

Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul, BNP mayoral candidate in Rajshahi, refused to cast his vote and staged a sit-in in front of Islamia College polling centre, in protest of alleged electoral irregularities. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

An uneven BATTLEFIELD

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



NAZMUL AHASAN

AMONG all ruling party-backed candidates in the three-city elections, Khairuzzaman Liton, in Rajshahi, seemed to be the most desperate one. He—or his campaign—spent approximately three times the campaign spending limit only by publishing hundreds of thousands of posters, banners and festoons, according to an estimate by Prothom Alo.

Liton's aggressive campaign strategy left his BNP-backed opponent, Mosaddek Hossain, the incumbent mayor, with little space. "There is literally no prominent place in the city left for us to hang or put up our posters," Mosaddek's chief election agent, Tofazzal Hossain, told the Bengali paper.

Liton's aggressiveness was coupled with the local police's heavy-handedness against BNP—more than a hundred of the party's activists were arrested by the police in the run-up to the election.

With reports of AL activists taking control of polling centres and heavy ballot stuffing, half the polling centres saw a highly unusual turnout of over 80 percent. In the end, Liton emerged "victorious" in all but four of the 134 polling centres in the city, while Mosaddek, who won in 113 centres last time, had little to do except for staging a sit-in.

The political equation was also a bit complicated and, shall we say, ironic. Ariful's biggest blow came from a very unlikely bloc: his party's long-term ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, which unusually resisted calls from BNP to withdraw its candidate in Sylhet. Interestingly, Ehsanul Mahbub Jubayer, the Jamaat-backed candidate, enjoyed a relatively tolerant treatment from the police during the campaigning.

On the other hand, the development mantra, the Awami League's central electoral message, proved uncomfortable for its candidate in Sylhet. A large chunk of the city corporation area falls under the prestigious Sylhet-1 parliamentary seat, currently held by the Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, who has facilitated a good number of development projects in his constituency. Ariful, therefore, was in a position to claim credit for those projects, forcing Kamran to avoid attacking the incumbent mayor on the issue of development.

If the election was held in a free and fair manner, the fight would be very close—at least everyone thought so. In the end, it indeed proved to be a close fight, but the ground was so uneven for the BNP candidate that he might have won big time if things had been on an equal footing. In fact, having seen his

With the national election approaching, these elections were the one last chance for the EC to redeem itself, prove its credibility and reclaim its constitutionally designated position, but it chose not to do so.

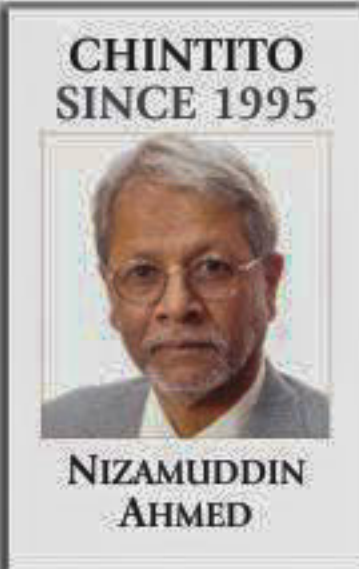
election agents forcefully evicted in many polling centres, Ariful even decided to reject the election, only to revert his decision as the initial results started to paint a brighter picture than what he had anticipated. In the end, defying current trends, Ariful all but pulled off a startling electoral surprise.

The recently concluded five-city elections had many things in common, but the most blatant was, perhaps, the Election Commission's sheer lack of ability or willingness in maintaining fairness on the ground. The EC watched silently as the police paid no heed to its directives and arrested opposition activists and workers. With practically zero control over the local administration, the election day in all five cities proved to be a total disaster.

With the national election approaching, these elections were the one last chance for the EC to redeem itself, prove its credibility and reclaim its constitutionally designated position, but it chose not to do so. And, this should serve as an indictment of the deteriorating state of our democratic index and institutions.

Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team, The Daily Star.

Rupa, Rajib, Payel, Dia, Abdul Karim...



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

PASSENGER safety or dignity were never the strong points of transport workers starting from the ticket counter till pushing them off a bus. Behaving badly with passengers, almost deliberately, is the established culture. Female passengers have long been subject to sexual humiliation by bus driver and company. Demanding exorbitantly over published prices is the bus owner's monopoly and have led to many a spat on board.

One a ghastly night last August law student Rupa, the last remaining passenger in a Chhowa Paribahan bus from Bogura was gang-raped by three helpers (assistants) of the bus in the moving vehicle. On reaching Tangail-Mymensingh highway, when she screamed for help, the rapists in connivance with the driver broke her neck and threw her out at a secluded area. Five suspects were later arrested.

Road flyover on the afternoon of July 29. One reached the stoppage at Armed Forces Medical College, Kurmitola, where passengers, including students of mainly Shaheed Ramiz Uddin Cantonment College, were waiting to board. The other hot-on-the-heel bus then rammed into the waiting people. Twelfth grader Abdul Karim (18) and eleventh grader Dia Khanam Mim (17) died on the spot. Several were severely injured. Said Dia's father, Jahangir Fakir, himself a driver: "Many bus owners recruit drivers considering relationship and recommendations of known people without properly examining their driving skills. By doing this the recruiters are virtually giving the unskilled drivers the license to kill". And they continue to kill.

Longstanding impunity is largely responsible for leading transport workers into believing they are Badshah Shahjahan, and therefore untouchable by law. That is not necessarily the only cause of the about dozen deaths daily on our roads with an annual death toll of

drugs to keep awake and apparently to feel good. Despite a strong directive from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on June 25 to enforce five-hour driving limit for the transport drivers on highways, as well as provide alternative drivers, restrooms, and service centres at specific locations along the highways, the situation has hardly improved.

Some drivers are expert in driving with one hand (two fingers actually) while talking on the mobile phone on even important family matters that seemingly do not upset them. They often do not live to tell. Others will sometimes perform a magic show by opening a bottle of water while driving. Look Ma, no hands!

A majority of drivers, including those of private cars, are reckless on the road with no *taakka* to traffic rules and signposting, deficient though they are. Despite a court order, driving American style continues with or without a flag fluttering and a siren blaring. Bus drivers also engage in unhealthy race for passengers. Last Sunday, that perhaps was the cause at Kurmitola. Or, was it the wounded ego of the driver who lost the race on the ramp?

Wrongly overtaking, illogically speeding and dangerously overloading were all established when they were wiping the windscreen for their idol and idle *Ustaad*. Not in their control, however, are narrow two-way roads, dilapidated highways (?) with low potholes, occasioned by risky turning points, giving them the rush of adrenaline to foolishly exhibit their daredevil antics at blind corners, which again is in their control; the vehicle, more often than not, is not.

Clearly there is lack of minimum education among majority of drivers to the level of being able to read and write, and appreciate life. Road Safety should be taught from kindergarten, and included in the syllabus up to Class VIII. A driver's job should not be an employment opportunity gifted by nepotism because human life is involved.

A driving license should be earned by learning and passing stricter tests on traffic rules, eyesight, gender issues and love for self, society and country. It should not be bought. Any individual should not be allowed to instruct another at the expense of some unaware person's fuel. Driving Schools should be structured. Who are the instructors? What training do they have?

Our roads will take time to become safer (the rot is very deep), to reduce the daily death toll to an acceptable international standard. But to get there we need to urgently enforce punitive measures against culpable drivers, adopt short-term procedures to curtail erratic driving, introduce traffic teaching in schools, and integrate radio, television and print media in a national mass campaign.

P.S. - Those of you who are educated beyond Class VIII and do drive, please act educated.



Rajib



Rupa Khatun

She did not live to face them in a court of law.

In April this year, undergraduate student Rajib Hossain's right arm was caught between two buses at Dhaka's Bangla Motor, and severed from the elbow due to the rashness of the drivers of BRTC and Swajan Paribahan buses. The 22-year-old died two weeks later.

Tragedy cannot justifiably define what happened to university student Md Saidur Rahman alias Payel (20) on July 21. On his way to Dhaka from Chittagong along with two friends, when their Hanif Enterprise bus stopped at Madanpur (Narayanganj), he alone got down to relieve himself. Soon the bus started to move. Payel ran to get on board, but was badly injured on hitting the door. Bleeding, he lay on the road. Thinking the passenger was dead, the bus driver, supervisor and helper unthinkably threw Payel into River Fuldi from a bridge. His body was found two days later, his face unrecognisable, floating some distance away at Gazaria's Bhabar Char. Autopsy showed he was alive when the transport workers picked him up.

Two Jabal-e-Noor Paribahan buses were racing on the Mirpur-Airport

around three and a half thousand, mostly pedestrians, from about three thousand accidents (not based on scientific data but garnered from media reports). Worldwide the figures will be one of the highest per kilometre of road and per million people; statistics not accolades for any country.

The king-of-the-road arrogance provides transport owners and workers the "road permit" to ply unfit vehicles devoid of any maintenance, lights (head, side & brake), and working doors, but of course with a deafening horn because that is power. Brake failure is not uncommon.

They have not fallen from the sky. Most of them have been promoted from the rank of windscreen wiper, via helper, to finally a five-star *Ustaad*. The skills of driving, they never learnt because they have been moving the bus/truck in the parking lot since puberty. After a while, when about 15-looking-17 many of them manage a license legally, complete with all paperwork.

Transport workers on the road essentially lack self-discipline, healthy food habits and rest/sleep. They are overworked, only resting on a ferry or in a jam, but many are reputedly into

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is an architect, a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Fits together
 - 7 Obsessed whaler
 - 11 Sigh, say
 - 12 Collected stories
 - 13 Prone
 - 14 Killer whale
 - 15 Nostalgic song
 - 16 Showed again
 - 17 Comfy spot
 - 18 Live
 - 19 Turquoise kin
 - 21 Flowed into
 - 22 Dates for dates
 - 25 -- canto
 - 26 Sunrise site
 - 27 Tooth layer
 - 29 Washer unit
- DOWN**
- 1 Head, in slang
 - 2 Cast out
 - 3 Herring's cousins
 - 4 Animal's area
 - 5 "Legally Blonde" heroine
 - 6 Spot
 - 7 African lilies
 - 8 Shock
 - 9 Play places
 - 10 Hit with a pitch
 - 16 Peruses
 - 18 From the country
 - 20 Powerful chess piece
 - 22 Capitol worker
 - 23 Mobile setting
 - 24 Hawks' home
 - 25 Turned into
 - 28 King with a golden touch
 - 30 Eye-related
 - 31 Claire of "Home-land"
 - 34 Writer Chopin
 - 36 Compact, e.g.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A G I L E S L O E S
L A N E S C O U R T
T E S T S A S T R O
A L I A R T S I C
R I D Y E S I N K
S C E N E S E D G Y
T A D P O L E
P A R T E V I C T S
O N A A C E H A T
M A D C T R A G E
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