

A credible election is still possible

The ball is in AL's court

THAT Khaleda Zia cannot contest in the election due to a Supreme Court ruling is surely a crushing blow to BNP, as it is set to participate in the election without its leader for the first time in its history. Despite the setback, the BNP has stuck to its initial decision—to participate in the election, which suggests that the party has learnt its lessons from boycotting the previous election.

We are, however, concerned that in spite of strong objections from several important coalition partners, BNP refused to cut its ties with Jamaat-e-Islami, a party infamous for its opposition to the Liberation War and collaborating with the Pakistani forces.

What we find disturbing is that BNP allowed Jamaat leaders to use its own symbol—sheaf of paddy—to contest the upcoming election as Jamaat is no longer a registered political party. It looks like this religion-based political group has been assimilated into the BNP.

We are also concerned about the fact that thousands of opposition activists are still in jail, while millions of others allegedly face criminal cases. Despite the prime minister's assurance, the so-called political cases continue to haunt opposition activists. We wonder how they will concentrate on elections if such uncertainty continues to loom over their heads.

As the election is set to be held under a partisan government for the first time since the restoration of democracy in the country in the '90s, the governing party bears much responsibility, certainly more than the opposition, to make sure that the election takes place in a free, fair and peaceful manner. If the ruling party succeeds in holding a credible election, it will bring much-needed faith in our democratic system for citizens. Awami League should not miss this opportunity.

Legacy of a promising mayor

We must complete his laudable work

AFTER assuming office in July 2015, the late mayor Annisul Huq only wanted a few years to change Dhaka city and we, the city dwellers, were keenly observing his ambitious plans and wondering if those plans were at all achievable. To our surprise and delight, he had materialised many of his plans that once seemed unrealistic to many.

During the two and a half years that he led the DNCC, the city saw some qualitative changes. His bold initiative of reclaiming parts of the Shatrusta intersection in Tejgaon area from the clutches of truck owners was exemplary. The eviction drive faced obstruction from transport workers and violent clashes ensued but Annisul Huq refused to back away and eventually the area was cleared. Another remarkable success of this charismatic mayor was the opening up of Gabtoli Bus Terminal which eased traffic congestion in the area remarkably and made entering the city from Savar much easier. He also tried to rid the city of the hideous billboards that sprang up everywhere and he motivated people to plant trees to make Dhaka green again. He also did a great job of improving Dhaka's garbage management system, an area which was largely neglected until his initiative.

He was a well-known personality even before becoming a public representative as he was a popular TV host and a successful business leader. He had the rare ability to motivate and engage people with his works. After he passed away on November 30, 2017, the DNCC cleaners worked an hour overtime to pay tribute to him—a unique way to pay tribute to someone in this country. This is just one example of how he made people love their work.

However, it is sad that many of his unfinished works and initiatives to improve the city came to a standstill after his death. We urge the DNCC as well as the government to continue on with the unfinished works of the late mayor. On his first death anniversary, let's not mourn his absence by citing what he could have achieved if he were with us. Instead, let us take strength from this dynamic personality, celebrate his undeniable achievements and work together to fulfil his vision of making Dhaka a better place to live in.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What do we expect from political parties?

The forthcoming election is extremely crucial for the future direction of our nation. Not just because it's the first time that the opposition agreed to take part in the election under a partisan government, but also because the stakes are so high for the people given the current political circumstances.

Still the people face a tough situation. On the one hand, one may argue that the last ten years saw massive infrastructural development for the country, while on the other, it is also true that a certain section of people disproportionately reaped the benefits of such development. Meanwhile, the opposition's track record in governance is also questionable.

Contesting parties are expected to announce their electoral manifestos within days. I would encourage people to find out whether their concerns are addressed in the manifestos.

Political parties, too, need to understand that the people expect them to govern the country in a responsible and democratic manner, while taking the necessary steps to reduce corruption. All the contesting political parties would do well to remember before the election that we, the people, expect them to respect our expectations in their activities and in their conducts.

Biplob Biswas, Faridpur

EC seems to be in denial of ground realities

MORE THAN JUST FACTS



NAZMUL AHASAN

IT'S barely a secret that even after the election schedule was announced, the police filed hundreds, if not thousands, of so-called political cases against leaders and activists linked to the opposition. The media recently uncovered a new trend: "gayebi mamla" or "ghost cases". The curious terminology is derived from the fact that many of these cases were filed against non-resident, terminally ill or even dead people, and describe events that did not take place at all.

"Thousands of people are now waiting at the premises of the High Court to obtain bail," Barrister M Amir-ul Islam told a seminar recently, referring to BNP activists. "Will they campaign or secure bail or go to jail?"

The prime minister recognised this when she reportedly promised during the dialogue with the Oikyafront that she would ask to revise the "political" cases against opposition activists. The Chief Election Commissioner, too, appeared to acknowledge the phenomenon when he instructed the police high-ups not to harass anyone or lodge new cases without a court warrant.

However, in response to the CEC's directives, the police bosses arranged a meeting and came to the conclusion that nothing barred them from pursuing "criminal cases," according to multiple media reports. But here's the catch: cases filed to "harass" opposition activists are, more often than not, criminal cases.

One would expect the EC to confront the police for its non-committal tone. Instead, it seems to have taken a conciliatory position. "The police are not arresting anyone for no reason or without consulting us," the CEC later declared.

According to BNP's estimates published by numerous newspapers, as many as 1.2 million opposition activists were sued from 2017 to 2018 alone, with thousands imprisoned, despite the fact that this period was relatively calm as BNP carefully refrained from resorting to street agitation. Few would believe most of these cases are legally substantive, yet the EC seems to be very reluctant to do anything effective about this. In an ideal situation, such a policy of non-interference would sound perfectly legitimate. However, in a climate in which "ghost cases" abound, an intervention is quite necessary.

Since the restoration of democracy in the '90s, Bangladesh has seen four credible elections—all held under a non-partisan caretaker government. While a non-partisan government is certainly less likely to influence electioneering, the secret to its success was largely attributed to one particular strategy: sweeping and random reshuffling within the bureaucracy.

The outgoing government usually tries to design the bureaucracy in its favour, and thus the reshuffle was essential. The idea was that when a mid-level officer working, say, in an agricultural institution was made an

all-powerful district commissioner, there would be less of a chance for him/her to be politically influenced. And, the strategy worked.

Now that the provision of the caretaker government no longer exists, the Oikyafront demands that similar steps be taken by the EC. It even alleged that a group of senior administration and police officials are plotting to maintain the status quo.

The EC categorically rejected their demands, declaring not a single transfer, let alone reshuffle, would take place without any evidence of wrongdoing. Once again, in a normal situation, the EC's position would seem perfectly fine. But in reality, the EC seems to simply be in denial of how things work here in Bangladesh.

Not only has the EC been unable to assert its

context, it is difficult to overlook the fact that they were all critical of the EC's role in the controversial 2014 election.

What's more, in recent days, the EC secretary issued a number of directives to prospective observers. For example, they were instructed to monitor polling "like a statue" and, as such, carry no mobile phones or cameras in the polling booth or talk to the media during live broadcast. Such restrictive directives are unprecedented, according to several long-time election observers.

In comparison to all these shortcomings of the EC, one particular issue may not seem like a big deal—and that is the nephew of the CEC being nominated by the ruling party. Some important questions need to be asked here. The Awami League is obliged to explain



Why is the EC shying away from using the vast powers at its disposal to address the realities on the ground and create a level playing field?

PHOTO: COLLECTED

authority over the bureaucracy and the police, but has also sought to restrict observers.

According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the number of observers in the 2008 election was four times that of this time, in spite of the number of voters and polling centres being much higher this time around. While this is partly because of the "lack of funds" for monitoring organisations, the EC's decision to reduce the number of monitoring organisations by half must have contributed to the decline in the number of observers.

What is even more surprising is that the EC delisted FEMA and Brotee, two of the oldest election monitoring organisations in the country, and revoked the registration of Odhikar, a critical human rights organisation, for seemingly trivial reasons. In this

how the CEC's nephew, despite having literally no political prominence or experience, obtained his nomination, bypassing a coterie of politically active and experienced local aspirants including the current MP. The CEC is yet to clarify why this shouldn't amount to a conflict of interest.

In a nutshell, contrary to the EC's claims, an even-playing field remains elusive, while its sincerity now seems questionable. In the name of rules, it is simply shying away from using the vast powers at its disposal to address the realities on the ground and create a level playing field.

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The distinct experience of being a woman MP in Bangladesh



ZAHIR AHMED

IN our upcoming parliamentary election on December 30, 2018 more women MP aspirants have shown an interest to take on a legislative role than ever before (more than 50 from each alliance). How can we explain this change? Could it be that the political parties want to increase women MPs to comply with international conventions in order to maintain gender equality? Why do the MPs want to contest, and what will be the effects? What does it mean for representation of the constituents?

Studies suggest that significant representation of women (around 20 percent of all Members of Parliament) in Bangladesh National Parliament is ineffective. Their powers have been constrained by being appointed rather than being elected in many cases. There is a difference between appointed and elected women MPs. Currently, women are representing Parliament both through direct election and reserved seats (with 22 elected and 50 reserved seats). The number of reserved seats in Parliament was increased from 45 to 50 through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which are distributed proportionately among the sitting political parties in the Parliament.

For selected women MPs, the tendency to get involved in public engagement in constituency service appears to be relatively stronger compared to many male MPs. Some women MPs I interviewed are constituency-based and live in their own residences with four of them seldom staying in their parliament dormitories in Dhaka. Women MPs are seen as less independent because they are appointed by the party and are not elected. As one woman MP said, "There is an aura of neglect. No matter how much progress has been made in empowering women, problems still linger. Furthermore, in the places where we, the women, cannot be ignored, they pay us respect only out of courtesy or obligation—not out of reverence."

Since 2005, it became evident that some women MPs in the parliament

invariably want to pursue more women's rights based strategies. But the attitudes of most male MPs (no matter whether they belong to the same party or not) have prevented them from promoting women's interests, they reported, despite both main party leaders being women.

When one woman MP was asked about her opinion on bills on women's issues, she said, "Regardless of my proficiency and eligibility, I do not get to determine my own career path. Last year, I wanted to move away from my party to the district level, the mainstream. I was not allowed to do so and was asked to ponder upon the fate of women's wing if I had left."

"So, you are not being permitted to go to the district level?"

"No. If they had, they would have had to make me a joint secretary or give me a higher designation—and they acknowledge this themselves. In the history of sovereign Bangladesh, no woman had been elected as MP in this district before me."

Having observed male and female MPs in several constituencies since 2005, it seemed to me that they handle their representative role differently too. Nearly every female MP believed that they work for the constituents, especially as constituencies become increasingly demanding. Some female MPs always appeared more confident, especially in intensely emotional conversations with female constituents. Familiar too was the pattern of women MPs investing proportionately more time than men in everyday happenings that are less visible, valued and rewarded in terms of money or power. So there is a social and political significance in the gendered experience of being an MP.

The majority of women MPs did not take a liking to the word "reserved". As one woman MP told me, "In my opinion, we should become MPs through election. It can be best solved by giving women a seat in every upazila and limiting them to one in every district. Whatever they do, I would rather not be labelled as a 'reserved woman MP'."

In response to a question about whether the circumstances are the same in terms of budget allocations as well, the answer of women MPs was straightforward. One woman MP replied, "Yes. They (male MPs) are given twice the amount for a single upazila, whereas we are given merely half, for two

districts." The quote does not indicate that women are being given less to spend. Rather, this is direct discrimination as the different allocations are for elected versus selected MPs which affects women in a negative way.

At the constituency level, a female political leader with formidable political expertise and qualifications does not enjoy the same status as her male colleagues. Two such female MPs have informed me that though they have been involved in politics for a long time, they are not entrusted with esteemed designations and/or responsibilities because they are women. As one of them narrates, "As a woman MP, the major constraint I face is working in a patriarchal environment. We are treated in terms of patriarchal values—as 'reserved' or 'regular' MPs. We are 'inferior' to men. But we are elected too."

The representative part of this is that women MPs have less influence on constructional activities. It is essential to ask men and women MPs about how their experiences were gendered. I observed that women were sympathetic to women's issues at the constitutional level. Another important example is that a fair amount of legislation on women's issues has gone through the Parliament, which reflects a change in attitude towards women in society. But alongside these changes in law, we saw that various male parliamentarians were reluctant to push these forward.

Very recently, I was collaborating with a multidisciplinary research coalition looking at the relationship between Parliamentarians and civil society in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. Male/female MPs were asked to provide their opinions. In both countries, I found contrasting stories by women MPs about their relationships with male MPs in Parliament. In Addis Ababa, my colleagues observed that the MPs mentioned the strengths of their party and government and their successful efforts at promoting gender equality. According to them, when the male MPs left, the conversation changed abruptly.

In the case of Bangladesh however, one of the MPs, when asked what it was like being a woman MP, said: "When a woman gets up to speak in the Parliament she is always hesitant, representing 'reserved seats', whereas a 'regular' male MP never has to worry." In

both countries this encounter conveys the message that women MPs struggle with "self-dignity" but are under pressure to appear "invulnerable".

When the situation is favourable, women MPs express public engagement. One MP in Bangladesh said, "I am involved in development programmes such as improvement of schools and colleges, constructing and repairing roads, Kabikha (food in return for labour) programmes, and so on. I am always working on eradicating the dowry system, preventing drug addiction, and especially preventing the persecution of women. Although I had been working on these issues even before I was elected, the breadth of my involvement now has broadened significantly."

In Bangladesh, a number of women MPs were credited with strong advocacy work to prevent early marriage as well as their vigorous efforts to build the capacity of female members of parliament through further education. Then there is the hard work the caucus put into including parliamentary standing committees. In contrast, it is hard to find women MPs who actively participate in budget debates to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in key pro-poor and growth sectors. This is a neglected issue that needs to be addressed moving forward.

But here is a fundamental cautionary note. It is good news that the number of women MP aspirants is increasing. It is of course important, but the patriarchal ideology which has brought women's emancipation down to the level of Parliament must be challenged. Some opine that such discriminations plague developmental activities as well. Since women occupy the reserved seats in Parliament, their status is "inferior" to their colleagues despite being elected by the same Parliament members who discriminate against them.

With the 11th parliamentary election nearing, our political parties should develop a perspective that takes into account the social and political significance of the gendered experience of being an MP in Bangladesh.

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