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LATE S. M. ALI

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A citizen's 'manifesto' on the Election Day

A momentous day Voters must be able to exercise their franchise freely

THIS election is unique. Because the last election was largely uncontested, and it being the first participatory election in a decade, people are very keen to vote, as indicated by the fact that many have left the capital city for their respective constituencies. It's now up to the Election Commission and the law enforcing agencies to live up to the expectations of the people. May we remind them that in the end, it is the quality of the electoral environment, not just inclusiveness and competitiveness of the election, that will define its credibility.

For all their disagreements, both the ruling and opposition coalitions agree on one thing: the stakes are very high in this election. The ruling party contends that this election is about continuing the pace of development and stability. The party boasts a robust economy, better performance in several socio-economic sectors, infrastructure development and an undisputed record in combating militancy. The opposition, on the other hand, argues that this election is the last resort to halt the country's dangerous democratic backsliding.

Today, it is up to the people—the voters—to decide which argument is more convincing. However, we cannot ignore the fact that it was mostly opposition activists who faced an overwhelming extent of violence and were hit with a baffling number of cases, which is indicative of an uneven electoral field.

Many opposition candidates weren't able to campaign freely due to fear of arrest or attack. The widespread violence—while less lethal than previous elections—might act as a dampener.

The role of the Election Commission has been, to put it mildly, questionable. It hasn't taken any meaningful measures to address the concerns over a level playing field, or a lack thereof. The police, the role of which is crucial in ensuring fairness in the election, has not acted even-handedly either in dealing with the parties.

Moreover, the noticeably small number of domestic poll observers—one-eighth compared to the 2001 election—even as the number of polling stations has increased, and the increased restrictions on the media mean that the reporting of the conduct of the polls would be difficult.

And then, two political parties are urging their activists to "guard" the polling centres or "not to leave the stations before counting is completed." Such an aggressive and combative posture will only exacerbate the climate of fear, which has prevailed throughout the election season, contrary to the air of festivity that we usually witness.

These notwithstanding, we hope to see a peaceful election in which the people will be able to cast their ballots freely—free of fear, intimidation and coercion. Only if voters can exercise their franchise will our democracy be strengthened. Today is the opportunity for the EC to redeem itself and establish its credibility.

This election is going to be the first one presided by a partisan government, with the parliament remaining undissolved, and participated by all major parties. It is, therefore, an opportunity for the ruling party to prove that an election can be free and fair even under such a dispensation. If it can do this, the party will go down in history as the one that put to an end the notion that a partisan government can never hold a credible election in Bangladesh.

We earnestly hope that whichever party comes to power is fully committed to protecting our inalienable rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly. The people of this country are still waiting for a political environment in which the longstanding acrimony between parties is replaced by a culture of dialogue, keeping in mind, first and foremost, the best interests of the people who are the fundamental source of power in a democracy.



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

TWO parties have ruled Bangladesh for most of its 47-year-old life since the independence and one of these parties will form the government again after today's

election, which begins at 8AM to be precise. On occasions like this, it's customary to take an upbeat view of the outcomes of the election—the most empowering moment in a citizen's life. For Bangladesh, this moment was hard-earned and long-anticipated as it came after 10 years of wait, and whether or not it offers any real choice for the people, they are expected to participate in this democratic process anyway and choose their representatives to serve them in parliament for the next five years.

The optimist in me would like to believe in the effectiveness of this process but the pessimist in me, hardened by the years of discontent and disillusionment, is not so sure. How shall we assess Bangladesh's journey in these past decades? There are two conflicting conclusions: one hails the country's transformation from its post-1971 days as a "test case for development"—a success model for other countries—while another considers it a squandered opportunity to bring about real change in the life of its people. However, while the public is still numerically pro-status quo when it comes to the question of development, there is a growing sense of unease about the country's inherent authoritarian

Our politicians should encourage social accountability so that the citizens can transform themselves from being a people "whom things happen to" into a people "who make things happen."



NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

ELECTION Day in Bangladesh is usually a festive occasion. The weather is wonderfully crisp. We are in our Friday best. With friends and family, we throng to the polling centres to brave long lines

armed with astute political analyses and roving eyes ready to spot ballot-box thieves. And snacks. Sometimes you don't even need to bring your own; they're provided by candidates. The unending lines are locations of euphoria. As each voter comes out with their thumbs splashed with black ink, a sign that they've voted and cannot cast another vote in another location, people often cheer, probably giddy from waiting, and the prospect of a glorious new beginning.

Democracy is a seductive notion, even at its bare minimum, which is voting. Elections are instruments of democracy, after all. It allows us to imagine that we have a role in how the country will unfold in the next few years. Is the idea that our voices will be heard magical in our context?

Magical thinking in the face of violence
Magical thinking makes us believe that everything is fine even when many things aren't, if the recent spate of violence is anything to go by. It doesn't actually matter who is behind the violent attacks on various candidates and party members; it doesn't matter if the violence is self-directed to make rivals look bad, as some might suggest. What matters is that the violence occurs in stark contrast with the shining numbers that herald Bangladesh's imminent transition from being a low-income to a middle-income nation. Indeed, our economic growth rate has been impressively high this past decade, even though it has been accompanied, as often is the case, by deepening income and social inequality. What matters is that these economic growth rates form the backdrop of our magical thinking, while the inequality

structure that allows pseudo-democratic regimes to exploit people while real development remains elusive.

This second school of thought also links Bangladesh's sub-optimal performance to the futility of our electoral exercise in the absence of a functional democracy. It argues that people are doomed to defeat whichever way the election turns. Election today, according to the nation's leading thinker Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, has rather become "an occasion for the people to choose their own oppressors for the next five years." He based his theory on the fact that no matter which party wins the election, they all eventually turn corrupt and oppressive because of the corrupt system in which they function. Be that as it may, one thing is certain: even after 47

should be based on, and equally importantly, what those should *not* be.

Our politicians, whether in power or not, must make a concerted effort to rid Bangladesh of its authoritarian system and practices which are at the heart of all its social and political crises. And unless and until we are able to dismantle this system, the citizens of this land will never be really free. A step in that direction will involve embracing, among other ideals, equality, diversity, and inclusivity, and the fundamental principles advocated in our Constitution.

Secondly, there is a need for political consensus on the idea of development. A narrower definition of the concept is actually harmful as it leaves room for exploitation. Amartya Sen provides an important insight into how development



years, Bangladesh has failed to address its deep-seated structural problems that allow the political class to perpetuate this cycle of exploitation, and if this is allowed to continue, we will never reach our full potential as a nation.

Which is why we need a new style of leadership that will save Bangladesh from this destructive cycle and lead to an in-depth transformation of our institutions and policies. Unlike the usual manifestos, which are issued by political parties outlining what they deem to be our priorities, this "manifesto" by the author is *for* those political parties and outlines what I believe the citizens actually want on a priority basis. But it doesn't contain any concrete proposals.

Rather, it is a humble reminder of what the policies and decisions of our leaders

works. To him, economic growth is simply a part of development, a means to an end—not the end itself—which is freedom. Real development, therefore, requires the removal of various types of what he calls "unfreedoms" which "leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency" (*Development as Freedom*).

Among these unfreedoms are poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities, systematic social deprivation, suppression of the weaker sections of society, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states. The removal of these unfreedoms, in Sen's opinion, is constitutive of development.

However, the issue here is not one of bringing about a drastic change in our

existing economic model or institutions or social programmes. The issue is primarily of changing how those function, their bureaucracy-ridden, inherently corrupt and deeply politicised system, which traditionally the ruling class use to their advantage. So our politicians must renew their commitment to good governance, rule of law, accountability and human rights.

They should also recognise the importance of encouraging social accountability so that citizens, especially the youth, can transform themselves from being a class "whom things happen to" into a people "who make things happen." A sense of ownership among them is very important since a state is as strong and powerful as its citizens. Only then will the concept of republicanism embedded in the name "People's Republic of Bangladesh" will finally become meaningful. And it will eventually lead to a fair and lasting social development of the people.

As it happens, ours is a very polarised society. There are profound divisions within and among different classes, communities and faith groups. But any positive social transformation will require the citizens to embrace and promote the values of unity and diversity, despite their divisions, even though it may seem difficult at times. It is a task that the citizens must undertake on their own. They must reach out to those they don't like or support for the sake of a harmonious coexistence, and accept similar initiatives from others, but the political class has to lead this process, by empowering social networks and platforms and encouraging greater social engagement.

It is said that in a corrupt system, people usually have two options: conform or be crushed. The time has come to change that equation, because our nation has reached a point of crisis from which you can go no further. Bangladesh is hurting, quite visibly. With all the challenges that we are going through at the moment, it is no longer possible to continue as before. People will no longer be satisfied with a passive role in which "things happen to them." This manifesto may not provide specific proposals for that desired transformation, but it does provide a moral baseline against which to gauge the judiciousness of all our future policies and decisions.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.
Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

Election Day Hoopla

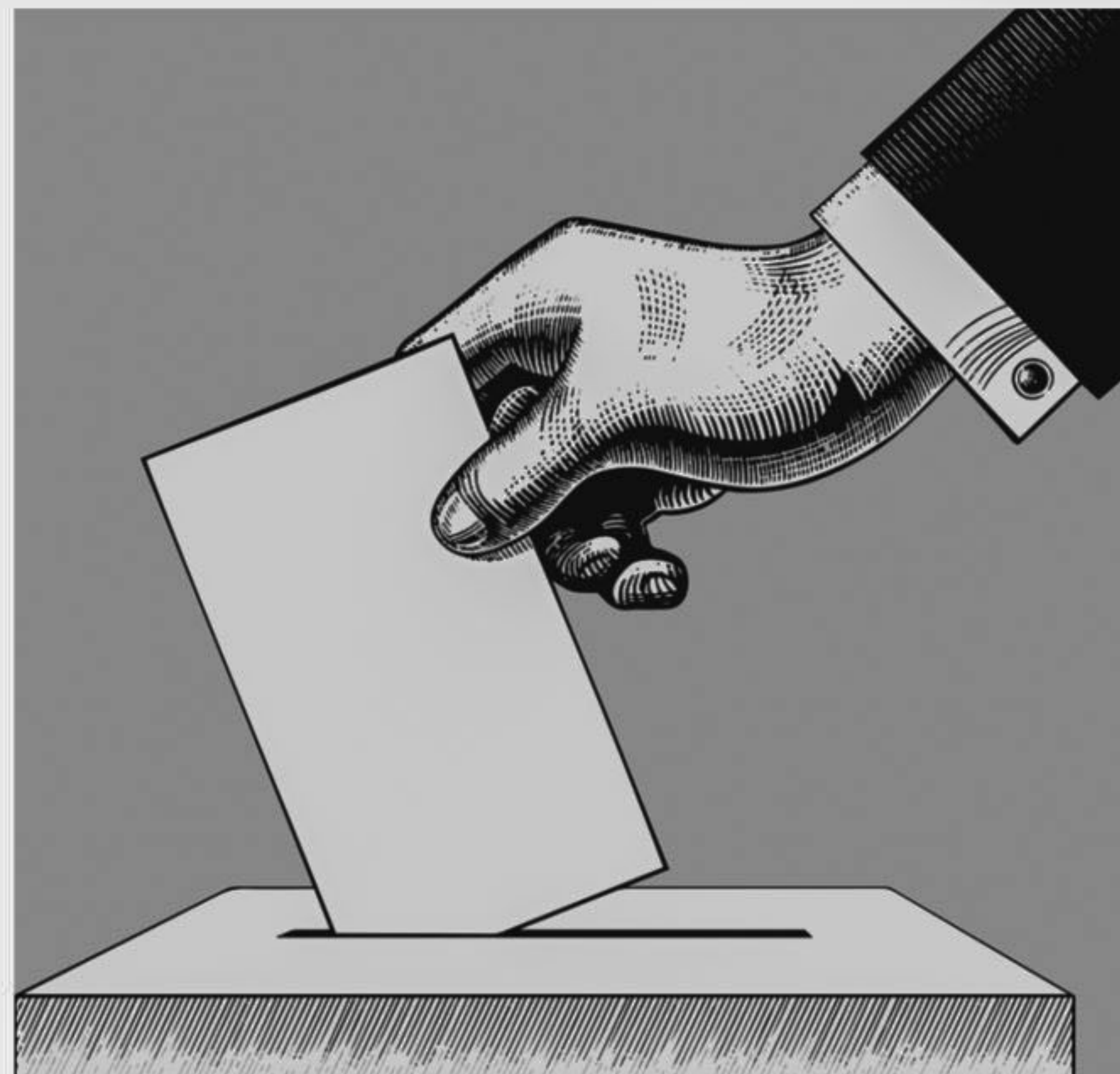
foments unrest.

What matters more, in my estimation, is that when we see political violence directed at various political campaigns, candidates, and journalists, we feel immune to that violence because we are familiar with the said unrest; we are familiar with what violence does to the human body. We are not fazed by the gore, the maimed bodies; we are mostly glad that we weren't at the wrong place at the wrong time. Because magical thinking allows us to imagine them as isolated incidents.

offices of Jamuna TV. There was violence against the ruling party members too, but in a much smaller scale. These are but a handful of the numerous violent incidents which saw campaigns of at least 56 candidates being attacked and around 1,190 individuals being injured this election season.

Paranoia as an instrument of fear

Fear of what? It's not always clear. Sometimes it's a non-AL party that we are told to fear. Sometimes it's the fear of continued violence. Sometimes it's the fear of the return of the burning buses.



However, the violence is anything but isolated. Over the last few weeks Dr Kamal Hossain's motorcade was attacked as were Zonayed Saki's party workers, BNP's Habibur Rahman Habib was stabbed a day after BNP's Goyeshwar Chandra Roy was injured with 30 others in Keraniganj, while Shamim Khan, a reporter from *Jugantor*, went missing after their office was attacked along with the

So insidious is the fear-mongering that it takes on a life of its own, spiralling into more fear-mongering that takes the form of rumours and "inside scoops."

The violence and the rumours together make paranoia inevitable, perhaps. The paranoia first makes us ponder, then speculate. We concoct theories and become "experts." Some of us are convinced that we are a playground of

superpower politics. Paranoia makes us think we have no agency because they control "everything." Some of us see the nation as under threat and in need of protection by "all means necessary." With the same conviction, some of us are convinced that the surveillance state has tapped all our phones and is watching our every move.

Can we step out?

On Election Day, I worry that we will either be paranoid or deep in our magical thinking. While magical thinking prevents us from critically assessing the promises that our political candidates have made to us, paranoia makes us feel like we have no voice. While magical thinking makes us blind as to who we are voting for as we vote for parties, *markas*, paranoia keeps us away from the polls.

This Election Day, let us step out of both these states—magical thinking and paranoia—because it is time for us to vote for individuals based on their ideals, based on whether they truly represent us and what we want for this nation that we so deeply love.

Let's vote for individuals who are good for us, and not just the party that we are emotionally attached to: individuals whose platform of fear-free Bangladesh must resonate profoundly with those of us who have been exposed to violence; individuals whose main goal is to empower adolescents by educating them; individuals who promise to address income inequality in their constituencies.

This Election Day, let us qualify the phrase "Amar bhot ami dibo, jake khushi taake dibo," to say that we will not vote for just anyone, but someone who deserves our vote. As we stand in line—presumably soon after the *azaan* for Fajr prayers, pondering who to vote for—may we do what is best for the collective "us". In case of a crisis in faith, let us remind ourselves that we have a history of fighting authoritarianism. If needed, we will fight again.

For now, with a hat tip to the activists who brought us democracy, let's head to the polls.

Nadine Shaanta Murshid is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University at Buffalo.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

People want a credible election

Voting day is finally here and the 11th parliamentary election is being held today under a partisan government. The people want nothing more than exercising their right to vote in a festive, peaceful environment. However, given what we have seen so far, I think proving the election's credibility in the country and to the outside world may be challenging.

From the very beginning of election season, a level playing field has been missing. The opposition alliance's candidates, their supporters, and even the independent candidates were threatened by ruling party activists as well as members of law enforcement agencies.

What we had observed in the previous elections under a caretaker government was that law enforcement agencies and officials of local administration played a neutral role. Those elections were acceptable to the voters. But this time we saw many print and electronic media publishing biased news in favour of the incumbent government.

However, despite all this, one would still like to hope that today's election will be violence-free. We hope people will be able to cast their votes without being intimidated. We want a free, fair, credible and inclusive election above all.

Md Zillur Rahaman
Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd,
Lalmohan Branch, Bhola