

Violence and violation of electoral code

The EC must ensure peaceful, fair elections

We are noticing, with growing dismay, that as the municipal polls are drawing closer, incidents of violence and violations of electoral codes are also on the rise. From MPs openly campaigning for their candidates to intimidating opponents with threats and physical attacks, all kinds of anomalies can be seen days before the elections. The CEC's insistence that the overall atmosphere is favourable for the polls, seems to contradict the realities on the ground.

It seems that despite categorical directives from the Election Commission, regarding rules and regulations of electioneering, candidates and their mentors, many of them ruling party MPs, are least bothered about honouring them. MPs have openly shown their support of candidates by being present during submission of nomination papers, staging showdowns, bringing out processions and motorcades and so on. The role of the Election Commission also seems to have been undermined as it has been quite ineffectual in curtailing such violations. Despite penalties and show cause letters, the rules have been flouted.

Attacks on candidates of opposition parties and rebels are ominous precursors of what may become an escalation of violence during the polls if it is not checked immediately. We urge the Election Commission to ensure a violence-free environment for candidates to freely carry out their campaign and also a fair electoral environment, without illegal patronage, so that the most deserving candidates win the various posts of the municipal elections.

DMCH's chronic equipment malfunction

Why must patients suffer?

PATIENTS getting admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) for serious ailments are confronted with the prospect of no treatment since much of the crucial medical equipment like CT scan and MRI machines are dysfunctional. The situation is inexplicable since much of the equipment in question has been out of order for as long as ten months. What it means is that patients must go to get their tests done in private diagnosis centres that charge heavily on tests that should have been readily available at DMCH but are not.

This is hardly the first time we have covered the issue of broken down equipment at DMCH, but it appears peoples' lives and wellbeing are not being prioritised. Hence patients with serious ailments like brain haemorrhage and skull fractures are left to fend for themselves to get the requisite tests done elsewhere, which it may be stated, could very well be beyond their financial means. And it is not merely about financial capacity. What happens when a patient arrives with a critical injury to the hospital and precisely how doctors are to ascertain whether that person needs surgery or not without a CT scan is beyond our comprehension.

One cannot rule out the prospect that such critical machinery is kept offline deliberately so that private clinics can make windfall profits at the expense of patients. Or perhaps the lengthy procurement procedures of public institutions render such equipment inoperable. Whatever may be the case, it remains imperative that crucial medical equipment is kept operational for smooth delivery of patient services. The hospital's authorities must take immediate steps to remedy such deplorable negligence.

COMMENTS

"No freedom to poke fun?"
(December 17, 2015)

Srijon Das

There are many pages on Facebook that always mock BNP and Jamaat-Shibir and support the government. So it's okay to mock other parties as long as you don't criticise the government?

Shams Noor

Mockery doesn't justify an arrest. Bangladesh is a signatory of the UN freedom of speech treaty and is required to allow satire. Obama and Cameron get mocked by their people in every comedy page on Facebook. Do you see the US and UK governments arresting the admins of those pages?

Arman H. Roxy

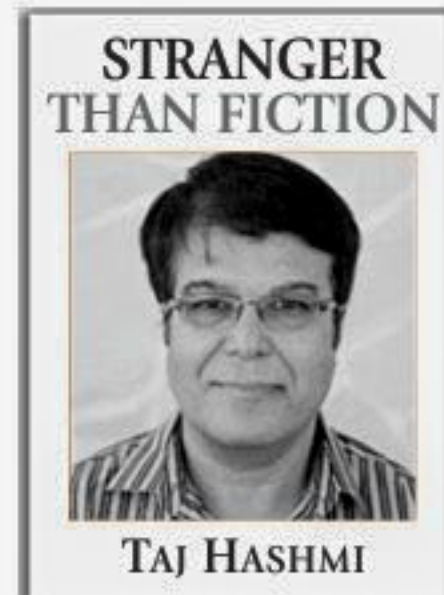
There should be freedom to criticise the wrong actions of the government.

"Sun rose from ruins"
(December 16, 2015)

Tarek Mollah

Our profound tribute to all the freedom fighters.

Should Bangladesh provide mercenaries to the Saudi coalition?



STRANGER THAN FICTION
TAJ HASHMI

WHAT the Saudi Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud declared on last Tuesday (December 15) about the formation of a so-called coalition of 34 Muslim nations to fight the ISIS and Islamist terror was dramatic, ridiculous, and ominous. It signalled the beginning of a long-drawn war between super powers, and

between Muslim nations on sectarian and other more important geopolitical issues.

Nothing could be more ridiculous than assuming that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and some other Muslim nations have suddenly decided to crush the ISIS for the sake of global and regional peace. It's unbelievable that countries like Turkey, who buy cheap oil from the ISIS and treat its injured fighters in their hospitals, can just abandon their protégés for some unknown reasons.

Then again, as there are multiple variables about the nature and outcome of the so-called coalition, made in absolute haste, so are there divergent opinions about how this coalition will work, or if it will work at all. Analysts aren't sure if the coalition will ever involve military forces anywhere. There is scepticism about the real motives of Saudi Arabia. Some analysts believe the coalition reflects Saudi Arabia's desire to prove that the kingdom and its state ideology (Wahhabism) have nothing to do with the ISIS.

Others argue that Saudi Arabia wants to contain the growing Iranian influence in the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon; and that the coalition reflects Saudi apprehension that the eventual lifting of nuclear-related sanctions against Iran will further strengthen its Shiite adversary. Some analysts believe there are no military implications of the coalition. One of them insists: "At the end of the day this is a political message, not an operational strategic one. It seems very ad hoc." He believes the coalition is all about containing Iranian influence in the region.

Monish Gulati is quite optimistic about the outcome of the coalition: "The coalition could serve to heal the divide amongst the Sunni Arab countries; the coming together of Turkey and Egypt could bring some positive influence to bear in countries like Palestine where cultural and sectarian rifts have influenced developments negatively. The coalition could even, to the relief of the West, address the refugee issue." Last but not least, some analysts believe the coalition is aimed at assuaging the world that Muslim nations aren't indifferent to Islamist terror attacks, and are determined to address the problem.

One, however, doesn't believe that the unilateral declaration by the Saudi defence minister has anything to do with fighting the ISIS and its ilk. One doesn't believe the coalition will bring the Sunni Muslims together, and will positively impact Palestine, and will

address the refugee problem. It seems like the coalition is all about overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria, and eventually containing the Russian and Iranian influence in the region. No wonder, unlike conventional military alliances, which take months and years to germinate, evolve and mature, one single declaration by a Saudi prince ushered in a mega military alliance of 34 nations. Surprisingly, some of the "coalition" members – including Pakistan and Bangladesh – only learnt about their inclusion in the alliance through media reports.

There's nothing inclusive or Islamic/Muslim about the coalition. Had defeating the ISIS been a motive, Syria and Iraq – the worst victims of ISIS terror – would have been in the coalition. The exclusion of Iran makes no sense either. While Saudi Arabia and

different ball game from sending troops for UN peacekeeping missions. Since Bangladesh came into being by fighting a just war against the perpetrators of an unjust one in 1971, joining an unjust war – a proxy war of super powers and their clients – is reprehensible, least dignified and desirable.

One is afraid, what Bangladesh has earned over the years by taking part in UN peacekeeping missions, would be thrown away by sending mercenaries to fight proxy wars in the Middle East. Since proxy wars lack transparency and legitimacy, no peace loving country can take part in such wars. Since the Saudi-led coalition isn't aimed at fighting the ISIS and other Sunni extremists but to contain Iran, Russia and other common enemies of Washington, Riyadh, and Ankara it's reprehensible that countries like Bangladesh should



Saudi Defence Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announces the coalition.

Turkey have been virtually at war with anti-ISIS forces in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, one wonders as to how these countries are members of a coalition, purportedly created to crush the ISIS and other Sunni terror outfits across the region! As the Saudi minister asserted, the coalition would be led by Saudi Arabia, which would also host a "joint operations centre" to coordinate efforts. Most importantly, military operations are very much in the agenda of the coalition.

In this backdrop, it's simply unbelievable that Bangladesh has decided to support the coalition, and might send mercenaries to tilt at windmills. What doesn't seem to have dawned on policymakers in the country is that sending mercenaries to kill innocent civilians in the "neo-war on terror" is altogether a

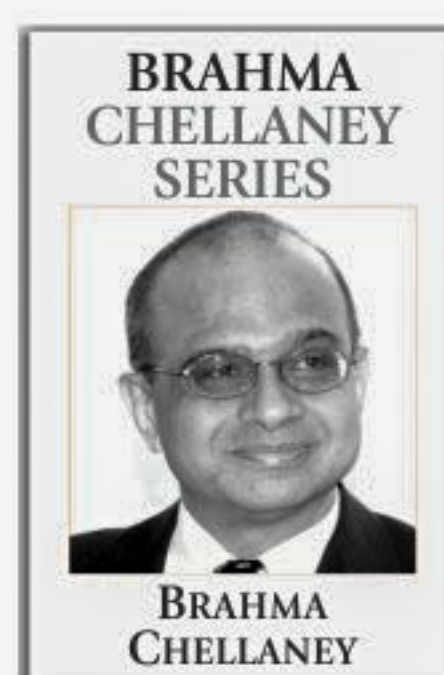
send mercenaries just to earn some foreign currency. Last but not least, as per the Constitution, Bangladesh can't engage in any warfare on behalf of some other country/entity in a foreign land (unless sanctioned by the UN).

Bangladesh has already sent thousands of maids to work for their Arab masters – in the most deplorable conditions – to augment its foreign currency reserve. It shouldn't even think of sending mercenaries to fight someone else's unjust wars. Self-respect, dignity, and commitment to peace and justice are more important than foreign currency. Nobody respects a nation of coolies, domestic servants and mercenaries.

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

Unaccountable China



BRAHMA CHELLANEY SERIES
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SINCE late 2013, China has been engaged in the frenzied creation of artificial islands and the militarisation of the South China Sea. This amounts to an alarming quest for control over a strategically crucial corridor through which \$5.3 trillion in trade flows each year. But what is even more shocking – not to mention dangerous – is that China has incurred no international costs for its behaviour.

Of course, the international community has a lot on its plate nowadays, not least a massive refugee crisis fuelled by chaos in the Middle East. But the reality is that, as long as China feels free to manoeuvre without consequence, it will continue to do so, fuelling tensions with its neighbours that could easily turn into all-out conflict, derailing Asia's rise.

A key component of China's strategy in the South China Sea is the dredging of low-tide elevations to make small islands, including in areas that, as China's Deputy Foreign Minister for Asian Affairs, Liu Zhenmin, recently acknowledged, "are far from the Chinese mainland." In China's view, that distance makes it "necessary" to build "military facilities" on the islands. And, indeed, three of the seven newly

constructed islets include airfields, from which Chinese warplanes could challenge the US Navy's ability to operate unhindered in the region.

By militarising the South China Sea, China is seeking to establish a de facto Air Defence Identification Zone like the one that it formally – and unilaterally – declared in 2013 in the East China Sea, where it claims islands that it does not control. China knows that, under international law, its claim to sovereignty over virtually all of the resource-endowed South China Sea, based on an "historic right," is weak; that is why it has opposed international adjudication. Instead, it is trying to secure "effective control" – which, under international law, enhances significantly the legitimacy of a country's territorial claim – just as it has done in the Himalayas and elsewhere.

But China's ambitions extend beyond the South China Sea: It aims to create a strongly Sino-centric Asia. Thus, the country recently established its first overseas military base – a naval hub in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa – and it has repeatedly sent submarines into the Indian Ocean. Moreover, China is engaging in far-reaching economic projects – such as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which entails the construction of infrastructure linking Asia to Europe – that will strengthen its presence in, and influence over, a number of countries, thereby recasting regional geopolitics in its image.

Meanwhile, US President Barack Obama's administration remains hesitant to back up its much-publicised "pivot" toward Asia with meaningful action – especially action to constrain China. Instead of, say, imposing sanctions or exerting localised military pressure on China, the Obama administration has attempted to pass the buck. Specifically, it has stepped up military cooperation with other Asia-Pacific countries, encouraged other claimants to territory in the South China Sea to shore up their defences, and supported a more active role in regional security for democratic powers like Australia, India, and even Japan.

To put it bluntly, that is not enough. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, unlike natural islands, China's constructed islands – which were built on top of natural features that did not originally rise above the water at high tide – do not have sovereignty over 12 nautical miles of surrounding sea. Yet it was not until recently that the United States sent a warship within 12 nautical miles of an artificial island. And even then, it was just a sail-through that an official Chinese mouthpiece dismissed as a "political show." The US did not challenge China's territorial claims directly, or demand that China halt its island-building programme.

In fact, even as China persists with its fast-paced dredging, which has already created more than 1,200 hectares of artificial land, US officials

insist that the South China Sea issue should not be allowed to hijack Sino-American relations. This feckless approach to China's quietly emerging hegemony in the South China Sea has heightened concerns of the region's smaller countries. They know that when two great powers bargain with each other, it is countries like them that usually lose.

Some already have. In 2012, China seized the disputed Scarborough Shoal, located well within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. The US, which had just brokered an agreement requiring Chinese and Filipino vessels to withdraw from the area, did nothing, despite its mutual-defence treaty with the Philippines.

But Asia's smaller countries are not the only ones that should be worried. Given the South China Sea's strategic importance, disorder there threatens to destabilise the entire region. Moreover, if China gets its way, it will become more assertive in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. Perhaps most important, if Chinese bullying enables it to ignore international rules and norms, a very dangerous precedent will have been set. One can easily think of other countries that would be sure to embrace it.

The writer is Professor of Strategic Studies at the New Delhi-based Center for Policy Research and Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy in Berlin, is the author of nine books, including *Asian Juggernaut: Water: Asia's New Battleground*; and *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2015. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reduce workload of Agargaon passport office

In 2010, I got my first MRP from the Uttara (Sector 5) passport office. With its looming expiry towards the end of this month, I had filled in the re-issuance form and went to the same office. I was told that Gulshan residents had to submit an application to the Agargaon office.

While there is no queue at the Uttara office, at Agargaon, the scene resembles

more like the Gabtoli cattle market on the eve of Eid-ul-Adha. Queues stretch all the way from one level via the staircase to the next. Loudspeakers blare names causing incredible noise pollution. And for the thousands of people, male and female, who assemble there every day, there is just one toilet.

Common sense dictates that the Agargaon HQ should pass on some of its workload to its satellite offices.

A very frustrated senior citizen
On e-mail

Canada should look for economic opportunity in South Asia

Canada has elected a new government to the office and it is time to explore and expand new economic opportunities. South Asian countries, mainly Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, have been opening up to foreign investment, overseas trade, establishing stronger bilateral relations with the West. The current prime minister may visit South Asian countries to initiate new bilateral relationships and strengthen economic ties.

Saikat Kumar Basu
Lethbridge, AB, Canada