

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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First EVM-only polls

Can the EC prove the sceptics wrong?

IT is now evident that concerns regarding the use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) raised by the opposition political parties and experts have fallen on deaf ears. The Election Commission (EC) is going ahead with its decision to hold its first major EVM-only polls. However, we don't think it's too late to remind the EC that these concerns should have been taken seriously and appropriate measures adopted to address people's anxieties.

To begin with, we cannot fathom what justification the EC has for doing away with the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), a printed receipt-like document which shows voters that their votes have been cast and for whom. In its absence, it is feared that the election officers can override EVMs, if a voter's biometrics does not match the database. What is most concerning is that the decision to exclude it was taken despite the reservations of Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury, who was the head of the Technical Committee formed by the EC itself. The logic provided by the EC for doing away with the paper trail was reportedly to avoid "technical difficulties in printing the receipts". Talk about a classic case of cutting off the head to get rid of a headache! While we acknowledge the technical difficulties faced by many voters during the parliamentary elections a year ago, we cannot help but wonder why the EC was so eager to make an all EVM-polls—spending a whopping Tk 4,000 crore even though there was no budgetary allocation for EVM purchases—if it could not figure out the simple function of printing out receipts.

Meanwhile, during the last parliamentary elections, the common complaint of voters in the six constituencies where EVMs were deployed was that their ballots were cast by someone else in their presence. What steps, if any, were taken by the EC to investigate these allegations in those particular polling centres? Equally urgent is the question: what steps, if any, is the EC going to take to ensure that such incidents do not occur in the upcoming polls?

All said and done, we hope the EC is fully cognizant of the risks it has taken by introducing the EVMs in such a hurried and undemocratic manner, without the consensus of all political parties and without taking into consideration public concerns. We urge the EC to dispel our skepticism by ensuring no untoward incident takes place on polls day.

Govt's move to allow Rohingya children formal education

A step in the right direction

THE government's move to allow Rohingya children living in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar to receive formal education is commendable. Reportedly, the government will soon launch a pilot programme to give formal education to more than 10,000 Rohingya children, the curriculum of which is being jointly designed by the Bangladesh government and UNICEF. According to foreign ministry sources, the refugee children will be schooled in Myanmar history and culture up to age 14, and will also receive skills training so they can find employment in the future.

More than half a million Rohingya children living in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar currently do not have access to formal education. While Bangladesh has shown great generosity in opening its borders and taking in so many refugees fleeing from genocide, it was disheartening to see that even in the camps, these children were being denied their right to education, especially since this was a right that was also denied to them in Myanmar.

According to Amnesty International, Rohingya children have faced severe difficulties in receiving official government education in Myanmar since 2012. After the 2017 military crackdown in Rakhine, the children who fled to Bangladesh facing genocidal violence in Myanmar only received primary education in temporary learning centres set up by UNICEF.

Needless to say, the Rohingya children stranded in the camps will be a lost generation if they grow up without access to formal education. They will be exposed to poverty and all forms of exploitation, including trafficking. There have been reports on how these children may get involved in many criminal activities, including drug smuggling. There are also chances of them being radicalised, or of severe negative impacts on their mental health, as experts fear. Only quality education in the appropriate language and with an accredited curriculum can empower them to claim their rights and contribute to the society and economy they live in.

We commend the government for making this positive commitment to the right to education of Rohingya children, despite the limited resources at their disposal. We also call upon the international community to help Bangladesh, since they have to play a key role here in ensuring that the Bangladesh government has the support required to provide education to such a large population. Without a coordinated and concentrated effort, it will not be possible to ensure that the children in the refugee camps do not lose their childhoods to a state of hopelessness and ignorance.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Justice for Tuba's mother

The Daily Star yesterday printed a heart-breaking article on little Tuba, who still wakes up in the middle of the night calling for her mother, who was beaten to death by a mob six months ago. It is inhumane that such an innocent child is now motherless because of the viciousness of complete strangers. What is even more worrying is that so much time has passed since then, and there is still no justice. How can we stop this occurring again if the people who commit such terrible crimes are not punished for them? The law enforcers need to step up their efforts immediately and hold the perpetrators to account. We cannot allow any more children to become motherless through such meaningless acts of violence again.

Tasneem, Shantinagar, Dhaka

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN
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NDC, PSC (RETD)

LIKE many of President Trump's actions in the last three years, the recently rolled out "Deal of the Century" is a farce. The so-called peace plan was crafted by the President's son-in-law over the last three years, drawn up without the participation of the only other stakeholder—the Palestinians. The provisions of Trump's Middle East plan are at best a travesty and comes as no surprise to either of the parties, nor to the rest of the world; and the timing of the announcement may not be entirely coincidental either.

President Trump has really lived up to Netanyahu's description of him as "the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House." Israel (and of course Netanyahu personally) owes Trump and his chief negotiator and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, "an eternal debt of gratitude," given that on the very day that the US President, himself under impeachment, was handing over virtually the state of Palestine to Israel, the Israeli PM was also indicted on charges of corruption.

US endorsement and support of Israeli policy reminds one of the early stages of colonialism when Pope Alexander IV divided the New World between Spain and Portugal through the papal bull *Inter Caetera* in 1493, which granted the two countries sovereignty over their overseas possessions, making them the colonies of these two nations. The difference is, we have Donald Trump instead of the Pope and the "Peace to Prosperity" plan instead of the papal bull, doing exactly what the Pope did—give lands to Israel that does not belong to it, much like the Pope who gave unto Spain and Portugal lands that did not belong to them.

How viable can any plan be without the participation of one of the main interlocutors? How relevant and feasible

The latest Trump plan is part of the process of fulfilling his avowed election policy relating to the Middle East, of validating the annexation by Israel of Arab and Palestinian territories, including recognition of the Golan Heights and shifting of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.



S. AMINUL ISLAM

THE honorable president of the country has been sounding the bell of alarm regarding the state of our higher education, with his recent comments at a convocation event on how "we do not want certificate-based higher education" and that teachers need to "play a more prompt, sincere and meaningful role in the acquisition, rearing, practice and distribution of knowledge." Both UNESCO and the World Development Report 2018 have issued a stronger warning signal. Higher education today is globally suffering from a quadruple crisis—low learning, fiscal crisis, "ethicide" or a lack of ethical concern, and the perils and promise of digital technology.

The world, reported UNESCO, is losing about USD 129 billion a year due to the poor quality of education—"The situation leaves one in four young people in poor countries unable to read a single sentence." The key element here is the low quality of teachers. It is, however, not the schooling system which is the driving force, as the World Development Report 2018 diagnosed, but a larger vicious circle. Universities in most developing countries, in general, produce low-quality graduates. These low-quality university graduates become poor school and college teachers and bring out other low quality school and college graduates. The trap snowballs, reproducing low-quality learning at every level.

The scenario is the same in Bangladesh. It is not that the University of Dhaka or other universities have not achieved progress. We have left far behind the situation of the late 1830s, when Scottish missionary William Adam in his Education Report for the East India Company observed that getting education for the children of Muslims was like "scaling the heavens". Many of our universities have access

TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST PEACE PLAN

A recipe for further conflict

is the plan contained in a 181-page document titled "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People"? It reads like an obituary to the very foundation of the solution—the two state solution. It is a plan drawn up secretly with Israel by a person unfit for the job and without a sense of history who sees the world in the prism of 2020; it was handed down to Palestine as fait accompli, offering the Palestinians a country without its sovereignty, its capacity to protect itself

policy relating to the Middle East, of validating the annexation by Israel of Arab and Palestinian territories, including recognition of the Golan Heights and shifting of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It conforms, too, with what Netanyahu had vowed when he first became PM. Annexation of occupied territories was the objective he never made a secret of; his position against Palestinian statehood was well known, and he went out of his way to manufacture lies about Iran's nuclear

country and give it to another?

What the US has actually done is wrap the long term Israeli plan inside a glossy looking peace plan, which engenders no prospect of peace but accentuates the possibility of further violence in the region. Do the Palestinians have any other option than to reject it out of hand, which they had done well before it was formally announced by Trump on January 28? The purpose, regrettably, is not peace but to push the Palestinians up against the wall, compel them to reject it and then paint



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Donald Trump take part in an announcement of Trump's Middle East peace plan at the White House in Washington, D.C. on Jan. 28, 2020.

PHOTO: MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

totally curbed and its security outsourced to Israel, since it wouldn't be allowed to have its own army or air force.

According to the Foreign Policy, the plan demands very little of Israel while allowing it to annex strategic occupied land in the West Bank. What the US has done through this plan, more damagingly though, is to renege on its own longstanding policy that any final solution of the problem will be based on the borders between the two states of 1967, predating the illegal annexation of Arab lands following the 1973 Arab Israeli war.

The latest Trump plan is part of the process of fulfilling his avowed election

capability after Trump came to office. It was not difficult to convince a US president whose mind on the issue was already made up, to cancel the deal.

So how much progress or peace will it bring for Israel and Palestine? Particularly a deal drawn up by a country who, by reformulating its policies and repositioning its stance on the Palestine issue, has lost all credentials as an honest broker? By validating Israeli annexation, the US has become a party to the conflict. Thus, can it ink a plan that essentially violates not one but dozens of UN resolutions on Palestine? Can it carve up territories and land belonging to one

them as rejectionists.

The world must read between the lines of this document. What it aims to do is reduce the Palestinians to a vassal of Israel, imprisoned by their obligations to Israel for security. The treaty has trodden on the sentiments of the Palestinians and reduced them into a political nonentity. The plan endorses illegal occupation, the deprivation of rights of a people to their own land and the right of refugees to return to it. No wonder the plan, as one commentator described it, is DOA—Dead on Arrival.

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The diploma disease of higher education

to e-resources. There are dozens of PhDs in every department of the major universities. We have a host of brilliant young scholars and a few islands of excellence. We now produce graduates by thousands and the long list of universities in the country was beyond our imagination even a few decades ago.

Yet our education system is locked into a spiral. The trap can be best described by borrowing a phrase from Ronald Dore, an eminent sociologist specialising in education, who has described it as "diploma disease". All our efforts today are directed towards getting diplomas—the higher, the better. This trap has its roots in a pre-colonial

in power without taming student politics. It entails strong government involvement in the university administration and student politics, which tends to distort the incentive structure of higher education. Political loyalty becomes more important than the pursuit of knowledge.

A brilliant student finds it difficult to get a job at a university without a political patron and a young academic soon discovers that students do not want to learn, that his peer group does not care for his academic performance, and that he has few friends unless he joins a "colour" (i.e. a political group in public universities) or adapts to the market-driven approach at private universities. Teachers with PhDs become professors

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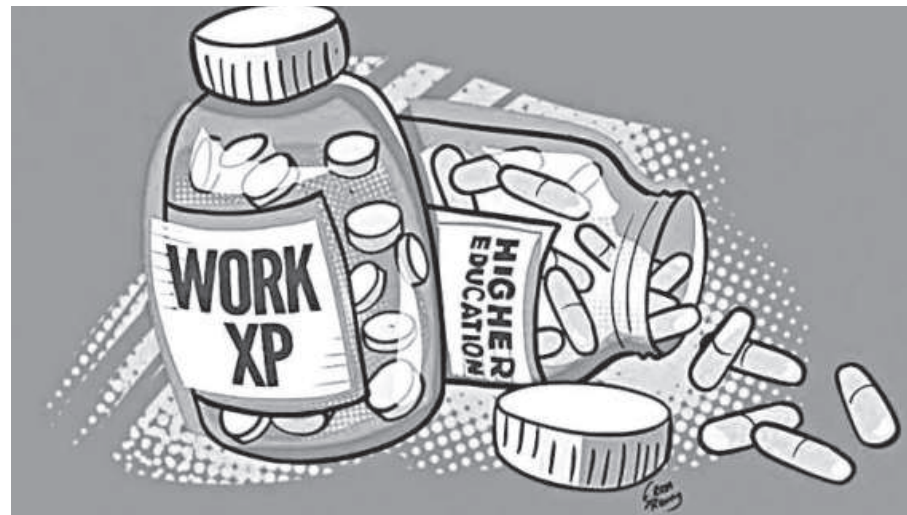


ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

tradition that banked on mimesis and the colonial policy of education that took as its mission the production of clerks or at best "mimic men" as envisioned by Lord Macaulay (who famously replaced Sanskrit and Arabic, which he considered inferior languages, with English in colonial India), and has found its finest portrayal in Naipaul's novel "The Mimic Men" (1967). The post-colonial reality has been marked by what anthropologists Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph called the rise of the students as a "demand class". In Bangladesh, it is nearly impossible for a political regime to stay

within a decade of their career and in the absence of research funding or a good university library, they have nothing to do. Campus politics is the only route for upward mobility—to become a vice chancellor or win prestigious jobs in government bodies. So it is best to take the "exit" option, and those who remain only reproduce what they learnt at their foreign universities. All this results in the reproduction of knowledge dated by decades or even a century. Universities produce and reproduce dogmas and diplomas, not knowledge. We have no effective and

comprehensive national policy for ensuring quality in higher education. Although sporadic initiatives are being adopted, the crisis is so deep and multi-layered that only donor support or fragmented interventions are not going to solve it. What we need is a paradigm change in our higher education policy. As the University of Dhaka enters the second century, we must think hard and envision an integrated and pragmatic policy.

The first Industrial Revolution produced the landscape of poverty in Bengal—a land which was the sink of all the gold and silver of Europe. Starting from Latin America, this landscape of misery spread to most of Asia and Africa in the wake of technological breakthroughs in Europe. The fourth Industrial Revolution is certain to explode soon onto the very fabric of our society as artificial intelligence takes over the load of common jobs, leaving behind a vast, idle reserve of low-skilled university and college graduates. It is destined to produce another angry and violent landscape of relative poverty, not only in Bangladesh, but also over a large part of the Global South. We need to act and act fast if we want to cross the digital divide and prolong our fast pace of growth within the emerging global knowledge economy.

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