

New law on formation of EC

President's comments heartening

WE welcome the honourable President's remarks made while talking to the JSD leadership who went to call on him to discuss the issue of selecting the Election Commission (EC). He said that he would consider the proposal of the enactment of such a law in line with relevant article of the constitution. We laud this stance as the country has not yet been able to enact a law in this regard as yet despite the constitution spelling it out quiet plainly.

A reliable election commission is kernel to the flourishing of true democracy in any country. Its role is vital in not only making democracy vibrant, its effective oversight of the electoral process inculcates people's confidence in both democracy and in the office of the EC. As such it should be constituted on the basis of a legal framework as our constitution demands, and as prevalent in many countries, and not on any arbitrary formula or partisan consideration. We are only too aware of the consequences of ad hoc procedures in appointing the EC.

In this regard, we recall the recent statement of the Prime Minister where she said that election in Bangladesh would be held the way it is conducted in other democratic countries. That necessitates an EC that has the confidence of all the stakeholders, which is not the case now. Election in a true democracy is a complex affair where the commission exercises its clout without extraneous let or hindrance to keep the electoral process free, fair and impartial. We believe the PM should address this issue and enact a law to take care of this problem soonest.

Money rolling in District elections

Where is the Election Commission?

AS voters go to polls today in the district election, allegations have been made against certain candidates and people's representatives who are backing candidates in the forthcoming district elections, that substantial amount of cash is being spent on the campaign trail. According to news published in a leading Bangla daily on December 27, in 61 districts there are at least 30 rebel Awami League (AL) leaders who intend to contest. Moreover, candidates of opposition parties like BNP, Jatiya Party are being favoured by many ordinary voters in AL-held districts where some of the biggest spending is allegedly happening to woo voters.

The culture of spending stupendous amounts of money is nothing new in our elections. Buying of votes is an unpalatable truth of the election process in Bangladesh. News has emerged of candidates resorting to this practice in the various districts of Mymensingh, Manikganj, Barguna, etc. Indeed, a certain candidate from Bogra has apparently promised to distribute rice earmarked as relief food, for votes. Such practices go beyond immorality; they are a direct violation of electoral conduct and yet it is unclear what exactly the Election Commission (EC) has done.

There is the danger of these elections becoming a travesty where cash transactions rule supreme in the absence of any visible action by the EC against electoral misconduct; where people are unduly influenced with the lure of gifts in cash, or in some cases, kind. Unless the EC is willing to act (in conjunction with local administration) decisively against such gross violations, elections like this will not reflect people's aspirations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: AFP

Tigers and Kiwis face-off

Bangladesh's tour of New Zealand is already underway. It is an important series for both the teams considering that they both lost their last ODI series. NZ were crushed by the mighty Aussies in their recently concluded ODI series in Australia. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, they also lost their last ODI series against England in Bangladesh. Thus, this series is crucial for both teams and for their confidence.

NZ has had quite a dismal time in ODI matches since September 2016. In order to get their form back, the Kiwis must bounce back and put up a good fight against the Tigers. No doubt, they will try everything to win.

The Tigers, on the other hand, must not be taken lightly. They may have lost the ODI series against England, but they once again showed good fighting spirit. And they do have a very good track record of surprising any team on their day. The Tigers do, however, have to ensure that all their key players are in good physical condition. Mustafizur Rahman has just recovered from a shoulder injury which prevented him from playing for a while.

Overall, there is no doubt that the clash between the Tigers and the Kiwis should produce a great spectacle for everyone.

Minhaj Ahmed
Uttara, Dhaka

The year that was for us



RUBANA HUQ

1 and 9 have always been the most significant numbers in my life. Most of what has happened to me (save one) has always taken place on dates that add to either 1 or 9. I am superstitious. When I take flights, I add up flight numbers to check if they add up to 1 or 9, so that I can rest in peace and not suffer air fright. I also add up numbers of my hotel rooms so that I know whether my stay is going to be meaningful or bland. So, when we hit 2016, I almost instantly knew that it would be a year that would be, at least, eventful. But little did I know that assessing 2016 was going to get tricky mid way. Holey marked 2016 so badly that no good news was good enough, no achievement looked worthy of mention, and none looked like a hero. With Holey, it wasn't as if we had just lost people there; for most of us, we had lost a piece of the fabric of pride belonging to Bangladesh. In spite of 45 years of terrorist attacks in Europe, consisting of 4,724 people dying from bombings, 2,588 being assassinated, 159 from hijackings, 114 from building attacks and thousands being wounded or going missing, ironically the news of Bangladesh always takes the world by storm. Somehow...we are always on the disaster map. Freedom of expression is almost never as expected, democracy is always apparently 'wavering', freedom status is 'partly free' (according to the Freedom House report), political pluralism and participation always questioned, and corruption apparently 'endemic'. In the

report of Human Rights Watch, in 2016 Bangladesh has been termed as pursuing an authoritarian direction, with the authorities attempting to hinder civil liberties. But, luckily there are also reports out there that mention that the country has "maintained an impressive track record on growth and development" (World Bank) while growing nearly at 6 percent per annum over the last decade, with more than 15 million Bangladeshis moving out of the poverty level, and with life expectancy, literacy, and

Seems that there are just too many "if-only" factors surrounding Bangladesh. That's not surprising at all. People from all over the world have a difficulty figuring us out. Where does all that spirit come from, they wonder. From within us, we respond. What else sung from within us this year? Our spirit of justice soared with Motiur Rahman Nizami and Mir Quasem Ali being hanged this year. Our spirit of pride reached newer heights with Bangladesh topping the South Asian countries in gender equality for the

up the global spirit by appealing to all to nurture the "restless urge" for the liberals. All's not over for the world. Hope's not dead yet for anyone including us. For example, Democracy in Bangladesh was pronounced dead quite a while back. But thanks to the CPR administered by the collective national conscience, it seems to be working better now. With Ivy breezing through the election, with Obaidul Kader visiting ailing Manna at the hospital, the breeze of democracy smells sweet indeed.

For me personally, 2016 ushered in promise of yet another brilliant year. My optimism peaked with a movie, 'Aynabaji' I watched a few weeks back. 'Aynabaji' deserves kudos. It smells of Lacan as we see ourselves in the mirror in true colours; it celebrates Camus with his L'etranger in a more evolved manner and style; it aptly reflects on the erroneous impressions that we impose on others of ourselves and how quickly we switch places to escape and to punish the other. The movie critiques the judiciary, the law enforcing agencies and yet gets away with a clean chit of a good story teller. It reminded me of another movie called "NO" that I watched in 2012 where René, an in-demand advertising man working in Chile in the late 1980s, uses advertising tactics in political campaigns, when the Chileans decided against the dictator Augusto Pinochet. Often story tellers speak of truths in far bolder fashion than many of us ever dare to do. With 2017 approaching, truth should be best told through creativity and in case if reality hinges on suspicion, may we all find a way to creatively critique, and salute tolerance.

Happy New Year to all Bengalis and the rest who live on this soil of ours and beyond!

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per capita food intake increasing in a landmass of 147,570 square kilometres which is home to 160 million people of the world out of which some 50 million or 30 percent are between the ages of 10-24. There are reports that also predict that Bangladesh is all set to enjoy a demographic advantage for the next couple of decades, while becoming a middle-income country by 2021, impressing the entire world, if only the growth is inclusive, if only the urbanisation process is more effective and if only there's macroeconomic stability and if only majority, out of other factors, the country can address the energy and infrastructural deficits.

second consecutive year, standing at a 72nd ranking out of the 144 countries covered in the Global Gender Gap Report 2016 published by the World Economic Forum (WEF). Our spirit soared when there were young geniuses like Ian Shakil breaking boundaries with technological leaps. Our spirits were soothed with the workers returning to work in Ashulia, assuring that all's well with the industry and the USD 50 billion export by 2021 is not just a dream.

So, is all well with Bangladesh? In spite of the most turbulent turns in global economy and politics, Economist, in its Christmas issue brilliantly summed

Violence: Neoliberalism at the root of it



NADINE SHAAANTA MURSHID

Given the current world order, neoliberalism, with a right wing and/or authoritarian tilt, this is perhaps inevitable.

But first, here's a brief primer. Neoliberalism, an ideology marked by concepts of privatisation, trade liberalisation, economic liberalisation, deregulation, and personal responsibility, is a manifestation of free-market capitalism that suggests that wealth "trickles down" to the poor when wealth is allocated to top income earners of a country. Often termed 'Reagonomics' because it was under President Reagan in the United States (and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom) that Milton Friedman and Hayek's idea of trickle down policy bore fruit in response to embedded liberalism's failure, neoliberal policies are a mechanism by which wealth is redistributed to the wealthy from the poor, by use of policies that favour the wealthy, such as tax breaks for investments, low corporate tax rates, deregulation, budget cuts, and deindustrialisation at home (Harvey 2003). The state actively partners with corporations by means of policies such as bailout packages and other schemes that allocate public property to corporations for commercial use. The EPZs that we see in the outskirts of Dhaka are a prime example. Arguably, as part of the neoliberal project, the state becomes the apparatus through which the capitalist class maintains its class power, albeit in various degrees in different parts of the world, while the working class find themselves de-unionised and exploited as real wages decrease and the welfare state is rolled back, or as the case may be – the welfare state never sees the light of day.

Hence, the neoliberal era did not do away with the state as many would argue; it transformed the role of the state from that of an interventionist to a partner of the corporate world; instead of intervening in the economy to prevent market failure (the key role of government in the pre-neoliberal era), the state allows for proliferation of donor-funded non-government organisations (NGOs), particularly in the developing world, to provide social services and public goods, including education and banking services for the marginalised, in the absence of government provision of goods and services. That little is known about whom NGOs are accountable to and where their funds come from is a problem that shrouds much of the developing world including Bangladesh (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2014).

Margaret Thatcher had claimed "there is no such thing as society – only individual men and women" to which we can apply the argument of scholars such as Ulrich Beck who suggest that under neoliberalism citizens have had to become entrepreneurs of their own lives, taking personal responsibility for their failures as public-private governance paved the way for entrepreneurial citizenship. This

idea of individualism connects with ideas of private property, personal responsibility, and family values to create neoliberal subjects who are coerced into their new identities. As such, being an entrepreneur is not just about economic success but also personal development.

This creation of neoliberal subjects by making individuals become entrepreneurs of their own lives has happened both in old capitalist countries and developing countries such as Bangladesh that are new to capitalism. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have coerced nations like Bangladesh to implement neoliberal policies, better known as "structural adjustment policies," based on the Washington Consensus. These structural adjustment policies aimed at liberalisation of developing nations have been criticised as an attack on institutions that "democratise gender relations and mitigate patriarchy by alleviating women's poverty and overwork" such as trade unions, welfare statism, and social solidarity.

It is under this neoliberal system created by such structural adjustment policies that various institutions have emerged – including

resources and income as well as care for the family in a system that doesn't have adequate health care provision for its citizens, a system that doesn't make child care a priority which means most workplaces don't have child care options, where elder care is supposed to be provided by family members, whether or not they are able to.

Sexual harassment at the work place, and on the streets, rape on public transportation, harassment on the way and back from work – all of these persist because neoliberalism while prioritising competition and efficiency has made women part of the work force, has not made the environment friendly towards them. It hasn't dismantled the system that has historically oppressed women and continues to oppress women. Instead, it has created isolation. So when women experience all these forms of oppression – at home, workplace, and on the streets – they have nowhere to turn for real help, which means the violence against them is maintained over time, in more and more locations.

At the same time neoliberalism creates inequality – even amidst increasing Gross Domestic Product, which is what we hear most



microfinance – to empower women, along with industries that employ women. This creation of employment (at garment factories for instance) and self-employment for women should perhaps be lauded, but because it has happened within a patriarchal structure, what we see is a rise in neopatriarchy and gender inequality. This is perhaps where the distinction between old and new forms of patriarchy needs to be made; while the former is what Kandiyoti calls "classic patriarchy", the latter is a product of neoliberal policies that marginalise and isolate women while enhancing their participation in economic activities and the labour market. Women are now found to be in locations of tension and conflict as violent and coercive practices are used to extract labour from women.

Neoliberalism is an attack on women's liberation. It has made women into workers, including low-wage workers, who work long hours, who are made to feel "responsible" for those long hours spent away from their homes – children and family, because patriarchy lives on, but in new forms. Women now have the double burden, as some call it, of providing

about. But violence and inequality are "mutually constitutive" – which is perhaps what Galtung (1969) was pointing to when he coined the term structural violence. He was among the first to explain how inequality fosters violence, which in turn creates more inequality.

Thus, any effort to reduce violence must be accompanied by efforts to reduce inequality. As we look to the future, this is what I hope we can do: recognise that without addressing the various forms of economic and social inequalities we cannot address violence. Recognise that structural problems – including climate change, poverty, weak institutions, bad governance, lack of sanitation and access to water, transportation, unsafe roads and streets, together with a culture of misogyny exacerbates structural violence.

We must take it upon ourselves to make structural violence a priority by working towards dismantling the neoliberal structure that continues to produce it.

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