

# Naraynganj mayoral polls

Replicate the ambience in national election

WE congratulate Ivy for carrying the day, but both she and Sakhawat deserve our congratulations for giving us a remarkable election.

The Naraynganj mayoral election was different in several ways from all previous ones. The amiable mood that prevailed during the run up to the election was unprecedented. The absence of hostile attitude between the rivals was very palpable. That all the contestants had vowed to ensure a peaceable atmosphere and accept the result, we hope, is a precursor of change in the electoral politics in the country.

We are glad to see the polls end without any serious law and order problem. In fact, the festive atmosphere has disproved the pre-ballot fear about peaceful polling in an area that has a history of violence-ridden elections, although the voting was not without theatrics like the one staged by a local Awami League leader. Now that a much anticipated election has ended, the result should be accepted with grace without levelling allegations of 'subtle rigging'.

There are, however, a few lessons that the political parties can take away from the Naraynganj election, given that the election was held in the backdrop of dialogues between the President and several frontline political parties to thrash out the best way to select the new election commission. For one thing, it is abundantly clear that a good election is as much a function of the election commission as it is the willingness of the major parties', particularly the ruling party's, to see a free, fair and peaceful election. For another, it is best to leave the final choice to the main stakeholder, the voters, and allow them to exercise their rights unhindered.

It is our hope that the Naraynganj election and the deportment displayed by the candidates will be emulated in future elections, national election included.

# Illiteracy still an issue

## Addressing it should be prioritised

WITH the progress it is currently making, Bangladesh needs another 44 years to have an initial level of literacy skills for all its citizens and 78 years to attain the advanced level, according to a report of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). While the number of people in each level of literacy has increased, the main driver behind this increase has been the overall population growth. And although progress has been made in various levels of literacy, the pace of progress has remained sluggish — 0.7 percent annually.

This is obviously unsatisfactory as the progress made has clearly been stymied, most noticeably, by social constraints. One example would be the large number of children, who are still not attending schools in spite of the government making primary education free for all. Instead, they are being forced into child labour to economically support their struggling families.

But even when we do have individuals going through the education system for a long enough period of time, sometimes, their level of literary competency remains awfully low compared to what is acceptable. Not only does this cast a shadow on the quality of education that is being provided, but it also indicates to the existence of deep systemic problems within the entire system that needs addressing for there to be any substantial improvement.

And to identify these and address the most fundamental problems within our education system, the authorities must involve experts to devise a comprehensive strategy for improving the quality of education. Meanwhile, by removing the various social constraints, access to education can be increased significantly across the board.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Encourage children to play chess

Magnus Carlsen has done a great job by winning three World Chess Championships on the trot at the mere age of 26. A study shows how four months of chess instruction significantly raised the IQ scores of 4000 Venezuelan students, comprising of both boys and girls.

Our children should be advised to play chess instead of cruel and violent virtual games that can turn impressionable minds into trigger-maniac brutes. It will increase their IQ, critical thinking, power of imagination and concentration.

Sujit De  
Kolkata

### Reducing rate of DSSC tax

Dhaka South City Corporation (DSSC) has been reassessing household, commercial and industrial units under the corporation areas to increase holding tax. City dwellers are in panic. The approved rate for tax is 10 percent of assessment amount – months' house rent is deducted from the yearly rent as maintenance charges. On balance, 10 percent amount of the 10 months' rent is counted as tax for the year. The tax amount is less if there is a loan, or if the person does not use the house. Even though the city corporation authority declared that tax rate would not be increased, it seems like the new tax figure will be many folds the present amount.

We urge the elected Mayor of DSSC to reduce the rate to from the current 10 percent to eight percent.

Md. Ashraf Hossain  
Ramna

# Narayanganj shows the way



SHAKHAWAT LITON

*The win in Narayanganj is a big boost for the ruling Awami League as it won for the first time a competitive mayoral election by defeating its rival BNP. Its leaders are portraying the win as an expression of people's confidence in the government. But according to political analysts, Selina Hayat Ivy's personal popularity for her clean image also contributed largely to her win. The AL leaders should pay heed to this point.*

THE Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC) election is undoubtedly a stellar example of free and fair polls. The way people are lauding the polls in social media and in other forums shows that the peaceful election has raised their expectation for good elections. It has also restored their confidence in the electoral system, which had largely been damaged in the last three years due to the rampant attacks on it.

The entire electoral atmosphere in Narayanganj city was unique in the recent history of our elections.

During electioneering for more than two weeks, mayoral candidates nominated by two archrivals AL and BNP did not engage in the mudslinging that is a common phenomenon in our national politics.

They refrained from spitting venom on each other by attacking each other's character. Their supporters did not attack the opponents' election campaign. Their campaign was focused on various local and national issues.

This atmosphere during the run up to the election contributed to ensure a peaceful polling day. There was not a single untoward incident reported in the polling day—something unprecedented in our election record. This speaks for the necessity of candidates with clean images to make an election good.

The Narayanganj election once again proved that the vital pre-condition of a free, fair and peaceful election is non-interference in the polls by the government and the party in power.

If the party in power refrains from influencing the polls, the law enforcement agencies and officials of the civil administration engaged in the election are able ensure a peaceful atmosphere for fair election.

Nominating candidates by political parties with clean images also matters. Candidates with criminal records and black money holders with their efforts to manipulate the election damage the polling atmosphere which hinders the Election Commission to conduct free and fair elections.

The same EC that was unable to hold free and fair election in the last three years since the January 5, 2014 parliamentary election was able to conduct a peaceful election in Narayanganj because of the other factors for fair election.

This EC was also able to hold free and fair elections in five city corporations - Gazipur, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet. It has been possible because of non-interference in the polls by the party in power. BNP

supported mayoral candidates won these elections by defeating their opponents backed by AL.

But things have changed in the January 5 parliamentary election and subsequent elections in local government bodies - Upazila Parishads, municipalities, Union Parishads and three city corporations in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Fairness of all those elections was questioned due to undue interference in the polls by ruling party men, making the law enforcement agencies and civil administration unable to play an effective role for fair and peaceful elections.

The Narayanganj election proved again that the EC alone cannot make an election free and fair alone. Free, fair and peaceful

also contributed largely to her win. The AL leaders should pay heed to this point.

The AL leaders are also claiming that the NCC polls proved that free and fair election is possible under their government. It is true, but for this, they must restrain party men from interfering in the polls. In the last three years, the ruling party men resorted to exert undue influence in almost all elections to ensure victory. Therefore, the party needs to do more to restore people's confidence in their pledges that the EC would be allowed to hold free and fair elections in the future.

The vote bagged by the BNP mayoral candidate also deserves careful analysis. Obtaining around one lakh vote by a fresher still shows BNP's popularity in election politics. His clean image contributed to drum up people's support. The BNP



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

election is an outcome of collective efforts by all the players engaged in the polls.

Yet, the need for a strong EC cannot be ignored as the constitutional body gives the leadership. A weak leadership cannot play an effective role. The current EC is an example of it.

The underlying meaning of the messages from the NCC polls is immensely significant.

The win in Narayanganj is a big boost for the ruling Awami League as it won for the first time a competitive mayoral election by defeating its rival BNP. Its leaders are portraying the win as an expression of people's confidence in the government. But according to political analysts, Selina Hayat Ivy's personal popularity for her clean image

candidate could have bagged more votes had party's local leaders unitedly worked for him. The party leaders should question the fairness of the NCC polls only if they have any substance. Raising allegations for the sake of defending their defeat in the NCC polls will discredit the party further.

The NCC polls stand out as a model election. It shows a path for national politics, which if followed, will supply a fresh breath of air into the confrontational culture in politics, it will guide us on how to hold free and fair elections. Application of the NCC model in future elections will contribute to invigorate democracy in Bangladesh. Narayanganj shows us the way. We need to follow it.

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# Remembering the bright



ASHAFAQUE SWAPAN

December is a special month: It brings back memories of the liberation of our country in 1971. It's a moment of pride, patriotic affection, gratitude to all who fought for our freedom and our foreign allies especially India and the erstwhile Soviet Union, respectful remembrance of those who laid down their lives.

I was a precocious pre-teen at that time. Independence came at a terrible price. Of the many losses at the time, the murder of intellectuals is a particularly heart-breaking outrage that haunts me to this day.

I continue to feel the loss personally. Dhaka was a small town then. Everybody seemed to know each other. Two martyred doctors, Dr. Fazle Rabbi, a brilliant physician, and Dr. Alim Chowdhury, a superb ophthalmologist, were close friends of my father from their medical college days. (My father, the deceased paediatrician Dr. Badrul Alam, designed the first makeshift ShahidMinar in 1952. He was targeted by the Pakistan Army in 1971, but that's a story for another day.)

My father was deeply immersed in cultural activities during his medical college days, so he knew some Dhaka University intellectuals as well. I recall running into Munier Chowdhury, a celebrated scholar of Bengali literature, at New Market. As my parents exchanged pleasantries with him, I recall being a little star-struck. I was still too young to have read his marvellous anthology of critical articles in *Tulanomulok Samalochona* (Comparative Criticism) or his hard-hitting book-length appraisal of Mir Mosharraf Hossain in *Mir Manas* (The Mir Persona). I was awestruck to meet in person the man who introduced me to Shakespeare. Chowdhury had translated Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, which was broadcast in Dhaka Television. The Bengali title was *Mukhora Ramani Basikaran*. It was a top-notch production carried on the broad shoulders of the great thespian Golam Mostafa, and I daresay the first thorough exposure to

Shakespeare for the Bengali-speaking audience in erstwhile East Pakistan.

When Dr. Rabbi and Dr. Chowdhury visited our home, my father's eyes used to light up. They chatted with abandon as they reminisced about their student days. History lecturer Ghiyasuddin Chowdhury, a burly bear of a man with a booming voice and the gentleness of natures, was a family friend.

We did not learn of their deaths until after December 16. I can't describe what a pall of sadness it cast on our joy after being liberated by from the Pakistani military monsters.

When we heard about it, the shock and pain was personal. These were not just celebrated intellectuals. Many of these were people I knew, people I had seen talking and

take on our intellectuals in the marketplace of ideas. In a free country, they would not have the lopsided advantage of having the support of a foreign reactionary government. They could not kill their ideas, so they killed them physically instead.

It is no easy task to quantify the terrible loss to our intellectual capital. There is one thing that is not mentioned often enough. The intellectuals who were singled out for murder in 1971 had something in common. Both Dr. Rabbi and Dr. Chowdhury, for instance, like pretty much most of the intellectuals targeted in 1971 espoused progressive, secular values which religious fanatics during those days viewed with alarm and hatred. That has not changed.

In 1971 they targeted intellectuals, today



PHOTO: STAR

laughing. What made it particularly unbearable was that they had not died in battle. These intellectuals were hunted down in cold blood at the cusp of our victory by religious bigots, adversaries who already knew they had lost. So they took one last murderous swipe at intellectuals they had failed to thwart with ideas and argument.

Religious extremists, now and in those days, make a great pretence of moral principle and courage. Yet in 1971, when push came to shove, they took the path of unprincipled barbarity and ultimate cowardice. They realised they would come up short when they

they target innocent bystanders whether in a restaurant in Dhaka, a shopping market in Berlin, or an art gallery in Ankara. They remain as devoid of humanity and decency as ever, a dark, evil and monstrous force.

I live in hope that the values of a plural, humane, tolerant and inclusive society will ultimately triumph in our country and in the world.

It won't happen a moment too soon.

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