

Save the environment, not posters



IQRA L QAMARI

WITH the Dhaka City Corporation election ready to roll out next month, the capital is brimming with a palpable air of electoral mood. From door-to-door canvassing to microphones blaring the theme songs of the latest municipal polls of Dhaka, the promotional preparations have left no stone unturned to capture the attention of the residents. The most eye-catching of them all, however, is the festoons of posters all over the city bearing the faces of the candidates, urging the public to vote for them.

This brazen exhibition of such resource wastage not just distorts the aesthetic quality of the areas, but falls heavy on the environment. Tons of paper is wasted during such elections for this publicity stunt, with no one to bear its liability and neither is there any standard practice of recycling them. This time, the question of recyclability does not even arise since the campaign designers have taken it one step further and laminated the papers with a plastic covering to protect them from humidity and rainwater. They have found a way of tweaking the electoral code of conduct for the upcoming municipal polls—which prohibits candidates from sticking their posters, leaflets or handbills on public places such as walls, electric pillars, fences, etc—by hanging the posters on strings and wires across city streets.

“It’s not just paper waste that we are dealing with anymore, it’s also plastic waste. These are also creating a fire hazard. In some areas, they are hung in high density near the electric cables so a safety and security issue arise here as well,” says Nooha Maula, a concerned citizen.

The situation is made dire by the fact that those who the voters are supposed to entrust with the responsibility of protecting the city are the ones violating their duties towards it. “The ones who are supposed to provide the

solution are in fact adding more to the problem,” adds Nowsheen Sharmilla, a resident of Baridhara.

The constituencies want to see responsibility on the part of the candidates—someone who is aware of the environmental repercussions that such paper and plastic wastage would cause. The fact that they are willing to dismiss the environment as a stakeholder even before they are elected reflects their priorities clearly. With the ongoing infrastructural changes that are already putting stress on the environment, all these campaign paraphernalia will only catalyse the damage.

According to Rezwan Ahmed, a student residing in Mohammadpur, “The paper usage here seems redundant. They are constantly using megaphones and other media outlets that involve visual and auditory

means.” He further went on to argue how if these posters are a means to appeal mostly to an illiterate base, then it still does not make sense as most of them cannot read what is written on them.

The only function of the posters is to signal to voters who to vote for—displaying said candidate’s name, picture and the alliance they belong to—but these carry very little to no necessary information about why they are worthy of the vote. Hundreds of thousands of papers have been printed only with this limited information and then laminated with plastic to be hung over the city-streets for weeks leading up to the election, only to ultimately end up in the dumping grounds and yet no one is held accountable for this epic proportion of wastage. The entire democratic process of choosing the candidate you think is worthy of the

particular position gets diminished to just a gimmicky exercise of face recognition and face recall as far as the agenda of the posters go.

They are a promotional tool formulated with the concept of repetition and this city-wide proliferation is an insult to the intelligence of the general public. According to waste management specialists, such traditional campaign materials such as posters and bunting may have been significant in the past, but their usage should now be curbed given how easily the internet, newspapers and mass media can be used to disseminate information. The concept of e-elections might be far-fetched but it is high time that politicians and campaign runners think about better alternatives that involve technology and not paper or plastic wastage, aligning with the principles of

Digital Bangladesh.

The ironic footnote that can be added here is that only a week after the High Court directive of the country-wide ban of single-use plastic products in coastal areas, hotels and restaurants to be implemented within a year was announced, the roads were covered with plastic coated posters of “promising candidates” which fall under the category of single-use plastic according to Wikipedia. In the name of promotion, they are willing to leave behind plastic waste, the lifetime of which would exceed that of the candidates themselves, let alone the length of their office tenure. They need to stop looking at everything through their myopic lenses and hold themselves accountable for the ripple effects of their activities.

Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, a mayoral candidate for the DSCC, when contacted by *The Daily Star*, went on to say that there was no such prohibition on the usage of laminated posters from the Election Commission and further added as some sort of self-justification that he would remove all the posters at his own cost, post-election. The damage, though, that has been caused already is irreparable. All these unrecyclable plastic posters would aggravate waterlogging during the coming monsoon and accumulate in the landfills. Not to mention the amount of greenhouse gas that has already been released during the process of lamination.

As for the latest update on this story, the HC has banned the production and display of these laminated posters which could be seen as a wise step taken too late. Yet it is laudable, given the utter disregard of the candidates for the environment and our own lethargic passivity. It is indeed sardonic that the candidates who have made promises of protecting the environment have ensured a way of further damaging it. Sadly, this time, we had to bear witness to how safeguarding posters from damage takes precedence over safeguarding the environment. Hopefully, things will be different next time.

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PHOTO: STAR

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES The looming oxymoron



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

AS the impeachment trial of US President Donald Trump unfolds in the US Senate, something very strange is going on.

The president and his defenders in the Senate are dismissing all charges, saying there’s no evidence. Trump has repeatedly called it a “hoax.” According to him, it is, if you will forgive the pun, a trumped-up charge based on a “perfect” phone call in April 2019 to the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky where he asked for (wink, wink) a favour.

But here’s the odd thing.

For a president and his supporters who so vociferously claim his innocence, you’d think they would be the most enthusiastic about getting everything related to the issue out in the open—documents, testimony of people privy to what actually happened, everything. “Sunlight is the best disinfectant,” US Judge Learned Hand had once intoned.

Yet right from the get go, the Trump administration has done its damndest to close off all possible routes to information. It barred administration officials and bureaucrats from testifying during the House investigation, and refused to comply with any request for documentation.

I think it’s a safe bet that you aren’t the only one who finds it very strange behaviour from people who profess the stoutest faith in the president’s innocence. After all, if somebody

is innocent, all possible evidence should be exculpatory, right?

My intention, however, is not to provide a thumbnail sketch of the current US impeachment saga, which is being covered *ad nauseum* by every known media.

I’m simply bringing up the impeachment to make a broader point.

Democracy has always been messy, but we seem to have entered a new age of intolerance and autocracy which is happy to sheathe itself in the accoutrements of democracy, for which it has scant respect.

It’s the attitude of those in power that is so disturbing. It’s the increasing currency of politics as a brand of virulent tribalism. It’s the notion that political opponents are not just opponents with disagreements, but undeserving of the right to dissent at all. It’s a situation where political divisions are not driven by ideological or political disagreements over which there is the possibility of a give-and-take and compromise, but manifested in purely subjective, implacably opposed, different groups.

Add to this a brazen shamelessness, a remarkable willingness to flat-out lie in the face of contradictory facts, made all the more possible due to the tribal nature of politics. When you’ve got on that slippery slope, the next thing you know is you’re trying to pack the courts, twist the arms of universities, and play fast and loose with the media to erase the last vestiges of a level playing field for the marketplace of ideas.

The likes of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Prime Minister Victor Orban in Hungary, and the ruling Law and Justice Party of Poland epitomise this intolerance. While their democratic

credentials are genuine, their commitment to democratic values is deeply suspect.

It’s heart-breaking to note that this deadly virus has deeply affected the Indian subcontinent. In Bangladesh, the signs are too many to belabour repetition: Ballot boxes get captured in uncontested elections; people disappear with disquieting frequency; dissenters are viciously beaten up. In India, vigilante teams attack Muslims and broadcast it live on social media. Attacks on secular writers and activists have gotten so bad there—a few have been murdered in the

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recent past—that many authors have returned national literary awards.

The notion that democracy is too dangerous for a country’s own good is one much favoured by autocrats. It had once landed now-deceased Singapore President Lee Yuan Kew in hot water in international circles. Kew, the architect of modern Singapore, is credited with the astonishing economic success of that nation state.

Always a bare-knuckled pugilist of a politician, he never minced words. He said flatly that the

improvement of the quality of life of citizens was too important a task to be left to the fickle vagaries of democracy. Singapore is effectively a dictatorship with some affectations of democracy—regular elections (where the playing field is ludicrously uneven), an unfree press (*The Strait Times*, the major English-language daily, is state-owned).

Kew had a point, but it’s as spurious as justifying a rape just because it produced an Einstein. The real danger of choosing economic progress over democracy is that you might end up with neither.

For the health and sustenance of democracy, political rivalry should not manifest in thuggery and intimidation. It should—and can, with great effect—be played out in the realm of words. History tells us that in 19th century Britain, there was no love lost between British Tory statesman Benjamin Disraeli and his bitter rival, Liberal statesman William Gladstone. Both served terms as prime minister. Disraeli had said that Gladstone had “not one redeeming defect.” Radical Liberal statesman John Bright, on the other hand, had said that Disraeli is a “self-made man who worships his creator.”

When Disraeli was asked the difference between a misfortune and a calamity, he had deadpanned: “If Gladstone fell into the Thames, that would be a misfortune; and if anybody pulled him out, that, I suppose, would be a calamity.”

Alas, in today’s intolerant age, it’s more likely that someone would actually physically throw Gladstone into the Thames, and prevent all attempts to pull him out.

Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a digital daily for South Asians in the United States.

QUOTABLE
Quote

MARSHALL MCLUHAN
(1911-1980)

Canadian communications theorist and educator.

The more the data banks record about each one of us, the less we exist.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

22 Turn bad

32 Belarus neighbor

1 Symmetry lines

33 Bordeaux buddy

5 Mall businesses

34 Day light

10 Truman's hometown

35 Burglar's bane

12 So far phonetically

37 Omit

13 Musical set in Argentina

39 Crunch kin

14 "Skyfall" singer

40 Long attack

15 Pear-shaped fruit

41 Flower parts

16 Wallet bill

42 "—bien!"

18 Down

DOWN

1 Hebrew letters

2 "X-Men" professor

3 Asylum seeker

4 Plunked down

5 Sax great Getz

6 Brick carrier

7 Infant outfit

8 monotonously

9 Pentagon

11 bigwigs

12 Patellae places

13 Band boosters

14 Grog base

15 Blotto

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	D	A	M	P	I	C	A	S
A	D	E	L	E	A	D	O	P	T
T	O	L	L	S	P	O	L	E	R
I	R	A	A	W	E	S	O	M	E
N	E	W	S	I	R	A	W		
G	R	A	B	T	E	X	A	N	
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N	I	V	E	N	L	I	V	I	A
E	V	E	N	T	E	D	E	N	S
D	A	R	T	S	S	A	R	G	E

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott