

CEC's injudicious comment

Anomaly-free national elections not practicable!

We do not know what to make of the CEC's comments that the election commission cannot guarantee irregularity-free national elections. The statement is not only imprudent, it is an irresponsible and uncalled for comment, particularly from a person whose constitutional duty it is to give the nation a free, fair and untarnished election, and one that would allow the voters to choose their candidates without hindrance or let.

In spite of our repeated calls, the EC has repeatedly failed so far to live up to the expectation of all the stakeholders, as demonstrated in the last three mayoral polls. And much as the CEC refuses to acknowledge that the three elections, and the Khulna election preceding those, were marred by irregularities, the evidences on the ground, the pictures and reports, belie his individual perception of the quality of the elections. Inaction in the face of gross violation of electoral codes, and the pretexts for that has not added to the EC's credibility at all.

What is equally ominous is that the CEC's statement is giving the impression that he is preparing us for what is to come in the next parliamentary elections; and he is also admitting, in advance, his powerlessness to do anything about it.

Instead of abdicating his mandate, and that is the clear impression that Huda's words convey, he should be thinking of how to ensure that the Jatiyo Sangsad elections and all the others that are to take place under the watch of this commission is acceptable to all parties. Instead of that he has presented us with a fait accompli. That is unacceptable.

Victims hounded

Go after the attackers, not the students

It is extremely disconcerting to witness that 22 university students have been placed on two-day remands in cases filed over "vandalism and attacks on police." Numerous cases have been filed in different police stations where unknown students have been made the accused. But, what we witnessed in the last few days was that students and journalists were themselves the object of attacks, by activists clearly opposed to the road safety movement. The official claim has been that certain elements had infiltrated the protests over road safety and they were the ones who carried out the attacks. The role of the police, who many journalists and witnesses say were nearby when the attacks happened, remains unexplained. Why were the law enforcers unwilling to stop the helmeted and armed men who attacked the students and the journos? And why has there been no headway in identifying who this supposed external elements are? Instead, we see law enforcers going after these students—the victims are now being hounded again.

The legitimacy of the demands of the protesters is beyond question, and the government had rightly accepted them. Since the start of Traffic Week by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, the number of people seeking licences and fitness certificates at the BRTA has reportedly increased one and a half time. There are around 20 lakh unregistered vehicles on the road.

It is a gross miscarriage of justice that students and journalists are having to pay the price for the violence perpetrated by these men. It is the responsibility of the police to find out who the attackers were. We also hope that the police clarify why it was silent when the attacks were made. It is a pity that university students have been detained and allegedly tortured. We demand that the due process of the law prevails and the police go after the attackers, instead of letting them go scot free despite attacking students and the media.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is the new transport law enough?

Road accidents took over 2,400 lives so far this year and caused injuries to many more. While accidents cannot be ruled out before they actually happen, accidents resulting out of reckless driving cannot be condoned at all.

I would be failing my conscience if I do not give credit to those brave students who, with their indomitable spirit, stood resolute in their endeavor to bring discipline to the road transport sector. The students proved something that we have all known all along but never practiced or enforced, that when there is a strong will, nothing is insurmountable.

What seemed to be a herculean task once, the students managed to do that. They restored sanity on the roads, at least for a few days. It is in response to the sacrifices of these enterprising students that the administration was moved to put things in order as far as our chaotic traffic system is concerned.

The government should be commended for the expeditious cabinet approval of the draft road transport bill that had been in hibernation for over a year. However, I feel that the government should review the proposed punishment offered by the law. The punishment for road accidents has to be determined based on the severity of the offence.

Javed Hyder Kareem, By e-mail

CORRIGENDUM

In our editorial titled "Road Transport Bill, 2018 falls short", published yesterday, we wrote "There are some good measures in the proposed act like minimum educational qualification (Grade 8) and minimum age (18 years) to get a professional driver license ...". The minimum age is 18 to get a driving licence but 21 to get a professional licence. We regret the error.

When extraordinary courage meets unthinking response



It would appear from the relative calm on the streets and in universities that the student movement, which has catapulted an entire generation of teenagers into adulthood in just a matter of days, is over. But calm is not necessarily peace, and peace can be an exhausted possibility when wrong methods are applied to attain it. From the look of things, a metaphorical bullet in the form of a more threatening development may have been dodged, but a sense of relief can be short-lived as the manner in which the protests were stifled, and public outrage that had ignited them in the first place, may have inevitable consequences in the future.

At this point, it's probably irrelevant to recall the particular circumstances under which the movement was born. Suffice to say, the deaths of the two college students on that fateful morning on July 29 gave the nation a rare moment of unity: they united in mourning for the two students killed, in seeking justice, seeking an end to road casualties, and supporting what started as a spontaneous gathering on Airport Road. That feeling of unity and rejuvenation is all but lost now. What transpired in the intervening period can be described as a classic case of what happens when, as a social commentator has put it, "extraordinary courage" is met with "extreme cowardice"—each day a more painful version of the previous day.

If the government is relieved that a movement that it could neither publicly disapprove of nor allow to continue unimpeded is finally over, those who supported it are just as well relieved that their children wouldn't have to face the business end of violence any more, not at least in the foreseeable future.

This speaks of an institutional system increasingly alienated from the public that is unable or unwilling to meet their legitimate demands and would resort to aggressive methods to counter them. Note what the police had to say when asked why only students, and none of those behind the attacks, were implicated in the 29 cases filed over the violence in protests: "Does any officer has the guts to file a case against ruling party activists unless a political decision comes to that end?" (*The Daily Star*)

There you have it—a crime is not a crime unless the system says so. A victim doesn't deserve justice unless the system says he/she does. This culture of lawlessness, corruption and lack of accountability is precisely why a demand for justice by the grieving students of one school became a rallying cry for change for all the students and teachers from all educational institutions and people from all walks of life, who felt equally threatened by it and wanted a solution.

However, when extraordinary courage is met with extreme cowardice, it's unlikely to go without consequences. The government's handling of the movement, clearly one of the most injudicious crisis

into submission. Photos and video clips on these excesses circulated via social media attracted widespread condemnation from across the world. Not only did Bangladesh's image suffer as a result of it, but the government too will have to wrestle with the fallout from such critical portrayals.

Secondly, the government should think about the potential role that the increasingly disaffected youth can play in the next election. It's handling of the protests has clearly made it unpopular with a large section of the youth, aided by its past handling of popular movements like that for quota reforms, and further widened the chasm separating the institutional system from

with this line of thinking is that in Bangladesh, politics has a very narrow definition. Being political is generally understood to be supportive or critical of a political party. Going by this definition, you cannot be political and not directly support/oppose any party. This narrowing of definition, however, is as costly and chilling to the rich variety of the political traditions of this land as to those who like to think independently. Young people today are very conscious politically, but if we continue to go down this narrow path, all cherished notions of liberal democracy could soon be completely drowned out by reactionary politics.



Thousands of students protested on Sunday over recent crashes and lax enforcement of traffic laws.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

management blunders made by it in recent years, has drawn determined pushback. And some of the reactions or outcomes should worry it, with the general election only months away.

Firstly, the unflattering headlines in the international media, drawing attention to how the protesters were subjected to violence and torture, should worry it. The international media highlighted how the government allegedly crippled Internet services, censored local news coverage, and used extrajudicial force to cow the protesters

the people. For example, the young students particularly objected to the frequent references to the alleged politicisation of the movement and the involvement of "other forces", which they viewed as an attempt to discredit their movement and support the heavy-handed response used to tackle it. The government has so far failed to come up with any credible evidence of the involvement of "other forces", and made no visible attempt to identify the suspects either.

However, a fundamental problem

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The US is at risk of losing a trade war with China



truce agreed by Europe and the US holds, the US will be doing battle mainly with China, rather than the world (of course, the trade conflict with Canada and Mexico will continue to simmer, given US demands that neither country can or should accept).

Beyond the true, but by now platitudinous, assertion that everyone will lose, what can we say about the possible outcomes of Trump's trade war? First, macroeconomics always prevails: if the United States' domestic investment continues to exceed its savings, it will have to import capital and have a large trade deficit. Worse, because of the tax cuts enacted at the end of last year, the US fiscal deficit is reaching new records—recently projected to exceed USD 1 trillion by 2020—which means that the trade deficit almost surely will increase, *whatever the outcome of the trade war*. The only way that won't happen is if Trump leads the US into a recession, with incomes declining so much that investment and imports plummet.

The "best" outcome of Trump's narrow focus on the trade deficit with China would be improvement in the bilateral balance, matched by an increase of an equal amount in the deficit with some other country (or countries). The US might sell more natural gas to China and buy fewer washing machines; but it will sell less natural gas to other countries and buy washing machines or something else from Thailand or another country that has avoided the irascible Trump's wrath. But, because the US interfered with the market, it will be paying more for its imports and getting less for its exports than otherwise would have been the case. In short, the best outcome means that the US will be

worse off than it is today.

The US has a problem, but it's not with China. It's at home: America has been saving too little. Trump, like so many of his compatriots, is immensely shortsighted. If he had a whit of understanding of economics and a long-term vision, he would have done what he could to increase national savings. That would have reduced the multilateral trade deficit.

There are obvious quick fixes: China could buy more American oil and then sell it on to others. This would not make an iota of difference, beyond perhaps a slight increase in transaction costs. But Trump could trumpet that he had eliminated the bilateral trade deficit.



Chinese officials struck a defiant note ahead of Thursday's talks in Beijing.

In fact, significantly reducing the bilateral trade deficit in a meaningful way will prove difficult. As demand for Chinese goods decreases, the renminbi's exchange rate will weaken—even without any government intervention. This will partly offset the effect of US tariffs; at the same time, it will increase China's competitiveness with other countries—and this will be true even if China doesn't use other instruments in its possession, like wage and price controls, or push strongly for productivity increases. China's overall trade deficit, like that of the US, is determined by its macroeconomics.

If China intervenes more actively and

retaliates more aggressively, the change in the US-China trade balance could be even smaller. The relative pain each will inflict on the other is difficult to ascertain. China has more control of its economy, and has wanted to shift toward a growth model based on domestic demand rather than investment and exports. The US is simply helping China do what it has already been trying to do. On the other hand, US actions come at a time when China is trying to manage excess leverage and excess capacity; at least in some sectors, the US will make these tasks all the more difficult.

This much is clear: if Trump's objective is to stop China from pursuing its "Made

more unqualified economic team than Trump's, and a majority of Americans are not behind the trade war.

Public support will wane even further as Americans realise that they lose doubly from this war: jobs will disappear, not only because of China's retaliatory measures, but also because US tariffs increase the price of US exports and make them less competitive; and the prices of the goods they buy will rise. This may force the dollar's exchange rate to fall, increasing inflation in the US even more—giving rise to still more opposition. The Fed is likely then to raise interest rates, leading to weaker investment and growth and more unemployment.

Trump has shown how he responds when his lies are exposed or his policies are failing: he doubles down. China has repeatedly offered face-saving ways for Trump to leave the battlefield and declare victory. But he refuses to take them up. Perhaps hope can be found in three of his other traits: his focus on appearance over substance, his unpredictability, and his love of "big man" politics. Perhaps in a grand meeting with President Xi Jinping, he can declare the problem solved, with some minor adjustments of tariffs here and there, and some new gesture toward market opening that China had already planned to announce, and everyone can go home happy.

In this scenario, Trump will have "solved," imperfectly, a problem that he created. But the world following his foolish trade war will still be different: more uncertain, less confident in the international rule of law, and with harder borders. Trump has changed the world, permanently, for the worse. Even with the best possible outcomes, the only winner is Trump—with his outsize ego pumped up just a little more.

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