

Condemnable attack on journalists

Punish the perpetrators

IN another reprehensible attempt to suppress the media and its electioneering coverage of the upcoming national elections, a gang of 30 to 35 people launched a hideous attack on around 40 journalists and their drivers on Monday night. The attack took place at a rest house close to the Nawabganj Police Station in Dhaka district, leaving 12 journalists injured and 16 vehicles belonging to their respective media organisations vandalised. And it continued for 20 minutes during which time the journalists tried to contact the local Upazila Nirbahi Officer and officer-in-charge of Nawabganj Police Station but to no avail. When questioned about it, an Election Commission Secretary expressed his ignorance about the issue the following day.

While we ourselves are shocked and disappointed at him for seemingly being oblivious to the incident, we would like to ask: why do the law enforcement agencies or the EC have to wait for media reports? Don't the authorities have their own channels of communication? And why was it that the police failed to respond to the journalists under attack? Isn't it the duty of police to ensure the security of all including journalists?

Even though the ignorance of the EC Secretary beggars belief given that the news of the attack was all over the various forms of media and social media, if indeed we are to accept that he, or the Election Commission in general, was unaware of the incident, it fails to instil any confidence in the EC's ability to ensure the kind of environment that is needed to have credible elections. Which is why we call on the EC to come out of its bubble of "not being aware" of any "inconvenient truths" that exposes the commission's failure to perform its duty one after the other.

We further call for an immediate investigation into the attack and for the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

When a candidate threatens voters

A blatant breach of electoral code

WE are appalled at the way a lawmaker and AL candidate contesting from Natore-2 has threatened voters of his constituency if they chose to vote for any other party other than the party with the "boat" symbol. A video footage that has gone viral on social media shows Shafiqul Islam Shimul warning local people that only those who vote for boat can go to the polling centres and those who don't vote for the AL candidate cannot do so. In fact he has categorically warned people of his area that anyone voting for the "sheaf of paddy" (meaning BNP) or a candidate under this symbol will not be allowed to go to the voting area. His threats are crystal clear: he has said if they want to stay in good health and live in the area, they should work with him and his activists. Conversely, if anyone is found to do otherwise will have to face "tough actions" after December 30 elections.

Such threats are blatant violations of the electoral code. Yet as far as we know no action has been taken against this lawmaker who has so openly tried to intimidate voters of the opposition parties. Is this what the EC calls a "level playing field" where voters are practically being terrorised to vote for a particular party or else face dire consequences? Why is the administration, which includes the EC, police and election officials, not doing anything against such a candidate who has no regard for electoral codes of conduct? Meanwhile the administration has completely failed to prevent attacks on opposition candidates and supporters. There are reports that an RO has ignored the complaints made by an aggrieved candidate of the opposition regarding attacks on her supporters.

Such disturbing incidents do little to give us confidence regarding the upcoming election day as far as how freely voters will be able to vote.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Why is the number of observers so low?

With the elections scheduled to be held on December 30, the role of election observers is at the centre of discussions.

The European Union has said it was unable to send observer missions. A US observer group cancelled its mission because it was not issued visas in time. What's more, the number of local observers has been cut down drastically, compared to previous elections, although the number of polling centres has increased.

Opposition candidates have come under widespread attacks across the country. Such a climate will certainly discourage people from turning up. But what's more dangerous is that the Election Commission has created some impediments for observers, while declaring some critical and prominent observer groups ineligible.

This election can be a way for the current government to prove that elections can be free and fair even under a partisan government. Instead, it seems that it has chosen to do the opposite.

Jahidul Islam Nahid, By email



The effect of partisan policing

MORE THAN JUST FACTS

NAZMUL AHASAN

IN less than five days after the candidates officially hit the campaign trail on December 11, a number of opposition candidates—including prominent figures such as Dr

Kamal Hossain, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Mirza Abbas and Reza Kibria—came under attack from their opponents, a trend that has since continued unabated.

This was partly because the police failed to ensure the safety of all candidates. In fact, some officers of the law enforcing force have appeared obviously biased against the opposition.

In Noakhali, for example, the police has drawn up a polling centre-wise list comprising of both the ruling party and opposition activists. The police plans to seek help from the AL men to maintain law and order while identifying the opposition activists as troublemakers who would be dealt with on Election Day. Also in Noakhali, a candidate (Barrister Mahbub Uddin Khokon) was even shot at by the police using rubber bullets. In Satkhira, a police officer publicly sought votes for the Awami League (and was subsequently withdrawn).

What's more, the police has detained several opposition candidates under old cases, despite the fact that the norm is that candidates wouldn't be harassed by the police after the announcement of the polls schedule.

Such a disappointing role of the law enforcement force has left an adverse impact on the electoral field. In normal circumstances, candidates would be out on the streets handing out leaflets as they meet and greet people. Instead, quite a number of opposition candidates have retreated from canvassing, with some

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KNOT SO TRUE

RUBANA HUQ

Kolkata in the latest cars; the roads are still swamped with yellow taxis and a touch of Uber and Ola has changed the scene only a bit. Your columnist for one has never had any problems walking through the pavements of Kolkata, or having *bhlepuri* by the roadside, or taking public transport. The touch of the ordinary and the hint of moderation certainly feels promising in a world of excess.

Thus, a convocation ceremony in the most modest setting, graced by scholars and graduates draped in saffron in Jadavpur University, was an emotional experience for your columnist. Yours truly was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Arts by the institution two days ago. During the ceremony, economist Dr Kaushik Basu, the chief guest, focused on meta honesty, inclusiveness and determinism. Basu admitted that he has little faith in traditional religion and unhesitatingly declared that he believed in Determinism and at the end, it all boiled down to luck. I couldn't disagree more and responded in Twitter by writing that Lady Luck hadn't helped me write my 300-page thesis. I did. We decide which rainbow is for us to chase and which is not. For me, I chose my closure or rather, the new beginning to be in education. My PhD journey, at 54, is a journey that I will continue to share with every aspiring woman ...

My first school was Little Jewels, a small place tucked away in real Dhaka. I call it "real", as all the happening places were on that "real" side. That "real" side of the town had a Chinese laundry, authentic Chinese restaurant: Chu-Chin-Chow and while we shifted from the real to the "near real", we went close to the old books from Nilkhet, frequented a quaint bookshop, Zeenat Book Store in New Market, an aeroplane shaped mosque opposite in Elephant Road, a fair price shop of

confining themselves to their house or campaign headquarters in fear of being arrested and attacked.

True, there are reports that Awami League campaigns have also faced attacks, but not to the extent to be called widespread—far from it. In fact, several ministers and MPs continue to use state protocols including police protection. This has created a major imbalance between the two coalitions.

In Dhaka, the contrast could not be starker. For instance, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, the home boss who heads all law enforcement agencies, is ironically competing against BNP's Saiful Alam Nirob, who is virtually on the run as he faces more than two hundred cases—the highest among all candidates. Nirob is yet to make a single public appearance,



Police detaining a BNP activist from a party rally. The photo was taken in September.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

with the election less than a week away. This is, more or less, indicative of the situation in the capital.

A recent explosive report, titled "*Ek Bhoyongkor September*" ("A terrifying September") dated December 20 by *Prothom Alo* explains why. The report makes for a compelling read and leaves little to the imagination as to how the police heavily engages in weakening the opposition camp. It points out that in September alone, the police in Dhaka filed 578 cases—mostly against opposition activists, accusing them of "exploding bombs", "attacking the police" or "engaging in subversive activities", among other things, despite the fact that the last few months have been mostly peaceful in Dhaka. Even during 2013-2015, when political

accused, date and the place to file new cases.

As if this wasn't frightening enough, a lesser known news website, *Sara Bangla*, owned by a ruling party MP, has recently reported, citing anonymous sources, the police has prepared a list of individuals "who might take control of the polling stations." The list mentions as many as 240,000 suspects whom the police plans to detain by December 27—three days before the election.

Later a report by *Daily Jugantor* corroborated the existence of such a plan, although it puts the number of suspects at 200,000. And unsurprisingly, most of these suspects are, by both accounts, opposition activists.

The terrifying nature of the plan aside, detaining 200,000 people at once

subsequently went viral and was widely reported on by the media.

This suggests that the prospect of a major "combing" operation targeting mainly the opposition before the election is likely. And what has the Election Commission done to avoid a disaster that would be followed by the crackdown? So far, the commission has ordered four police officers-in-charge to be withdrawn, apart from delivering frequent sermons.

If the EC cannot assert its authority over the police, so much so that it is free from the partisan government's control, the prospect of a free and fair election will remain bleak.

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In honour of education

Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, hogged biscuits from an only visible confectionary Ruma on the "high street", bought sandals from a modest shoe shop called Rakhee ... and of course, dreamt of Dhaka University.

Times have changed. We have a huge Chinese community in Bangladesh now, engaged in trading, production, instead of the little laundries that we used to send our clothes to. Instead of the sweet and sour prawn laced with sugar or hard American chop suey, we have now developed a taste for fine Chinese dining: instead of Zeenat Book Store, we now have our sophisticated Kindle to handle; instead of praying in the heat, we have super modern air conditioned mosques

own language; the literacy rate has crossed 73 percent; life skill-based education has been included for classes 6 to 10; ICT education has been declared compulsory for all between grade 6 and grade 12. And the figure that pleases me most is the increase in enrolment in technical and vocational training. Nine years ago, that figure used to be one percent and today it has jumped to 15.12 percent. The National Skills Development Policy 2011 is being implemented, 12 industry skills councils are in place, online admission for vocational training is in practice and ... the list could go on. Point is, in any country, while changes take place, hiccups surface at an even faster pace. With the right policies set, we



to go to; instead of TCB, we ourselves have become traders racing for profits; instead of Ruma Confectionary, we have a whole new series of French, Italian gourmet spreads to pick from; instead of Rakhee, our footwear are imported; and instead of the 40 public universities that we have, most of us send our children to the other 80 private universities. Let's pick education for now ...

Today, while one could infinitely argue about the quality of education, let's look at a few figures that may please us too. In 2017, for the first time, 3,500 blind students received over 27,000 braille books; five minority groups in the Hill Tracts received 227,000 free books in their

should be able to pull through, amidst critiques and curiosities. But vision to embrace disruption in the system is going to define our next leap.

With AR and VR leading us and with the fourth industrial revolution setting in with the majority of the world feeling deprived and suspicious of governance, the only way is to consider new approaches to formulate new policies so that systems are designed to augment the potential of labour instead of replacing it. In order for that to happen, new policy labs can be formed within a government, so that a new renaissance in education based on humanism happens. Extensive commitment to govern with agility will

The most important factor to consider is going to be the trajectory of human development, without which, under the guise of welfare, we will only be breeding a culture of advanced insensitivity.

enable the next government to rule better. While we argue about the ethical implications of artificial intelligence and the social ramifications of most of the technological disruptions, we will also need to keep in mind that the most important factor to consider is going to be the trajectory of human development, without which, under the guise of welfare, we will only be breeding a culture of advanced insensitivity.

It's early morning in Kolkata. The cafe at 5:00 am is still open and people are happily streaming in and out of it, having croissant and coffee. Most of them are on their phones, reading the news, playing games, or "WhatsApping" their friends to wish and celebrate the special day and the year ending. The next decade will see 80 billion devices all around the world in continuous communication, and installed base of Internet of Things (IoT) devices will increase from an approximate USD 15.4 billion in 2015 to USD 75.4 billion in 2025. That is going to be education at its best ...

While heading for the airport, weary travellers like me are ending up gazing at the Indian version of Santa Claus, popping out of almost every second iron fence, with a huge sack laden with the promise of a new tomorrow. Let our tomorrow be one of eagerness to learn, of compassion to forgive, to change, and to cherish whatever little or more we have.

Happy 2019!

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