

A tale of two elections

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

GOKAHLE'S tribute, "What Bengal thinks today, India will think tomorrow", reflected the leading role that Bengal was taking in the anti-British movement. His view about Bengal's enterprising proclivities and innovative capabilities has proved to be so prescient as to be relevant even more than a hundred years after it was expressed. This innovative prowess still remains in the realm of politics, at least in Bangladesh, but in a very convoluted and intricate manner that has twisted the definition of politics and desecrated the hallowed principles of democracy manifesting, consequently, in a tarnished version of it. And what we have done with our electoral process has been picked up in the US for subverting the will of the people.

Today's topic has been provoked by what our inimitable Chief Election Commissioner said after polls of by-election to two parliamentary seats on November 12. The by-election was held at the same time when the US presidential polls had ended and counting was going on. Our by-election result was as predictable as all the previous elections since the last decade. It was not surprising that more than 80 percent of the votes were cast. The versions of the CEC and of one of the election commissioners Mahbub Talukdar, about the election is highly contrasting, but we need not embark on a flight of imagination to conclude who is telling the truth, given our experiences of the past elections. But this piece is not

about our election; in any case, writing about our elections would be a waste of time and energy. Because, as Trump had said about the pandemic after nearly 200,000 people in the US had died of it, "it is what it is", accepting a *fait accompli* since there was precious little he was capable of doing, or willing to do about it. For us too, democracy is what it is—a unique version that demands adding a new chapter, if not writing an entirely new book on political science.

Watching the 2020 US elections, the events leading up to the November 3 polls, and the monkey business resorted to well after three weeks of the polls being cast, one was pervaded with a horrible sense of *deja vu*. The shenanigans we have witnessed in the US, and are still witnessing is a fun-house-mirror image of our own situation in some respect. The CEC had remarked that the US had much to learn from Bangladesh as to how to conduct an election. He was rather outdated, because it seems that Trump, given the way he has gone about conducting himself before, during and after the election till date, has already picked up quite a few tricks from our methods of politicking, electioneering and hogging an election. We can take some skewed pride that the president of the greatest democracy in the world has taken cue from the manner of conduct of our elections.

But there are a few remarkable differences. As the saying goes, the water of the Ganges in the US has flowed upstream. It was not the opposition that was crying foul about the election; it was not the Democratic nominee but the sitting president who contested the results in all the swing States. In fact, he behaved exactly the way our opposition does. He feared foul play predicting his victory provided the election was "free and fair" and after the results became evident, made it a "heads I win tails you lose" matter.



Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda.

PHOTO: MOHUDDIN ALAMGIR

But of course he was proved wrong; the US institutions, despite the US president's tantrums and accusations did not sacrifice their integrity. The election volunteers and they belonged to both the parties, rose above their political identity and did what was their moral duty. However, for us the oppositions' cry of foul play turns out to be true, most of the time. The evidences bear out the allegations, and despite the legal stamp of validity in the court of law, it remains a questionable election in the court of public opinion.

Mr Huda should know why, as he said, the US cannot finish counting ballots in 4-5 days but we can do it in 4-5 minutes. In venting his false pride he not only betrayed his abject ignorance of the US election process, he also exposed our tainted and sullied electoral

system. He flaunted the speed with which our votes are counted, but overlooked the reason why that is possible. He forgot that for some voters in our case, the time for casting votes commences much before the schedule (at 8:00 am) in the morning and the bulk of the ballot boxes are stuffed well before the voting starts officially. That is the norm. Therefore it is no wonder that our counting takes so little time. One would not be surprised if in future the counting ends even before the start of voting, much like in some polling centres in the last general election, where the number of votes cast were higher than the actual number of authorised voters in the list!

Unlike in our case, the sitting head of government in the US went to court and resorted to litigation, and all, but all the cases were thrown out, being without

merit. Hardly, have we seen our ruling party castigating the system and running down the democratic institutions or putting forward a national conspiracy theory. That is the exclusive preserve of the opposition. The incumbent US president peddled the conspiracy theory and excoriated almost all his agencies for doing what is right by law.

The CEC had also uttered another piece of gem—we have something to learn from the US elections too. Indeed we have. For example, the litigations were dealt with quickly, unlike for example in one instance when the result of a parliamentary seat was contested, soon after the result and the court verdict came only after the term of the parliament was over. The verdict was in favour of the plaintiff, that means that the defendant occupied the seat illegally and thus all the benefits that accrued to him owing to that was illegal. Has the EC done anything in this regard?

I do not believe that the US has anything to learn from Bangladesh, if anything its institutions have emerged stronger than before. Ours get weaker by the day. Trump has sacked the head of the US head of cyber security—for doing his job and ensuring the integrity of the system. Ours gets accolades for being partisan. We have much to learn from the US—first and foremost integrity of character of those who run the electoral system. I cannot give a one word definition of integrity. But can tell you what it is. It is when you look in the mirror first thing in the morning and don't feel ashamed to see the person you see in it. I wonder if all those who conduct our elections feel embarrassed to look in the mirror in the morning, particularly after an election.

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Covid-19 pandemic and the paradoxes of universities



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WE are almost at the tail-end of the year 2020. What a year this has been! We haven't lived it. We just have breathed through most of it. Beating the pandemic—whenever that happens, if it indeed happens—doesn't seem to steer us

past the raptures and ruins it wreaked. Our lives are already radically different and comprehensively compromised. People worldwide desperately want back the peace and the pace of a normal life that used to define their pre-pandemic life. Arundhati Roy, quite surprisingly, claims in her essay, *The Pandemic Is a Portal*, "Nothing could be worse than a return to normality", because that "normality" was ridiculously abnormal, abject, and paradoxical. These paradoxes are so insidious that most of them remained unnoticed until the pandemic exposed them. Universities have had their share of paradoxes, too.

Universities, for example, have passionate advocates for sustainable development. Ironically, the pandemic exposes that the universities are not sustainable themselves. Economics and politics tilt and tank universities. During the pandemic, economies worldwide have nosedived. Politics has languished. Chaos has crept everywhere. Universities have shown no autonomy to guard themselves against the pandemic. Basing his observation on the US education system, Olivier Garret cites a survey in his article, "This Is the End of College As We Know It", in *Forbes* in June, 2020, which claims that 72 percent of university presidents plan to lay off staff. Garret also cites the prediction of the CEO of Chegg, an online education service provider: "about 20 percent to 25 percent of colleges are going to go bankrupt." If these plans and predictions sound dire and apocryphal, history reminds us that after the Black Death, the fourteenth-century epidemic of bubonic plague, of the roughly 30 universities that existed in Europe at the time, five were wiped out. The vulnerability of universities is a historical phenomenon across contexts.

Bangladesh represents a peculiar context concerning the history, economics, and politics of universities given its irreducible

demarcation between the public and private ones. Public universities in Bangladesh are managed and financed by the government. Nothing—neither partisan politics, nor a devastating pandemic—can wipe them out, apparently. Until the 1990s, when the private universities began to emerge, there were no alternatives to public universities in Bangladesh. As the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh catalogues, we now have in 2020, 46 public universities and 107 private ones, though

the fundamentals of finances is critical for both faculty and staff. Universities worldwide, however, hardly make it a practice that their faculty and staff grasp the magic and mystery of finances that keep the universities afloat. Allison M Vaillancourt in her article, "What if Everyone on Campus Understood the Money?" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* this past September claimed, "Most faculty and staff members—and a significant percentage of academic and administrative leaders—struggle to provide correct

administration radicalises rational voices to run *The Toxic University*, as John Smyth claims, where faculty members are derided, denigrated, and defeated. When such an administration functions, it reverses the definition of a university. A university should be a guild of self-motivated scholars, who are brilliant, bold, and visionary. During the pandemic, we have hardly seen any of these scholars speaking out boldly and brilliantly against the phony vision of an administrative university. They are defensive. They remember that Ward Churchill was fired from the University of Colorado, Boulder, for his "On the Justice of Roosting Chickens" following and regarding 9/11; that David Graeber, the author of *Bullshit Jobs*, was denied tenure at Yale for his uncanny research; and that Lorgia García-Peña was denied tenure at Harvard recently for teaching the unpleasant history of racism. If you need a home-grown example along this line, think of the aftermath of the op-ed, "Ulto pothe ki shudhui bus?" by an Assistant professor of Economics at a public university in Bangladesh in 2017. Regardless of the contexts, an administrative university seems to send the same message to its faculty: "Shut up, or bugger off." During the pandemic, this message of silence echos resoundingly through universities.

An administrative university, then, hardly benefits from the collective voice of vision and intelligence. This accounts for why universities worldwide during the pandemic have suffered from authority without leadership. Decisions and directives emerge from nowhere, and then evaporate just as suddenly and randomly. The gap between faculty and administration widens. Misunderstanding compounds. Universities run on a plethora of ad-hoc decisions in a bubble of rumours, rulings, and suspense. However devastating the pandemic is, it should not have been the rationale to swerve the vision, integrity, and grit of ethical, informed, and unflinching leadership that underpins universities. While the pandemic has altered the usual affairs of universities, ideal leadership would never reduce the effects of the pandemic to online vs on-site teaching. The pandemic effected no pedagogical problem, per se. Teachers had been teaching enough before the pandemic, and they have been teaching enough during the pandemic. The problem is economic, the untenable business model universities are based on. University leadership hardly talks about this economic model. Administrators, instead, have tried to push a square peg into

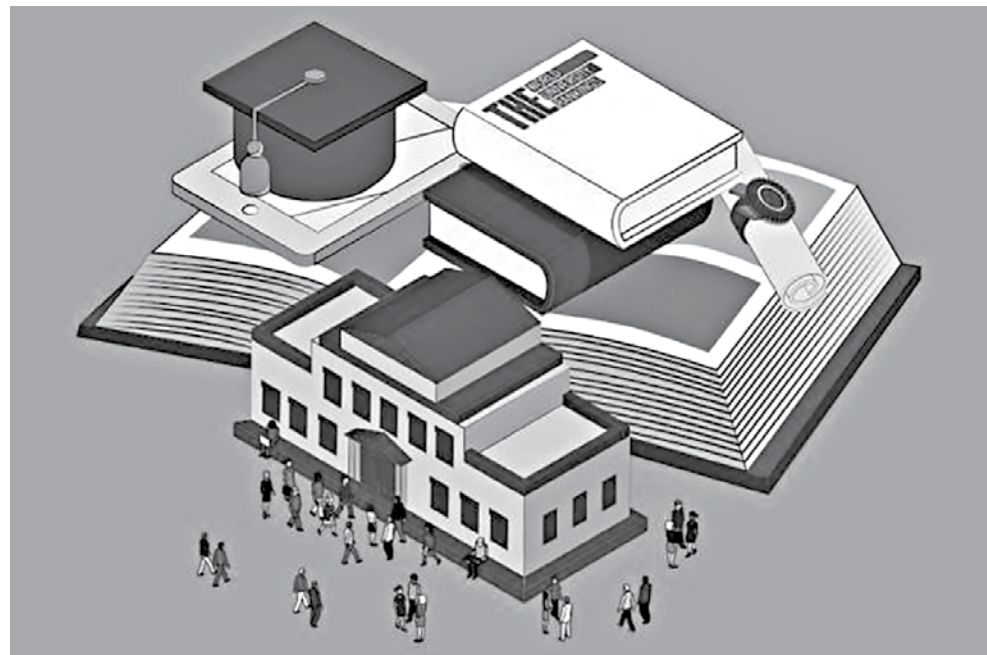
a round hole. Don't they know about the paradox that these gaudy, greedy universities are eternally poor?

Poverty is contagious as it trickles from the universities to societies. An ideal university cultivates compassion and connection to establish equity between humans. Universities are also a breeding ground for empathy, self-reflection, and ethics. These values are often shunted from the whole university to the humanities and the social sciences. Even before the pandemic, the humanities were being treated as a stepchild, as universities avowedly embarked on a mission of minting doctors, engineers, lawyers, and businessmen. These elitist professions are undoubtedly critical to helping society function smoothly, but the pandemic has shown that such professionals apparently lack the intellectual capital to appreciate and question the layers and degrees of inequality ravaging societies. They, thus, re-produce inequalities, inadvertently. Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University claims in her book *If Then* that higher education has a Silicon Valley problem along with distorted effects of money. The pandemic has made education more technology-dependent and money-driven. The residual incentives from the humanities have shifted to sciences. During and following the pandemic, students are being steered toward higher education brutally for immediate financial dividends. For a Computer Science department, for example, the pandemic probably signals a boon. For an English department, the pandemic heralds a bust. Universities have more equally treated some of its constituents as already more than others, and the pandemic reinforces that paradox.

Perhaps the biggest of all the pandemic paradoxes is that the pandemic has made the virtual real. A university is no longer physical. It's, instead, invisible and digital. It's compressed into a portable device. Nobody needs to go anywhere to go to a university. Everyone, with a device, attends a portable university from home or from anywhere. Already several semesters into the pandemic, the portable university is competing with its erstwhile counterpart for space and prestige. Should we concede further space and prestige to it, what would that mean for universities in the times ahead?

More paradoxes, guaranteed!

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several private universities are not yet functional. I couldn't locate any empirical evidence to outline the harrowing realities the private universities are enduring because of the pandemic. If, however, anecdotes and personal correspondence are any indicators, the pandemic is the death knell for them. Enrolment pinches. Tuition dwindles. Budgets shrink. Employment freezes. Faculty and staff perish. Salaries drop. In short, universities crumble. What, then, qualifies universities to exhort students and society about sustainability in Bangladesh and elsewhere? A sustainable university is an oxymoron!

As the pandemic exposes, universities are not sites for honest conversation about the basics of institutional finances. Now that the universities worldwide are struck by an unprecedented budget crisis, knowing about

responses" to all or even most of the 10 questions she asks, while giving talks about the finances of higher education. This is so paradoxical that people—faculty members, in particular—who are responsible for informing and enlightening others, wallow in ignorance in their own professional orbit. And their ignorance is not a blessing. They are among the victims. They're fired, furloughed, and financially compromised. This pandemic should be calling out faculty and staff to step out of their comfort zone into the nitty-gritty of university finances to resist being the victims of administrative whims and follies.

Unfortunately, *resistance* is a word being forced out of university discourse, for universities worldwide are being hurled into a culture of conformity and complicity. A university no longer means faculty; it, instead, means administration. University

QUOTABLE Quote



MARGARET THATCHER (1925-2013) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 "That's cheating!"
 - 7 Whirled
 - 11 Smith grad
 - 12 Bakery buy
 - 13 Committed, as crimes
 - 15 Asparagus unit
 - 16 Close
 - 18 Hits with a ray gun
 - 21 Pack and send
 - 22 In addition
 - 24 Charged particle
 - 25 Distant
 - 26 Cobbler's cousin
 - 27 Makeshift bookmark
 - 29 Carpet feature
 - 30 Gambler's giveaway
- DOWN**
- 1 Catch some z's
 - 2 Flamenco cheer
 - 3 Cat coat
 - 4 Intensifies
 - 5 Bumbling
 - 6 Asses
 - 7 Sacred beetle of Egypt
 - 8 Contrived
 - 9 Luau instrument
 - 10 Homer's
 - neighbor
 - 14 Barber's tool
 - 16 Photo session
 - 17 Door part
 - 19 Visit unexpectedly
 - 20 Planting bases
 - 21 Comic Caesar
 - 22 Roofing goo
 - 23 Casual shirt
 - 25 Unfaithful
 - 28 Go by
 - 29 Fries source
 - 31 Low card
 - 33 Remain
 - 34 Golf goal
 - 35 Sense of self
 - 36 Valentine color
 - 37 Dickens boy
 - 38 Eden name
 - 39 Animal's lair

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

BREWS PARTS
 AURAE ADORE
 ABATE NOW IN
 EYED SOD
 TARRAGON
 ASIF GRITTY
 MIDAS AGREE
 PAELLA HEAPS
 LIGHTERS
 HOP GOOF
 IRISH NADAL
 TACIT ELITE
 SLAPS SLEET

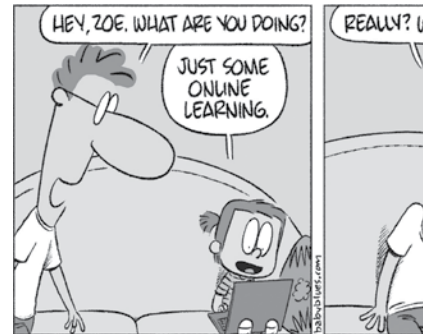
BETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

