

Can the polling system be saved?

The EC must be allowed to act neutrally

At a day-long discussion in the city on Saturday, political analysts, former bureaucrats and good governance campaigners were all in agreement that the country's democratic system would collapse without a free and fair polls system.

The blatantly low voter turnout at this February's mayoral elections has sent a sobering message to the country, in particular to those governing it. It reflected the apathy and lack of faith in the Election Commission (EC) and the entire electoral system. This disinclination to exercise one of the fundamental rights of a citizen belonging to a democracy has not come about in a day. It is based on the bitter experience of previous elections during which the Election Commission failed to hold elections without allegations of vote rigging, voter and opposition party intimidation, violence and other ploys that completely marred the electoral atmosphere.

It is a tragedy for the voters that despite all the pre-election assurances by the EC regarding the steps it would take to make sure that the mayoral elections would be held in a free and fair manner by taking action in the case of irregularities, in reality, all the fears voters had regarding the polls seem to come true. There were reports of opposition polling agents being driven away from the centres, "helpers" casting votes for the voters, lack of privacy while voting in the booths, fingerprints not matching with those on the databases and vicious attacks on journalists for trying to cover the polls. Thus, many voters who did vote were not very happy with the experience while others didn't bother to come at all because of experiences in previous elections. Logically, this is most likely to result in even fewer voters turning up for the next elections.

The Election Commission can no longer bury its head in the sand and pretend everything is in order after letting the voters down so miserably. More importantly, the powers that be must recognise that having such a low voter turnout and the reasons behind it cannot be allowed to go on in future elections. It is about time that the Election Commission is allowed to act neutrally by addressing all kinds of irregularities before and during the polls and for the government to make sure that a conducive, intimidation-free atmosphere exists for voters in general, for opposition party candidates and their supporters, as well as for the media. Only then can we expect more voters to turn up at the polling centres. Only then can we say that we are in the right direction in upholding the spirit of democracy and of our Liberation War.

Dredging of Karnaphuli hampered by polythene!

Strictly enforce the ban on plastics

PLASTIC pollution in our rivers has reached such an alarming level that it has now become difficult for the authorities to even dredge the rivers because of these non-biodegradable wastes. We are stunned to learn from a report by The Daily Star on February 16 that the dredging work in the Karnaphuli river has slowed down because of a deep layer of polythene in the riverbed. Reportedly, the Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) had started a dredging project at a cost of BDT 258 crore in 2018 to restore the navigability of the Karnaphuli, but they found it difficult to continue the dredging because the cutter blades of the dredgers were getting jammed with polythene. Also, a survey conducted by BUET researchers has found that the riverbed has a layer of polythene and plastic waste stretching from two to seven metres.

Karnaphuli has become the worst victim of the polythene menace, since the polythene bags dumped in the 37 canals of Chattogram eventually end up in the river. What it means is that even if the dredging work of the river is done properly, the river will not get back its flow because of the continuous stream of polythene into the river. The only way Karnaphuli can be saved is by making sure that no polythene and plastic wastes are dumped in the city's canals.

While the authorities should continue with the dredging work, they must also coordinate with the city authorities to clean up all the canals. The clogged-up canals are the main reason for the city's waterlogging problem during monsoon. We hope that the Chattogram Development Authority and the Chattogram City Corporation will come to an understanding about cleaning the canals.

As for fighting the plastic menace across the country, the authorities concerned should follow the High Court directives, according to which the government must strictly enforce the ban on polythene or throwaway plastic bags through regular market monitoring and closure of polythene manufacturing factories. Only through complying with rules and regulations, and by raising awareness among people about the detrimental impact of polythene on our environment, can we stop plastic pollution and save our rivers.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Uniform admission tests are not a good idea

Our Education Ministry fails to understand that implementing uniform admission tests for public universities will be chaotic and full of complexities. Firstly, the idea of short creative questions may enhance the duration of receiving the results. Secondly, deterioration of standards for setting questions is a big problem. I am certain these questions will be average, since the UGC intends to help every student pass. Renowned public universities like University of Dhaka and BUET will lose their question standards. Moreover, forgery, corruption, and inaccuracy in exam papers will increase. The intention behind the initiative is good but its results will be ominous.

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A tale of two cities

What voter turnouts tells us about the state of democracy

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

ACTIVIST-turned-politician Arjun Kejriwal has had smooth sailing at the recently held Delhi legislative polls, with his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) being handed a strong mandate by the Delhiwalas, winning a sweeping 62 out of 70 seats. This is his third straight term in office.

Despite the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) landslide success in the 2019 national elections and Amit Shah's vitriolic campaign for the Legislative Assembly polls promoting the Modi's government's agenda of Hindu nationalism—which has raised important questions about the pluralistic democratic tradition of India—it was Kejriwal who emerged victorious in the February 8 polls. An overwhelming 61 percent of Delhi's 14.7 million eligible voters cast their ballots in the election.

The Delhi polls' voter turnout has been in complete contrast to the number of voters who showed up to cast their ballot in the Dhaka mayoral elections that was held on February 01, 2020. A mere 25.30 percent voters turned up in the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) polls, while a slightly higher proportion of voters—29 percent—showed up in the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) elections.

DNCC saw the re-election of Mayor Atiqul Islam with only 14.84 percent of the total voters, while Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh managed to get elected with the support of 17.30 percent of the voters. While the figures look bleak and have been blamed on the lack of Dhaka voters' interest in elections, in view of the significant voter participation in Delhi's legislative assembly polls—despite the political and social turmoil that India, especially Delhi, has been plunged into because of BJP's divisive policies,

Some might argue that AAP's success in Delhi was possible because the Indian capital is one of the more well-off urban centres where tax collection is among the highest in India. But so is Dhaka.

including the NRC and CAA—this apathy of voters towards elections in Dhaka deserve introspection.

For one, the voters in Delhi had something to vote for. Kejriwal, in his last two terms in office, had been very active in addressing the basic needs of the people of Delhi: electricity, water, and sanitation. "AAP government has delivered on certain segments such as providing subsidised electricity and water, improving the condition of government schools and health clinics," said Rahul Verma, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, regarding the popularity of Kejriwal's AAP. Ever since Kejriwal came

running of affordable neighbourhood clinics in Delhi have also hit a resonant chord with the people. After his election victory, Kejriwal said, "It's not just my win. This is a win for every family whose children are now getting good education in schools, whose family members are getting good treatment in hospitals."

In comparison, if we ask what the people of Dhaka had to vote for, the answer would be simple: inaction, lack of foresight and a myriad of city service failures. Case in point: the failure of the two city corporations to tackle the dengue outbreak last year that claimed more than 164 lives, according to official



Supporters of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) celebrate after learning of the initial poll results outside its party headquarters in New Delhi, India, on February 11, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ANUSHREE FADNAVIS

to power in 2015, he made sure to make basic utilities available for the people of his locality, to the point where his victory in the recent polls has been attributed to what the BJP calls "freebies"—free water and power, to be specific. And if Kejriwal could, he would make all the services under his jurisdiction free for the people.

Kejriwal's agriculture policy—his announcement of compensation for damaged crops after his election in 2015—had instantly won the support of the farmers. His ministers and his team worked relentlessly in the rural areas to provide bus services to the people.

Kejriwal's education programme, which included improving government-run schools and the opening of vocational centres for skills training, was also a hit among the people living in the fringes of society. The establishment and

figures. The lacklustre performance of the two city corporations in combating dengue, including the use of ineffective insecticide and a strategy that was completely inadequate, to put it politely, goes on to explain why perhaps the people of Dhaka were not so enthusiastic to participate in the elections.

The constant water-logging woes of the people and illegal parking of vehicles were added elements that show the ineffectiveness of the two city corporations. Rampant illegal grabbing of public properties including public parks, footpaths, and other public places is also a key highlight of the ineffectiveness of the city corporations. The widespread use of plastic lamination for posters that decorated the alleys and streets of Dhaka in the lead up to the elections, as well as the waste of paper during the mayoral

Some questions are deeper than partisan politics. They relate to the fundamental nature of our polity; the democratic fabric that makes up our community. It is easy to take for granted their durability in the face of adversity, but lest we forget, our democratic rights were a hard-fought achievement and not a birth right.

Perhaps our leaders, the same leaders who had so valiantly fought for these rights, cannot sense the slow, insidious erosion of these ideals—perhaps there is no erosion at all. But the numbers reflect a fact that is hard to deny—the silent majority is growing more silent, and becoming even more of a majority. Surely, this cannot be a healthy state of affairs?

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MIDDLE EAST PEACE PLAN

An unworkable approach



SHAMSHER M. CHOWDHURY, BB

IN an op-ed published on January 30 in The Daily Star, former Associate Editor Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan (Retd) described Washington's Middle East "Peace" Plan as a "recipe for further conflict". He backed his point with facts, exercising his liberty as a journalist to be totally candid. To put it more diplomatically, the plan, if not anything else, is unworkable.

The so called "peace" plan, as it stands today, guarantees anything but peace for the region and beyond. The situation in Palestine has, over time, taken the shape of the world's longest standing instance of injustice. The plan, launched by President Donald Trump and crafted by his son-in-law and Special Representative for the Middle East Jared Kushner, effectively seeks to validate the illegal occupation of Palestinian and Arab territory by Israel since 1967 and, at the same time, deny even a semblance of Palestinian sovereignty over whatever would be left of it. Not surprisingly, it has been summarily rejected in unison by not just the Palestinians, but by the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the African Union (AU). Even Washington's strong ally, the European Union, in a statement by its foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, said that Trump's plan departs from "internationally agreed parameters". Borrell added that the issues of the borders of a Palestinian state and the final status of Jerusalem were among those still in dispute, and steps by Israel to annex Palestinian territory, "if implemented, could not pass unchallenged". Such a rejection from the EU, all of whose members have strong diplomatic relations with Israel but maintain a studied position on the Palestinian question as a bloc, must have surprised Washington. The EU has earlier condemned Trump's decision in 2017 to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, saying Washington had compromised its position as a mediator for peace.

Reactions to the proposal from other corners have been equally negative. Michael Lynk, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 pointed out that the deal doesn't offer Palestinians a state but a "21st century Bantustan in the Middle East. The Palestinian statelet envisioned by the American plan would be scattered archipelagos of non-contiguous territory completely surrounded by Israel, with no external borders, no control over its airspace, no right to a military to defend its security, no geographic basis for a viable economy, no freedom of movement and

with no ability to complain to international judicial forums against Israel or the United States". Al-Haq, a Palestinian NGO that has special consultative status with the UN, noted that the proposal "rewards Israel for its illegal colonisation of the occupied Palestinian territory by allowing Israel to annex more territory, in flagrant violation of international law," and it "reaffirms the United States unlawful recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel... [and] unilaterally strips Palestinians of their claims to sovereignty."

B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation, also said that under this scheme, "Palestinians will not be able to exercise their right to self-determination and will continue to be completely dependent on Israel's goodwill for their daily life, with no political rights and no way to influence their future. They will continue to be at the mercy of Israel's draconian permit regime and

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need its consent for any construction or development. In this sense, not only does the plan fail to improve their predicament in any way, but, in fact, it leaves them worse off as it perpetuates the situation and gives it recognition".

Scholars and those who have followed the Palestine-Israeli issue for long in the United States have always argued that for Washington to be seen as an honest broker, it is imperative for it to be objective and fair. This means that the fundamental issues of illegal occupation and annexation of Palestinian and other Arab territories by Israel, Palestinian sovereignty on areas that would constitute the eventual Palestine state, and the final status of Jerusalem would need to be central to any peace process. Anything less would not work.

The Camp David Egypt-Israel Peace pact of 1978, moderated by President Jimmy Carter, largely worked despite initial rejection by an overwhelming majority of OIC members. This was mainly because it succeeded in achieving two major objectives: end of military conflict between Egypt and Israel and the withdrawal from all Egyptian territories captured by Israel in 1967. However, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—who signed the Oslo Accords in Washington with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat—by a Jewish fanatic youth in 1995, was reflective of the rabid anti-Oslo fervour amongst the Israelis, thereby burying whatever chance of peace Oslo offered.

Avraham Avi Shlaim, an Israeli historian, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Oxford University and fellow of the British Academy, said, "For all their shortcomings and ambiguities, the (Oslo) accords constituted a historic breakthrough in the century-long conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. It was the first peace agreement between the two principal parties to the conflict." He added that, "both sides agreed to resolve their outstanding differences by peaceful means. Mutual recognition replaced mutual rejection. In short, this promised at least the beginning of a reconciliation between two bitterly antagonistic national movements." He went on to explain that the return of the rightwing Likud party to power in Israel under the leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996, and his dependence on far right political forces for continuation in office, signalled the end of the Oslo peace process. Netanyahu made no effort to conceal his deep antagonism to the Oslo process, denouncing it as "incompatible with Israel's right to security and with the historic right of the Jewish people to the whole land of Israel".

President Trump's "peace" plan offers far less. Unlike Camp David of 1978 and the Oslo process of 1993, the latest plan was not preceded by any negotiations between the key stakeholders. It is not surprising, therefore, that the plan has met with widespread rejection. If genuine and lasting peace is to be ensured, it is imperative for all to go back to the drawing board and come up with fresh workable plans that feature a universally recognised and realistic two-state solution that guarantees peace and security for all sides. Sadly, given the current mood among the protagonists, this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. In the meantime, Netanyahu's policy of expanding Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian lands, mostly in the West Bank, illegal annexation of territories and the killing of Palestinians continue unabated, and with impunity.

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