

Mass graves in Thailand

The inhuman trade must be stopped

THERE are no words to describe our outrage at the tales of horror of mass graves, detention and torture of migrants in the jungles of Thailand. At least 32 mass graves of victims of trafficking from Bangladesh and Myanmar were found two days ago in an abandoned jungle in southern Thailand, and another 50 graves were discovered yesterday in another camp. It's suspected that there are more buried bodies scattered along the Thailand-Malaysia border. These graves are a testament to the harrowing experiences of victims of trafficking, who are forced to live -- and die -- in inhumane conditions, when their families fail to provide ransoms demanded by transnational human traffickers.

According to a report by *The Daily Star*, at least 2.5 lakh Bangladeshis have been held captive in Thailand over the last eight years and crores of taka have been taken from their impoverished families. The diabolical manner in which such a vast number of vulnerable people are trafficked and abused is, indeed, alarming. These groups who prey on naïve villagers on the borders of Bangladesh must be identified and brought to justice through systematic raids. However, it is reported that the groups in both Bangladesh and Thailand are so organised and well-connected that raids do not always have the expected results.

The issue of human trafficking is a regional concern, and must be addressed through cooperation between the three countries involved -- Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand. A comprehensive regional intervention is needed to stop this slave trade, and SAARC and ASEAN, along with the IOM, must make it a priority concern. Meanwhile, mass awareness campaigns need to be undertaken in the border areas to warn unsuspecting people of the threats posed by human traffickers.

Al Qaeda spectre Go the whole hog

IT is indeed disconcerting that in a video titled 'From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down', Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has claimed responsibility for the death of four Bangladeshi bloggers, including US-based Bangladeshi writer Avijit Roy. The contents of the images are a ghastly reminder that the global terror outfit has spread its tentacles in the region, especially after Al Qaeda supremo Ayman al Zawahiri's September 2014 speech in which he had declared the launch of the group's terror franchise in the Indian Subcontinent.

If such targeted killings like that of Roy's are to be pre-empted, it is high time that we reinforced our intelligence to dismantle the home-spun sleeper cells and the group's local cohorts that, it seems, have been trying to become active. An enhanced use of human intelligence in this regard is pivotal; so is tracking down terrorist financing, which is crucial in the fight against terror groups that work across the border.

While the government and the law enforcing agencies have taken some multi-pronged counter-terrorism measures, we believe that our policy on terror needs teeth. The engagement of religious leaders and scholars can be worthwhile, especially in initiating a nationwide deradicalisation drive. There should be convincing counter narratives of the extremists that would prevent recruitment to their ranks. Fighting terror on all fronts is all we

The city polls charade

C R ABRAR

IT'S been a while since the city dwellers have settled back in their routine lives. The horns canvassing for votes for mayors and councillor aspirants have ceased blaring, sporadic demonstrations of their supporters no longer hinder traffic flows, the poster-filled roads and walls are being gradually cleared and the new mayors are about to sit in their much aspired offices of authority.

At the national level members of the ruling Awami League are gloating over their recent 'electoral' success. They feel their position, as espoused by the party chief, that the BNP had inflicted so much pain and sufferings on the people over the last few months did not deserve to win, stand vindicated. For them the results were obvious. How could a party expect to fare any better when it failed even to mobilise polling agents for its candidates, they ask. Their ideologues, noted intellectuals and celebrated commentators, go on to elucidate that militancy, terrorism and symbiotic links with Jamaat had led to people's disillusionment with the BNP and this was translated into the party's electoral debacle. The Awami stalwarts do not find any problem the way the election process unfolded. For them the 'bit of irregularities' that took place was within acceptable limits. After all, no country can ensure absolute fair polls, they reason. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), the individual responsible under the Constitution, holds identical view.

Unfortunately, not everyone shares this official narrative on the efficacy of the polls. Almost all opposition mayor candidates boycotted it by mid-day. The Election Working Group, a platform of 28 non-partisan civil society groups did not find the elections credible by any standard. The TIB observed that "irregularity took place under political shelter and muscle power" and accused the Election Commission (EC) of "politically biased attitude". Poll observers of development partners and the UN found serious anomalies in the way the elections were conducted. Some even claimed to possess credible evidence of vote rigging, intimidation and violence and demanded "thorough investigations of the irregularities".

Such contra positions to official account were reinforced by a plethora of television footages, newspaper reports, photographs and recorded accounts of individuals who were denied their right to franchise by the supporters of the ruling camp; in many instances aided and abetted by members of law enforcement agencies and those responsible for conducting the elections. The social media is bloated with video recordings of mass stamping of ballot papers, accounts of helpless election officers and armed goons turning away eligible voters.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of vote rigging the ruling quarters and its surrogate EC refuse to take facts into cognizance and insist that the elections were free, fair and transparent. Instead of refuting the cases of fraud presented in the formal and the social media, the spin-doctors of the establishment became busy questioning the intent of those who had furnished evidence of massive fraud.

A review of the election process lays bare that neither the government nor the EC was disposed to deliver the much-cherished fair, inclusive and transparent elections. The elections were called at a time when the

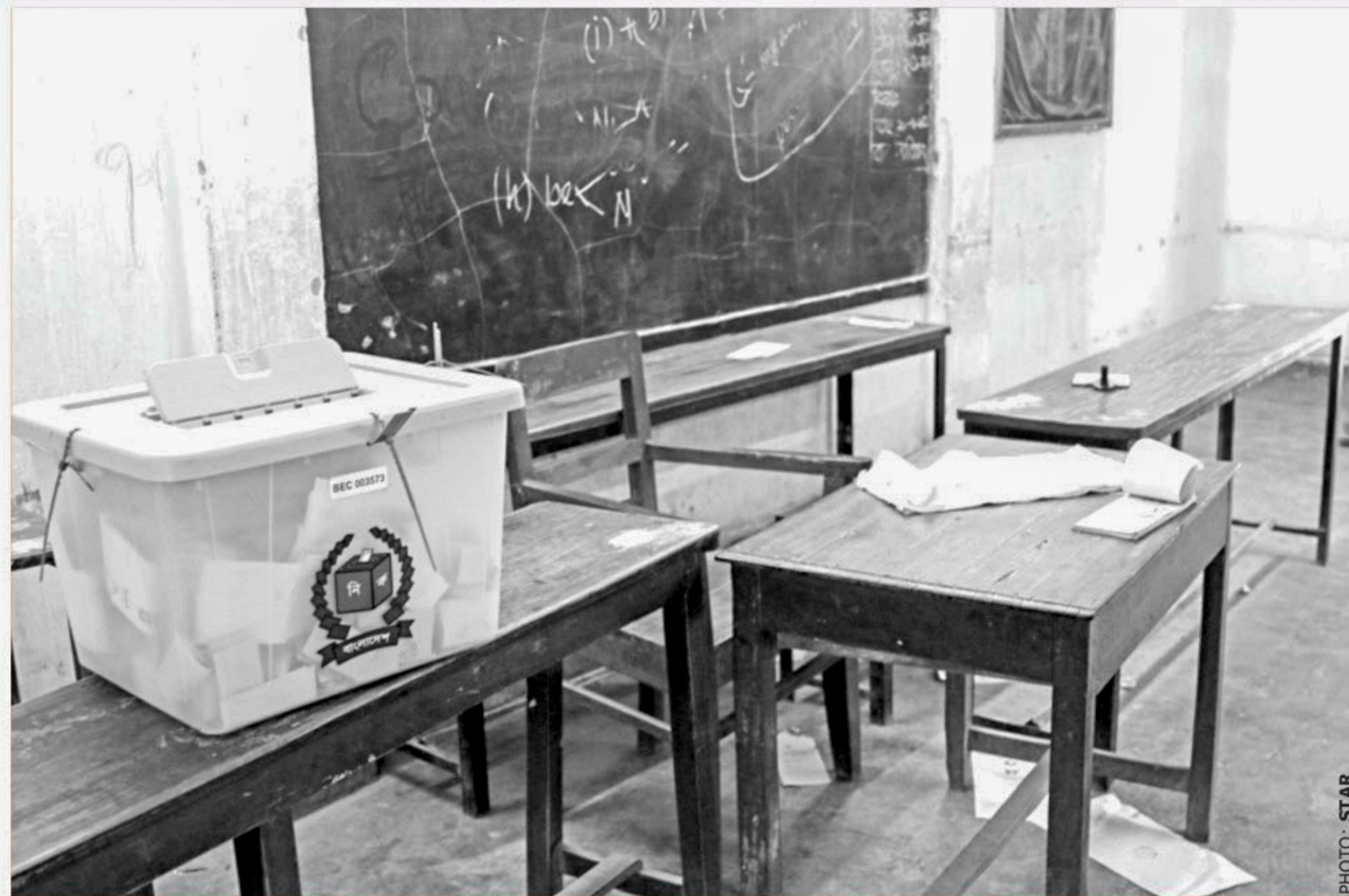


PHOTO: STAR

country was in the middle of a political chaos and senior and mid-ranking leadership of the opposition BNP were either incarcerated or were on the run. As the election process gained momentum a major potential mayoral contender was arrested under dubious charges and was placed on 20-day remand. He was unable to enter the foray. The CEC capriciously refused to entertain pleas to shift the election date and create an enabling level-playing field made by a pro-BNP citizens group. Many of its candidates continued to remain in hiding for fear of arrest. After a lot of dithering the BNP finally decided to take part in the polls.

The mood in the run up to the elections was upbeat. The parties nominated fresh faces with smart ideas. Candidates debated and discussed their development agenda face-to-face in several public platforms -- on television, on stage and in newspaper interviews. Creative schemes to make cities environment and gender friendly struck the right chord among the voters. The civility displayed by contending mayoral candidates -- posing for group photograph arm in arm, embracing each other and even seeking each other's vote -- was a lesson in itself for the political leadership of national level.

Regrettably, such positive vibes for an exercise in democracy did not lead to its logical conclusion. Little did the electorate realise that forces were at play to rob their right to franchise in the most blatant form and they would soon be the victims of yet another round of cooked up elections. The unfolding of events on the eve of the elections and on the election-day dashed all expectations of those who dared to hope for a better future for the country's politics.

The partiality of the EC was reflected in the run up to the elections as well as on the election day. For the first time in the country's history the EC solicited the opinion of the police in fixing the date of the polls. It rejected the opposition pleas for shifting of the date and meeting some other conditions to ensure a level playing field. It failed to halt

appointment, promotion and development activities of city corporations that compromised a fair election procedure. It refused to take any action against attacks on Khaleda Zia and her campaign team and reversed its decision to deploy army on grounds of "misunderstanding". All these factors point to the Commission's obvious bias in favour of the candidates supported by the administration.

The EC's tilt was no less pronounced on the eve of and on the day of the elections. Press reports, photographs and narratives of many involved in the election administration process have amply established its culpability in undermining fair election. The EC failed to call in and deploy army and take any meaningful action in cases of alleged ballot stuffing in favour of ruling party candidates, intimidating and expelling polling agents of the opposition camp, restricting access of journalists and accredited observers to polling centres on spurious grounds and protecting and extending necessary support to the functionaries involved in election duty who came under threat. No less graphic is the case in which EC Secretariat's own observers were attacked and their laptop and cameras snatched. In an instance, a treasury bench MP, Ekhlash Molla, was alleged to have seized the camera of one EC observer and delete the photos from the camera. No action was taken in this case either. All these have led the eminent local government expert Tofail Ahmed to observe, "It does not seem that there was such a body as the EC during the polls... They have completely failed."

Thus the city polls failed to deliver on the expectations that it generated among the populace. Once again it became clear that the incumbent political leadership has little faith in the collective judgement of the people and the constitutional body such as the EC is merely an appendage of the executive arm of the state.

The writer teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka. He researches and writes on migration and rights issues.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A farcical election

I have gone through the commentary of Mr. Mahfuz Anam published in *The Daily Star* on May 1, 2015. He wrote about three conclusions from the recently-held city corporation elections.

The government fixed the election time hoping that people, being tired with the 20-party alliance, would flock to the polling stations to cast their votes in their favour. But it did not turn out that way. Though people had to face inconvenience, they tolerated it to get their voting rights back. They wanted democracy to be established. We are baffled by the government's behaviour. When they were sure that people would reject the candidates backed by the BNP and Jamaat, then why did activists of the ruling party take control of the polling booths and stuff the ballot boxes with stamped ballot papers with the help of the police and other law-enforcing agents?

Nur Jaban
Chittagong

Rushing into war

A hundred years ago this week, over 1,000 female peace activists gathered from around the world to call for an end to war. The extraordinary meeting, known as the International Congress of Women, took place as World War I raged across the globe and marked the formation of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. It was organised by Dutch suffragist Dr Aletta Jacobs. The event took place in the Netherlands because of its neutral position during World War I. Two future Nobel Peace Prize winners took part in the US delegation: Jane Addams, the co-founder of Hull House and the sociologist Emily Greene Balch. Another veteran, former US defence secretary Chuck Hagel, who served in Vietnam, said, "It is interesting to me that many of those who want to rush this country into war and think it would be so quick and easy don't know anything about war," he said. "They come at it from an intellectual perspective vs having sat in jungles or foxholes and watched their friends get their heads blown off."

Politicians start wars. War is a distraction.
Ted Rudow III, MA
Palo Alto, CA, USA

India-Bangladesh LBA: The Cake with a Bite

DR. VIKASH KUMAR

SOON the Government of India would table the 119th Constitutional Amendment Bill to bring the revised India Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) into force. The modified bill, unlike the December 2013 bill, leaves out Assam from being a party to it.

This reminds me of two things. First, how domestic politics influence the foreign policy of a country especially in its neighbourhood. Both the 2013 and 2015 bills have bearing on Indian domestic regional politics. When the 2013 bill was to be tabled in the parliament, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) had opposed it to the extent of contesting the Parliament's jurisdiction to alter the territory of India by an amendment to the Constitution. The regime changed and the bill rested in peace. The 2015 bill would have a smooth sail in the Lok Sabha because there will be more than enough of the required two-third support, as TMC has reportedly agreed to stand by with the government. The reason behind leaving Assam out is probably the pressure of RSS and the state election which is due next year. The Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, has criticised the move and urged the Central Government for inclusion of the state in the bill, which might enable it to gain seven hundred acres of land in the swapping.

Second, I am reminded of what Partha Ghosh, an expert on South Asia, calls Bangladesh-India relations: an enigma. Indian officials said that their counterparts had been informed about the latest developments; however, the next day it was reported that Bangladeshi officials did not receive any formal communication. One fails to understand what encouraged the new government to bring the bill so soon after opposing it, and what prompted the TMC to agree to support it. Now where is the Teesta River issue? Does it not hold any relevance for West Bengal as it did in 2011 when Mamata Banerjee refused to accompany Manmohan Singh to Dhaka on the ground that she could not compromise with the interest of her state?

The LBA coming into force would enable the border management to be more efficient. It may also help curb

the cattle smuggling, arms trafficking and other trans-border crimes especially in the enclaves and undemarcated border areas. It would also ease the high density deployment of about 11 Battalions of Border Security Force (BSF) only to safeguard enclaves, which, in addition to being costly, also leads to frequent skirmishes with Bangladesh Border Guards (BGB). However, if the 262 km Assam-Bangladesh border remains unsettled, conflicts between the two countries would continue, albeit to a lesser degree.

It will also give an opportunity to anti-India elements to keep on blowing their trumpet.

Assam is one of the most affected states for alleged illegal migration and, as Mr. Gogoi says, leaving out Assam also taints the concept of cooperative federalism. In fact, Assam was the first state to raise its voice against this issue in the 80s. Even if the government thinks of bringing further amendments to this effect after the Assam election, there is no guarantee that NDA will have similar strength in the parliament considering the volatile nature of TMC and the increasing differences among its allies.

Bangladesh should welcome the amendment even if it happens in one or two attempts and as long as India fulfils its commitment. In any case Bangladesh would gain almost ten thousand acres of land in the swapping of enclaves and lands in adverse possessions.

If the Indian Government is indeed serious about improving relations with its neighbour, the LBA issues should be settled once and for all. It would also be an opportunity to rejuvenate the friendship between the two countries which has seen ups and downs in the last few decades. In the present geo-political atmosphere, India cannot afford to be seen as a friend of only one political group of Bangladesh; rather it will have to endeavour to win over the friendship of the nation irrespective of whoever is in power. It would also be in the Indian interest not to have contentious border issues with Bangladesh. Skirmishes on the border with a friendly country like Bangladesh will have perennial problems both for domestic politics on either side as well as for bilateral relations.

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COMMENTS

"Are we doomed to flawed polls?"
(May 01, 2015)

M A Kabir Talukder

As a community we are yet to measure the long lasting damage it is likely to have on the character and psychology of our young generation as they experience the disgusting irregularities in various elections. We can neither expect them to live up to the spirit of our Liberation War nor can we hope them to be kind and responsible citizens when they grow up. Surely, we are looking for short-term gains and heading for long-term disasters. It is high time to show collective wisdom for its reversal, the sooner the better.

Dev Saha

How can these people do it so bluntly in the daylight and get away so easily? Would we ever be able to have a true democratic mind?

"Most Needed and Most Neglected"
(May 01, 2015)

Rezaul Karim

Real pictures of our exploitative society have been reflected through this article. Many thanks to the writer.

PlainSpeaker

Thank you from the core of my heart for writing this article. I do hope that the employers would read it and ponder for a while.

"Bangladesh 8th, above Pakistan"
(May 01, 2015)

Md. Habib Ullah

Bravo and congratulations to the Bangladesh cricket team. We are all proud of you. To see Bangladesh in 8th position and above Pakistan has made us really very happy. We believe Bangladesh will continue to win like this and someday bring the highest award for the nation.