Higher development, fewer voters: fantasy or reality?

GOLAM MORTOZA

BANGLADESH'S economy is doing well; in fact, it is doing so well that economic growth keeps increasing, and with it increases our per capita income. However, in the middle of all this "good", the world's greatest Finance Minister, A H M Mustafa Kamal said, "The country's economy is not doing so well."

What could have happened that suddenly turned good into "not so good"?

Even a year ago, the elections were a cause of celebration for people. The excitement was so much that even the deceased came forward to vote! A local of Bogura, now residing in Malaysia, was able to vote without having to return to the country, even in the absence of postal or online voting. Alongside 100 percent turnout, the fact that there were more votes than voters on the list was also noticeable.

However, the same celebratory mood was not seen during the City Corporation elections of February 1. Very few voters came to cast their votes, but this wasn't the first time the elections saw a low number of voters. People didn't go to vote in the municipal elections; at the time, it was said that this was due to BNP's refusal to participate—the lack of competition led to low voter turnout. But with BNP's participation during this year's city polls, there is no opportunity to try and use this same logic. Nevertheless, the excuses have not stopped.

"Those who didn't come to vote, a majority of them spent their time relaxing, sitting at home, eating *pulao*," said Minister of Planning, M A Mannan, on the day of the elections at Habiganj Circuit House. On the issue of low voters, the Secretary of the Election Commission (EC) said that voters were busy with Facebook given the three-day holiday. Awami League's Joint General Secretary, Mahbubul Alam Hanif, said that this was the best election in the last 100 years.

With regard to low voter turnout, Obaidul Quader first said that this is an ominous sign for democracy; but after that, the General Secretary of Awami League (AL) asked, how many people vote in developed countries? An example of democracy is the United States of America. What percentage of the population vote there? Has democracy been destroyed in these countries?

Dhaka North City Corporation's winner for AL, Mayor Atiqul Islam said, "The country is moving forward, and low voter turnout is an indicator of the country's progress." Many of AL's leaders, supporters and analysts have repeated the same thing.

There is a general understanding that people in developed countries do not vote; hence there is low voter turnout. The main reason for this is assumed to be that the people of developed countries lead stable and secure lives, and therefore are not bothered about elections. Which party has come into power, who is their MP or their Mayor—they are not interested in keeping track of this news.

These assumptions aren't entirely untrue; in the US, voter turnout was seen to be around 20-25 percent during the mayoral elections of some of their biggest cities. The question is, is low voter turnout a universal thing? What is the voting situation in other developed countries in the world?

Japan is Asia's—and one of the world's—most developed country. During the mayoral elections of Japan's capital city, Tokyo, there was a voter turnout of 46.14 percent. In another developed country in Asia, South Korea, the 2018 mayoral candidate held in Seoul had 59.59 percent voter turnout.

Let's take a look at the 2016 city elections of four cities in England. In London, voter turnout was 45.3 percent, Bristol 24 percent, Liverpool 30.9 percent, and Mansfield 57.9 percent. In one of Europe's most developed countries, Germany, the 2016 city elections in Berlin and Munich saw voter turnout of 66.7 percent and 44.01 percent respectively. In Rome's 2016 city polls, voter turnout was 50.01 percent. On February 8, Delhi's assembly elections received votes of 62.05 percent.

In America's 2016 presidential elections, voter turnout was 55.7 percent. Another developed country in North America is Canada, where during the 2019 national elections, 65.95 percent of the population voted. In Germany and France's national elections of 2017, voter turnout was 76.02 percent and 67.93 percent respectively. Norway's national elections for the year 2017 had votes of 70.59 percent. In Switzerland's 2019 national elections, it was 46.58 percent. In England's 2019 national elections, there was 67.30 voter turnout, and Japan's 2017 national elections had 53.68 percent of voters.

Consequently, Bangladesh had low voter turnout in the city polls because it is developing or already developed—can this really be a logical conclusion to reach? Bangladesh's per capita income is USD 40,000-50,000 less than the developed countries whose voter turnout statistics are mentioned here. People with a per capita income of USD 50,000 turn up to vote, but Bangladesh's people, with a per capita income of USD 2000, do not bother to visit the voting centres!

Being too "developed" is not the reason behind Dhaka's people not voting—there really is no need to try and justify this argument. Those who have stated reasons such as three-day holidays, staying at home and feasting, or being occupied with Facebook, also know this to not be true. Putting forward such excuses is possible only when you are trying to hide the real reasons.

The Election Commission barred the use of public transportation on election day, and motorcycles and personal cars were not allowed either. Someone who is a voter in Mohammadpur may have shifted homes and moved to Uttara. How is he going to travel to Mohammadpur to cast his vote? The EC may have not taken the issue into consideration; or perhaps they took this decision so that people are unable to vote. From the very beginning, the EC has been accused of discouraging voters instead of encouraging them.

Casting votes using Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) will reduce the prospects of voting at night or other forms of manipulation and rigging—this promise from the EC did not restore people's trust in them. The EVM and all such devices are managed by people, but people are not managed by devices. People's doubts weren't towards the EVM; rather their doubts and lack of trust was towards the EC. The Chief Election Commissioner stated that EVM results cannot be changed or tampered with. The machine will work the way it has been programmed; and whoever is responsible for the EVM can change those programmes. In the era of technology, everyone is more or less aware of this.

Lack of faith and trust in the EC has led people to lose interest in voting. If the voting was done through the election ballot and not EVMs, that does not mean that people's faith in the EC would have been restored. During the 2018 national elections, people observed the activities of the EC and voters did not find any consistency between the current situation and the Election Commission's stance and point of view. They have reached the conclusion that their votes do not carry any importance.

Prior to the elections, AL leaders suddenly accused BNP of bringing in terrorists from all over the country to Dhaka, and that they were trying to capture the voting centres. In response to AL's accusations, BNP leaders claimed that it was actually AL who was responsible for bringing in terrorists. Taking advantage of the two parties' accusations against each other, law enforcement authorities insisted that no one should go out without proper identification, and "outsiders" will have to leave the city.

Why will the people of Bangladesh be considered "outsiders" in the capital of their own country? Why was having "identification" enforced? A sense of fear was spread on the day before the elections. This is also one of the reasons for low voter turnout. Such decisions from the law enforcers, who are supposed to be under the mandate of the EC, was met with silence from the EC. In that case, was it the EC who gave the law enforcement officials these directions?

Bringing back voters' trust and faith is the EC's and the government's responsibility. But it seems like no one is focusing on that. Instead, civil society has been blamed for depoliticisation, and reducing involvement in the political process. But civil society did not discourage voters from voting. BNP has been accused of not being able to bring voters to the polls. In this election, the combined efforts of both AL and BNP could not bring people into the voting centres. How removed have Bangladeshi politicians become from the public? Will this realisation ever dawn on them?
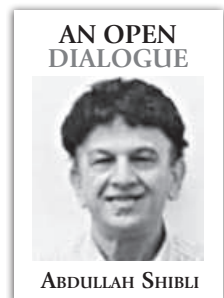
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Golam Mortoza is a journalist.
The article was translated from Bangla by the Editorial desk.

A deserted polling centre at Sir Salimullah Medical College, Dhaka.

PHOTO: **AMRAN HOSSAIN**

UGC must act to stop any new dissertation scandals

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

A recent news item caught my attention— "High Court directs the University Grants Commission (UGC) to submit a report on PhD approval process". It was reported that following a writ petition filed by Supreme Court lawyer Advocate Mohammed Moniruzzaman, the High Court of Bangladesh wanted to know whether public and private universities are conferring PhD and equivalent degrees to students following the rules and regulations of the University Grants Commission.

It is alleged that an associate professor of the department of Pharmaceutical Technology of the University of Dhaka was conferred a PhD degree on the basis of a dissertation that was highly plagiarised. According to a report published in Prothom Alo's online version, 98 percent of the thesis of the faculty member was taken from a paper authored by another researcher.

Unfortunately, this is a practice that is common in our country, since most people are unaware of what really constitutes as plagiarism. The word derives from the Latin plagium which means "kidnapping", and is worldwide considered to be the equivalent of cheating on an exam. It happens when you quote or paraphrase the writings of others, while leading the reader to believe that you are the sole author of the text. According to Columbia University's graduate school handbook, "Plagiarism includes buying, stealing, borrowing, or otherwise obtaining all or part of a paper (including obtaining or posting a paper online); hiring someone to write a paper; copying from or paraphrasing another source without proper citation or falsification of citations; and building on the ideas of another without citation." Students are also forbidden from submitting the same paper to more than one class.

Plagiarism is a form of corruption perpetrated by two parties, the student and the university. Academic institutions throughout the world have been tackling this issue for many years, and the problem has taken a new turn with the proliferation of the World Wide Web. Many developing countries have taken measures to check the veracity of data and authenticity of research in order to meet the challenges posed by the availability of research papers online and the proliferation of vendors who are also known as "essay mills", who sell term papers and dissertations. An academic dean of an online university commented that the number one enemy of academic integrity regarding doctoral writing is the abundance of fraud-selling websites.

During my own graduate studies in the USA, writing the dissertation was truly a labour of love. My dissertation was subsequently published as a book by the University Press of America. In the US, the practice is to require a PhD candidate to follow the hard and fast rules set by the university. First, one must finish the required coursework and take the "comprehensive" examination. Second, after passing the comprehensive, the candidate, known as ABD (all but dissertation), submits a proposal for the thesis and works under the guidance and supervision of the thesis advisor(s). Third, the candidate then submits the dissertation for review by a committee and on approval, defends the work in a seminar where the department invites faculty, graduate students, and other researchers. During the defence, the dissertation is subjected to intense scrutiny and the candidate has to explain the research methods used and also answer questions about the research findings.

At Boston University, where I was enrolled, we were constantly reminded of the primacy of academic honesty. My professors repeatedly emphasised the importance of academic integrity and frequently discussed various forms of dishonesty. The following paragraph, taken from one of our "Academic Bibles", was read to us:

"Academic integrity concerns honest research practices as much as avoiding plagiarism. Research misconduct falls into three categories: plagiarism, falsification, and fabrication. Falsification includes purposeful manipulation, modification, or omission of data or results. Fabrication is the making up of data or results and the recording or reporting thereof." We knew that we could quote from another source as long as we acknowledged and properly cited the other work. Having a professional to write for you was also forbidden.

Plagiarism is a serious, yet widespread type of research misconduct, and is often neglected in developing countries. As can be gathered from an opinion piece written three years ago in *The Daily Star* by fellow columnist Fahmida Khatun, plagiarism is poorly acknowledged and discussed in our academic world. She wrote: "There is a new group of eager learners who avail the opportunity to get doctorate degrees from various sources and means. There are several doctorate degree holders in the country now who have obtained their degrees through sub-standard, non-accredited western universities operating illegally."

So what is the solution to this problem? First and foremost, the UGC needs to outline its policy on plagiarism, clearly establish the consequences, and enforce its "academic honesty policy". Secondly, all senior faculty must be given the proper resources, and trained to detect plagiarism using "text-matching software".
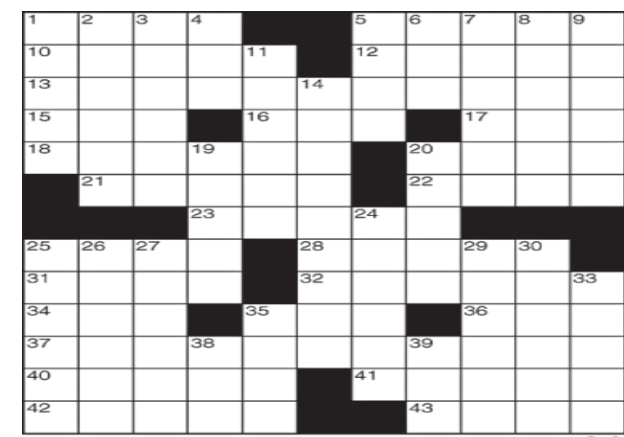
Thirdly, all our universities should develop codes of conduct and other internal policies and procedures that clearly describe areas of academic misconduct and possible consequences of violations, such as a reduced grade, a classification of the thesis as "inadequate" or other disciplinary actions, with the highest punishment as removal from the university.

Finally, all PhD candidates must be constantly reminded during their graduate work and research that paraphrasing, or "putting the ideas and theories of another into one's own words, or rearrangement of phrases or inserting synonyms of the original author's words does not allow one to avoid committing plagiarism." They must be trained by a professional to acknowledge the source of paraphrased or quoted material each and every time. They should also practice how to make careful documentations of the sources used and "review the final manuscript to ensure each quote or paraphrase received proper acknowledgement through the prescribed writing format (in-text citations, footnotes, reference page entries, etc.)". It is only through such comprehensive and meticulous interventions that we can even begin to deal with the scourge of plagiarism in our tertiary education institutions.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 "Sesame Street" regular
5 Danger
10 "The Waste Land" poet
12 Kitchen come-on
13 Raised number
15 Harris and Asner
16 Ump's call
17 Rent out
18 Join forces
20 Thinker Descartes
21 Steal
22 Casino figure
23 Compassion
25 Stare in disbelief
28 Urges on
31 Historic times
32 Bays
34 Huck's pal
35 Sleeve filler
36 Zodiac animal
37 Of the highest quality
40 Grammar topic
41 Writer's work
42 Mexican money
43 Nuisance

DOWN
1 Trouble
2 Dodges
3 Woodcutting too
4 Sock part
5 Treaty
6 Make mistakes
7 Muddied up
8 Be about to happen
9 Coffee bar orders
11 Acting company
14 Kara Danvers's secret identity
19 Silent performers
20 Fit for a king
24 Swindler
25 Rises
26 Awaken
27 Grassy plains
29 Infer
30 Barrel pieces
33 Refine ore
35 God of war
38 Sense of self
39 Summit

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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