

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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## An election marred

*Our hopes for constructive politics are dashed, again*

WHAT started off as a peaceful, tension-free day of voting, turned out to be a disappointment for the city dwellers of Dhaka and Chittagong.

Instances of intimidation of polling agents, journalists and voters in many voting centres of these cities, are undeniable. Many voters found their votes already cast. In some instances ballot boxes have been openly stuffed and there have been reports of violence with ruling party goons chasing polling agents of non-AL candidates out of the centre.

The Daily Star sent a team of 34 journalists and photo journalists to about 325 polling centres to cover the voting process. The findings of the report include the following:

The EC failed to provide the kind of peaceful atmosphere that was needed. The EC personnel were either afraid or intimidated. They did not use force to clear the premises of outsiders.

The role of the police was questionable. In some instances they were co-opted by members of the ruling party's youth wings to intimidate journalists and voters. This paper's reporters were beaten up by goons of the ruling party and in many cases physically shoved around by police. Photographers had their pictures deleted before being allowed to leave.

Rival councillor candidates of the same party created an environment of fear by using local mastans to discourage voters from voting for their opponents. Thus the supporters of the contesting councillors took over the polling booths and engaged in ballot stuffing. This had a negative impact on overall voter turnout.

The BNP's withdrawal, on the other hand, from the election was too early. In fact many questions can be raised about the sincerity in their preparation for the polls, lending credence to allegations that its mid-day boycott was predetermined.

All in all, the hope that through this election our politics will achieve a more constructive character, has been completely dashed.

## Save our parks

*Shrinking breathing space disquieting*

A report published by this newspaper yesterday reveals an alarming fact about Dhaka's parks. The capital city, ranked one of the worst liveable in the world, has only 54 parks when, ideally, it should have 92.

That's only one side of the problem, though. Many of the existing parks are inaccessible to the citizens for recreational activities. According to the report, at least 10 parks in several parts of the city have been encroached on by powerful quarters. Parking lots, community centres, kitchen markets and mosques have replaced trees and shrubs that used to be a refuge to the city dwellers amidst the maddening chaos of the Dhaka City. And this has happened apparently with the acquiescence of the city corporation itself. Many of the major parks remain a haven for illegal activities such as prostitution, drug peddling and gambling, not to mention the rampant smoking.

There lies deep-seated within all of us an instinctive need for occasional moments of solitude, alone with nature. Research shows, the sights and sounds and smells of birds and trees are good both for the body and the soul. We need parks to keep us sane in the midst of bricks and concrete. For the healthy development of the children and adults alike, parks are essential to our being.

We urge the city corporation officials to strictly enforce the laws to manage the existing parks more efficiently and save others from illegal encroachment.

# Another 'election'?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

IN these very columns we had carried an article with a similar heading following the farcical January 5, 2013 elections. Regrettably, we have to say the same about yesterday's

mayoral election that did not live upto our expectations.

The BNP has boycotted all the city corporation elections charging mass scale rigging and other electoral malpractices on the part of the ruling party. A few other candidates had followed suit while a few candidates had done so the day before the elections but they did not belong to the so called 'heavy-weights'. Apparently, the start of the voting was peaceful and the BNP announcement came rather suddenly.

According to some electronic media report voter turnout was 35 percent six hours into the voting. But one never knows: the turnout may double in the last two hours given the vast difference between the voter turnout one saw on ground on January 5 2014 and the statistics given out by the EC quite a few days after the election.

According to the BNP, except for two or three, all other polling stations were occupied by AL workers and their polling agents were not allowed to enter the polling centres. In some centres, voters found that their votes had already been cast. The reporters on ground substantiate the allegations about capture of voting centres. It is regrettable but, allegedly, not only were the AL party cadres used to take control of the polling centres and booths, the actions of the personnel on security



PHOTO: STAR

duty indicate that they were used blatantly in the elections. Can we ask why journalists were not allowed to enter the polling booths this time and film the activities there? And if the EC had not passed any such instruction to the security forces, then who did? Could the police authority have passed such an order themselves, on their own? Why were journalists assaulted while they were taking photographs of ballot box stuffing? According to some media reports, men were found stuffing ballot boxes in women's polling booths!

We had hoped that the mayoral elections in the two cities would infuse new life into politics in the country, and that it would be a win-win situation which-ever candidates carried the day in the election. However, things could not have turned out in a more disappointing manner.

AL alleges that the BNP decision to boycott the election was predictable and stems from the early realisation that the votes would not go the way of its candidates.

In spite of the subtle and sometimes not so subtle action by the government through various means to the contrary, BNP had taken part in the election. For the BNP, as a party, it found the city corporation elections a convenient egress from the political rut the party had found itself in. Mid-day announcement of boycott was perhaps rather premature and the BNP might have waited till the end of the casting of votes to announce their decision.

In these very columns last week we had suggested that there could not have been a better time for the government to announce the two city corporation elections. With most of the BNP top ranking leaders behind bars it had hoped the BNP would shun these elections; it did not. The mayoral elections afforded a win-win situation for all; and the major parties could use the results in a manner that would suit their political positions. For the BNP, a win in a majority number of seats both for mayors as well as councillors would reinforce their demands of a midterm national elections.

For the AL even if the results did not go in its favour it could prove their point that important elections could be held under the present incumbent. And if it won the elections so much the better for the AL. However, we had put a caveat to this, which was that any indication of directly tampering with the votes and influencing the casting of votes will provide enough grounds for further political agitation.

Many feel that the AL supported candidates would have won even if there were free and fair elections, given the swell of anti-BNP sentiment because of their recent destructive politics. One therefore wonders whether there was need for the AL to indulge in such blatant interference in the voting process.

This was a good chance for the AL to

*For the AL even if the results did not go in its favour it could prove their point that important elections could be held under the present incumbent.*

show that indeed fair elections could be held under an incumbent government. It failed to capitalise on it. It was a good opportunity for the EC to show its mettle. It couldn't. It was also a good opportunity for BNP to regain some political momentum. It did not do so. We missed an opportunity to put our politics on a more constitutional trajectory.

The writer is Editor, OP-Ed and Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

# "Dhaka is one of the riskiest cities for earthquakes in the world."

Dr. Syed Humayun Akhter, Professor and Chairman of Department of Geology at Dhaka University, speaks to Nahela Nowshin of The Daily Star about earthquake risk assessment and management in Bangladesh.

The Daily Star (TDS): It's been said that while earthquakes are a natural phenomenon, the destruction caused by them are to a large extent man-made.

Dr. Syed Humayun Akhter (SHA): Regardless of the magnitude and distance of the earthquake, if the ground shaking reaches more than VII on the Modified Mercalli Intensity (MMI) scale then infrastructure is likely to be damaged or destroyed. The question is: are these structures strong enough to withstand such ground shaking?

Dhaka is a megacity that continues to expand. It's densely populated -- with an average population of 45,000 per square km -- and is extremely ill-planned. Before the liberation era, the number of buildings was much less than now. When earthquakes took place then, there wasn't much damage. With time, buildings continued to be built starting from the Buriganga River expanding northward. These buildings were made on lal mati -- this one million year old red soil is compact and of very good quality. Most of the buildings made on this soil were one or two storeyed.

After liberation, however, Dhaka expanded very quickly due its growing importance as the capital. Buildings were being built on the riverside humus soil in the east and west. In the low lying areas, they were built using the arching method. These attractive, multi-storey buildings were constructed using faulty designs. The bottom floor is a parking space, and they are called soft story buildings. Due to earthquakes or even strong winds, the lateral deflection of the building top caused by the ensuing tremors cannot be resisted due to these large, unobstructed spaces on the bottom floor (known as a soft storey



Dr. Syed Humayun Akhter

collapse). These soft story tall buildings are vulnerable to distant earthquakes.

An overwhelming number of buildings have been built flouting the Bangladesh National Building Code. The code didn't even exist prior to 1993. The buildings made according to Rajuk's plan exceeded the number of floors than allowed -- largely to accommodate the growing number of people. For owners of these buildings, it meant more money. These practices became widespread. We have a history of collapsed buildings (Rana Plaza) resulting from these malpractices.

To put this into perspective, in the event of an earthquake of a magnitude of 5-6 (on the Richter scale), or a recurrence of the 1885 Bengal Earthquake or the 1897 Great Indian Earthquake in Dhaka with its population of 15 million, widespread brick masonry, non-engineered and poorly constructed

buildings would be hit worse than ever in the history of Dhaka. The catastrophic picture will be beyond our imagination and could even lead to abandonment of the city.

TDS: People in Bangladesh have more pressing problems than to worry about a future earthquake. Tell us something in terms of preparedness in the event of an earthquake.

SHA: If you ask the government, they'll say they're prepared. In the last two or three years, we saw some risk reduction initiatives such as the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme. The objective of the programme was to strengthen national capacity to manage such risks and the ensuing response and recovery efforts. About 60,000 volunteers were supposed to be trained but so far only 16,000 have been trained. This is beyond insufficient for earthquake management.

My question to the government is: despite experts' warning of there being a high risk of earthquakes in Bangladesh, why are the general people not being given information on earthquake preparedness? Why are no precautionary measures being taken? I don't see any such necessary steps being taken by the government.

I personally believe the first step should be about spreading awareness and information on basic preparedness on individual, household and community levels. In the past few days, we saw people running out of buildings in a state of panic and chaos because of which six people died. Even the fire brigade suggested to people that they should exit the buildings they were in. That's just wrong. People should instead be told about the quick steps to take in

such instances. Even the volunteers were incorrectly trained by the fire brigade. How will they help others when they can't even save themselves?

TDS: What are some recommendations for earthquake preparedness?

SHA: The 'drop, cover and hold' method is highly recommended and it's practiced globally. Drop to the ground, get under a table and hold on until the shaking stops. If that's not possible, then cover your head immediately to prevent a head injury. It's not recommended to stay near doors or windows. Seeking shelter in wall corners is better.

TDS: In light of the earthquake in Nepal, is the earthquake risk in Bangladesh greater now since our tectonic plates are interconnected?

SHA: Earthquakes and tremors depend on a lot of factors such as the proximity of the epicenter to Bangladesh. The country's position adjacent to the very active Himalayan front in the north and Burma deformation front in the east expose it to strong shaking from a variety of earthquake sources that can produce tremors of magnitude 8 or greater. There are epicenters very close to Bangladesh so this is a high risk area. It also depends on the proneness of a certain area to earthquake damage. The more the earth shakes, the more destruction there will be. Then there's the population density which is extremely high. There's a lack of education, awareness and preventive measures. Urban planning is poor, there aren't open spaces to seek shelter in, and hospitals are ill-equipped. All these factors combined heighten the risk. Dhaka is one of the riskiest cities for earthquakes in the world.

## COMMENTS

### "Nepal quake may trigger major tremors in Bangladesh" (April 26, 2015)

Juditha Ohlmacher

Not necessarily. There is no way to predict where any earthquake will strike. It may affect many other faults all around the region, including Myanmar, Tibet, and China. Or there may not be any other major quakes for a long time. This kind of fear-mongering doesn't help anyone.

Fuad Mahamud

That means more earthquakes will occur.

Patricia Labrique

Is the government taking necessary precautions in case of any more tremors?

### "Bankers term it unusual" (April 23, 2015)

SM

Why are some people claiming that the bank robbery was perpetrated by militants? To cover up the culprits? Our government has become violent, our law enforcing agencies are violent and are violating laws, similarly our bank robbers have gone violent too and that's the reason behind this gruesome robbery.

### "Eyes wide shut" (April 20, 2015)

Ziya41

If the girls who have been molested do not come forward and report to police, the investigation will get closed by itself. Whoever has taken a photo on his/her mobile should also come forward and submit it to the police.

### "Hasina calls for peace, security" (April 23, 2015)

SM

It's funny to hear her preach about democracy and peace.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Broken promise of funds

Fifteen retailers and brands that have committed to contributing to the Rana Plaza Trust Fund for the victims are yet to pay, even after two years have passed since the deadly industrial disaster that claimed the lives of 1,138 workers and injured many more. The Rana Plaza Claims Administration (RPCA) had previously estimated the size of the fund at \$40 million, which was later cut down to \$30 million due to poor responses from retailers and brands. The available fund now stands at \$21 million.

We urge the retailers and brands who committed to contribute the fund for Rana Plaza victims to fulfill their commitment ASAP.  
Tauhid Milton, Dhaka



PHOTO: STAR

### Noisy election campaign

During the city corporation election campaign, activists and agents of the mayoral candidates and councillors made life difficult for us. They used loudspeakers for the campaign and chanted slogans loudly and incessantly all day long. The whole election campaign appeared to be a chaotic one. They pledged many things but forgot the fact that their campaigns were creating serious noise pollution.  
Zabed Wali  
Chittagong

### Unabated postering

The campaigners of the mayor aspirants used the boundary walls of the citizens' residences rampantly for putting up posters. It's a mockery when the honourable aspirants were promising the beautification of the city as one of their mandates. Who gave their campaigners the authority to carry out such activity?  
Anonymous  
On e-mail