

Routine gesture or is there more to it?



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY
 ALI RIAZ

THE statement of the heads of the diplomatic missions of the European Union, Norway and Sweden in Dhaka on Monday calling to "ensure a genuine, credible, inclusive and transparent electoral process" in the upcoming parliamentary election warrants our attention. The question is whether it's a routine diplomatic gesture or there is more to it. The timing, tone and tenor of the statement do not suggest a mere formality, particularly when a number of recent developments in Europe and the United States point to an increasing interest among the international community about the election scheduled for December 30.

Until recently, there seemed to be a mood of resignation among the changed the course of the country's politics: the democratic space has increasingly shrunk since then, the authoritarian bent of the government has become palpable and the possibility of inclusive politics, let alone an inclusive election, has gradually begun to fade. The international community, that is the members of the EU, the United States and other development partners, continued to call for an inclusive election at every occasion, which was quite conveniently ignored by the government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her associates insisted that they too want an inclusive election. But beyond the rhetoric, there were very few, if any, indications that the government wants to create an environment conducive to an inclusive election. Harassment and persecution of opposition activists and filing "ghost cases" became normal; judicial and extrajudicial measures have been employed against the critics of the government; and freedom of assembly

of the forthcoming election was a major concern for the EU. Recently, in an interview with the German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*, Josef Weidenholzer, a member of the European Parliament, said, "The current political situation in Bangladesh does not display the existence of fundamental prerequisites of fair elections such as freedom of assembly, freedom of press, etc. The opposition is restricted, and its leader Khaleda Zia is sentenced to 10 years in jail lacking a fair trial. There is no independent election commission." He also stated, "Under such conditions, the presence of a European Parliament election observation mission would not fulfill its objectives and could be misused for distortive purposes." There were serious concerns, among observers of Bangladeshi politics, whether the BNP would be willing or able to participate in the election. Notwithstanding the persecution of the opposition activists since the 2014

What role the international community can and will play to ensure that the election, participated in by the opposition, does not become a "staged show" is up to itself.

EC's appeal for neutrality and peace

It must also enforce the code of conduct

THE CEC has called on the judicial magistrates to act impartially while performing their electoral duties, and in the same vein the returning officers have urged the participants to maintain peace and follow the code. All these are very good, but we feel that mere statements may not have the desired effect. Already, newspaper reports inform us that several opposition party candidates have requested the EC to take steps to ensure safety and security in various localities so that peace and order in the run-up to the election are ensured. This is a message echoed by a joint statement by the European Union, along with Norway and Switzerland, which has asked the government, the EC and other stakeholders to protect citizens' right to vote. Unfortunately, the facts speak for themselves. There has been flouting of rules well ahead of the allocation of symbols. The EC has so far not taken any effective steps to pull down the massive billboards, posters, festoons, etc., that violate the rules. Indeed, the Commission's statements regarding rules of conduct fall flat as its rules have been flouted openly. Regrettably, the code of conduct has been observed in its violation.

While we fully endorse the EC's concern for peace and neutrality, the EC should not overlook the very important role it has in this matter, both in regard to the non-partisan role of the electoral officers and peace. It must be more active in enforcing the code and take punitive actions against those who are in breach of it. Otherwise the calls would remain pious hopes only.

Why are stalkers not caught?

HC directives have not been heeded at all

FIFTEEN-year-old Lucky Ghosh, a schoolgirl who is fighting for her life in hospital at the time of writing this, was brutally stabbed by a group of stalkers while on her way home at a village in Manikganj. A candidate for the upcoming SSC exams, Lucky was being stalked by this group for the last two months until it decided to attack her so viciously. It is outrageous that despite strong directives from the High Court and laws that have been enacted to prevent violence against girls and women, school girls continue to be stalked and attacked on a regular basis all over the country. In 2011 the HC recognised stalking as sexual harassment after many young girls took their lives after being stalked. Among the directives, the HC asked the government to include stalking as a sexual offence in the Women and Children Repression Act, set up separate cells at every police station across the country to monitor and deal with stalking cases, make sure the heads of police stations hold meetings on these cases and ensure that appropriate actions are taken; so that such cases are properly tried in court. The court also said that its directives will be considered as law, and mobile courts will deal with incidents of stalking until the government enacts a fresh law or amend the relevant law to stop the crime.

It is obvious that none of these directives have been taken seriously, leaving young girls vulnerable to the whims of these psychopaths. If we really did have separate cells in police departments to monitor stalking, if stalkers were given exemplary punishment, if the police (including higher officials) seriously went after stalkers and took action, how many of these girls would have been saved? Stalking as we all know, usually happens over a period of time, which means it is not difficult to identify the stalker. So why are we not stopping the crime before it escalates into a fatal attack on a helpless young girl or woman? The government has a huge responsibility to implement the HC directives and protect young girls, whether they are at school, on the streets or at home, from these predators.



Jatiya Oikyafront leaders join hands on the rally stage at Sylhet Registrar's Office ground in October 2018. The emergence of the coalition, headed by Dr Kamal Hossain, has brought a sea-change in the political landscape. PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

international community that the election will be a repeat of 2014, when the opposition boycotted the election and the ruling Awami League got a free pass. While many blamed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for its decision to boycott, others have suggested that the ruling party wanted the BNP to stay away from the election. There is a theory that the BNP walked into the ruling party's trap by boycotting. Whether it is the BNP's misjudgment and wrong political calculation which is to be blamed or a well-designed and well-executed plan of the AL, is a matter of interpretation but the consequence is beyond disagreement: the 2014 election was far from an acceptable election. It delivered a hollow victory to the AL, and its moral legitimacy has remained questionable until now. Besides, it is not an exaggeration that the election

remained limited at best. The growing number of extrajudicial killings and the normalisation of enforced disappearances clearly were not viewed as an encouraging environment for the opposition to participate in the election. However, there is a widespread perception that the international community had encouraged, if not insisted, the opposition to join the election and shun street agitation. Several City Corporation elections held under the present Election Commission gave very little credence to the claim that it is acting neutrally. It is against this backdrop that the European Union, when it planned various election monitoring missions early this year, decided to exclude Bangladesh. Although its public statement cited scarcity of funds, there were clear indications that the quality

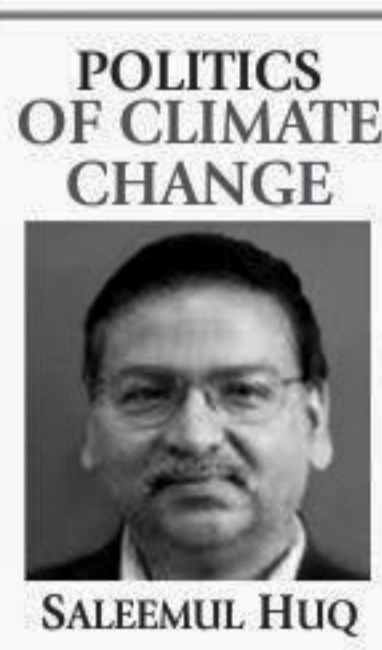
election and the failed movement in 2015, the conviction of Khaleda Zia in February and October this year, and the increase in her punishment on appeal from the government, provided an impression that the BNP is being forced into treading the path it took in 2014. But the BNP did not choose the same path, which surprised many including an analyst who penned the Briefing Paper for the British House of Commons Library. However, the emergence of the Jatiya Oikyafront, headed by Dr Kamal Hossain, in early October has brought a sea-change in the political landscape. Expectedly, the international community has taken note of it. The importance of the election has been underscored at various forums. For example, on November 15, several members of the European Parliament expressed concerns on the state of human rights and stated that "the

coming election in Bangladesh poses as the country's last chance to determine the course of its democracy and rule of law." On the same day, a hearing held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) of the US House of Representatives, was told of the sorry state of human rights and concerns regarding a credible and transparent election. Two resolutions have been introduced in the US House of Representatives between November and December: HR 1156 and HR 1169. The latter particularly called on the House to reaffirm "the commitment of the United States to promote free, fair, transparent and credible elections in Bangladesh." Although none of these resolutions is expected to come to the floor from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and acted upon before the election, they show that the US Congress is not oblivious to the situation. The statement of the heads of the EU diplomatic missions at Dhaka has come on the heels of these recent developments. One may recall that the January 2014 election received more international attention than any in Bangladesh's history. Clearly, there was a schism between India and the international community on the issue of the election; the former was not opposed to a non-inclusive election while the latter, especially the US, UK, and various multilateral organisations, called for an inclusive election. The 2018 election is yet to see such levels of involvement of the international community.

Many are asking whether it is too little, too late for the international community to act to ensure that the country holds a credible and transparent election. But there are indications that unlike a few months ago when the international community seemed to have accepted the political trajectory as fait accompli and the election results as a foregone conclusion, there is a growing sense that it has a role to play. What role the international community can and will play to ensure that the election, participated in by the opposition, does not become a "staged show" is up to itself. But it can hardly avoid the responsibility after encouraging the opposition to participate even when the situation is far from a "level playing" field.

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COP24 gets political after first week



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE
 SALEEMUL HUQ

THE first week of the two-week 24th Conference of Parties (COP24) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) being held in Katowice, Poland has just ended with a major political difference between the countries who wish to raise ambitions to take faster action to tackle climate change in light of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5 degrees, and those who are associated with fossil fuel interests. The IPCC report was asked for by the COP in 2015 and was produced by the best scientists around the world. It was then adopted by all governments who are part of the IPCC in October this year. The report shows that there is a very significant difference between a world with a 1.5 degree and a 2 degrees higher global atmospheric temperature. It will affect all countries, not just the poorest. The report also said action was still possible if all countries agree to raise their ambitions for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. The need is for all countries to be reliant on 100 percent renewable energy no later than 2050. The IPCC presented their report to COP24 in Katowice last week. Normally it would be a very routine matter for the COP to acknowledge it and take its findings into the COP decision making process. However in this case it was not accepted and the argument took place over one word: "welcome". The vast majority of countries said they would like to "welcome" the IPCC report. However the US, Saudi Arabia and Russia would not accept that word and would only allow the COP to take "note" the IPCC report. This may sound like a trivial play of word but it signifies a major stand from the fossil fuel interests which are being represented here by Saudi Arabia, US and Russia. To give an example of how the US is doing that, there are two sets of events being hosted by the US, one by the Trump administration and the second by others including states like California, cities like New York,



People attend a demonstration to urge politicians to act against climate change in Paris, France, as the COP24 is held in Poland, December 8, 2018. PHOTO: PIROSHKA VAN DE WOUW/ REUTERS

and companies and universities. This second pavilion has the slogan of "we are still in" the Paris Agreement. It is one of the most popular pavilions at the COP! On the other hand the official Trump delegation is holding a special event to promote coal as the future which has been paid for by the coal industry in the US. Many countries are asking why Trump has even bothered to send a delegation to the COP if he wants to leave the Paris Agreement? The answer is that he doesn't just want to leave it but rather to prevent other countries from making progress. In this goal he has gained the support of Saudi Arabia and Russia (which is really a trio who are becoming a major global partnership on more than climate change).

So it is now clear that the division of interests is very clear between those who wish to take real action to tackle the global emergency of climate change and those who want to promote fossil fuels sales. It is no longer the case that those questioning the reality of human induced climate change is doing so because of ignorance, but rather that they are deliberately trying to subvert action. The answers may well lie in Saudi Arabia and Russia joining Trump to leave the Paris Agreement and let the rest of us carry on tackling this global emergency. Saleemul Huq is director, International Centre for Climate Change and Development, Independent University, Bangladesh. Email: Saleem.icccd@iub.edu.bd

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Arity's unconscionable treatment

Arity Adhikary of Viqarunnisa Noon School & College ended her life hours after she and her parents were allegedly mistreated and humiliated by some teachers of the school, after she was accused of cheating in an exam. Yes, cheating is wrong (I hope the nation's elders, especially people in high places, are reading these words). But if she was a first-time offender, was it right to humiliate her parents? Was it right to threaten her with a expulsion? Arity was only a ninth-grader and a product of her society and culture. One might ask, how "perfect" is this society where far more egregious matters get swept under the rug, where Tk 22,000 crore is plundered through banking scams, where sexual harassment of women is deemed an entitlement? The school authorities who traumatised Arity to the point where she ended her life have terrible wronged her. Children need to be nurtured, cared for, supported emotionally, and treated fairly. We have fine educators in many academic institutions who continue to toil and care for the country's promising youth. But there are also some who push the wrong buttons and are themselves in need of counselling, as they often go too far, immersed in their power, need for dominance and self-importance. It is time to ensure that those who treat children like this are held to account. Syed Saad Andaleeb, by email