

## BNP's preconditions

*Boycotting election is not the way forward*

IT is after a long time that the BNP has been able to organise a political rally without much let or hindrance, and what is a natural affair in the politics of a country elsewhere, becomes a matter for complimenting the administration, that being an exception rather than the common in Bangladesh. While the large gathering at the BNP rally was impressive, we are disappointed by the message BNP sent out to the people on Saturday by way of the six preconditions for participating in the forthcoming general election. It seems that BNP has learned nothing from its decision to boycott the 2014 elections, which has left it sidelined as a political party. In the last four years BNP has offered nothing constructive to the people except anti-government rhetoric and preconditions. The people are not aware of the BNP's policies with regard to the country's socio-economic or external policies that would persuade voters, particularly the swing voters, to choose the BNP over the AL to run the country. And, disappointingly, it has continued with its close relationship with Jamaat, despite the party being a deadweight on the BNP. BNP's strategy should be positioned on positives rather than negatives, on visions for the future rather than a narrow partisan focus. Boycotting general election by a leading political party can never be an option. Abstaining from the last general election has marginalised the BNP. There can be only one inescapable outcome for the BNP should it persist with the policy of boycott—become a complete political non-entity.

## TIB report merits cognisance

*Law enforcement must be corruption-free*

IT goes without saying that law enforcement agencies are an integral part of any modern state and an indispensable element of good governance. Thus its proper functioning, unfettered by politicisation or corruption, is crucial, since that defines the condition of the state as regards the level of individual and collective security, and of freedom as enshrined in the constitution, which consequently engenders public confidence in the state apparatus. We would like our law enforcement agencies to be up to international standards. But unfortunately, corruption in this sector stands in the way of that goal. The latest TIB report indicates that these agencies are the most affected by it. Such depletion in basic ethics among protectors of law makes it difficult to curb crime and bring perpetrators to justice. The ultimate goal should be to develop a law enforcement system in which people have trust, one that is truly a protector of the public and their rights as citizens of this country. We, therefore, urge the government not to dismiss the findings of TIB as baseless or biased; rather it should use the data and conclusions of the report to take remedial measures. Research studies like this are meant to be used for learning and inducing corrective measures that will ultimately make governance efficient and effective. TIB has been publishing their findings in this regard for many years and if corrective measures had been adopted from the very beginning the situation might have been much better than it is now.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## EVM: Whose purpose will it serve?

The news that the Election Commission is moving ahead with a plan to use Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the next general election, despite opposition from most political parties and apprehensions among the general people, is deeply disturbing. The EC is reportedly fast-tracking the project and has already allocated Tk 3,821 crore for procuring 1.5 lakh EVMs and other equipment even before a decision has been reached. This raises the question: whose purpose is the EC serving then? So far, the only ones backing this plan are parties associated with the ruling coalition. The EC has taken this decision only four months before the election—which is too little a time to implement a project like this. I think this is a bad decision, and quite dubious too. It's also risky given that all this money will be wasted if those EVMs are not used finally. The EC must step away from this plan. It has no right to take such a whimsical decision. It has failed to conduct free and fair elections in the City Corporation polls this year, so its focus should be on conducting a credible election at the national level, not to experiment with electoral systems or do anything rash to make the election questionable. Nur Jahan Chittagong



NAHELA NOWSHIN

A divorce takes place every hour in Dhaka. This was one of the startling findings in an exclusive report published by Prothom Alo recently. The report states that in the last seven years, the divorce rate application has increased by a massive 34 percent throughout the country according to data compiled by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). "At least 50,000 divorce applications were filed in Dhaka North and South City Corporations in the past six years, which means on average one divorce application was filed every hour," the report reads. In Chittagong City Corporation, already 2,532 applications have been filed during January-July of this year. For the inquisitive mind, these findings could provide for a very interesting case study. Does this trend signal that a major societal change is under way? Is it a manifestation of attitudinal or behavioural changes towards marriage? If so, does this shift in attitude have a relationship with something much bigger? Could the changing socioeconomic structure of Bangladeshi society have a role in all this?

The answer to the first two questions will vary depending on who you ask. I have come across some who see it as an indicator of female empowerment. Then there are those who believe that this trend demonstrates the eroding sanctity of the institution of marriage as a whole (which, I believe, could be true to an extent but it's harder to "prove" this claim). Going back to BBS' findings, in Chittagong City Corporation and the two city corporations of Dhaka, the majority of applications being filed were by women. While the most common reason for divorce has been found to be marital conflict, what's more intriguing are the differences in reasons cited by men and women for seeking a divorce. For women, the most common reasons were their husband's suspicious nature, extramarital relations, dowry, husband never returning home after going overseas, drug addiction, Facebook addiction, impotence, and personality clash, among others. On the other hand, the most common reasons cited by men were wives not leading lives according to Islamic rules, bad temper, indifference towards the family, disobeying their husband and infertility. A cursory glance at the most common reasons cited by women lends some legitimacy to the claim that the rising trend of divorce, as more and more women are initiating divorce and seeking a way out of their marriage, is an

indicator of empowerment. Today, women are less willing to remain in an unhappy marriage where the husband is constantly suspicious of the wife, is having an affair, or is physically torturing or mentally abusing the wife for dowry. The taboos against divorce are still intact in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas, where a divorced woman is associated with disgrace and shame. But it could be argued that the prejudices attached to divorcees are withering away, albeit gradually, in places like Dhaka where modernisation is giving way to people shedding their conservative attitudes. This shift in attitudes is likely part of a broader societal change brought about by an increased number of women



attaining higher education and their absorption into the labour force. As a woman's decision-making role in the private sphere has begun to be recognised, so too has her right to end a marriage. The combination of a growing societal acceptance of divorce and women's realisation of their own rights has a big role to play. Women's economic independence stands as one of the most crucial factors—not just in Bangladesh but around the world where we see similar trends in divorce. Women's participation rate in the labour force in Bangladesh has increased by eight times in the last four decades—from four percent in 1974 to 35.6 percent in 2016. It is true that much of Bangladeshi women's increased freedom in their personal lives today has

to do with their financial independence: less dependence on the spouse for money means there's less of a need to remain tied to an abusive marriage. In a paper titled "The Connection between the Family Cycle and Divorce Rates: An Analysis Based on European Data" published in 1974, the author looks at how industrialisation, urbanisation and rise in educational levels affect phases of the family cycle. The findings of the study, gleaned from data of European countries, hold a lot of relevance for industrialising countries even today where family cycles and roles of men and women are undergoing transformation. One of the findings is related to women's increased participation in the labour force which,

generalised conclusions. The above BBS data—which gives us a glimpse into marriage and divorce scenarios in urban and rural areas—does not give nearly enough information needed to analyse, for example, region-wise trends: what proportion of divorces taking place in urban and rural areas are due to marital conflict, torture, etc. Could it be that more urban women are filing for divorce on grounds of marital conflict while in far-flung rural areas more women are divorcing their husband alleging torture or physical violence or due to abandonment by their husband? An analysis that looks at the socioeconomic status and the reasons for divorce of individual couples could shed much light on the contrasting views men and women from different strata of society have on divorce. Given the frequency with which we are bombarded by headlines of women being tortured or killed for dowry—violence against women being so deeply embedded in society—especially in rural pockets of the country, we would perhaps be surprised to find the number of women filing for divorce on grounds of physical violence *despite being financially dependent* on their spouse.

Furthermore, the prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh presents an unfortunate paradox: on one hand, girls as young as 15 (and even younger) are being forced into marriage while, on the other, more women are seemingly choosing to leave their marriage of their own volition. Just a thought: could there be women filing for divorce (included in BBS' statistics) who were victims of child marriage? In that case, isn't it true that divorce, for a woman who was coerced into marriage at an early age, represents a symbol of liberation as she is the one who took the decision to leave the marriage?

The way we look at and talk about divorce should be nuanced. True, age-old notions about divorce are slowly being shed. And women's higher decision-making power derived from their economic freedom is a major reason. But let's also start talking about the ways in which divorce can be prevented. A rising trend in divorce also means that there are increasing disruptions in familial harmony—a painful experience and a source of severe trauma for children that can have lifelong effects. Existing awareness campaigns such as those against violence against women and dowry—two big reasons behind women seeking a divorce in Bangladesh—could take on these findings to drive home their message. Extensive research that takes into account the social complexities of Bangladesh and resulting disaggregated data could also prove to be very useful in understanding the deeper causes behind the rise in divorce and the ways to prevent it.

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## The strategic importance of Rakhine State

*Understanding land grabbing as a motivator behind the forceful expulsion of Rohingyas*

ASHRAFUZZAMAN KHAN

WHILE the media spotlight on Rohingyas has primarily focused on religious persecution and ethnic cleansing, the strategic importance of Rakhine State of Myanmar needs to be articulated. Rakhine State, where the Rohingyas have lived predominantly since time immemorial, is considered resourceful, but politically fragile. As we know, military operations ignited an ethnic conflict that resulted in the displacement of the Rohingyas from their villages in Rakhine State. Accordingly, state-sponsored violence, as sporadic episodes of brutal oppression of the Rohingyas, in Rakhine province is believed to have evicted approximately 700,000 Rohingyas who have fled across the border into neighbouring Bangladesh since August 2017. Why did the Myanmar government target the Rohingyas? What were the driving forces underlying the multiple episodes of eviction? In order to respond to these questions, we have to understand how "land grabbing" works. More specifically, this concept evokes the images of the coercive mechanisms of state agencies, multi-national corporate stakeholders and elite actors used to evict smallholders or marginalised communities. The violence instigated by the regime of the civilian-led administration was due to Rakhine's geostrategic location and natural resources. Neighbouring countries have decided to invest in Rakhine province. In response to these new trading networks and alliances, both China and India have become interested in building mega projects despite being rivals. Both countries proposed a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Rakhine State: China preferred the city of Kyaukphyu while India chose Sittwe. To entice foreign countries or investors in the SEZ,

land grabbing has been taking place, leading to the eviction of small landholders who depend on subsistence livelihood. In order to boost economic growth in Myanmar, the forced displacement of Rohingyas seems to be planned—it is a mechanism to create trading networks with China and India. Apart from economic reasons, Rakhine province occupies a rather critical position in Myanmar and has a strategic perspective for both China and India. In the past few decades, China has

and Saudi Arabia. It seems that China has implicit desires to strengthen defence ties with Myanmar by using the Bay of Bengal—and only the coastal belts of Rakhine State provide such opportunities. On the other hand, India's strategy is to not only strengthen regional economic cooperation as an emerging superpower in Asia, but also develop surveillance systems for the provinces of northeastern India, namely Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Sikkim. These provinces are poorly



Burnt out remains of a house in Myo Thu Gyi village, where houses were burnt to the ground near Maungdaw town in northern Rakhine State, Myanmar, August 31, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

been investing significantly in Myanmar, as a sign of thriving China-Myanmar friendship, in order to have a sway on regional politics underpinning the expansion of trading networks. From a strategic perspective, Myanmar is situated between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The coastal belts of Rakhine, moreover, are access points to the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal for China—an opportunity to strengthen trade networks and military ties with Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran,

connected to the Indian mainland and have experienced many separatist movements or insurgencies, as well as share borders with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Both countries, thus, consider Rakhine as the "geopolitical headquarters" in order to materialise various political aspirations and implement mercantile strategies in the future. The eviction of Rohingyas from Rakhine province was a state-sponsored crime. To accomplish this mission, the civilian-led administration established

fresh strategic relations with Delhi and Beijing; this new alliance aims to reinforce military support to the Myanmar government. Despite the horrendous situation in Rakhine State, China and India still stand beside Myanmar. In addition to the role of these countries, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader, played an extremely dubious role, as she allowed for the continuation of socio-economic development programmes in Rakhine State. Accordingly, the most densely populated areas inhabited by the Rohingyas were not merely cleared—a total of 362 villages were destroyed too, according to a report published by Human Rights Watch. Approximately 48 investment projects in the areas were also given the green light. The forceful expulsion of the Rohingyas from their ancestral home reflects the concept of "primitive accumulation"—formulated by the philosopher Karl Marx—which reveals the process of proletarianisation: the conversion of communal property to private property, the transformation of human relationships and the suppression of the rights of the commoners accompanied by coercive mechanisms. The process of primitive accumulation thus provides a lens through which we can understand the current process of land grabbing in Rakhine State—how vast swathes of farmland, the coastal belts, and oil and offshore gas reserves are being captured. Of course, Myanmar can propose and endorse schemes of "economic corridor" to boost its economic growth, but the ongoing persecution of Rohingyas and the latter's expulsion from Rakhine State is a classic example of land grabbing which is associated with political, economic and biophysical conditions.

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