

**We repeat the PM's call
 Improve university environment
 to revive healthy politics**

WE reiterate fully the prime minister's call to the newly elected leaders of Ducsu to help revive healthy politics on campus. The prime minister has hit the nail on the head with her statement. After a long time, we finally saw the Ducsu election take place (which students had been demanding for some time), and although we have reservations about how it was held and were disappointed to see the various irregularities, holding the election itself was at least a step in the right direction.

The environment in Dhaka University (DU) and other universities is not how it should be. The prime minister, when she called for reviving healthy politics in universities, expressed the reality of the situation which is that healthy politics does not exist now. Just as she rightly recognised the unhealthy university environment that currently prevails, we hope that she is also aware of who is responsible for vitiating the atmosphere in not only DU but in many public universities. The prime minister must be aware of the various reports in the media about the Chhatra League's on-campus activities and also about its intraparty fights that have regularly disrupted the environment of education in universities. The prime minister, we expect, will rein in the BCL. Now that the Ducsu election has been held, we hope that the BCL too will act in a manner that behaves the student wing of a major political party.

At the end of the day, the situation, as it is right now, cannot continue for long. And we appreciate the prime minister calling on students to help shift the university environment towards a more positive direction. At the same time, now that she has directly expressed her concern, we hope that she would take the necessary actions that could help change the existing scenario as we are confident that with her personal intervention, many of the issues that are hindering the creation of a healthier university environment—which is crucial in order to revive healthy student politics—can indeed be solved.

**The case of the missing
 ambassador**

Isn't it for the state to find out where he was?

WE are happy to see that the ambassador, who had gone missing 15 months ago, has returned home. And he happens to be among only a lucky few to have done so. His disappearance and resurfacing bear close resemblance to a few other similar high-profile cases, where the missing person, having been kidnapped and living in a state of incommunicado with the outside world for some time, has reappeared. But he was either unwilling to tell what had happened to him or was unable totally to recollect what had happened to him in the interregnum.

We fully understand the need for the former ambassador and his family to have complete privacy, peace and recovery, since there cannot be a more traumatic experience for a family than to have a husband or a father go missing with no palpable effort by the agencies to trace him out. However, having said that, we feel that it is incumbent that the state unearths the facts. After all, a person was reportedly waylaid on his way to the airport. And not only that, three well-dressed men took away his laptop, camera and desktop from his residence after that.

We would like to give the benefit of the doubt to the security agencies and not point the finger at them. However, it is both worrisome and difficult to think that there are criminal groups who are so supremely confident that they feel emboldened not only to kidnap a person from a busy thoroughfare, but also feel self-assured enough to visit his house to take away his computers.

In all these 15 months, there was little effort by the police to find him. Thus, it devolves on the agencies, for their own credibility, as well as for the sake of public safety and confidence, to dig out the truth. Otherwise, there can be only one other inference, which is equally alarming.

DUCSU ELECTION

What students saw and what they were told to believe



THE OVERTON WINDOW
 ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE recent Ducsu election, held after 28 years and for the first time since people's representation in government is said to have prevailed in the country, was another

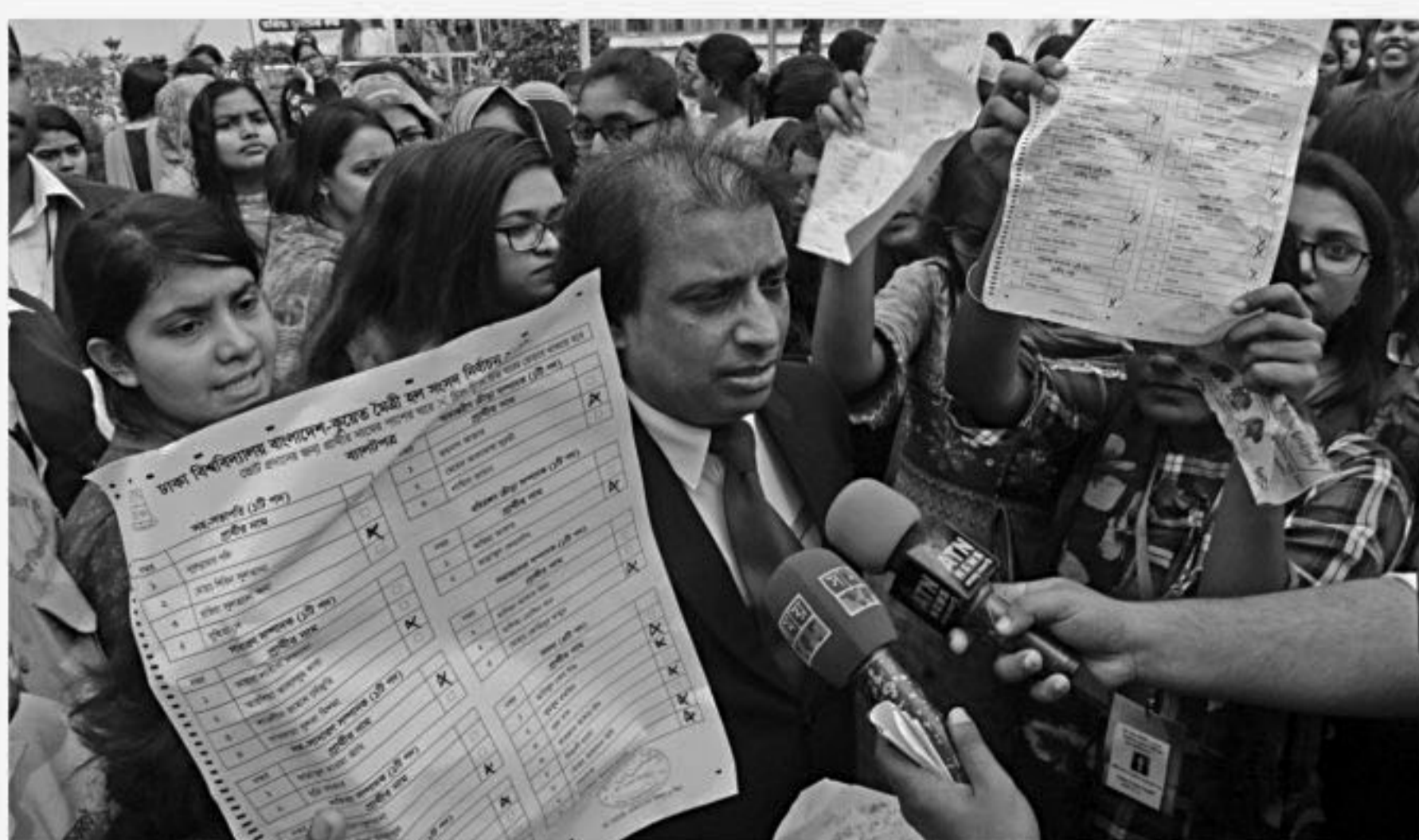
unfortunate nail in the coffin of our so-called democracy. Not that anyone had any high hopes from it after the last national elections. But the history of our people being able to exercise their right to choose their own representatives on a national level has always been murky; whereas, the history of the Ducsu elections was relatively untainted up until now. It will unfortunately be marred forever henceforth by the frauds and manipulations that turned this election into a farce.

While history will remember this for what it was, how will the students who were directly involved in it, and whose lives have or will be affected by it, see it?

Sadly, like history, they too will judge it with revulsion. And one of the primary reasons for that is—even more tragically—the role played by a few of their teachers and Dhaka University authorities.

But who can blame them? That those entrusted by them and their guardians to “teach” students about the democratic principles becoming of any civilised society and instil in them values deserving of being taught at a “higher educational institution”, would lack them so abhorrently in their actions, is by no means a minuscule tragedy. And it is not a tragedy that one can easily brush under the rug as has so often been done lately.

Whereas teachers of this country had set excellent examples in the past, what



Students hold marked ballots as Dhaka University Proctor Golam Rabbani talks to journalists inside Bangladesh-Kuwait Maitree Hall during the Ducsu polls.

students would have seen during this election are teachers who teach them about examples of upholding principles, but cower in the face of power, and indeed merge hands with those immorally exercising power, in exchange for the meagre attainment of such ill-gotten power for themselves. They would have seen those who talk about setting high moral standards, lacking them most severely in the midst of scores of young people whom they are apparently meant to guide towards ethical decision-making. What they would have seen was hypocrisy!

Furthermore, whilst more and more irregularities on the day of the Ducsu election surfaced, what the students would have also seen are blatant lies being told by the university authorities. And as they listened to the lies that threatened to betray what they had seen with their own eyes, they must have connected them with the number of irregularities they had seen to come to an understanding of what was really happening. Which is that those responsible for safeguarding the hopes,

wishes and wellbeing of students were themselves responsible for taking them away—either through telling lies only, or worse.

As many of the students themselves expressed when calling for the resignation of the Dhaka University vice-chancellor, it is the latter that most of them seem to suspect. After all, without some involvement of those responsible for protecting the fairness of the election in the irregularity process, how else could they have so blatantly happened? What they would have seen are the double standards of university authorities who are rightly expected to hold students to account for cheating, as they allowed some to cheat and get away with it right in front of them—at the very least by refusing the demands of students to take a serious look into the evidence of irregularities.

In the midst of all this, what they also saw was some teachers courageously refusing to partake in this charade, holding fast to their principles and

standing alongside the vast majority of students in declining to pretend as if nothing wrong was happening—to establish the kind of example one would expect university teachers to set. What they saw was a microcosm of what has been happening for some time now on a broader (national) level, i.e. the macrocosm.

From this, what they should have realised is that they too are a microcosm in the macrocosm that is their university (and the nation at large). If irregularities and immorality can prevail right now, then their opposite too can triumph in the future. The students can play a defining role in achieving that. And they should.

As Mr Ali Riaz brilliantly pointed out in an article in this newspaper recently, “The politics of delegitimising elections is meant to depoliticise the society.” The attempt to delegitimise the Ducsu election too was an effort to depoliticise our student polity. And the reason why those behind such attempts to depoliticise the society/student polity believe them to be necessary, and would go to such lengths to do so, is because they believe change is possible. Thus there is no reason for the students to believe otherwise.

Granted that the odds they are up against are difficult—making the path to attaining positive and sustainable change long and hard which is exactly why those who are corrupt take the easy way out, as they did during the last elections. However, if one actually believes the pursuit of that difficult path to be meaningful and important—as believed by nearly all individuals that history ultimately seems to preserve—then one should stick to that belief, knowing full well the resistance they will come across, and recognising that it is they themselves who must learn how to overcome it.

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**Building a circle of trust between
 buyers and suppliers**



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE dynamics of the global apparel retail industry are changing rapidly, more so than during any time in the past 100 years. We are witnessing a rapid shift to online fashion retail and the closing of traditional brick-and-mortar shopping centres. This, in turn, is visibly having a dramatic impact on the retail landscape.

Well-known retail names are, in some cases, disappearing. They are being replaced by smaller, more nimble companies which operate almost exclusively online and bring trends straight from the catwalk onto their website in as little as two to three weeks in some cases.

The keyword in all of this is “uncertainty”. It doesn't matter whether you are a major multinational with thousands of stores around the globe or an independent, online operator with a tiny market share. Uncertainty is the nature of the game right now.

Will more businesses migrate online? The truth is, nobody can tell for sure. Can traditional fast fashion retailers maintain their current business models which are still predominantly about huge, flagship stores in major cities around the world? Or do they need to completely reinvent themselves?

Again, while people may have an opinion on this, the reality is that nobody knows for sure. We know that there is uncertainty in the retail space.



Most of us would agree that if we want clothing made in sustainable conditions by workers who are paid a fair wage, there is a price to pay.

SOURCE: PINTEREST

In this environment of declining prices, it is therefore in the interests of buyers and suppliers to form long-lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships.

Look at the apparel supply chain and you'll see a very similar picture. This state of uncertainty is partly a direct result of the doubt we see on the high street—global apparel brands often squeeze suppliers if they face financial challenges of their own. But there are other reasons as well for this uncertainty in the apparel supply chain.

Here in Bangladesh, in the apparel retail space, we have been witnessing the biggest changes taking place for decades. We have seen huge factory upgrade programmes which have made our industry much safer. There has been a rationalisation of the industry, with more and more orders going to larger factories and a reduction in the number of “backstreet operators” which cannot operate in the current environment where there is so much emphasis on compliance.

Against this backdrop, it is quite ironic, to say the least, that in a great many cases, the relationship between buyers and suppliers continues to be adversarial. The day-to-day reality for many suppliers is that the relationship with western brands when doing business is confrontational.

As mentioned previously, there is constant pressure by buyers to keep unit prices down, regardless of the fact that costs might have increased due to, for instance, the increase suppliers have seen in the minimum wage for factory workers. This increase in the minimum wage has, in the vast majority of cases, had to be absorbed by the supplier factory.

Other costs have also increased for suppliers—an obvious one being the cost of remediation to improve factory safety in line with the stipulations of the Accord, Alliance and National Action Plan. Again, these costs have been absorbed internally.

The point to be made in all of this is that suppliers and brands both face huge challenges. So why don't they work more closely together? Why don't they collaborate more and seek to build relationships which are based on partnership and mutual benefit?

There are so many benefits to be gained by such an approach. After all, manufacturers and their apparel brands both face what is ultimately the same challenge—declining end prices. This picture will not change until the expectations of end consumers with regard to the price of clothing are revised downwards, and this is unlikely to happen in the coming years, if at all.

In this environment of declining prices, it is therefore in the interests of buyers and suppliers to form long-lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships which ensure high-quality supply of product made in sustainable factories.

A key issue here is trust, which is clearly a two-way thing, and to build more trust we need more openness and transparency along supply chains with regard to costing and other related issues. Brands are fully entitled to haggle for the best unit price but they also need to be supportive of their suppliers to ensure that products can be provided at a price which ensures

workers are paid a fair wage and that products are made sustainably. Can brands be trusted to take this approach? Can they be trusted to do the right thing?

What we need is a completely different mindset, and one cannot expect this to happen overnight. A brand is unlikely to be fully open and transparent with a supplier with which it has only recently begun working, which is why there is a need for stronger, more robust relationships. Such an approach would also mean that the trend of brands switching from factory to factory seeking the lowest price will have to come to an end.

Most of us would agree that if we want clothing made in sustainable conditions by workers who are paid a fair wage, there is a price to pay. Working in partnership, buyers and suppliers are best placed to decide what that price is. The onus also lies with the suppliers to take into consideration the legitimate demands of workers while carrying out price negotiations with buyers. Good negotiation skills of suppliers/factories are extremely important in order to convey to the buyers the strengths of suppliers and convince the buyers as to why they should pay a bit more.

Collectively, buyers and suppliers should accept that unit costs generally need to increase across the board to ensure that all actors in the supply chain remain profitable and viable. This is in the interest of all parties. An agreed minimum price for certain staple items isn't a bad option, and it would provide the kind of stability which all decision-makers and business owners crave.

Thus, the only sensible way forward for our industry at this time is collaboration and partnership.

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**LETTERS
 TO THE EDITOR**

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Will we ever see an end to traffic congestion?

Commuting in Dhaka is becoming more and more difficult. While the number of cars on the roads is increasing every year, the number of roads has remained pretty much the same. Flyovers in the city create terrible traffic jam as they have not been planned properly. So to travel even a short distance, commuters often have to spend hours on the road. Apart from diplomatic areas and some other places, traffic rules are barely ever enforced anywhere in the city. Another problem is corruption. Traffic police are often seen taking bribes from those who break traffic rules. All these issues should be addressed to rid the city roads of traffic congestion and provide some much-needed relief to commuters.

Nabil Ahmed, East West University



PHOTO: STAR