

Lessons from municipal polls

Both the ruling and opposition should heed these

The municipal elections, the first round of which passed rather peacefully, has ended on a sad note on Tuesday as they were marked by widespread violence coupled with snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes allegedly by ruling party cadres in the Chittagong and Sylhet divisions.

Such an ending of the municipal elections has been accompanied by predictable blame games as well as *hartals* by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in trouble-torn districts.

Understandably, relative success of the BNP-backed mayoral candidates vis-à-vis the electoral losses sustained by the ruling Awami League-backed candidates has been instrumental in triggering the electoral violence in its final rounds. In other words, leaders of the ruling party have found it hard to digest the reverses their favourite candidates have gone through so much so that the joint-secretary general of Awami League has squarely blamed their arch rival BNP for the electoral violence and even warned them of serious consequences for that. Such utterances from responsible ruling party men are regrettable and uncalled for.

Whereas in democratic parlance the ruling party could have congratulated the opposition BNP for the success of the candidates supported by the latter and the opposition reciprocated it by welcoming, they have again engaged themselves in a slanging match of exchanging bitter recriminations. In any case, the government could have lapped up the credit for presenting the nation with another instance of free, fair and peaceful local government election after that of the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC). On the other hand, the better performer in this case, the opposition BNP, far from accepting the electoral results in a decent manner by thanking the electorate as well as the Election Commission for its handling of the polls, has responded with the time-worn, blunt and widely abhorred agitational programme like *hartal*.

The post-polls reactions of both the major political camps have therefore disappointed the nation as a whole. Despite the unwelcome developments in some of the constituencies, the overall outcome of the municipal polls should be a lesson to learn for the ruling party and the opposition, each in their own way. The opposition has made inroads into constituencies that the ruling party considered to be their bastions of power. Similarly, the opposition party, too, has experienced similar reverses. So, they should better get used to accepting these results as the verdict of the people rather than behaving in their habitual knee-jerk fashion.

In particular, the phenomenon of rebellion by local level leaders and workers of both the parties as manifested in the just held municipal polls should be a wake up call for both of them. These are signs of leadership crisis at the centres.

Hopefully, the ruling and the opposition parties would get wiser after the municipal polls. Learning from the mistakes, the ruling Awami League needs to improve their performance during the remaining years of their present term. The opposition should also use this opportunity and join parliament where they have a greater role to play for the electorate.

Shipyard casualties again!

Act against violators of the law

The accident that occurred at a ship-breaking yard at Sitakunda on Tuesday last took a toll of 4 precious lives. As many as 30 workers died and 16 were maimed in last 21 months in 16 ship-breaking yards. Besides, many others were injured whose number remains unrecorded.

We watch with trepidation that fatal explosions happen in the industry at regular intervals as the authorities concerned did not comply with the High Court orders and let the owners operate without equipping their workers with necessary safety measures.

Flouting of rules has become a general practice these days. As per reports, the blast at Sitakunda took place during the scrapping of a tanker that entered the country violating the HC directives on toxin free entry in the first place.

In addition to defying High Court directives against allowing any ship into Bangladesh and equipping the workers with safety measures, there are other breaches of law. According to existing law, it is mandatory for all ship-breaking yards to have environmental clearance certificate, although majority of the 100 ship-breaking yards are operating without proper clearance from the concerned department. Almost all of the yards scrap vessels on open beach and dismantle them manually exposing the man and the environment to extreme health and environment hazard.

The entire process of the trade demands regular monitoring to ensure safety of lives and environment. The process involves acquiring of ships or tankers and putting them on for scrapping in compliance with all the internationally prescribed adequate safety standards. This is particularly imperative on our part because Bangladesh has been vulnerable to dumping of old ships by the owners. As guardian, the government ought to be the first party to ensure that all the ship-breaking yards are complying with the requirements as prescribed by the law not only to ensure safety of the workers but also to protect the environment.

That so many unauthorised yards have been operational by flouting laws is an indicator of the government's indulgence at some point which it must now shun without much ado.

Let us have the yards but have them only subject to maintenance of international standards, and in a manner that some other countries are operating with regular precaution in place.

A bullet is a bullet is a bullet

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DEATHS from BSF firing have assumed disquieting proportion, and the Indian authorities seem to be able to do nothing about it. And only recently has the Bangladesh government been spurred, by criticisms at home and prodding from the Border Guards Bangladesh (and perhaps from abroad in the form of a report by the International Commission on Human Rights about the border killings), to summon the Indian high commissioner to register its condemnation of BSF action.

This was in the wake of the brutal and senseless killing (that is how the particular killing was described by the Bangladesh foreign ministry reportedly) of a 15 year old girl by the BSF on January 7. The situation had come to such a pass that the chairman of the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission was constrained to invoke the help of his Indian counterpart.

One is at a loss to rationalise the trigger-happy attitude of the BSF, and even more at the fact that the killings have gone on in spite of the declaration of unilateral moratorium on border firings by the Indian government, and assurances of the BSF authorities at the very highest level of command that such killings would cease. Statistics of border deaths belie the much vaunted excellent state of relationship between the two countries.

Felani's killing (that was the name of the poor girl who was shot like a sitting duck literally when her sari got entangled in the barbed wire she was trying to negotiate in her attempt to cross the border illegally) makes BSF explanations of the shootings, and the descriptions of those being killed as being criminals and felons armed to the teeth, sound hollow. It is a fig leaf that fails to hide their contempt for human lives. And hiding behind semantics and resorting to verbal

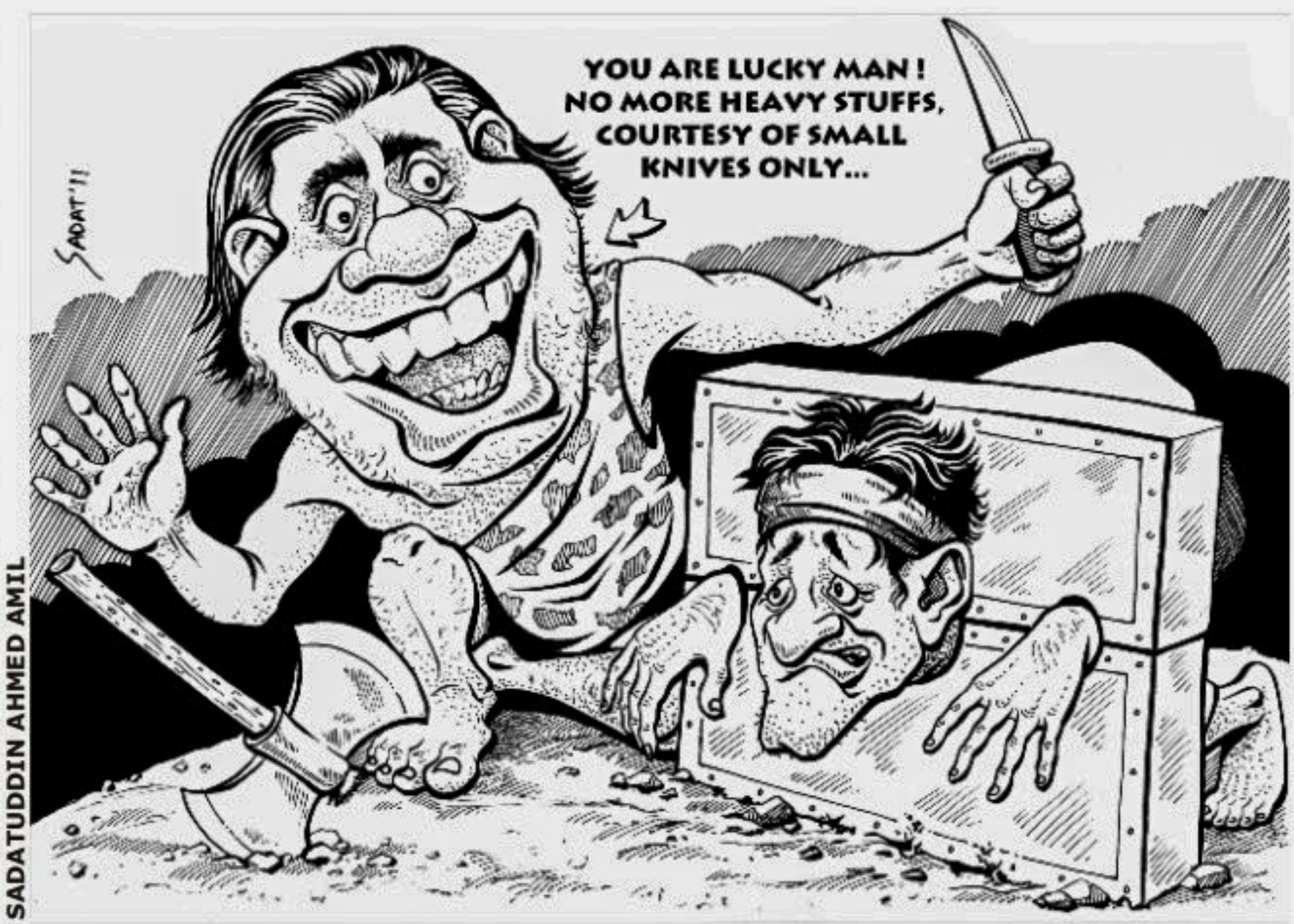
Since the core element is metal the risk to life remains from misuse, particularly where intentions are hostile. It is more of a defensive expedient, but given the psychological disposition of the Indian border guards, the palliative, poor as it is, will not work.

subterfuge like these are not killings but death by firing, as the BSF DG tried unsuccessfully during his visit to Dhaka in September of 2010, doesn't assuage the feelings of those affected.

It just so happens that a meeting of Bangladesh-India JWG on security is on in Dhaka currently and as one paper has reported, both the countries "have agreed on the need to stop border killing." Is it not such an obvious matter that needs no consultation to "agree upon?" Instead, what one would have liked to hear is what steps would be taken to that end?

However, we have been given to understand that the Indian government, in order to prevent deaths in the border, is thinking of providing the BSF with rubber bullets instead of metal ones, to fire at the trespassers, majority of whom, going by the number of reported deaths in BSF firing, happens to be Bangladeshis. And Bangladesh has taken the credit for suggesting such an alternative.

A bullet, whatever it is one chooses to coat it with, rubber, or sugar or honey, will still hurt, and if it happens to strike at a sensitive spot of the human anatomy, may very well kill.



Therefore, neither can one take satisfaction in suggesting it as an alternative to metal bullets nor should one feel elated by accepting the suggestion. It is a bad alternative to an equally reprehensible use of illegitimate and disproportionate use of force. And there is nothing to exalt at the new arrangement, since it sanctifies a bad alternative without going into the very fundamental nature of the problem; neither does it guarantee the physical safety of those that choose to use the border illegally, but nonetheless don't deserve death as a consequence of breach of the border.

Rubber bullet, according to the manuals, is rubber or rubber-coated projectile which is intended to be a non-lethal alternative to metal projectiles and is used for short range practice and animal control, but is most commonly associated with use in riot control and to disperse protests. According to experts, these are kinetic impact munitions meant to cause pain but not serious injury.

Rubber bullets are used at close quarters, but if used indiscriminately can prove lethal; they may cause bone fractures, injuries to internal organs,

or death. In a study of 90 patients in Northern Ireland, one died, 17 suffered permanent disabilities or deformities and 41 required hospital treatment after being fired upon with rubber bullets.

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Regrettably, the Bangladesh-India border is not as well managed as it might be. And changing the type of weaponry only is not the answer to a situation which requires a change of mindset of the BSF. Some of the deaths have been due to torture also.

Managing the Bangladesh-India border requires a deep understanding of the intricate nature of the border, a border that is not like borders between any two countries. Thus the rationale of rubber bullets is full of holes. And a hole is a hole is hole, as much as a bullet is a bullet is a bullet.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

China's currency isn't our problem

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WHEN President Hu Jintao of China visits Washington this week, many Americans will clamour for Beijing to stop manipulating its currency. We think we are being cheated on a huge scale, but we should reconsider. When it comes to lost jobs, the negative impact of China's currency, the renminbi, is less than one

and containing social unrest.

Many Americans believe that the Chinese jobs being preserved by an artificially low currency come at the expense of American jobs. There are three common explanations behind this theory.

First, a stronger currency would increase the purchasing power of Chinese consumers and decrease the

American companies to move jobs to China and thus keeping more people employed at home.

These claims, however, are more wishful thinking than actual truths. Consider the first idea, that a strengthened Chinese currency would increase the growth rate of American exports to China. From 2005 to 2008, the renminbi appreciated nearly 20% against the dollar. Yet, American exports to China over those three years grew at a slightly slower pace than in the previous three-year period when the renminbi did not appreciate at all (71% versus 89%).

This is because many of America's top exports to China are for capital-intensive goods like aerospace and

little evidence that an undervalued Chinese currency hurts American exports to third countries. This is mostly because there is little head-to-head competition between America and China. In less than 15% of top export products -- for example, network routers and solar panels -- are American and Chinese corporations competing directly against one another. By and large, we are going after entirely different product markets; we market things like airplanes and pharmaceuticals while China sells electronics and textiles.

Finally, it is unlikely that a stronger renminbi would bring many jobs back home. Instead, companies would most likely shift labour-intensive production to Vietnam, Indonesia and other low-wage countries. And in any case many high-skilled jobs will continue to flow overseas, as long as cheaper talent can be found in India and elsewhere. Only in a few industries, like biomedical devices, would a stronger Chinese currency combined with quality issues tempt American companies to keep more manufacturing at home.

Don't get me wrong: China's currency policies have led to unhealthy artificial distortions in the Chinese and world economy. They also fuel currency wars that threaten to undermine the cooperation needed to sustain a global recovery. And while the effect on American workers is far less than imagined, workers in the developing world stand much to gain from a faster renminbi appreciation.

We should discuss currency issues with China, but the exchange rate should not be at the top of the bilateral agenda. The issue is best left to the Group of 20, for this is as much the rest of the world's problem as it is ours. Resolving our economic troubles will depend much more on reinvesting in education, transportation and other government services, basic science and applied research than on forcing China to yield on its currency.



might think. Adjusting the exchange rate should not take priority over more vexing issues like North Korea, Iran and bilateral trade.

Since China agreed to a more flexible exchange rate last summer, its currency has appreciated a measly 3.6% against the dollar. This is because China, just like the United States, is also worried about jobs. In going slowly on appreciation, China is giving its exporters time to adjust, thereby limiting job losses

relative cost of American goods in China, spurring more Chinese to buy more American products. Second, a stronger currency increases the relative cost of Chinese goods in third markets, like Europe or Latin America. So if the renminbi appreciates, consumers in other countries will shy away from Chinese products in favour of American products. Third, a stronger currency would increase labour costs in China, making it less attractive for

power-generation equipment. Price is but one of several factors for these purchases, along with technology, quality and service. In addition, American companies in those industries are usually competing against European and Japanese firms rather than Chinese manufacturers. Ultimately, the dollar-euro and dollar-yen exchange rates may play more important roles in Chinese demand for American goods than the renminbi rate.

Second, I recently did an analysis of the top American exports to our 20 leading foreign markets, and found