli military and civilian areas in the southern part of Israel, killing at least 250 Israelis and capturing dozens of Israeli soldiers and civilians as hostages.

The attack clearly caught the Israeli command unawares, and the success of the Hamas operation has been touted as one of the biggest failures of Israeli military and intelligence. Moreover, dozens of Palestinian videos of the commando-style operations, attacks on Israeli military installations, destruction of tanks and military hardware, and hostage-taking have made their mark in terms of psychological warfare. According to Marwan Bishara, Aljazeera senior political analyst, "the damage done to Israel goes beyond the intelligence and military flop; it is also a political and psychological catastrophe. The invincible state has shown itself vulnerable, weak, and terribly impotent, which will not go down well for its plans to be a regional leader of a new Middle East. Images of Israelis fleeing their homes and towns in fear will be ingrained in their collective memory for many years to come. Today was probably

the worst day in Israel's history. An utter humiliation." By mid-day, Israeli forces had gradually begun re-establishing control, although by the end of the first day, there were still 25 points where clashes between the Israeli military and Hamas were continuing. As in the past, the Israeli occupation forces then proceeded to bomb civilian areas in Gaza, which has to date led to the death of more than 200 people and left thousands injured.

While many analysts are of the opinion that it is still too early to say where this conflict is headed, Israel has threatened to exact heavy revenge, possibly through undertaking severe bombardment and assassination campaigns, leading to great suffering and countless casualties among the Palestinians. There is also the possibility of a land invasion by the Israeli military, but this could become complicated as Lebanese armed militia Hizbullah has threatened to join the war from the North in case that happens. The Hamas operation has received a high level of popular street support from various Arab nations, Turkiye, and Iran, which showcases the unpopularity of normalisation deals that Israel has been trying to pursue with various countries in the Middle East and North Africa over the past several years and could be further jeopardised in the event of brutal Israeli retaliation. Internally, the Netanyahu administration also faces a tough choice either way, a far-right backlash in the event of any response that would seem too weak and the possibility of global condemnation and isolation in the event of a disproportionate response.

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World leaders meet in New York for 78th session of UNGA

The 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was held from September 5 to September 26, 2023, in New York City. The theme of the General Debate was “Rebuilding trust and reigniting global solidarity: Accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals towards peace, prosperity, progress and sustainability for all.” The General Debate, the main focus of every UNGA session, was held from September 19 to September 23 and September 26, 2023. World leaders gathered to discuss solutions to global challenges and explore ways to advance peace, security, and sustainable development. Apart from the General Debate, the SDG Summit was held between September 18-19, where heads of state reviewed the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including ensuring quality education, providing clean water and sanitation, and taking urgent action to tackle the climate crisis.

The High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development was held on September 20, 2023, following the SDG Summit. It provided political leadership and guidance on the implementation of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda - a UN framework for mobilising resources to achieve the SDGs - as well as identified progress and emerging challenges. The Climate Ambition Summit was also held on September 20, 2023, alongside the SDG Summit. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called on every leader from Governments, business, cities and regions, civil society, and financial institutions to step up. The UN chief urged individuals or organisations participating in the event to present credible, serious and new climate action and nature-based solutions that will move the needle forward and respond to the urgency of the climate crisis.

Among the issues discussed in the UNGA General Debate were Russia’s war in Ukraine, lethal floods in Libya, the Palestine-Israel conflict, North versus South economic funding, and climate change, to name a few. Although more than 140 heads of state and government ministers attended the events, there were notable absences of heads of state of France, UK, Russia and China, making US President Joe Biden the only leader of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council to attend. This year marked the first time since the start of Russia-Ukraine hostilities that Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky attended the session in person, where he called on world leaders to show unity in the face of Russia’s continued “aggression” in Ukraine, mentioning that Moscow is “weaponising” food and energy.

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G20 summit at Delhi falls short of real action

At the G20 summit held this year in New Delhi, the world's 20 largest economies managed to reach a compromise over the war in Ukraine, as reflected in the statement issued at their summit over the weekend, which highlighted the human suffering the conflict had caused, but shied away from condemning Russia for the offensive, and called on all states not to use force to grab territory. Diplomats and analysts said the unexpected consensus in the summit statement on the Russia-Ukraine conflict was welcome and prevented a split in the group, and the addition of the African Union as a new member to the bloc was a victory for host India and developing countries. However, analysts also noted that few concrete advances were made on the core G20 mission of responding to global financial issues.

Considering that G20 members collectively account for over 80% of global carbon emissions, there were hopes of progress on cutting down on fossil fuel usage and increasing the use of renewables to fight climate change. However, despite an agreement to pursue tripling renewable energy capacity globally by 2030 and acceptance of the need to phase down unabated coal power, the final statement stopped short of setting major climate goals. Observers noted that members such as China, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia opposed timetable-set proposals to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030 and cut greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by 2035, preferring to just mention the need for such measures to take place. Alongside the above, the meeting also agreed to address the debt vulnerabilities of poor countries and strengthen and reform multilateral development banks, but without setting any concrete goals.

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French court upholds abaya ban, further alienating Muslim population

In a move condemned by many, the French government announced just before schools reopened this month that the abaya, a long, flowing dress worn by some Muslim women, would no longer be allowed because it violated the French principle of secularism. Experts have identified this as another instance of policies deployed by the French state to control the bodies and minds of racial minorities and specifically as a tool to exclude expressions of Islam and Muslimness from public life. The Muslim rights group Actions for Rights of Muslims (ADM), had filed an urgent appeal to lift the ban with the state council, France's highest court for complaints against state authorities, arguing that the ban infringes on "fundamental rights," such as the right to personal freedom. The court, however, upheld the government ban, rejecting complaints that it was discriminatory or could incite hatred.

The government's prohibition on abayas, firmly supported by President Emmanuel Macron, has sparked a political debate about secularism in France and whether it discriminates against the country's Muslim minority. Over the last two decades, state schools have increasingly become the focal point of debates around secularism after a law prohibiting the wearing of purportedly religious symbols in schools was passed in 2004. While the ban encompassed the hijab, Jewish kippas, Sikh turbans, and large Christian crosses, until now, baggy gowns, abayas, and long skirts were regarded as a legal grey area. On the first day of the school year, the education minister, Gabriel Attal, reported that French schools sent dozens of girls home for refusing to remove their abayas or long gowns. Macron had drawn outrage when he supported the abaya ban and vilified opposing Muslim voices by claiming that there is a "minority" in France who "hijack a religion and challenge the republic and secularism."

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Natural disasters result in high death tolls in Morocco and Libya

Consecutive natural disasters struck North African countries Libya and Morocco in the space of four days in September, leaving thousands dead and many more thousands injured. On Friday night of September 8, 2023, a terrible 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck Morocco's Atlas Mountains near Ighil in al-Haouz province, killing over 2,900 people and injuring thousands more. The earthquake severely damaged areas of Marrakech's old quarter and decimated several remote villages in the Atlas Mountains. It was felt as far away as Casablanca, Morocco's largest city, as well as in Portugal and Algeria. While rescue teams from numerous countries were deployed to assist Moroccan efforts on the ground, damaged roads in the rugged terrain prevented rescuers from reaching distant settlements in the Atlas Mountains region.

Just days later, a major flood caused by Storm Daniel caused two dams to burst, which killed thousands of people in the eastern Libyan city of Derna, sweeping away entire neighbourhoods with their residents and washing many bodies out to sea. The United Nations, citing UN World Health Organization (WHO) stats, announced a death toll of around 4,000 people from across Libya due to flooding, also stating that more than 9,000 people were still missing as of September 17. The death toll from the storm, unusually large, was the result of ailing infrastructure which resulted in the bursting of two major dams, and poor preparedness, which exacerbated devastation. Analysts also say climate change may have intensified the storm, which had swept across parts of southern Europe and the Mediterranean coast, killing at least 15 people in Greece, seven in Turkey and four in Bulgaria.

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Azerbaijan defeats rebels in Nagorno-Karabakh region

Azerbaijani troops backed by artillery strikes took full control of the Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh after starting the operation on September 17, 2023 to bring the breakaway region under Azerbaijan's control. Separatist fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh were forced to declare a ceasefire after Azerbaijan's decisive 24-hour military operation, and the breakaway government unilaterally voted to dissolve their republic on January 1, 2024. The region had been under blockade since December 2022, when Azerbaijan closed down the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, alleging that Armenia was using it to supply weapons to the separatist rebels. While there were fears of a possible ethnic cleansing of resident Armenians at the hands of incoming Azerbaijani military forces, these fears proved to be unfounded after the Azerbaijani state opened a humanitarian corridor for the region's 120,000-strong population, most of whom are ethnic Armenian, while Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev promised to guarantee the rights and security of Armenians in the region.

Nagorno-Karabakh, though internationally recognised as being part of Azerbaijan, has been a point of contention between Azerbaijan and Armenia for more than three decades, existing as a de facto breakaway republic ruled by ethnic Armenians supported by Armenia. The countries fought two wars over control of the region, which has been accompanied by instances of ethnic cleansing, the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, as well as forced displacement of local populations. In 2020, a large-scale war between the two countries ended decisively in favour of Azerbaijan, which forced Armenia to give back control of large areas to the south and effectively sealed the fate of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region.

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A decade of the Belt-Road Initiative has passed – how is China doing?

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), is a China-led global infrastructure development strategy officially announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 aiming to enhance trade and investment connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa through the creation of a vast network of railways, highways, ports, and other infrastructure projects. As the primary investor in the project, the BRI has become a significant aspect of China's foreign policy and global economic influence. While Chinese overseas development financing predates the BRI, it has reached a new level since 2013. China bankrolled an average of \$83.5 billion per year in overseas development projects in the first five years of the BRI (2013-2017), a net increase of \$31.3 billion per year on average over the five years prior (2008-2012), which quickly captured the attention of Global South leaders, culminating in investments in everything from gas pipelines in Central Asia to ports in Sri Lanka to trains in Kenya. The popularity and acceptance of the BRI can be gauged by the fact that by 2021, over 50 per cent of the low- and middle-income world in terms of population had joined BRI and nearly 30 per cent in terms of GDP.

While membership in the BRI may appear to be a big tent opportunity, some nations such as Russia, Brazil, and Venezuela have attracted a disproportionate share of Chinese development finance funds over time, mainly because of the use of natural resources like oil as collateral. However, if one were to look at the picture in terms of number of projects rather than just the value of funds, low- and lower-middle-income countries in Asia (Cambodia, Laos) or Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo) have attracted more projects than their wealthier counterparts. Such initiatives are frequently financed with more lenient conditions (grants or concessional loans) and indicate a stronger emphasis on attracting the international public rather than an overt commercial interest. A good example to gauge such behaviour is China's current engagement with the Taliban government in Afghanistan – China remains heavily invested in the country as part of the BRI, especially in the mining sector, and there are ongoing talks of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.

Regardless, experts are of the opinion that the BRI will continue to be a major influence on global development and that through the BRI, China is slated to become more engaged in the multilateral system to actively participate in the shaping of the global development agenda, with or without traditional Western actors. A question is whether this growing engagement will also induce changes to the political scape within China itself in fields of human rights and freedom of expression. At the moment, however, considering the Uyghur clampdown and massive state surveillance on common citizens, it appears that little has changed in the political sphere as opposed to the large-scale changes on the economic front.

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Canada-India tensions rise after India accused of Canadian Sikh leader assassination

Relations between India and Canada, which have been strained for some years, are at an all-time low after Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that his country's top intelligence agency had identified "credible allegations" linking India to the killing of outspoken pro-separatist Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, 45, in British Columbia in June outside a Sikh temple. The Indian foreign ministry vehemently denied the claim, calling it "absurd and motivated." The situation further escalated after both Canada and India acted swiftly to expel senior diplomats in reciprocal moves. Later, India's foreign ministry responded by temporarily suspending visa services for Canadian citizens over what it said were "security threats" against diplomats in Canada. According to India, Nijjar was allegedly the head of a pro-Khalistan organisation in Canada and had been previously accused by the Indian Government of orchestrating targeted killings in India, for which it had unsuccessfully sought his extradition. The diplomatic spat resulting from the situation forced US officials to give statements of support for the Canadian investigation, stating that they were concerned about the allegations of India's involvement.

Nijjar's death has shocked the Sikh community in Canada, which is home to the world's largest Sikh population outside of India, and it is believed that he was killed for his affiliation with the Sikh separatist movement, which calls for a separate independent Sikh homeland (Khalistan) to be carved out of present-day Punjab in India. India considers the Khalistan movement to be a terrorist movement and is wary of the fact that it enjoys a degree of support from Sikhs living abroad in North America and Europe. Historically speaking, while the Khalistan movement began right around the time of Partition, it attained serious support after Operation Blue Star, a 1984 military operation by the Indian army to flush out Sikh militants hiding in the Sikh Golden Temple, which resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, especially from Sikh pilgrims who were stuck at the religious site. The blowback from the operation resulted in widespread support for the Khalistan movement among Sikhs and led to incidents such as Indira Gandhi's assassination by two of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, extensive anti-Sikh pogroms in India, and the infamous terrorist bombing of Air India flight 182 over the Atlantic Ocean in 1985, which killed more than 300 passengers. The anti-minority policies of the far-right Hindu nationalist Modi government have resulted in increasing activity amongst Khalistan supporters outside India, and experts believe that this latest killing will further exacerbate tensions.

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Antarctica faced intense heatwave in 2022 as climate change sets in

According to a study published in August, the world's coldest region recorded the most intense heatwave ever last year. Temperatures in Eastern Antarctica rose by 39 degrees Celsius (102.2 degrees Fahrenheit) above the monthly average in March 2022, according to the study "The Largest Ever Recorded Heatwave - Characteristics and Attribution of the Antarctic Heatwave of March 2022." The temperature rose to -10C (-14F) on March 18, the hottest day of the heatwave, in stark contrast to the -54C (-65.2F) average for March. Temperatures remained above the previous March record of -31C (-23.8F) for three days in a row, including at night. According to researchers, the heatwave was caused by anomalous air circulation patterns near Australia.

According to the study, the heatwave occurred just after the record sea ice minimum in February 2022. However, sea surface temperature anomalies in the Southern Ocean had only minimal impact on the heatwave's magnitude. Because of rising global temperatures, sea ice minima reached a new record low in February 2023. The minimum for this year was 20% lower than the 40-year average. According to the study's author, Blanchard-Wrigglesworth, an increase in the frequency of such incidents over the next 50 or even 100 years may cause repercussions that we did not anticipate. Last month, researchers reported that emperor penguins were perishing at an alarming rate in breeding grounds of West Antarctica towards the end of 2022.

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