

Unfortunate setback for election monitors

It contradicts the promise of a fair election

WITH just a week left before the national election, it is worrying that there should be a need to reiterate the call for something as fundamental as creating space for effective election monitoring. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) has been forced to cancel its observation mission for the December 30 election after Bangladesh failed to grant credentials and issue visas within the stipulated timeframe to the majority of its international monitors. Rightly, the US, which funded the ANFREL mission, has expressed its disappointment. In diplo-speak, a country's "inability" to issue visas for such a cause is usually viewed as a rejection. It's inconceivable why the government would leave room for such speculations when it has reportedly promised to allow international observers for the sake of a credible election.

With ANFREL out of the picture, and the EU not sending any mission this year, the responsibility to observe the election rests on the shoulders of local observers and the few international monitors who can make it in time. But there are doubts if they will be able to do their job properly, what with the unreasonable restrictions being put on them about, for example, taking pictures inside a polling station or talking to the media while monitoring the election. All this tends to heighten fears about the EC's ability to deliver a fair and participatory election. The EC is already facing mounting criticism over its failure to create a level playing field for all the contesting parties and protect the opposition from threats of random arrests, violence, "ghost" cases and other barriers. Most recently, BNP's official website was blocked on vague grounds, which is just an indication of the shrinking space for the opposition. The latest setback suffered by the international monitors should serve as a warning for the EC that a lot remains to be done in terms of creating the proper environment for an election. The EC must act now as there is very little time left.

Police OC's partisan role

EC risks losing its credibility

A video clip showing the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Kolaroa Police Station in Satkhira has taken social media by storm. In it the OC is seen calling for people to vote for AL. Although the OC has denied the allegation, the video clip has been authenticated by statements by other police officials. We would like to know how a police officer can make such a biased political statement, in public and in favour of a political party that is running for election. It is good news that following video evidence, the EC issued an order and the officer has been withdrawn. But the EC needs to be far more vigilant so that such violations of the electoral code of conduct do not happen in the first place. The candidate from the constituency who submitted the complaint to the EC has said that the local returning officer had not taken "any steps in this regard despite repeated appeals".

Indeed, electoral campaigning at the Satkhira 1 constituency has been anything but peaceful. There have been numerous allegations against ruling party men of attacking the opposition camp. In the midst of such a charged atmosphere, we have an officer of the law openly currying favour with the ruling party candidate and assigning himself the role of party spokesman.

As we understand it, a formal complaint has been lodged against the OC in question and the EC (already under fire for being too complacent when it comes to stamping its authority on the police) would be ill-advised to pass this incident on as being minor or an isolated incident. Similar complaints have been launched in the last so many days against other police officials who are allegedly guilty of acts that point to their acting in ways that are anything but neutral. If it is the intention of the EC to present a credible election to the people, these anomalies by law enforcers must be checked now. The EC must make it absolutely clear that public officials openly campaigning for candidates is a violation of the code of conduct.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

US withdrawal from Syria will be consequential

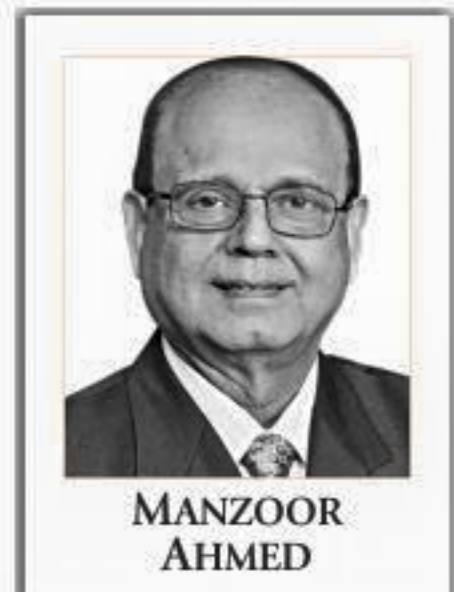
US President Donald Trump has announced that the country will withdraw its troops from Syria. While there are only US 2,000 troops currently stationed in Syria, the announcement will have a far-reaching consequence in the region. US adversaries, such as Russia and Iran, stand to gain most out of the decision, while US allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia will have to rethink their strategy in the region.

The US has supported the Syrian Kurdish forces namely Syrian Democratic Forces, which has fought against the IS. The SDF will be hurt by this decision as the threat of a Turkish invasion looms. In that case, SDF might attempt to reach an agreement with the Assad regime.

As Russia will become the dominant power in Syria in the absence of the US, Israel will likely spend much of its energy to appease Russia. On the other hand, while both Russia and Iran support the Syrian government, there will be competing interests for Russia and Iran in Syria when the dust settles.

Kaysar Karim, By e-mail

Manifestos in the era of alt-facts—the case of education



IN his famous novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel Prize winning Colombian writer, writes about Florentino, who professes his

undying love for Fermina while he keeps on engaging in trysts with other women. Márquez's magic realism narrative seduces readers and garners their sympathy for Florentino. Critics talk about the novel as an example of narrative as seduction and narrative as the means of constructing and deconstructing truth.

Not that artistic ambiguity is equivalent to artful falsehood in politics. In the era of Trump, the bar for credulity has disappeared, at least for his backers. Press is the enemy of the people and climate change is a Chinese hoax, declared President Trump. He has now announced victory over ISIS, the Islamic State fighters in Syria, and has ordered return home of US troops, while the decade-old war rages on with no end in sight. Politicians everywhere, inclined towards taking licence with inconvenient facts and truth, have given new currency to alternative facts and fake news in an era of "post-truth", replacing old-fashioned lies and falsehood.

The election manifestos of the major parties in Bangladesh are receiving media and public attention now. The parties are vying for seats in the 11th national parliament in the election on December 30. The ruling Awami League and the main opposition contender Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) released their manifestos when only some ten days remained till the polls.

The last-minute release of manifestos indicates a lack of seriousness about the deliberation process followed and how strongly the party stood behind it. A separate manifesto of the Oikyafront, the opposition alliance, of which BNP is the major partner, is also a cause for raised eyebrows.

How credible are the parties' pledges? Awami League has announced "zero tolerance" for corruption, an impossibility under any circumstance. But under the ruling party's tenure, thousands of crores of public funds have been lost through bank scams. The finance minister described bribery as "speed money" to keep the economy moving. And mega-projects are systematically delayed to raise their costs.



BNP, in its manifesto, promises a culture of political tolerance. Under its rule, the mayhem of August 21, 2004 happened when the then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina luckily survived a grenade attack, but 24 of her comrades were killed. BNP and its allies, failing to negotiate with the ruling party the terms for conducting the national election in 2014, perpetrated nationwide street violence.

The result was large-scale deaths of innocent people, arson, vandalism and damage of vehicles and property. BNP still has as its ally a party identified as one culpable for crimes against humanity during the Liberation War.

The plight of the education system and ways of improving it is not the most eye-catching subject in this political season. But ultimately, it is as important as any other, if not more, for the future of the country. The major parties mention education in their manifestos giving it varying degrees of attention.

Awami League in its 21-point manifesto placed education as item number 10 in the list, presenting it in two parts. The part about "success and achievements" includes 27 bullet points. On top of the list is the adoption of the Education Policy in 2010, though much of it remains unimplemented. The other points are about expansion of facilities and keeping the system functioning with teachers, textbooks and stipends for students.

The 12 bullet points under "objectives and plans" promise "highest allocations" for education, though during its 10-year rule the allocation hovered around two percent of the GDP despite repeated pledges to raise it. The other points relate to taking steps to improve quality, more facilities for indigenous groups, ending the disparity in salary between government primary school teachers and others,



PHOTOS: BSS/ Mohammad Al-Masum Molla

a technical training centre in each upazila, more nationalisation of institutions, and continuing most of the existing policies.

The 14-point Jatiya Oikyafront manifesto pledges to scrap public exams for grades five and eight, a centralised admission test for all public universities, holding student union elections at all academic institutions and setting up medical colleges in all districts.

The 19-point BNP pledge includes vows to exempt students from all kinds of value added tax (VAT) and withdrawing cases against students involved in recent civil service job quota and road safety movements. Higher education will emphasise science and technology; "world class universities" will be built; and a dedicated education TV channel will be started. BNP also pledged to reduce the price of internet and provide loans for education at low interest rates.

Both Oikyafront and BNP promised a five percent of GDP allocation for education. All three promised employment creation for young people—at least 10 million in the next five years.

It may be instructive to compare the education pledges of the political parties and the "critical areas of action in education" identified by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). CPD in its pre-election brief lists these under three categories: quality and scope of services, governance, and resources (CPD, December 10, 2018).

On quality and scope, the key points are: (a) Secondary education for all by 2030, with interim national targets for grades 8, 10 and 12—a priority under SDG2030 and for our national middle income aspirations; (b) Ensuring the quality of degree colleges, from where most school teachers come; (c) expanding non-formal alternatives for dropout/out-of-school children and lifelong learning

through a network of community learning centres; (d) Quality early childhood development for young children; (e) Making vocational and technical education truly market responsive; and (f) Making teaching an attractive profession with a 10-year plan and a National Teaching Service Corps as its centre piece.

The governance issues are: (a) Bringing all school education (K-12) under one national Ministry; (b) Decentralising education governance with upazila and district-based planning and management; and (c) A permanent statutory National Education Commission to guide education reform.

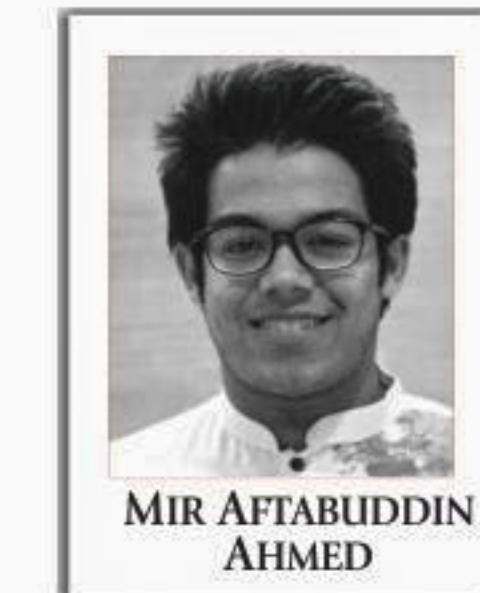
The main point in terms of resource is increasing the public education allocation to at least four percent of the GDP, and at least 20 percent of the national budget, as well as effective and efficient use of the resources.

Specific items in the party manifestos are pertinent and a manifesto is not a development plan. However, the contrast cannot be missed between the slap-dash manner and lack of a total vision of change in the manifestos, and the need for structural and holistic reforms noted by CPD.

Columnist Syed Abul Maqsood has written, "People don't give much importance to the election manifesto. The public would like to see democratic practices on the part of the larger parties rather than the promises in the manifesto." (*Kaler Kantho*, December 20, 2018). Democratic practices in the form of transparency and public accountability are more important than the particular promises. The unfortunate inclination of declaring victory *a la* Trump and moving on is already evident.

Manzoor Ahmed is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.

Increasing the capacity of Community Clinics



EVER since the early 1990s, Bangladesh has witnessed visible strides in several human development indicators, especially with relation to healthcare accessibility. However, inadequate financial resource allocation, political instability and the scarcity of skilled healthcare workers, mean that there is still a high level of inequity in the national healthcare structure. Therefore, integrating the efforts of both the public and the private sector is important in achieving progress in healthcare in our developmental journey.

In 1978, the administration recognised the importance of formulating a national healthcare policy structure for rural citizens, and as such, Bangladesh became a signatory of the historic Alma Ata Declaration on

The Community Clinic model is simple, and has its philosophical roots in Section VII (4) of the Alma Ata Declaration. The Declaration required and promoted "maximum community and individual self-reliance and participation in the planning, organisation, operation and control of primary health care"—thereby encouraging the empowerment of local populations in primary healthcare services. The Community Clinic model is indeed an innovative example of a public-private partnership, whereby the government provides structural services, medicines, service providers and other logistical support to local communities, who in turn donate land for the construction of these clinics and oversee the day to day affairs of these establishments. Importantly, the owners of these clinics are the people residing in the community—thereby operating in the spirit of Section VII (4) of the Alma Ata Declaration. From providing internet connections to better treatment procedures, over 130,000 Community

eases remain a core concern for Bangladeshis. As such, emphasising the growth of further public-private partnerships in the form of Community Clinics is an efficient and relatively cheap method of enhancing the capacity of healthcare provision in the country.

Community Clinics have their challenges as well, and these stem from the lack of skilled healthcare professionals in rural Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has promised the development of five new national medical universities if her party is re-elected to power in the upcoming elections—with universities in Rajshahi, Sylhet and Chattogram already under construction. In their 21-point manifesto, the Awami League highlighted their willingness to ensure "quality healthcare coverage for all" if elected to power. The BNP, on the other hand, has pledged to allocate five percent of the nominal GDP towards healthcare, if they receive the public mandate on December 30. Whilst electoral pledges are more symbolic in nature, it is important that whoever forms the next government will prioritise quality healthcare services in rural Bangladesh. Community Clinics are undeniably a positive way to get rural communities involved in healthcare systems, and one hopes that following the upcoming elections, further training institutes and tangible allocations are directed towards these establishments. The focus has to be on the development of human capital in this sector.

Community Clinics operate through the involvement and donations of local stakeholders—this is a unique way to universalise healthcare in Bangladesh, whilst ensuring an appropriate level of state support. Therefore, it is imperative for our political stakeholders to direct resources towards empowering local communities and their health systems, so that rural populations can work towards being self-sustainable in addressing healthcare challenges. Shrinking resource allocation towards this sector is concerning—and surprising—given the success of Community Clinics in mitigating the problems of inaccessibility in healthcare delivery. Therefore, with the aim of fostering a healthier and equitable population across the country, Bangladesh demands that its political stakeholders continue to engage in public-private partnerships such as this, but at the same time, ensure that they do as much as possible in enhancing the capacity of Community Clinics and broader healthcare systems through the training, education and growth of healthcare professionals in rural Bangladesh.

For far too long we have perceived development from the lens of real GDP growth. Education and healthcare remain two other pillars in the construction of human development. Without further resources being divested towards the health and education sectors, no levels of economic growth will be sustainable or equitable. And therefore one urges our political elites to think beyond mere numbers, and observe development from a broader lens of creating a healthy, educated and equal society.



Treatment seekers wait in a queue at Dakkhina Babu Community Clinic at Notabari village in Dimla upazila under Nilphamari district. The photo was taken in October, 2015.

PHOTO: STAR

Primary Health Care (PHC). In 1988, Bangladesh adopted the PHC approach as a guiding principle to the development of health systems in Bangladesh. Subsequent governments have put emphasis on healthcare as per this model, thereby assisting the reduction of infant mortality rates, the enhancement of vaccination schemes and the promotion of health services across the country. Nevertheless, the under-involvement of local stakeholders in health provision remained a problem—and as such, when the Awami League came to power in 2008, they instituted a more pragmatic innovation in the health sector. Community Clinics were a flagship programme of the current government; through the development of public-private partnerships, primary healthcare services are being taken to rural populations in the country.

Clinics receive constant support from the government, and in its totality, the scheme is working well across the aisle in the locations where they are currently operating.

Nevertheless, with relation to the broader question of healthcare in Bangladesh, there remain severe incapacities. The budgetary allocation for the health sector reduced from 1.1 percent in 2010 to 0.8 percent in 2017—showing a concerning trend in how development is perceived in the country. The strides made in achieving Goal 4 (reducing child mortality) and Goal 5 (improving maternal health) of the Millennium Development Goals are commendable. However, a growing young population demands the provision of further resources to this sector, especially at a time when worrying levels of pollution and infectious dis-

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a graduate (Honors Bachelor of Arts), Economics and International Relations, from The University of Toronto. Email: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca