

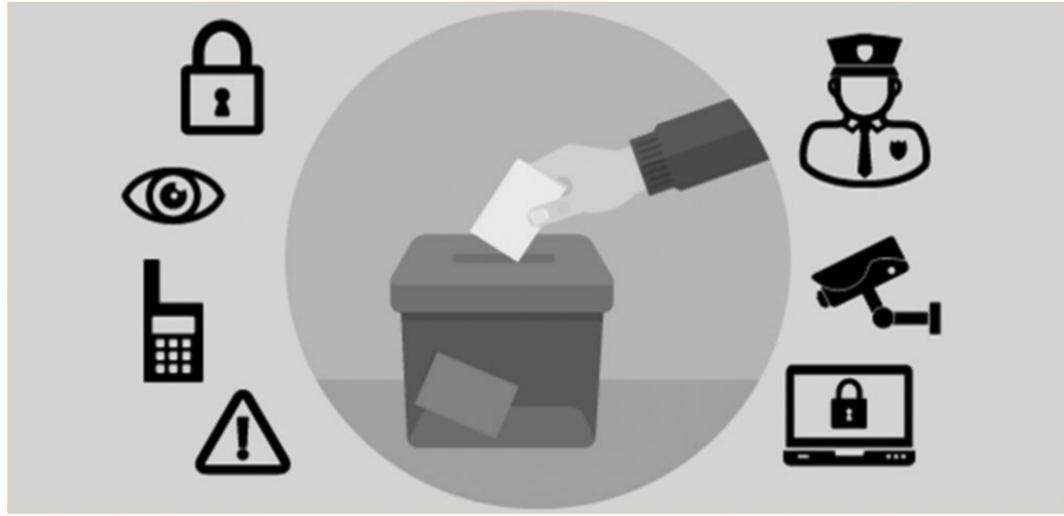
Electoral security: Important for a fair election

M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

THE much-awaited dialogue with the Election Commission (EC) had started with the participation of some prominent civil society activists and members of civil society organisations (CSOs), followed by senior media personalities both from print and electronic media. These dialogues would continue, as per the work programme that EC has released, with other stakeholders, chiefly the political parties who matter most. The aim of these dialogues, according to the EC, is to gather opinions on a few important issues as identified by them so that a free, fair and all-inclusive 11th Parliament election could be held with the current parliament un-dissolved and the AL still in office.

The EC's effort definitely deserves praise as it has continued the good practice that was initiated in 2008 but discontinued during the Rakib Commission. Like the CSOs, voters and the public in general do not want a repetition of the election held in 2014, which did not quite help sustain the democratic process in Bangladesh.

However, the dialogue that the EC has held so far would have been more meaningful if they were held to thrash out specific issues and suggest the *modus operandi*. The current exercise has not brought out the operational aspect of the issues discussed. Nevertheless, most of the participants emphasised the need to hold an acceptable election where voters can vote freely and for the EC to take steps to create such an environment. There were suggestions of all kinds, but the dialogue seems to have revolved around two issues: (i) deployment of the armed forces for effective electoral security, and (ii) reintroduction of "no vote". There were participants who had different opinions particularly on the issue of deployment of the armed forces during the next election, forgetting the fact that deployment of the armed forces has been a practice in all parliamentary elections since 1973, when the first post-liberation election was held. Those opposing the idea could not forward a



solid logic in their defence.

The requirement for deploying the armed forces is connected with the electoral security which features most prominently in our country's electoral governance, particularly when elections are held under a political government. While securing the electoral process is a very important factor, particularly in our country, it is not the only factor for ensuring a free, fair and acceptable election.

However, there are other factors that would create difficulties for the EC in holding elections under the present condition of Article 123(2)(a) of the Constitution, without dissolving the Parliament. These factors are: (i) continuous *patron-client* political culture; (ii) weaknesses within the electoral institutions; (iii) a polarised civil administration including law enforcement agencies; and (iv) electoral security arrangement. These are very important factors that would come into play in spite of the fact that Bangladesh has, theoretically, one of the most powerful electoral institutions and largest infrastructures of EC in the subcontinent. Yet, in practice, it is the weakest institution as far as its effectiveness is concerned.

One of the weak areas of electoral governance in our country is lack of continuation of the institutional good practices and planning an action-oriented electoral process. One glaring example of shortcomings in addressing the security issues, for example, is that the EC is not yet sure whether they would need additional forces in the form of armed forces, and if so, who would be their controlling authority—EC or magistrate, etc. The fact is, the EC would need the help of the armed forces to execute its security scheme, however ill-planned. The fact remains that our electoral management is becoming increasingly dependent on the security agencies, mostly of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which by and large would remain under political influence, as seen in the past.

Therefore, the armed forces are viewed by a large section of voters and the public as a neutral institution and they feel confident and safe in their presence. Since electoral security is one of the important determinants of an acceptable electoral process, the EC must be the one to decide on the issue. It is preferable that the armed forces be within the definition of "law enforcing agency" under Article 2 (xiiia) the Representation

of the People Order (RPO). Being deployed under the said article does not mean that they would be automatically deployed. It would not be tasked unless the EC felt the need for it, otherwise having such a potent force at EC's disposal would not pay any dividend.

I have very briefly highlighted the important aspect of security planning and deployment of security forces to ensure maximisation of security so that the weaker section of the voters, women and minority voters, feel safe to vote while the officials at field level feel confident to discharge their duties.

Unless the voters feel safe—and if the EC fails to deploy forces under its control within a security template that should have been prepared by now (and if the use of security forces is reactive rather than proactive)—it will be a total wastage of the 70 percent of the election budget apportioned to security. What is to be noted is that it is the EC that is in charge of creating a secure environment. Therefore, let it decide on the nature and quantum of force that would be appropriate, and who should be their controlling authority during the election.

M. Sakhawat Hussain is a former Election Commissioner, a columnist and PhD fellow.

Unplanned construction bane for city

Policy for land usage urgently needed

BANGLADESH Bureau of Statistics data tells us that we are losing agriculture land at the rate of one percent per year. Indeed the unplanned construction housing boom in the capital city has transformed the landscape of the city beyond recognition. Most of it has come from transforming agricultural land, and government data tells us that while we were losing 13,413 hectares of farmlands per year till the year 2000, that figure skyrocketed to 68,000 hectares per annum after that. It has become increasingly difficult to hold on to farmlands and water bodies in the face of relentless construction by real estate companies in the absence of any government policy governing land usage.

We have covered this issue extensively over the years and although some hope has been pinned on the proposed "City and Area Planning Act 2017", it remains in draft form—yet to be passed into legislation through passage in parliament. Such a policy would put a halt to any and all unplanned construction which we have been seeing over the last three decades. Any realtor would first have to seek permission and there would be provision for rigorous imprisonment for any party violating the rules. Given the dire straits we find ourselves in when it comes to land grabbing, it is high time that the policy is enacted into law. Experts believe that with such a policy in place, the proposed zoning of the city, and indeed the country, between agriculture and non-agriculture lands could get off the drawing board and we could finally move towards a planned city.

Combating human trafficking

Asia-Pacific countries must address push and pull factors

THE Bangladesh foreign minister has called upon the business community of Asia-Pacific region to join hands with the governments of the region in combating human trafficking and smuggling, while addressing the Bali Process Government and Business Forum in Perth, Australia. Although he didn't elaborate as to how business community could help, the "root causes" of human trafficking must be addressed by the governments.

Human trafficking has its own push and pull factors. Whereas "push" factors include extreme poverty and abusive a home environment that compel people to enter situations leading to trafficking, "pull" factors are those that create a demand for slave labour and a market in which the traffickers operate, thrive and profit. The kind of inhumane trafficking and smuggling witnessed across the Asia-Pacific region has all these factors. Many of those fallen in the trap of trafficking somewhat knew what might happen in the precarious boat journey across the sea and afterwards, yet they were so desperate that they decided to take their chances.

For its part, Bangladesh must recognise that those resorting to a perilous path in pursuit of happiness neither want to "tarnish the country's image" nor are "mentally sick". First, the government needs to realise and recognise what makes people so desperate to leave the country, and then seek to address them.

The governments must address the push and pull factors behind this phenomenon by intensifying cooperation with each-other while seeking to put an end to this problem.



sector in recent times," constituting "a significant part of the bank's total loan portfolio." When exposed to various credit shocks, 23 out of 49 banks would become undercapitalised mainly due to default by large borrowers, the report said. Having refused (for years) to admit the severity of trouble the banking sector is mired in, this is perhaps the clearest official admission till date as to the true gravity of the crisis at hand.

Yet, according to reports in the international media, there is a huge amount of defaulted loans "even outside of this" that is not being reported anywhere! The only reason why they have managed to remain hidden for so long, according to reports, is because of data manipulation and accounting frauds. Even the BB had, in fact, found several state-run and commercial banks under-reporting bad loans and inflating profits in its own inspections.

But putting that aside for a moment, a peek at the "officially" admitted figures alone should be enough to set alarm bells ringing. The amount of non-performing loans till April 2017, for example, stood at Tk 1,113.47 billion

even after all the (questionable) loan rescheduling and more, as per official data. This figure becomes even more astounding when one takes into account the fact that, in 2009, defaulted loans stood at only (relatively speaking) Tk 381.48 billion of which, more than half was already written-off.

Given that outstanding loans had amounted to Tk 62.632 billion at the end of 2016, over the last one year,

what it was a year before. During the April-June period of 2017, total shortfall went up from Tk 9.59 billion in the previous quarter to Tk 61.91 billion, showing that there has actually not been any improvement whatsoever; rather, performance of (most) banks have continuously deteriorated.

Given the circumstances, the *South Asian Monitor*, in one of its report, concludes that, "If things continue in

11.6 billion in recapitalisation funds between fiscal year 2011-12 and 2016-17. With all that recapitalisation fund predictably failing to incentivise banks to improve their performances (why would it?), the government, in June 2017, had again allocated Tk 20 billion to recapitalise the state-owned banks, perhaps, in hopes of a miracle and, in all likelihood, not for the last time either.

In the midst of all these, what remains most worrying, however, is the government's complete unwillingness, for whatever reasons, to address or even recognise for that matter, the real root causes behind the banking sector being in a shambles, despite economists, business-experts, the media and even citizens constantly harping on them. And the real "root of the problem", as highlighted by *The Economist* in a June 26, 2017 report, is "poor risk management"; as state-owned banks have, for decades, "lent large amounts to big, influential borrowers, who have been known to be lax with repayments."

Moreover, the fact that "defaulters are rarely penalised" and loans "routinely restructured" instead "to permit further lending to the same borrowers", means that the "regulatory response to the banking sector's problems" itself, lies at the root of it.

A large part of the solution requires for the government to hold banks "strictly accountable" to achieve the "numerical targets agreed upon with the authorities" and to implement reforms that would "focus on improving supervision, containing risks from loan concentration and improving the legal and financial framework for loan recovery" as pointed out in an IMF report. Ultimately, what is needed first and foremost, is the "political will" which the IMF report generously terms as having "been limited so far"; but in truth, has been nearly non-existent.

That "political will", however, is not very likely to just automatically emerge from within the government on its own, as is often the case. The only realistic way to bring that about, is for conscious citizens, experts, activists and others to exert sustained pressure on the government to ditch its disastrous policies, which by now, is clearly meant to serve only the interest of a minor few, at the expense of everyone else in general and the nation and its economy as a whole.

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Banking sector woes worse than you may think!



defaulted loans have increased by nearly Tk 11 billion—a record for Bangladesh. To put things more into perspective, according to a BB report published on March 23, 2017, a whopping 9.23 percent of total outstanding loans in the banking sector (then) were in default. If that wasn't bad enough, once restructured and rescheduled loans are factored in, that figure actually increases to somewhere close to 16 percent.

And it gets worse, still; despite the dangerous implications of all of this, banks have been allowed, somehow, to get away with having reduced levels of provisions against potential losses. At the end of March 2016, loan-loss provision totalled Tk 266 billion, with a shortfall of Tk 42.9 billion, according to the central bank's Regulation and Policy Department. Yet, provision shortfall went up again in the second quarter of 2017 by 18.33 percent in comparison to

this manner, Bangladesh is bound to face a severe recession, similar to the financial crash faced by the US a few years ago" ("Default loans deplete Bangladesh banking sector", March 29, 2017). Of course, what the exact implications of such a crash would be is a topic on its own. It is, however, not very difficult to predict overall, that the consequences, whatever they may be, would be catastrophic.

But one side-effect that we have already witnessed, perhaps without even realising just how seriously problematic it is, has been the repeated bailouts of banks using taxpayers' money, in spite of the widespread criticism that the government has received from nearly all quarters, and the fact that bailouts have time and again proven to be futile.

For example, according to data from the finance division, the government had provided state-owned banks a total of Tk

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Introduce weekend special train

Every year during the Eid, a few special trains as well as a few extra compartments are added to the existing train services for almost all the routes from Dhaka to other districts. Obviously, it eases the home-goers' journey to some extent, even though getting ticket is never easy.

However, there are a large number of people, whose families do not reside in Dhaka, who travel almost every weekend by train to meet their families. For these people, Bangladesh Railway should introduce return tickets or even a monthly ticket system. This ticket could be used for Thursday, when the weekend starts and many would leave Dhaka, and Sunday, when the weekend ends and all return to Dhaka. In order to meet the demand of tickets, the railway should bring special trains targeting weekends, as it does during Eid holidays.

Mawduda Hasnin, Rajshahi

Repair Chittagong city's unsafe roads

Chittagong is mired in numerous problems, of which water logging, as everyone knows by now, is the main one. Because of water logging, the roads of the city are badly damaged. Many pits on the road look like miniature ponds.

The city dwellers are suffering desperately from this problem. Almost daily I go to Sholoshahar from Dewanhat, en route to my university. The condition of the roads is so terrible that I can't describe the situation.

We appeal to the city mayor to repair these roads for the sake of the city dwellers.
 Naem Ariyan, University of Chittagong