



FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 7, 2020, MAGH 24, 1426 BS

Attacks on journalists covering polls

EC cannot evade responsibility for failure to protect them

WE are alarmed by the lack of action to check and investigate the spate of attacks on journalists covering the elections in Dhaka city corporations allegedly by individuals linked to the ruling party. Official response to these attacks—as well as those on the opposition activists and supporters—has so far been muted or inadequate at best, as neither the Election Commission nor Dhaka Metropolitan Police authorities have properly addressed the issue yet. At least 15 journalists were beaten, threatened, denied access to polling stations, or had equipment broken or taken while covering the elections on February 1, according to a statement by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPI), citing local reports. Attacks on journalists continue to be a running theme for the election even as its results—however questionable—were announced. According to a report by Prothom Alo, two more journalists came under attack on Monday after they went to Badda to inquire into allegations of post-election violence by the supporters of a newly elected AL ward councillor on their opponents. This is a worrisome development as it shows how lack of action and even acknowledgement by the responsible authorities can embolden the culprits and continue to put journalists in harm’s way.

The question that comes to mind is: why were journalists attacked and driven away if, as the EC claims, the elections were free, fair and peaceful? The EC’s failure to acknowledge such incidents, let alone take any action to prevent them, is but an example of its deeply partisan character and its inability to function as a constitutional body. Such response belies the fact that attacks on journalists covering elections in Bangladesh are getting increasingly common. We have seen this too many times. We have seen this during the last national election. Or during local elections in different parts of the country. And as common as the attacks have been the dodgy responses, or lack thereof, by the authorities. “Of all the attacks on journalists in the near and far past, none have been tried yet,” according to a spokesperson of the rights group Article 19, which has expressed grave concerns over the attacks on journalists during Dhaka city polls.

Although the government has reiterated its commitment to the freedom of the media and protection of journalists, the reality is, as far as election violence is concerned, no substantive action has been taken to fulfil that commitment. We urge the government, particularly the EC, to investigate and bring to account all the perpetrators of violence against the journalists covering the February 1 polls or the past elections. Any threat to journalists’ freedom to work freely and without fear or intimidation is a threat to democracy, and any government that derives its legitimacy from a democratic exercise should respect that freedom for its own good.

Foreign nationals are working here but not paying taxes

Government loses USD 3.1 billion a year in tax revenue!

IT is a disturbing fact that due to tax evasion by foreigners working in Bangladesh, our government is being deprived of USD 1.35 billion in revenue every year. A report by Transparency International reveals that about 1.6 lakh foreign nationals entered Bangladesh on tourist visas and then became gainfully employed in various sectors such as garment and textile mills, real estate, power plants, multinational companies, telecom companies, hospitals, hotels and restaurants. While it is true that most of these foreign nationals get jobs because of their strong communication and management skills which are in high demand in these sectors, we do not understand why they should not go through legal channels of employment. More importantly, how have such irregularities gone on without being detected by the authorities?

The study has found that government organisations that are supposed to be ensuring that the laws and regulations are followed have failed to do so. This has resulted in continuous tax evasion with salaries of legal foreign workers shown as less in the official documents than what is actually paid. Moreover, one third of the salary of foreign nationals working legally are paid into bank accounts with the rest being given in cash. If TIB could find out such details of these irregularities, why couldn’t government officials do the same and take necessary action?

We urge the government to pay heed to the recommendations given by TIB, such as initiating a one stop service system to provide the necessary services related to recruitment and stay of foreign nationals and getting the necessary information regarding foreign workers in various offices and factories for their own records. This will ensure due process of recruitment by employers and also reduce the possibility of tax evasion which deprives the government of a huge amount of revenue.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Where’s our democracy?

The election has become nothing but a race between the ruling party and the opposition, as they only intend to defeat each other at any cost; even if it means depriving people of their voting rights. Consequently, the public is being torpid and apathetic towards elections. The number of voters have decreased after the national election due to allegations of rigging. To counter this, the election commission has provided EVM in the city polls. But even then people continue to show indifference, and the inaccuracy in voting continues to prevail. Snatching away people’s rights sound more like autocracy than democracy.

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NAZNIN TITHI

the piled up garbage here and there, the open manholes spreading obnoxious smells, and the nonchalant vendors selling vegetables (and even fish) taking up half the space of the road.

Although the city corporation’s cleaners are supposed to sweep the road every morning, by 10:30am, when I step out, I find the road extremely dirty. While vegetable sellers dump all kinds of kitchen waste straight onto the road, pedestrians indiscriminately throw away water bottles and plastic packets wherever they wish. Sadly, I have never found a single dustbin on this road.

Household waste is also dumped on the road. Often the waste collectors who are supposed to collect waste from every house of the area, do not come to collect them. Sometimes they remain absent three/four days in a row. The situation gets worse when all kinds of waste are dumped straight into the open manholes, resulting in clogged drains with dirty water spilling all over the road.

Amid such squalor, I abandon my plan to walk and take a rickshaw instead. As I look at the only canal in the neighbourhood from the rickshaw, all I can see are polythene bags and plastic bottles floating on the black water. And piled up garbage on both banks of the canal. While with minimal maintenance the canal could have been a blessing for the area (it could help reduce waterlogging in the area during the rainy season), in reality, it has been used like an open dustbin, emitting a bad odour all the time and polluting the air. It has also been a major breeding ground of mosquitoes throughout the year.

Days before the city corporation elections, which were held on February 1, when the mayoral candidates unveiled their election manifestos, I was rather surprised to see the ambitious promises they have made to the *Dhakabashis*. Turning Dhaka into an “intelligent city” or a “tourist hotspot” made absolutely no sense to residents like me, because the problems for us are very basic and do not require a lot of ruminating.

Dhaka is literally drowning in a sea of problems which have made it the world’s worst city in livability ranking. The most pressing problems of the city include: lack of a proper waste management system, air pollution, mosquito menace, waterlogging, traffic congestions, and safety of women, to name a few.

Improving Dhaka’s liveability

Let’s start with the basics

According to a recent study, Dhaka’s air quality is the worst in the world and the city is also one of the worst in terms of ensuring women’s safety.

Living in a neglected ward in northern Dhaka, I feel that the basic problems in my neighborhood are mosquito menace, management of household waste, waterlogging during monsoon, and of course, the polluted air from uncontrolled construction work. What I understand is that this is true for most of the wards under Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). But since the city corporations only have the legal authority to improve the city’s garbage disposal system and control mosquitoes, and since solving all the other issues will need assistance and coordination from the over four dozen government agencies concerned, the newly elected mayors should start their work in these two areas.

Developing a proper garbage disposal system is crucial for Dhaka’s survival, the absence of which has not only made the whole city a garbage dumping ground, but has also contributed to the city’s

drains, canals and water bodies. The daily Prothom Alo ran a report on October 13, 2019 on how the local leaders and activists of the ruling party have been running a big business centring waste collection while the city corporations literally have no control over the city’s waste collection system. Although according to the city corporation rules, workers of the city corporations are supposed to collect the household waste, at present, the work is done by the over three hundred organisations known as primary waste collection service providers (PWCSPP). Although these organisations are registered with the city corporations, the latter do not have any mechanism to oversee their work.

And reportedly, DNCC and DSCC have collected over Tk 150 crore as tax from the residents for keeping the city clean in the fiscal year 2018-19. Sadly, the city dwellers did not get the service they deserved.

The other issue that needs both the city corporations’ immediate attention is containing the mosquito menace. With the dengue peak season only a few months away, the city corporations,

With the dengue peak season only a few months away, the city corporations, in fact, do not have much time for preparation. If effective measures are not taken now to destroy the breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitoes, the dengue outbreak could be more severe this year.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

waterlogging problems and mosquito menace. Reportedly, around 6,250 tonnes of garbage are produced in both city corporations every day. Unfortunately, our city corporations do not have the capacity to collect a major portion of this waste, which eventually goes into the open

in fact, do not have much time for preparation. If effective measures are not taken now to destroy the breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitoes, the dengue outbreak could be more severe this year. According to government statistics, more than one lakh dengue patients had been

On Ekushey and its global legacy

MOHAMMAD ZAMAN and MOHAMMAD AMINUL ISLAM

THE month of February is a prized and sacred one for Bengalis. It reminds us of the sacrifices made for our beloved Bangla language and the rewards it ultimately brought in for Bengalis as a nation. *Ekushey* now has a global significance, too, with the declaration made in 1999 by UNESCO

source of inspiration worldwide. The initiative to recognise February 21 as International Mother Language Day was taken by late freedom fighter Rafiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi-Canadian from Delta, British Columbia, along with Abdus Salam, another Bangladeshi-Canadian based in Burnaby. The move was taken in 1998 through the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS), which consisted at the time of



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

which recognised the date as International Mother Language Day. Today, we celebrate February 21 to enhance awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions all over the world, to protect and promote linguistic diversity through multilingual education. Thus, *Ekushey* has become a point of great pride for Bengalis and a

10 members representing seven different mother languages—Bangla, Cantonese, English, German, Kutchi, Hindi, and Tagalog. For almost two years, Rafiq and Salam worked tirelessly with UNESCO to bring about a declaration that would immortalise the language martyrs of 1952 in East Pakistan—what we now know as

Bangladesh.

The proposal went through various stages with support from the governments of Canada, Bangladesh, and other countries. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina strongly advocated for the case to UNESCO and mobilised support from friendly countries. Finally, on November 17, 1999, UNESCO adopted a resolution at its 30th General Conference declaring *Ekushey*—February 21—as International Mother Language Day. All 198 countries in attendance supported the UNESCO resolution, and agreed unanimously to recognise the occasion to promote multiculturalism and linguistic and cultural diversity.

The UNESCO resolution recognised the great sacrifices made by Bengalis during the 1952 Language Movement, when several students of the University of Dhaka demonstrating for the recognition of Bangla as one of the two national languages of newly independent Pakistan were shot dead by the police. The declaration further honoured the people around the world who speak about 7,000 distinct mother tongues in some 188 countries.

Unfortunately, many native and indigenous languages, including some in Bangladesh, are now under threat of extinction by more dominant languages. According to one source, one language dies every 14 days; as a result, by the year 2,100, nearly half of these 7,000 languages will most likely have disappeared. The worldwide celebrations of International Mother Language Day have increased awareness of the need to save native languages, and the value of multilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity. February 21 has thus created a global family of people committed to speaking in their mother tongues; it is a community for the protection and conservation of all mother languages.

Language isn’t just a means of communication. It is also the most powerful tool for preserving and developing one’s culture and heritage. Education in the native language, particularly in a multicultural and multilingual context, provides a sense of inclusion. It also fosters intercultural understanding and helps build global citizenship. Besides that, International Mother Language Day perpetuates the

awareness that adults—both men and women—should achieve literacy and numeracy, which supports the current UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4.6). Therefore, linguistic and cultural diversity are our best chances for a better future, through creativity, innovations, and inclusion.

International Mother Language Day was celebrated for the first time on February 21, 2000 and was inaugurated by a ceremony held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris with Rafiqul Islam as an invited guest. Since that year, the day is celebrated globally every year by member countries under the leadership of UNESCO as well as by many social and linguistic communities and groups around the world. Many mother language monuments have been built—inspired by the Shaheed Minar (Language Martyr’s monument) in Dhaka—in countries such as Canada, Australia, Japan, USA, UK, Italy, Denmark, and Norway. In 2001, the Government of Bangladesh, in recognition of its leadership, efforts, and contributions, awarded the MLLWS the *Ekushey Padak*. In 2016, the government awarded the Swadhinota Padak, the highest civilian award, to Rafiqul Islam (posthumously) and to Abdus Salam.

The year 2020 marks 20 years of International Mother Language Day. The date of February 21 has assumed new dimensions both at home and in the international arena. For Bengalis, it has created an identity that is now global. *Ekushey* is viewed as the source of independence and secularism that can inspire future generations to come. The Shaheed Minar at the Dhaka University campus and the annual celebration of February 21 all over Bangladesh is a clear demonstration of this national sentiment. With a total of nearly 250 million speakers, Bangla is the sixth most spoken language in the world today, and International Mother Language Day exists as a symbol of linguistic rights and identity—a gift from Bengalis to the world.

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