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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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DUCSU ELECTION

Let us not become the ostrich

Proposed gas price hike unjustifiable

Why new gas fields not being explored?

ALL of the country's five gas distribution companies have demanded gas price hike at consumer level at the latest Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) public hearing. Their proposal is to increase price by approximately 50 percent from Tk 8.63 to Tk 12.19 per cubic metre of gas because they claim that their production cost stands at Tk 12.19 after blending imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) with natural gas. The proposed price hike is spread across bulk and retail consumers—from industries to CNG stations to households.

Energy experts have been warning us for a few years now that the import of LNG would have an adverse impact on pricing. The price hikes range from 33 percent for a single-burner stove up to 50 percent increase for a double-burner stove at household level. Why has the Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company (BAPEX) not seriously explored new gas fields despite being given funds by the government to do so? LNG remains an expensive imported solution to our energy crisis and the continued inertia at policy level to conduct extensive onshore and offshore exploration for new gas remains a mystery. Instead of passing on the extra cost of an imported fuel to consumers, which according to critics is more than a hundred times expensive (per cubic metre) than locally produced gas by BAPEX, steps need to be taken to find new gas reserves. A country like ours cannot depend on such an expensive imported fuel to complement our depleting gas reserves.

Disasters waiting to happen

High time we prioritise low-cost social housing

A picture published by this newspaper yesterday of rickety three-storey buildings on the banks of the Buriganga river in the capital exemplifies another disaster in the making. These informal structures built of corrugated iron sheet, bamboo and metal pipes are inhabited by around 40 families. Needless to say, these structures are prone to disasters, putting these families at grave risk.

So, how were these structures allowed to be built in the first place? Certainly, these did not sprout up overnight. From the look of it, utility lines are also available for these buildings. And previous experience suggests that the likelihood of some influential person profiting from this settlement is very high.

But past actions taken against such informal structures, especially in the wake of disasters, do not give hope either. They are not sustainable. The capital city has a large percentage of people living in informal settlements, and in the complete absence of rehabilitation and social housing projects, eviction drives only serve to displace the issue from one site to another. Certainly, the families residing in these structures are aware of the risks and are only doing so because of lack of alternatives. The high costs of living in Dhaka too put formal housing beyond most of their means.

This is an issue that cannot be solved through indiscriminate eviction drives. Neither can it continue because of the immense risk that living in these structures entails. We need social housing projects for rehabilitation of our informal settlers—low-cost housing options must precede any action. So far, the issue has been skirted around by our authorities. We urge the administration to undertake social housing and rehabilitation projects for a sustainable solution, so that low-income segments of the population do not have to resort to rickety unsafe structures for establishing their fundamental right to shelter.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Unfair Ducusu election

It is very unfortunate that contestants from most student wings boycotted the March 11 Ducusu election over allegations of massive irregularities and they also demanded fresh polls. Many irregularities have been reported in the media like the periodic halts orchestrated at some polling centres as well as long queues of students. General students and witnesses also reported various wrongdoings such as rigging, preventing voters from casting ballots and filling boxes with marked ballot papers.

The DU is recognised as the centre of many progressive movements in our history. All major socio-political movements have been initiated from this campus. So the Ducusu election, held after 29 years, came with great expectations but it's painful to see the way it panned out. Even some who had contested in Ducusu elections during Pakistani rule said that such irregularities did not occur during those elections. The picture of one poster that went viral on social media on March 11 said that the very spirit of DU died during this Ducusu election!

The DU authorities should, therefore, look into all these gross irregularities and take necessary steps in this regard.

Md ZillurRahaman
Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd.

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

WHAT happened in the Ducusu "election"—which was made into a farcical show by the Dhaka University authorities, including the Vice Chancellor

and the teachers of the institution—requires no elaboration. Thanks to social media and reports by some media organisations, it is now well-known that the much-awaited election was nothing but a charade. It is unfortunate that the nation's long wait of 28 years for an elected leadership who could command respect, legitimately claim to be representative of the students of the largest public university and uphold the tradition and dignity of the students' union, which is intrinsically connected to the history of the nation, was trampled in broad daylight. The results, declared in the wee hours of Tuesday, make no difference in this regard. The damage has been done.

I am conflicted whether as a former student, twice elected Literary Secretary of the Ducusu (1979 and 1982), and as a former teacher of the institution, I should only be ashamed of a section of the teachers of this university for their roles or unreservedly condemn those first who planned the entire machinations behind the scenes and implemented them for their own benefits, with no regard for the history of this institution. However, I am proud to see that students stood up to this plot, and immensely thankful to the small group of professors who have demonstrated that conscience and sanity are yet to be completely vanished from the campus. They have become gladiator-like warriors.

Those who were sceptical about a fair election from the beginning of this process will point to the steps of the administration as to how the entire process was descending into a flawed "election" in slow motion, and conclude that it was bound to happen. The authority's decision to disregard the demands of all student bodies, sans the ruling party supporters, to shift the date of the election, transfer voting centres to the academic buildings, and pay more attention to the violation of behaviour codes—offered up telltale signs of what was about to happen. The collusion between the university authorities and the ruling party activists was on full display. There was no independent system of election observation, no clear instruction as to what candidates could do to ensure the fairness of the election. Indeed, with the imposition of restrictions on the media and digital phones at the polling centres and sending the ballots to the students' halls the night before, the dark shadow of

December 30 was looming large over the Ducusu election. By morning, it became evident that another December 30 was unfolding, thanks to the courageous female students who laid it bare. But looking back and saying that our worst fear has come to pass is not enough.

The wilful failings of the administration and the teachers demonstrate that partyarchy—that is, political parties' capture of different key state- and non-state institutions—has already vitiated Dhaka University like all other institutions of the country, and the teachers and administrators are in large measure part of a spoiled system. Considering this, we must look beyond what happened on Monday. To think that this happened without the knowledge of the ruling party and the government will be like burying our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich. Our behaviour will only be akin to that of the character of the

tarnish the image and reputation of Dhaka University and the Ducusu. This was one of the main drivers of this machination.

The other obvious goal is to make the electoral system in general controversial. Since 2014, every step of the way, the ruling party and their supporters have been trying to do so. The 2019 election was the epitome of this effort. There seems to be a well-designed effort to prove the futility of the electoral system. Many people, out of deep frustration and profound resentment, have started asking, what is the use of elections? Why waste money and time? Or, sarcastically suggesting that Bangladesh should adopt the North Korean style of election where the ballot has only one name for one position. Such a proposition, even as a joke, is an ominous development. Notwithstanding various weaknesses of the electoral system, a country cannot

and remind everyone how partisan the entire recruitment process starting from the VC to a lecturer has become. Because all of these have paved the path to March 11. But we should not stop there, because the institutional decay of Dhaka University is not an isolated phenomenon. In the past decades, particularly in the last one, institutions of all kinds have been decimated, from the election commission to public service commission to the judiciary to an independent civil society. The ruination has not been limited to these constitutional and social institutions only, but also the very foundation of politics—political parties (both incumbent and opposition)—has been destroyed. Those are now only the shadows of their past. Politics cannot allow a vacuum; the gap is filled in, to use a Harry Potter phrase, by "He-Who-



Students hold marked ballots on the day of the Ducusu polls.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal from the "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" authored by Douglas Adams. Adams joked about the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal that it is "so mind-bogglingly stupid that it assumes that if you can't see it, then it can't see you."

Ensuring a victory by any means was the primary goal of the ruling party student activists and delivering the victory to them on a silver platter was the objective of the administration. We can safely presume that preventing the Ducusu from becoming the initiator of an anti-government movement, as its tradition goes, is the proximate cause. But there is more to this than meets the eye. I don't think the ruling party activists were hoping that this will be an easy sail; instead they and their patrons were aware that it will be controversial, and that this will

claim to be a democracy worthy of its name without some form of representation of the will of the citizens. As of now, in Bangladesh, the problem is not the electoral system *per se* but how it is manipulated by those in power. The politics of delegitimising election is meant to depoliticise the society. We do a disservice to ourselves, and become a tool of authoritarianism, if we join the chorus against a fundamental right of the citizens—to have a fair election.

We must hold the university authorities responsible for becoming the proverbial "emperor with no clothes" and politely ask them to move aside for the sake of decency; point to the continuous degradation of the education system, particularly Dhaka University; recall that it no longer is the space for free thinking;

Must-Not-Be-Named". In times of despair, universities, particularly Dhaka University, have provided a glimmer of hope. It is the students, and a few non-conformist professors, who are viewed as the beacon. A combination of the history of the institution, myth, utopia and romanticisation is to be credited for this perception. But perception matters. Those who feel threatened by this perception would like to see the reputation of the university stained and eventually tarnished. That is the reason behind what happened on March 11. What we can and should do now depends on whether we can see this broad picture.

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at the Illinois State University, USA.

"I'd never feel comfortable introducing myself as a former VP again"

Mujahidul Islam Selim talks to The Daily Star

THE manner in which the Ducusu election was held is reprehensible. It was an arranged election by all means. Also, not holding the Ducusu election in the last 28 years was a heinous crime against our education system and the students of the university. The decision to hold an election to Ducusu on March 11 was, thus, a welcome initiative—an attempt to redress this crime—but a much bigger crime was committed in the name of holding this election.

Frankly, I would not even call this an election. I am sure the majority of the students of Dhaka University as well as the general people of the country hold the same view that it was a manufactured election. Through this farcical exercise, the image of this university was further tainted. As a former vice president (VP) of Ducusu, I feel ashamed. I don't think I



would ever feel comfortable to introduce myself as a former VP of this student body.

In this so-called election, various techniques were used for vote rigging in all the residential halls. And the shameless manner in which the rigging took place in some of the residential halls is unprecedented. There is ample evidence of manipulations. Thus the hopes and aspirations of the general students were trampled upon.

The students' demands were ignored when they called for holding the election in the academic buildings. Dhaka University has a big campus. The election could be conducted in a big area where many more polling booths could be set up. But that was not done. The teachers assured the students that the election

would be held in a free and fair manner, and that there was no need for polling agents, transparent ballot boxes, or phosphoric ink. And the students trusted them.

The people of this country always believed in teachers because they had set examples of high moral standards. When the Pakistani soldiers were about to shoot the protesting students of Rajshahi University in 1969, Dr Shamsujjoha, a professor of the university, had warned them: "You have to shoot me first before you shoot my students." So he was shot dead by the military, which accelerated the mass movement against the Agartala conspiracy case.

Universities are places where students are supposed to get lessons of honesty and morality. In the past, there were

many teachers who were ready to sacrifice their lives for the rights of the students. But in Monday's election, we have witnessed a completely different picture in which teachers set an example of how the students can be robbed of their voting rights by arranging an engineered election. It was as if they were teaching the students on how many ways an election can be rigged. The moral bankruptcy of the teachers was evident. This election is a shame for the whole teachers' community.

Although it was a long-standing demand of the students to hold this election, no amount of pressure from the student organisations could change the status quo until the High Court intervened. This election was held as per the High Court's directive. Thus, I would urge the court to immediately form a judicial committee to investigate the allegations of a sham election. And within two weeks, the schedule for a fresh election should be declared in order to establish a dignified Ducusu. During the Pakistani rule, when Ayub Khan had absolute control over the whole country, he was unable to take control of Dhaka University or the Ducusu. Why? Because the students had resisted and prevented all his moves to take control of the DU. I still believe the students of this university will come forward to establish their voting rights and save Dhaka University from the shackles of terror and subjugation of the powers that be. This will happen today or tomorrow. This is what history tells us.

Mujahidul Islam Selim is president of Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and the first vice president of Dhaka University Central Students' Union after the country's independence. This is an excerpt of an interview taken by The Daily Star.