

# A 'National Charter' to strengthen democracy

## Putting the cart before the horse EVM in next general election

**T**HE Election Commission's plan to use Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the next general election is surprising, given the very little time at hand to handle a logistical challenge of this scale. And even before finalising whether EVM would be at all used in the general election, Tk 3,515 crore has already been allocated for the procurement of 1.5 lakh EVMs and other necessary equipment. There are several aspects that raise questions.

First of all, the timing of the move is startling. Why now? With only four months to go before the national election, introducing a completely new method of voting in one-third of the constituencies, involving around three crore voters, is not a practicable proposition at all.

Secondly, apart from the regulatory aspect, which can be addressed quickly, there is also an equally, if not more, important factor—that of the issue of making the voters familiar with this system, most of whom, it must be admitted, are not electronic equipment savvy. One wonders how many fairs can be arranged within the time available before the election to promote the use of EVM and generate voter confidence in the system. Even in India, it was after several decades of tests and trials that EVMs were used in large scale. Why were not such extensive trials conducted?

Thirdly, given the prevailing mistrust among political parties, there is a risk that introducing a new system may further erode the confidence of the voters in the electoral system. It seems rather ludicrous that the EC would go for such a huge expenditure without being sure that the EVMs would be used at all, since it depends on the outcome of EC's consultations with the political parties at some future point in time. While we are all for digitalisation of the voting mechanism, we feel that the plan is not implementable in such a short time.

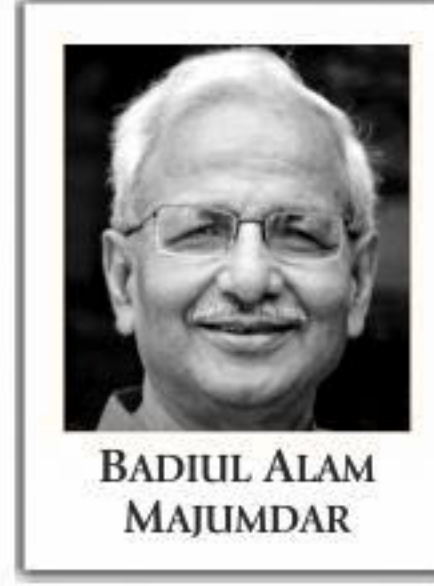
## Little progress on road safety

### 300 deaths on roads in last one month

**A**S we take stock of measures taken after a month since the school students came out on to the roads demanding safer roads, there is nothing to write home about. Indeed, there have been 300 road-related casualties over the past month. Things have not changed much; non-adults are still at the wheels of laguna-type transports plying the city and we still find buses stopping in the middle of the road, far from designated bus stops to pick up and drop passengers. The one thing that has changed is perhaps the record speed with which Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) is issuing fitness certificates to vehicles. According to a report published yesterday in a leading Bangla daily, BRTA is apparently issuing a fitness certificate every 42 seconds! Unless the BRTA has undergone a revolutionary change in the last one month in terms of productivity, we cannot comprehend how fitness certificates can be churned out at such record speed.

Bus owners at the time of the students' movement had promised that extra passengers would not be picked up unless at bus stops. That promise has not been kept. Roads are as unsafe as before because as per data published in this paper, there have been at least 10 accidents in the past nine days (August 20 to 28) on the country's roads during the Eid holidays involving slow vehicles alone, 46 people were killed and more than 40 injured.

Were we to compile data from all media outlets, the number would probably be higher. If we want to see a fall in these numbers, authorities will have to do much better than now. The first step would be to enforce the rules as laid out in the law. The government must rethink its decision to relax the experience requirement for getting licenses to drive medium and heavy vehicles. Any reform is always painful in the short term, but without these safeguards, there will be no let up to casualties and injuries on our country's roads.



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

**T**HE recent "student agitation" not only demanded safe roads, but also raised our awareness regarding our state structure, characterised by corruption, repression and injustice. A weak state structure generally caters to coterie interests rather than the public interest—a glaring example of which is the transport sector. Transforming the state structure would require a set of all-encompassing deep reforms, which will in turn require a political settlement and unity among the political actors as reforms must reflect the will of the people.

We on behalf of SHUJAN: Citizens For Good Governance have been, for the past decade, promoting a "National Charter", encompassing a set of far-reaching reforms for endorsement by politicians and other interested groups as part of a political settlement.

**Effective parliament**  
 The parliament should be made independent and effective to ensure the transparency and accountability of the executive branch. A *Code of Conduct Act for Parliamentarians* should be framed to prevent conflict of interest along with a *Privilege Act*, as mandated by the Constitution.

**Independent judiciary**  
 Independence of the judiciary and the rule of law through a true separation of the judiciary from the executive should be ensured. A law to appoint and remove judges in the upper judiciary should be enacted. All political influence, especially on the lower judiciary should end, stopping the filing of politically motivated frivolous cases, and ending the culture of withdrawing cases based on political consideration.

**Neutral Election Commission**  
 A law should be enacted, as mandated by the Constitution, for reconstituting the Election Commission (EC) and making appointments accordingly to ensure free, fair and credible elections. The Commission should be provided with financial independence, allowing it to appoint its own functionaries, and reforming the relevant laws to ensure its autonomy.

**Constitutional reforms**  
 An expert committee for recommending amendment of the Constitution should be appointed. Potential areas of constitutional reforms could include: bringing a balance between the powers of the President and the Prime Minister;

instituting term limits; constitutional recognition of the indigenous people; reserving one-third seats of Parliament for women; creating an upper house; reforming Article 70; bringing back the provision of referendum, and so on.

**Democratic and transparent political parties**  
 Requiring internal democracy within political parties, transparency in the nomination and financing of political parties and ending the culture of "patriarchy" would be helpful. Extremism, communalism, identity-based prejudice and violence by political parties should be renounced and their associated and affiliated bodies should be disbanded.

**Independent statutory bodies**  
 Amending the laws and appointing appropriate persons to the statutory bodies, namely the Anti-Corruption

Commission, Human Rights Commission and Information Commission to ensure their independence and effectiveness is also necessary.

**Decentralisation and local government**  
 A strong decentralisation agenda should be formulated and the local government bodies should be made autonomous and effective. Allocating 50 percent of the ADB to local government bodies and removing the role of the MPs in local government bodies, as per the High Court judgment, should also be included in the agenda.

**Independence of the media**  
 Ensuring the independence of the media through legal reforms should be prioritised. Forming a Broadcast Commission with appropriate persons to ensure the objectivity of the news programmes of publicly-owned media could help in that regard.

**Reforming the financial sector**  
 Laws must be reformed to prevent the looting and plundering of the financial sector and bringing perpetrators to justice is essential. The independence of Bangladesh Bank must be ensured and close supervision of the banking sector is necessary.

**Investment in youth**  
 It is time to invest in the youth to take advantage of the "demographic dividend" by making available high-quality education, health, nutrition and ensuring security for them. If such services cannot be ensured and the youth are derailed, the potential demographic dividend may turn into a demographic nightmare.

We feel that the implementation of the proposed National Charter could pave the way for repairing the state and achieving good governance. However, its implementation will require a democratically elected government. Thus, we will also need a political consensus on issues that will ensure credible election.

An independent, neutral and effective EC will be essential for credible elections. However, the strongest EC will not be able to hold credible elections unless the government, especially the law enforcement agencies and the bureaucracy provide the necessary assistance to the Commission. In other words, although a strong EC is necessary for holding credible elections, it is not sufficient. However, the continued and blatant politicisation of the bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies make it almost impossible to hold credible elections under a political government. Thus, we will also need a political consensus on the election-time government.

As is clear from the experience of the recent city corporation elections, our present EC is incapable of holding credible elections. Thus, we will need the reconstitution of the Commission. We will also need to amend the RPO to include provisions for no-vote and compulsory scrutiny of affidavits submitted by candidates post-elections. We further need to reform the affidavits. Furthermore, for credible elections, the parliament should be dissolved before elections.

To show respect to the student agitation, we hope our politicians will engage in dialogue, come to a negotiated settlement of their disputes, and reach an agreement for ensuring free, fair and credible elections—paving the way for the repair of the state and thus averting an uncertain and possibly disastrous future.

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**Campaign against corruption**  
 Initiating an all-out anti-corruption campaign by creating special tribunals to try corrupt individuals and giving them exemplary punishment should be considered. Taking effective measures to prevent illicit transfer of money abroad and to bring such money back would help and an Ombudsman could also be appointed.

**Reforming public service**  
 The government should enact a *Civic Service Act* and modernise the *Police Act* in order to ensure the neutrality and professionalism of the members of the bureaucracy and the law enforcement agencies. Ending corruption and payoffs in their appointments and transfers

**Safeguarding human rights**  
 Freedom of expression should be safeguarded by amending section 57 of the *ICT Act* and other repressive laws. The government should end the violation of human rights by stopping involuntary disappearance, abduction and extrajudicial killings.

**A new social contract**  
 It is essential that the poor get their due share of national resources, which could be facilitated by subsidised loans and similar measures. They should have quality education and health care provided to their families, and crop and health insurance.

**Environmental sustainability**  
 Environmental sustainability must be ensured. There needs to be long-term planning for coping with the effects of climate change. What this also means is the reassessment of development projects with serious environmental risks.

# Bimstec at a crossroads

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

**A**S top leaders from five South Asian and two South East Asian countries gather in Kathmandu under the banner of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) on August 30 and 31 for their fourth summit, it faces certain fundamental challenges. Set up in 1997 in Thailand with 14 priority sectors of cooperation, the grouping has remained largely moribund as five of the seven Bimstec member-countries have remained more busy with Saarc despite its progress being buffeted by the India-Pakistan rivalry.

For long, the Bimstec was lying in virtual disuse and it got a fresh round of traction only when Saarc came to a standstill in the second half of 2016, when the Saarc Summit in Islamabad in November that year was cancelled. Within a couple of months of the cancellation of the Saarc Summit, the Bimstec Outreach Summit was convened in Goa, India, in October. This raises a couple of questions: one, do the Saarc and the Bimstec involve duplication of efforts, and two, isn't it time to introspect if a choice needs to be made between the two? While the Saarc has eight member-countries, the Bimstec has seven. Afghanistan, Pakistan and Maldives are missing from the latter. It is easy to say that the Saarc and the Bimstec should not be viewed as an either-one-or-the-other narrative. But it is time to undertake the difficult exercise of assessing which of the two groupings has a bigger and less trouble-free geopolitical construct. Many of the areas of cooperation are common to both the groupings—trade, energy, connectivity, security and so forth. Besides, the Saarc and the Bimstec countries also have bilateral and sub-regional (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) templates for collaboration in those areas.

The Bimstec encompasses seven member states—five from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and two from South East Asia (Myanmar and Thailand)—lying in the largest bay in the world, the Bay of Bengal. It has a greater salience than the



Group photograph of BIMSTEC leaders in Goa, India in 2016.

PHOTO: PIB

Saarc because it demonstrates regional unity as well as contiguity. However, the Bimstec is also one of the least integrated regions of the world. And that throws up an opportunity. What is needed is political commitment, strategic focus signalled by the 2016 Bimstec Outreach Summit in Goa and a proactive engagement strategy.

The desired level of collaboration has evaded the Bimstec so far and prevented it from becoming a result-oriented and meaningful platform for regional cooperation. And this brings us to the second fundamental question regarding the Bimstec. When it began 21 years ago, it brought in a rambling agenda of fourteen priority areas for cooperation including connectivity, trade, energy, tourism and the Bimstec Free Trade Area. All these were expected to have a multiplier effect on trade and investment in the region. So, the Kathmandu Summit should give a thought to it because the Bimstec should not eat more than what it can chew.

The last two decades have seen little tangible results in any of these areas. It took seven years for the Bimstec countries to sign the framework agreement for a

Free Trade Area and the negotiations for the main deal are on for the last 13 years. Not that an FTA is the panacea for developmental problems facing the Bimstec. Besides, given the asymmetry in their size and economic potential as well as the presence of domestic trade and industry lobbies in the member-countries against free trade, it is certainly not easy to rush to a Bimstec FTA. That is why suggestions have been made from time to time to reduce the number of thrust areas of cooperation from fourteen to five to six—connectivity, power, security, climate change and trade, so that more time can be given to produce doable results. One hopes that the Kathmandu Summit would come up with some concrete agreements on coastal shipping that would open up access to landlocked Bhutan and Nepal to the Bay of Bengal through India and Bangladesh, and the Motor Vehicles Agreement. A Motor Vehicles Agreement under the Saarc ambit has been held up since 2014 due to Pakistan's refusal to sign on.

The single most important factor that runs like a common thread within the Bimstec is the need for all modes of connectivity: physical, digital, financial and people-to-people. It is in this context

that one has to see India building a multi-modal transport project on the Kaladan River in Myanmar and a highway connecting north eastern state of Manipur to Thailand through Myanmar. The pace of work in both the projects has been frustratingly slow but there are now strong indications that the trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand highway will be completed by the end of 2019. Progress in connectivity could be the game-changer for the Bimstec as it connects South Asia and South East Asia and gives the grouping a much bigger visibility in terms of regional economic integration. In fact, a suggestion has already been made to include Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the Bimstec in order to give it not only a greater South East Asian tilt but also take advantage of a region holding great economic potentials.

After a lack-lustre first two decades of existence, the Bimstec has entered a phase when it has been presented with an opportunity to change the narrative and its future course. One hopes the Kathmandu Summit will see it rising to the occasion.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Specialised training for new doctors

It is surprising that the government has decided to establish four new medical colleges in the country. While fresh MBBS doctors in the country are struggling to get into postgraduate programmes because there are not enough seats to accommodate most of them, the government's decision does not seem to be well thought out. Generally, MBBS doctors without a postgraduate degree or any specialised training are looked down upon.

Unless they can get government jobs through BCS exams or get enrolled in the BSMMU residency programme, which has a very limited number of seats, or any other specialised training programmes, they have to settle for poorly paid jobs. And those who are enrolled in the "honourary" training programmes after completing the five-year MBBS programme, have to work 48 hours a week without any payment. No wonder the country is experiencing a huge brain drain of brilliant doctors to other countries. It is high time the government came up with solid strategies to facilitate the specialised training process for new doctors.

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