

Participation of MPs in electioneering

Will create bumpier playing field

THE Election Commission has approved 11 changes to its City Corporation Election Code of Conduct Rules 2016, one of which will permit parliament members to participate in electioneering in local elections. What is surprising is that not only have they been delisted from the list of people barred from campaigning in local elections, but also that the decision was taken hastily without discussing the issue with other political parties, to accommodate the demands of the Awami League. Coming as it does on the heels of Khulna City Corporation which has done nothing to enhance the credibility of the commission, this decision will further erode public confidence in the EC.

It was for very good reason that the caveat to electioneering in local elections by certain categories of officials, including members of parliament, was imposed. One cannot deny the impact of their presence in their respective constituency. And for very obvious reasons the local administration is beholden to the local MP because of the political clout he carries. And contrary to what the EC contends, local facilities are provided to the lawmaker whenever he or she visits his or her area.

A very significant change was made to the local government election when it was shorn considerably of its nonpartisan character by allowing party-based election. And with the new provision its local character will vanish completely. These elections are meant to be local. It cannot be so with the direct interference and influence of the local lawmakers that the new EC rule will ensure. The decision we think is a rank bad idea which will do anything but provide a level playing field for all the other political parties, and make the elections anything but local.

Stop sexual harassment at work

All offices should have clear policy on the matter

SEXUAL harassment at workplace has emerged as a growing problem for women in Bangladesh as more women are now joining the workforce. Speakers at a discussion on Wednesday talked about the problems of harassment, violence and discrimination facing female professionals in general, and stressed on bringing in appropriate legislation to prevent them. Law, if enforced properly, can greatly help to curb such practices, but it is only part of the solution. For a greater impact, we need to work on why sexism persists despite so much progress in education and women's empowerment and what militates against the disclosure of such incidents.

Sadly, sexual harassment in Bangladesh is still not treated as seriously as other gender crimes, a fact that emboldens the abusers. Often the victims refrain from reporting an incident fearing humiliation, termination of employment and other consequences. In many cases, employers don't have a clear sexual harassment policy in place, and hardly an effort is made to let the employees know what to do if an inappropriate encounter takes place. The fight against workplace sexual harassment and violence, therefore, must start where it occurs, bringing accountability and transparency in the rules of engagement for all employees. But sexism is not specific to any particular place or vocation and, therefore, requires greater policy attention. Unfortunately, Bangladesh still lacks necessary law to protect women from sexual harassment.

We urge the government to enact and implement necessary legislation to stop sexual harassment and violence, especially at workplaces. The society in general also has a responsibility to ensure—through education and awareness-raising activities—that women don't have to choose between economic emancipation and individual dignity because everyone, male or female, has the right to equal treatment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure minimum wage for tea workers

As a nation born out of a struggle against economic and social injustice, we are morally obliged to build a society free of exploitation. Yet, a sizable portion of our population is still being exploited, and tea workers top the list. According to a report by this newspaper, even in 2018, the daily wage of a tea worker is only Tk 85, whereas even a farm worker earns Tk 300 a day. Meanwhile tea garden owners have made millions.

It is high time the government set up a wage board for tea workers and fixed a minimum wage for them. In addition, they should also be provided legal aid.

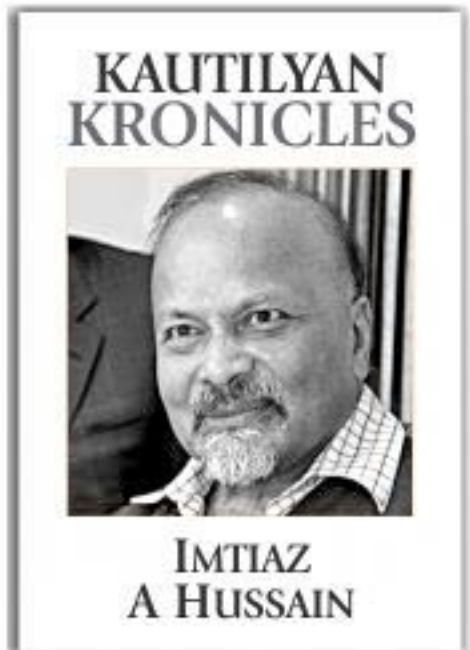
Tapas Pal, Apprentice Lawyer, Dinajpur Judge Court

A footbridge at Chankharpul needed

For passersby, Chankharpul intersection is a dangerous point. Four busy roads, directing to Dhaka University, Mayor Hanif Flyover, Dhaka Medical College and Old Dhaka, converge toward the intersection, which almost always remains packed with vehicles, but there is no footbridge for passersby.

For women, children and elderly people, the plight is even worse. Already, a number of accidents have taken place in this intersection, and more may occur in the future unless the authorities take steps to build a footbridge. Md Tarek Aziz Bappi, University of Dhaka

'We are the world' lullabies in Windsor



mother, the 'People's Princess'. Behind Bishop Michael Curry's fiery speech, it seems Michael Jackson's "We are the world" carried the Windsor wedding as a silent uninvited guest.

Behind the pageantry and photographs lay a very divided Britain: Brexit was only the tip of a long-accumulating iceberg in which not just Britons, tired of the many "Polish plumbers" symbolising the European invasion, wanted to leave the European Union, but also, perhaps even more so, an almost generation-long chasm of integrating Muslims, among other immigrants, into an increasingly resistant society given the recent terrorism upsurge. Of course, there was also Scotland failing, by not too wide a margin, of 55-44, to win an independence referendum in 2014.

One might as well add secular generational and technological changes to that pile. As often observed by too many in the marriage ceremony, the "old" order, of which Britain is a punctilious supporter and practitioner of, had its required rendezvous with the "new". Both Meghan and Harry played this to the hilt so naturally. Behind articulating the oldest of messages on love, straight from the scriptures, Bishop Curry forcefully pitched the "new" and "forgotten": rivers of preferences crisscrossing communities of indifference, their contents yearning to be heard, tasted, encouraged, and accepted, at least partially. His message was strong enough to stir the audience; that he carried a different skin colour also exposed where healing was most due, if not across Britain, then wherever populism was ascendant. The way Meghan and Harry clasped their hands so tightly during that speech might lead one to conjecture that that is precisely what they wanted, to absorb the "new" in common British conversations. How that message was choreographed gave it the best chance of not failing.

Meghan came with the credentials to inherit the vacant "People's Princess" crown from a mother-in-law she would have automatically clicked with. She had certainly tamed a wild, tryst-replete youthful Harry just when his country needs him the most, to be the Pied Piper of that much needed change. His elder brother, the Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, keeps one foot in the "old" camp (and has become quite a favourite among its denizens). Yet, even he could not but explore the "new" with the other foot, since that is the domain where his only

sibling, indeed the lone person he has bonded with the most since their mother left, seeks identity. Diana's marriage, in fact, may have directly touched the occasion. It was broken far too early for her personal comfort or royal pique, but by culminating in an affair with Egyptian Dodi Al Fayed, son of Harrod's former owner, Mohamed Al Fayed, stamped an authoritative off-beat royal tone that Harry is out to normalise.

Historically, however, there has always been a cheeky side to the "old" royal order in England. One cannot quite forget how the stone-walled Charles loudly wished, in a December 1989 bedroom telephone conversation with Camilla Parker Bowles, how he could live inside her as a tampon (revealed by *Mirror* and *People* magazines in 1993). Of course, there is stigma associated with sexual tabloid gossips in

sung, "Stand by me". Released by Ben E King in 1961, it originated in 1905 with Reverend Charles Albert Tindley, whose influence upon Bishop Curry was admittedly immense. Of Philadelphia origin, the song quickly took the US South by storm at a time when the promises the 1860s Civil War envisioned for blacks remained as far as ever from reality.

This Atlantic matrimony rippled farther beyond. Elton John's enormous musical talent may have become a royal favourite, but it was as if he played second-fiddle to an invisible Jackson silently humming "We are the world". With "Stand by me" underscoring local defiance, "We are the world" only globalised it. "There comes the time when we heed a certain call," it began, "when the world must come together as one." Meant to bail Africa out

alienate Angela Merkel's Germany; Emmanuel Macron treats him as an evil, though a necessary one; and his visit to Britain is not generating welcoming bites sufficiently. With both transatlantic sides slowly splintering, Meghan and Harry carry what may be necessary to restore trust and faith.

Broader still, a trenchantly divided world needs a royal marriage between racially and nationalistically different partners to adjust to a technologically reconfiguring future. As machines challenge humans, one hopes human frailties, such as discrimination mindedness, may also begin to evaporate. Resuscitating the Commonwealth is a starter, but the rest of the world would have to follow through big time.

A similar occasion once descended when the unthinkable happened: an Afro-



Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and his wife, Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, leave St George's Chapel after their wedding ceremony in Windsor Castle, in Windsor, on May 19, 2018.

PHOTO: JONATHAN BRADY/AFP

any royal setting. Yet, in 2005, Camilla still entered the royal family by marriage to Charles. Meghan's and Harry's grappling with even more stubbornly divisive issues, like race and nationalism, was more up-front, and the way it has been conducted, quite unlikely to rock the royal agenda. Her stunning yet simple wedding dress, particularly the veil and tail, embossed all the 53 Commonwealth country flags, even though it carried an English trademark with Clare Waight Teller as designer, albeit for a *potpourri* multinational, Givenchy. This admixture must have been one of the wedding's highlights.

Similarly, Prince Charles's orchestral music choices expectedly projected nationalistic scores, but were balanced by a defiant gospel stand-out song sublimely

of famine in 1985, today it strives to dampen discriminations and hostilities in every continent.

Meghan and Harry could revitalise that decaying Commonwealth edifice more effectively than Prince Charles, who was singled out as successor by the Queen in the London Commonwealth Head of Government summit recently. Yet, she might be the last to demur if Prince Charles passed that baton to his more hands-on daughter-in-law. Indeed, a wider world awaits her to pick up where Diana left off, not necessarily with land-mine: gender gaps being as explosive today as ever, demand a lot more attention.

Nowhere else would the cementing be more concertedely felt than inside Britain's transatlantic partner, the United States. Donald J Trump has done enough to

American striding into the White House (and a 21st-century "white man's world"), that too with a mandate to run the country from the Oval Office. Though Barack Obama brought back the dignity that was lost with John F Kennedy's assassination and Michelle the grace Jacqueline Kennedy decked the White House with, before their time and after, democratically elected officials have been leaving too many lascivious and rapacious fingerprints to sustain public interest and pride. Meghan and Harry may not only be the increasingly desperate fresh air we need in every nook and corner of this planet, but also a last reprieve should their key message remain unheeded.

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Karnataka call for India

What it means for the country's upcoming general elections

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE template for India's next general elections due early next year appears to have been set. It is going to be Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party versus the entire opposition. To keep the BJP at bay, the Congress is ready to play second fiddle to a regional party. These are the two biggest messages emanating from the swiftness with which the main opposition, Congress party headed by Rahul Gandhi, agreed to back Janata Dal

The Karnataka mandate may have changed the Congress leadership's thinking. The party now seems ready to show flexibility to play second fiddle to regional parties with much lesser number of seats in order to stop the BJP.

(Secular) in a bid to stop BJP which emerged as the single largest party in the legislative assembly elections in the key southern state of Karnataka that produced a fractured mandate.

The BJP with 104 seats in the 224-member state legislature fell nine short of simple majority while Congress was in second spot with 78 seats followed by JD(S) with 37. Taken together, Congress and JD(S) had the arithmetic to form the new government in Karnataka. Congress said that it had lost the mandate to form government again. The JD(S), with

presence in just 15 percent of the assembly, sensed a chance to return to power in the state. The common thread between the two post-poll allies, who fought the May 12 elections against each other with Rahul Gandhi going to the extent of accusing JD(S) of being BJP's "B team", is the rallying war cry of "stop BJP at any cost." That is the slogan that appears set to resonate across several regional parties across India and to cast the die in the run-up to the 2019 parliamentary polls.

Both Congress and JD(S) have gone on record saying that striking a post-poll alliance was a very hard decision for them. But they set aside the mutual bitterness of the past for a bigger political objective: to stonewall BJP. By quickly agreeing to support JD(S) to form the new government in Karnataka, the Congress tried to make the best out of its defeat in the state polls. It has sent a message loud and clear: Congress is ready to join hands with all anti-BJP forces and even play a secondary role for a much bigger cause—to stop the BJP juggernaut which has been winning almost all the state elections since Modi assumed power in May 2014.

This is a lesson the Congress has been reluctant to admit publicly so far even though a section of the party has rooted for alliance with regional parties like Nationalist Congress Party in the west, Trinamool Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal in the east, Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party in the north, DMK, Telangana Rashtra Samithi and Telugu Desam Party in the south besides the Left parties, to take on BJP in the next general election.

Soon after the Karnataka verdict, some of the regional parties and the Left parties went on record asking the Congress to shed its "ego" and tie up with regional parties to put up a united front against BJP in 2019. The Karnataka

poll outcome has given a big boost to regional parties which now argue that Congress should read the writing on the wall that its presence in the corridors of power has shrunk to just three of India's total of 29 states in the last four years and that Congress on its own cannot counter the BJP. In fact, the regional party leaders point out how Mayawati set aside years of hostility towards Samajwadi Party and joined hands with that party to successfully defeat the BJP in two by-elections in the politically key state of Uttar Pradesh a few months ago. Mayawati had also campaigned for JD(S) in Karnataka.

Soon after it became clear that no party is going to secure majority in Karnataka, many regional parties' top bosses, including Trinamool Congress Chief Mamata Banerjee, were in an overdrive to prod JD(S) supreme HD Deve Gowda to accept Congress support and form government in the state to keep BJP at bay. If JD(S) can form government in Karnataka despite finishing third with Congress backing, it gives heart to the aspirations of many regional parties that this model could be replicated at the national level if the next general elections throw up a fractured mandate. After all, India had in 1996-97 seen Inder Kumar Gujral and Deve Gowda, who belong to parties with very little national footprint, become prime ministers with outside support from Congress. There are some regional satraps like Bahujan Samaj Party Chief Mayawati and Trinamool Congress Chairperson Mamata Banerjee who are reportedly nursing prime ministerial aspirations.

Ironically, the Karnataka poll result came a few days after Rahul Gandhi, at a public function during campaigning in the state, had expressed his readiness to be the PM if the Congress got the required number. That was a clear

indication that Congress was not willing to give up its position as the only alternative to BJP and its centrality in an all-India anti-BJP front.

The Karnataka mandate may have changed the Congress leadership's thinking. The party now seems ready to show flexibility to play second fiddle to regional parties with much lesser number of seats in order to stop the BJP. The regional parties contend that Congress, with its shrinking footprint across India, must realise that it is no longer in a position to be the natural anchor of an anti-BJP front at the national level.

By extending support to JD(S), the Congress signalled that it did not want to stand in the way of "stop BJP at any cost" campaign by majority of the regional parties. Congress does not now want to be isolated politically among anti-BJP forces in the run-up to the national elections at a time when efforts are on to foster greater unity among such forces. For that, much will depend on the success, or otherwise of the longevity, of the Congress-JD(S) coalition. It is a test case for opposition unity.

But for Congress, the challenge is not just stopping the BJP. The party must also decide how much it can compromise to whittle down its own pre-eminence vis-à-vis regional parties. Will the Congress agree to the regional parties' formula that it cedes political space in states where it is not strong enough to fight the BJP in favour of a particular regional party? Won't it come in the way of the Congress' own existing spheres of influence and future growth in those states? These are issues that may come up in the future. Right now, the motto of Congress and other opposition parties is "stop BJP." At least till the next general elections.

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