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FOUNDER EDITOR
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A lone voice at the EC

Why are valid concerns of one election commissioner being ignored?

ACCORDING to Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar, the chief election commissioner and other commissioners are now ignoring his observations regarding the flouting of the electoral code of conduct by lawmakers and ministers. He further alleged that in the three meetings held since the announcement of the election schedule on December 22, there have been no discussions on the electoral code of conduct; nor is such a discussion on the agenda of the last meeting before the elections.

Yet we wonder: is it not the role of the EC to discuss, monitor and follow up on whether candidates are defying the electoral code of conduct? It is not unusual for an election commissioner to request to see a list of complaints lodged with the Returning Office of the EC; in fact, we are at a loss to understand why, with elections only three days away, the EC itself has not asked for such a list or called a meeting to decide how to move forward and address the complaints.

Mahbub Talukdar has been a lone voice for a while now highlighting the irregularities in the electoral process. The EC has repeatedly dismissed Talukdar's concerns about an uneven playing field, and now seems to have sidelined him altogether from the EC proceedings. But why? Is what he is saying so untrue that the EC does not have to pay any heed to his observations? We in the media are following the elections just as closely as the EC and we think the observations of Mahbub Talukdar deserve a careful hearing at least. By ignoring his views completely, the EC is casting doubt on its own credibility. But does the EC care?

Slow death of the Bakkhali River

Consequence of one man's endless greed

WE are appalled by the shameless actions of the mayor of Cox's Bazar municipality, who is also the general secretary of the ruling Awami League in the district. According to a report by this daily published yesterday, structures built by him encroached on the Bakkhali River, and a huge amount of garbage is being dumped into the river every day on his instructions. Shockingly, he also happens to be a member of the river conservation committee formed by the district administration. Which is why we must ask the conservation committee: how exactly does it expect this man to save a river that he is primarily responsible for slowly killing?

In 2014, the man in question was named on a Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority's (BIWTA) list of 52 people who encroached on the Bakkhali. Surprisingly, his name was not included in the Cox's Bazar district administration's list of river grabbers prepared in 2015, despite the fact that he built a number of shacks and a warehouse grabbing parts of the Bakkhali in the town's Natun Baharchhora area over the last 10 years. Does his exclusion have anything to do with the fact that he is politically well-connected? After all, that is reportedly why BIWTA failed to reclaim the encroached banks from him in order to construct a river port that it was supposed to do in 2014, when it prepared the list of encroachers.

And what we must also ask is, why during this entire time did the river conservation committee not take any action against him? Surely a committee with him on it will be completely ineffective at conserving the Bakkhali—is that not obvious to the committee?

This is a perfect example of how a politically well-connected, corrupt individual has made an entire district committee useless. As a result, a river is dying which will surely have grave repercussions for the environment and a large number of people. It is about time the authorities took action against this man whose greed seems to know no bounds.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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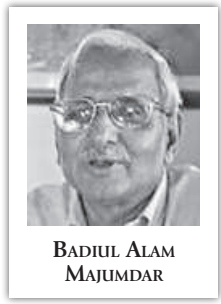
Trapped in their own city

Mirpur residents have to suffer the brunt of traffic congestion on a daily basis, which gets too unbearable at times. Of late, the problem has been exacerbated by the ongoing metro rail construction project which has significantly constricted the main roads and led to the closure of some smaller ones, causing immense sufferings of the commuters. Add to this the seasonal nuisance that comes with the monthlong trade fair in January, or the international cricket matches in the Mirpur stadium, which puts additional pressure on the existing infrastructure. Access to some roads leading to Mirpur is also restricted sometimes to make way for VIP movement.

All these, coupled with the fact that Mirpur is one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in Dhaka, have made life particularly difficult for the residents. It has been going on for some years now, and I think it can't get any worse. The government should take urgent measures to alleviate the sufferings of Mirpur residents by addressing its many problems. The movement and mobility issues of this part of the city need particular attention. With the DNCC (and DSCC) set to have an election on February 1, I think the mayoral candidates should also announce particular courses of action about how they plan to make Mirpur liveable again.

Zahid Hassan
A resident of Mirpur

Will the EC kindly answer?



of credible elections, for “stolen” elections again may have disastrous consequences for our nation. But in order for us to be really assured, the commission must urgently respond to some questions and take some immediate steps to ensure its transparency and accountability as the existing constitutional scheme provides no such mechanism for our constitutionally independent EC.

First, in the past, the CEC had repeatedly said that EVMs would not be used in the national elections without a political consensus. Why, then, did the commission suddenly decide to spend nearly Tk 4,000 crore to purchase EVMs even though there was no budgetary allocation for such purchase and at least 12 registered political parties, including BNP, opposed their use? Why was the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) not included in our EVMs, defying the advice of Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who was the head of the Technical Committee formed by the commission and who refused to sign the relevant document? It may be noted that with the inclusion of VVPAT, any voter could get a print-out showing whom she/he voted for, and the vote cast could be recounted, in case of disputes. It may also be pointed out that the EVMs used by India are now fitted with VVPAT—as directed by their Supreme Court in 2011—but our EVMs do not have the device despite being 11 times more expensive than theirs.

Second, in the last parliamentary election, election officers were allowed to override EVMs for up to 25 percent of voters, in case the control unit of the machines failed to verify their biometrics-based identity (BBC, November 24, 2018). In case of what percentage of voters was such overriding actually done? With this overriding authority, it should be noted, the election officers could conceivably cast votes for up to 25 percent of voters without their presence at the polling centres.

Third, the average vote casting rate was 51.42 percent in six centres where EVMs were used in the last national election. By contrast, in 294 centres where paper ballots were used, the average casting rate was 80.80 percent, showing a nearly 30 percent difference. Of the two, which is the true casting rate? There cannot be two correct rates of casting in the same election. How would the commission explain this difference? If the 51.42 percent casting rate is accurate, the 30 percent higher rate in 294 constituencies must be due to fraud and subject to be declared void. On the other hand, if the casting rate of 80.80 percent is accurate, there was likely voter suppression in the constituencies where EVMs were used, for which the commission must

be held to account. In addition, why were the results of the constituencies where EVMs were used declared after midnight, although their results were instantaneously available? Why was the casting rate in Chattogram-8 only 22.94 percent despite a participatory election there?

Fourth, on the morning of December 30, 2018, the BBC showed the pictures of stuffed ballot boxes from Chattogram-10 as evidence of voting on the night before. Even the CEC indirectly admitted it later. The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) also raised serious allegations of vote rigging. Did the commission investigate these allegations and take any action against any offender?

Fifth, from the centre-wise election

of intimidation and violence against opposition candidates and voters during the 11th parliamentary election. A Prothom Alo report (December 29, 2018) indicated that there were 250 incidents of violence in 149 constituencies prior to the election. According to *The Daily Star* (December 27, 2018), there were 60 incidents of violence in the pre-election period. Furthermore, Dr Kamal Hossain and other opposition leaders were attacked. There were many written complaints against such violations of the electoral code of conduct and also about election results to the EC and the Electoral Inquiry Commission. Would the EC publish on its website the list of complaints and the remedies given?

Eighth, it is reported that the



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

results published by the commission in response to my RTI application, we found that the vote casting rate was 100 percent in 213 centres, which was totally unrealistic given the death or absence of voters (for employment purposes) within or outside the constituency. Did the commission investigate the matter and take any action against anyone?

Sixth, from the centre-wise results, we found that BNP received zero votes in 1,185 centres, and Awami League in two centres. In addition, in 686 centres, Awami League candidates received all the votes. Such results are unbelievable and impossible. Furthermore, Hasan Mamun Rumi, a candidate from Chattogram-10, was shown to have received zero vote by the Returning Officer, but according to the centre-wise results, he received 283 votes, which amounts to a fraudulent change of results. How would the commission explain such anomalies?

Seventh, there were serious allegations

commission selectively appealed against the High Court decisions regarding the validity of candidature—in some cases, not in all. Will the commission disclose the list of such cases along with the names of lawyers?

Ninth, it has been reported that 74 cases were filed before the Election Tribunal, although till date no hearing took place in any of the cases. Since justice delayed is justice denied, will the commission approach the Tribunal to expeditiously hear these cases? Will the commission, in order to establish its own credibility, voluntarily initiate recounting of votes of the disputed constituencies?

Tenth, during the 11th parliamentary election, the CEC, the commissioners and officials divided among themselves the money earmarked for training, sometimes without participating in the training events themselves. Can the public servants, who are on government payroll, do so? What action

publish the investigation report?

The commission may, in response to the above questions, claim that no one lodged complaints, which is not entirely true. More importantly, the commission's constitutional responsibility is to hold free and fair elections, and using such excuses represents the most blatant dereliction of their constitutional responsibility. The commission may also claim that after the publication of election results in the official gazette, they had no authority to do anything, which is also not true. Our courts in multiple judgments recognised that the commission has almost unlimited power, including “adding to the statutory rules,” for the sake of free and fair elections [45DLR(AD)(1993)]. Unfortunately, the EC does not seem to realise the importance of its position.

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CLIMATE CHANGE RESEARCH

Lots of research, not much communication

HASEEB MD IRFANULLAH

ON May 29, 2014, soon after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the second volume of its massive Fifth Assessment Report, an interesting article was written in *The Daily Star*.

In that piece, Saleemul Huq and Clare Stott showed that despite being one of the most vulnerable countries of the world, most of the research papers on climate change in Bangladesh mentioned in that IPCC report were written by scientists based in non-Bangladeshi institutions. This analysis could make one ask if Bangladesh was lagging behind others in climate change research. But the truth is, a good amount of research on climate change in Bangladesh was done by Bangladeshi institutions, but most were not communicated through widely-recognised channels called peer-reviewed journals.

Once a research paper is done by a research team, it is important that other scientists check it before the research gets published in an academic journal. Our fellow researchers or peers basically check if the research methods we used, the findings we presented, and the conclusion we drew maintained the scientific practices and standards or not—and if not, how to make them better. Such validation, known as peer-review process, is a vital step to make our research accepted widely. It also takes an academic discipline, like climate change, forward through collective effort—not only by us, the researchers, but also by our peers.

The widely-quoted IPCC reports are essentially written based on published, peer-reviewed journal papers on climate change. Bangladesh's unpublished climate change researches, therefore, could not find their place in those highly-reputed publications six years back.

There was indeed a need for capacity development of our scientists to communicate Bangladesh's climate change research so that the scientific world listened to them. To meet this gap, “Gobeshona Young Researcher Workshop” was initiated in 2015 by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh, with support from the USAID. Over the following three years, more than 60 researchers were trained. Mentoring helped the young Bangladeshi scientists to publish around 20 research papers on

Researchers can be the most appropriate communicators of their own research, both to their peers and to the wider society.

climate change in Bangladesh in peer-reviewed journals. This initiative has been a fantastic milestone in disseminating climate change research of Bangladesh by Bangladeshis.

On January 22, 2020, at the 6th Gobeshona Conference on climate change research in Dhaka, for the first time ever, awards were given to four best climate change research papers. These papers were selected from 15 submissions; all were original research papers on climate change in Bangladesh, published in peer-reviewed journals in 2018 and 2019, by Bangladeshi authors. These articles mostly covered the vulnerability of the country,

climate change impacts on the people, their livelihoods, agricultural systems, water security and health, and our responses. The Gobeshona best research paper award is a fantastic step forward to recognise Bangladesh's research on climate change.

In addition to academic institutions, NGOs like ActionAid, Oxfam, and Practical Action have also been undertaking as well as supporting research on climate change and resilience. And in recent years, some are also looking forward to getting their research published in peer-reviewed journals. The reason is quite straightforward: global recognition and increasing demand for peer-reviewed literature, as opposed to non-peer-reviewed documents, like project reports and policy briefs, that we call “grey literature”.

But let us admit, research papers published in peer-reviewed journals are not for everybody. It is not only because we often cannot read them without paying a good sum of money to the journal publishers. It is also because the language that research papers use is not the language of the ordinary people. Such linguistic isolation widens the gap between the researchers and the general population, fails to put research into context for the policymakers, and thus slows down, even stops, possible use of the research to get positive impacts out of it.

We, therefore, need to translate climate change research into common people's language. Scientists may argue that such translation is a responsibility of the science communicators or journalists, not theirs. But I would counter—researchers can be the most appropriate communicators of their own research, both to their peers and to the wider society. They just need to realise this much-needed role and learn to translate science for practitioners, policymakers,

thus for the masses in general, to ensure better use and impact of their research.

Besides the climate change researchers, the local communities, NGOs, and practitioners on the ground also hold a huge amount of valuable, useful climate change-related knowledge and experience. These cannot be always captured following rigorous scientific protocols and cannot find their way in peer-reviewed journals. This is the reality of the developing countries, and we must recognise that.

We now need to develop, test and promote a system that would complement research publications in peer-review journals. Here we will collect information from the ground using methods with acceptable rigour and standards, document it sufficiently, and then pass it through a quality-check. At the end of this process, such non-academically-captured grassroots knowledge and experiences could be shared and used as “evidence” for discussion, planning, and decision making. Gobeshona, a multi-stakeholder climate change platform of 50 national and international agencies facilitated by the ICCCAD, could lead by piloting and standardising such a process.

Bangladesh continues to show its amazing capacity, strength and leadership in facing climate change. It can also showcase how peer-reviewed journal articles, their non-technical commentaries for the masses, and knowledge gathered through non-academic processes could complement each other and provide evidence for climate change impacts and climate actions. In this way, Bangladesh could lead the way to re-define evidence in climate change discussions and actions.

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