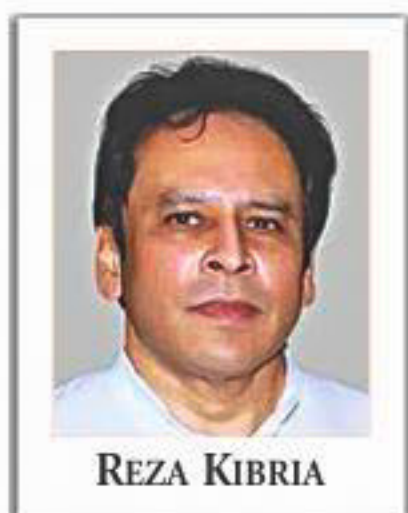


11TH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

The myth of the 'level playing field'



of a roadside stall in the far distance. The stillness is remarkable, particularly to a city-dweller used to the noise of traffic at all hours, and even in a densely populated area, there is virtually no one to be seen. People lock their doors and retire with their families to the relative comfort and security of their homes.

Imagine the terror caused when the silence is broken by the noise of police vans and the angry shouts of two dozen heavily armed uniformed men as they kick at the door demanding entry. It is 2am and a man working for the opposition looks helplessly at the terrified faces of his wife and their two young daughters, who have begun to cry. He utters a hurried goodbye to them and tells them to lock the door, walking out quickly, seeking to draw the police away from his home.

No, this is not a story from a war zone. This is the grim scene that took place on December 21 in Sadarabad



During the election campaign of Afroza Khan Rita, BNP candidate of Manikganj-3 constituency, at Kaunnara village under Satoria upazila in Manikganj this month, ruling party men launched an attack wielding bamboo sticks, leaving at least 15 opposition supporters injured and several vehicles vandalised.

(Aushkhandi) in Nabiganj. Similar scenes are being enacted all over the country. Despite an assurance from the prime minister (during the so-called dialogue) and the Election Commission that there would be no further arrests of opposition people before the December 30 elections, all

over Bangladesh many hundreds of local Oikyafront leaders and activists have been detained on the flimsiest of pretexts. In contrast, even the most flagrant violations of the law by ruling party candidates and supporters are being ignored.

constituency, every day this month has seen arrests of opposition people, generally under the cover of darkness as during the day there would be resistance from local people. There are many disturbing tales: a 70-year-old village elder is dragged from his home after midnight; a 16-year-old boy is taken into custody because his father was not home; and a man is pulled away from the bedside of his sick wife. These actions represent a systematic campaign unchecked by the Election Commission, so far, to terrorise and brutalise the opposition. It has certainly had the effect of frightening wives and many children, but it has not succeeded in quelling the spirit of opposition workers. It has had the opposite effect of galvanising many workers who realise it is not just any election but a historic struggle against tyranny and oppression.

The attitude of those entrusted with the duty of protecting the public has been mixed. I have come across some police officers who take their oath to serve the republic very seriously. Some others take the "Nuremburg defence" (i.e. I was just following orders), but they need to be reminded that they must always follow the law. They must be held to account for any excesses and those who ordered illegal actions must

realise they will one day be held accountable. Oikyafront vehicles are being attacked, processions are being broken up by ruling party activists, posters are being torn, and commercial printing presses producing opposition materials are being put under pressure. Some journalists who cover Oikyafront activities are being threatened and attacked and have had false cases filed against them. All these activities by the ruling party have had the effect of completely destroying any vestige of a claim to a "fair election". Clearly, popular support is not what the Awami League government is seeking to gain through its campaign.

This leads one to a chilling conclusion: this government seems to have little intention of allowing a genuinely free vote on December 30. Even with the money, weapons and administrative power at the government's disposal, this should not lead to despair. When the time comes, public officials will realise their first loyalty is to the republic. Most importantly, the rulers of this country have underestimated or simply forgotten the power of the people.

Dr Reza Kibria is an economist and a contestant for the 11th parliamentary election, to be held on December 30, as a candidate of Gonoforum and Jatiya Oikyafront.

What can we do to keep children in school?

The need to address the longstanding problem of student absenteeism



STUDENT absenteeism (in the classroom) is a matter of serious concern for education policymakers in Bangladesh because it is a

major hindrance in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), the objective of which is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." The phenomenon is noticeable in both primary and tertiary level educational institutions.

A Unicef report published in 2009 (entitled "Quality Primary Education in Bangladesh") claimed that student absenteeism in Bangladesh was 19 percent at the primary level. The percentage was an average figure for both public and private primary schools. In fact, if it is accounted for public schools only, the figure might be over 19 percent. In private schools, student absenteeism is relatively low, because private schools penalise students who remain absent in class without valid reason. Some private schools use it as a source of income. As a result, students attend school to avoid fines or penalties. My daughter and son attend a private college and a school in Dhaka city, where the authorities charge a fine of Tk 2,000 and Tk 300 respectively for each day that they are absent without a valid reason acceptable to the school authorities. But government schools are unable to exercise the practice within the given legal framework.

The driving factors behind student absenteeism are multifaceted including students' poor socioeconomic conditions and perceptions of parents towards education and their future expectations. In government schools and colleges, the majority of students hail from a poor background. Although

at the primary level, education is free, this "free" education too has a cost. Some researchers estimated that the annual private expenditure per student, on average, accounts for 54 percent of the total annual expenditure per student in non-government registered *madrasas* and 59 percent in government schools, while it is as high as 88 percent in non-government non-registered *madrasas*, 82 percent in non-government non-registered schools, and 77 percent in non-government registered schools. In rural areas, families shoulder an average of 63 percent of the cost burden, or nearly Tk 2,200 per year. Per student expenditure among families from the wealthiest quintile was nearly two and a half times more than that of households in the poorest quintile.

In addition, there are costs from the supply-side. The cost involves salary and benefits for the teaching staff and overhead costs to run the school. To mitigate the financial pressure, the government has undertaken a stipend programme. The stipend programme in government-funded schools provides families with Tk 120/year (USD 16) for one child, and only marginally more for additional children which is insufficient to meet the household's education costs. Consequently, low-income people prefer "work in the field" to education for their schoolgoing children.

In order to retain students in the school, the government runs the "school feeding programme" to provide primary students mid-day meals in schools. Despite that, student absenteeism shows no signs of ending. It may have something to do with the perception of many students and their parents towards education in government primary schools. They believe that teachers in government primary schools do not teach at all; they either sleep in class during classtime or waste time gossiping. In some research studies it has been found that Bangladesh's average annual classroom contact time

in government-funded schools is one of the lowest in the world, which was 587 hours per year compared to 1,200 hours per year in China for example (during 2000-2001).

Although the primary education subsector has witnessed many policy reforms being implemented under different donor-assisted projects, perhaps none of them has had any effect on the abovementioned issue of classroom contact time. The projects bring on board numerous international and national consultants for suggestions as to what to do and what not to do without any accountability or evidence of effectiveness. It is thus worth reviewing what we know about the causes, consequences, and potential solutions for absenteeism. Researchers categorise the underlying causes of absenteeism into

four groups: (i) student-specific factors such as poor academic performance and repeating subjects, lack of caring relationships with adults, negative peer influence, bullying; (ii) family-specific factors such as low family income, low parent involvement, at-home responsibilities, stressful family events conflicting with home and school priorities, language differences; (iii) school-specific factors such as poor conditions or lack of school facilities, teachers of poor quality, shortage of teachers, poor student-teacher interactions, lack of geographical access to school, lack of challenging courses and student boredom; and (iv) community-specific factors such as availability of job opportunities that do not require formal schooling, unsafe neighbourhoods, low compulsory educational requirements, lack of social

and educational support services. The projects undertaken by the government so far barely influence the above four areas.

If student absenteeism continues, achieving SDG 4 will remain a far cry. The information readily available for policymaking is often unsuitable, either because the rigorous research required to identify policy needs has not yet been conducted, or because the research that is available is contradictory and does not suggest a single course of action. It is thus crucial that educational policy decisions are made based on the most reliable evidence possible.

Shamsul Arifeen Khan Mamun, PhD, is an education economist and is the head of the Department of Economics, Moulvibazar Government College. Email: spu.heqep@gmail.com



The driving factors behind student absenteeism are multifaceted including students' poor socioeconomic conditions and perceptions of parents towards education.

A WORD A DAY



A Book of Nonsense (ca. 1875 James Miller edition) by Edward Lear which popularised the limerick form.

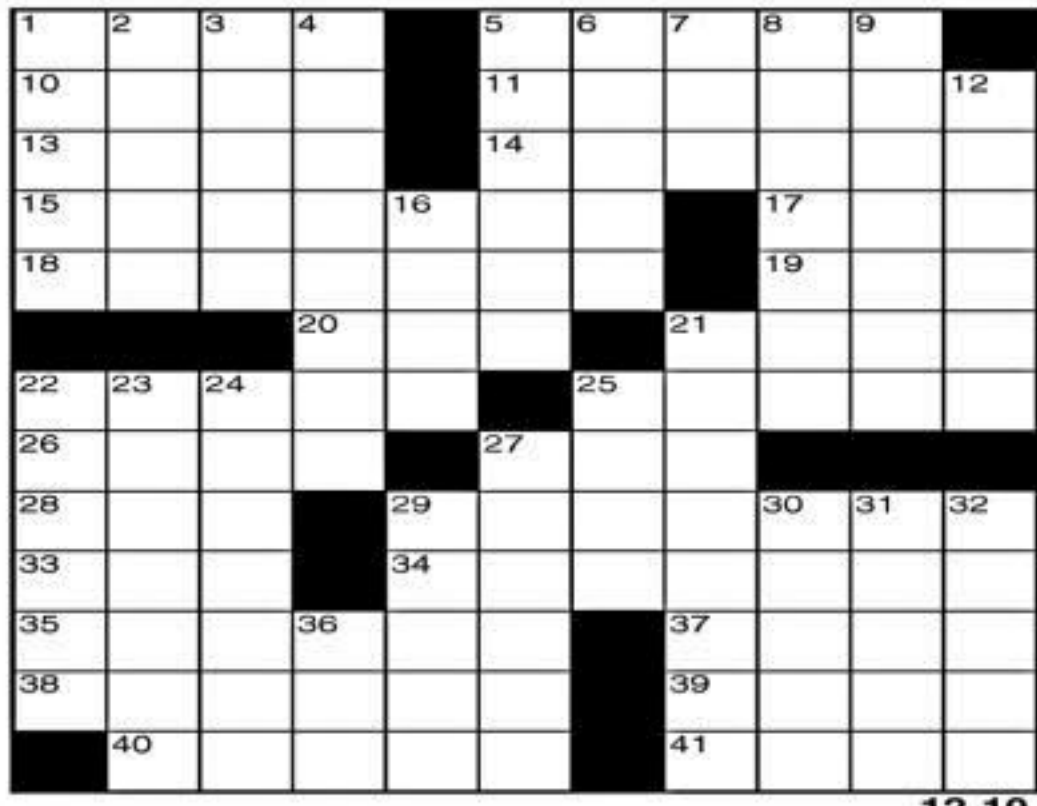
LIMERICK NOUN

A humorous five-line poem with a rhyme scheme 'aabba'.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS: 1 Newspaper, 5 Like the ice caps, 10 Like bulls, 11 Tolerated, 13 Sweeping story, 14 Made over, 15 Garden pavilions, 17 Chest muscle, for short, 18 Apple pie order, 19 First prime number, 20 Young fellow, 21 Bring up, 22 Foals' mothers, 25 Boot parts, 26 Smell, 27 May honoree, 28 Toast spread, 29 TV studio equipment, 33 "I -- Rock", 34 Lead or lithium, 35 Property defacer, 37 Letter after alpha, 38 Put in a display box, 39 At any time, 40 Doctrine, 41 Cincinnati team, DOWN: 1 Letter after psi, 2 Vatican-based, 3 "My Fair Lady" lady, 4 Last month, 5 Spoof, 6 Corpulent, 7 Pot part, 8 Birth parent seeker, 9 Magazine order, 12 Room designs, 16 Derisive calls, 21 Call to mind, 22 California desert, 23 Unyielding, 24 Love story, 25 Residence, 27 Polo need, 29 Stop, 30 "Superman" star, 31 Paid for a hand, 32 Flag features, 36 Writer Brown

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

