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MAILBOX

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Conserve rivers

"Let the rivers run wild" last week really put the spotlight on what's happening to Bangladesh's rivers. Rivers have a significant influence on life, the environment, ecology, and travelling in the country. But, at present, there is a greedy competition among people in the name of "development" which is contaminating our rivers. In recent years, many surveys, research and laws have been conducted but the recommendations not implemented to a great extent.

Even though the concerned authorities seek permission to establish new industries in areas adjacent to the rivers, eventually many wild animals and their habitats are going to be directly threatened by such toxic human intervention. In order to preserve biodiversity and the landscape adjacent to rivers, people should take drastic actions to raise awareness regarding the conservation of rivers and preserve biodiversity in those areas.

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REDEMPTION DAY

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In the end, the votes alone will count. Or so we hope. And in around 48 hours from now, we'll know. For all that it is played up as an act of civic duty, it does offer a delicious chance at subversion, voting. Very soon after my own political awakening on December 6, 1990—that bewitching evening whose amber glow and delirious sounds I thank memory for retaining—on the campaign trail with my uncle (*fuppa*) as he ran in what I now understand to be the advent of democracy in Bangladesh, I learned about voters who were happy to accept money from either side in exchange for their vote, but later in the secrecy of the voting booth, put the seal down next to whichever candidate they pleased.

While one may have learnt of it in the context of treachery, neatly gliding over the original sin of buying votes or attempting to anyway, in time I came to regard it as absolutely the right thing to do. Good on them for realising their vote is really the one thing for which they are not beholden to anyone. From recent times, the result of the Brexit vote in the UK, essentially spoke to this subversive tendency in the electorate. Where the government, media, the polls, the experts, even the central bank and visiting dignitaries, all lined up on one side, pulling out every stop in the book. Only for voters to say thank you and go the other way, when the time came to have their say. Once you're behind that curtain in the polling centre, nothing but your own conscience can and will dictate your subsequent action. For most people, both these tend to be pretty difficult to pin down in themselves, let alone in others. And that only serves to make the integrity of the process all

the more important. You can never second-guess the voter.

Yet even in the post-1991 era, Bangladeshis have been forced to endure two elections that fell abjectly short of resonating their will, their conscience. The principal way in which they fell short was the failure to attract the people's participation—without which any electoral exercise becomes pretty meaningless. Both dates have become immortalised in the



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country's political lore, destined to live on in infamy. They bear repeating, only to the extent that the first—February 15, 1996—was thankfully obliterated quickly enough. On December 30, the country now stands poised to finally put behind it the second—January 5, 2014.

Make no mistake, even for those who benefited (some exorbitantly so) from the farcical exercise that produced the 10th Jatiya

Sangshad, the whole thing has hung like an albatross around the neck. Countless are the times that the ruling Awami League's stalwarts, all the way up to the Prime Minister herself, have been caught wishing it were different. Although evidently not enough to put it right. And so the sheer tribalism afflicting our politics means that the result not only stood, but also that the parliament it produced, described at one point by Dr Iftekharuzzaman of Transparency International's local chapter as a "puppet show", has served out its full term.

It also means that the League has given itself the opportunity to correct the wrong on its own terms. One of the great things about elections is their redemptive power, and redemption for the ruling party in this case lay in organising an acceptable election, given that it took on the responsibility of its own accord in 2011. It did so through the exercise of its supermajority in parliament. Yet by convention, electoral rules and regulations are never subjected to the vagaries of majoritarian politics; they are arrived at through consensus among political parties. Having broken with that, it was up to them to at least do everything in their power to guard the integrity of the election process, starting with the enactment of a law regulating the appointment of election commissioners. As is well known, the constitution of Bangladesh neither prescribes a list of qualifications as pre-requisites for someone to be appointed as an election commissioner, including the chief, nor does it fix the number of election commissioners to be appointed.

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