

Take unfit vehicles off the roads

No more empty promises

DAMNING reports along with horrendous pictures about the state of our transport sector were published in all our major national dailies yesterday. According to these reports, among the 38 lakh licensed vehicles in the country, five lakh are not fit to run on the roads and the number of unlicensed drivers is more than 10 lakh. *The Daily Star* has reported that fitness certificates of 70,000 vehicles have not been renewed in the last 10 years. According to transport experts and road safety campaigners, unfit vehicles are a key reason behind most road accidents, and to ensure road safety, all the three aspects of transport sector—roads, transports, and drivers—have to be brought under strict scrutiny.

After every incident of road crash that sparks protests among the public, the BRTA, police, and other transport authorities become hyper-active in giving statements and making pledges. But unfortunately, they seem to forget all their pledges very quickly. That is why, the procession of deaths on the roads never stops. After Abrar Ahmed Chowdhury was killed, numerous accidents took place in the capital and all across the country. Just last Friday, 16 people were killed in road crashes. On the same day, an MP's car was hit by a speeding bus in the capital. The bus was running without a fitness certificate and the driver didn't have a valid driving license. The bus that killed Abrar also didn't have a fitness certificate.

Is the state for law-abiding general people or for those who are powerful and therefore can violate the rules? Has anybody been taken to task for committing crimes as gruesome as killing people on the roads? Will it be ensured that the vehicles that run without fitness certificates be taken off the roads? We want to see tangible steps taken by the authorities to punish those responsible for these deaths and to bring some order on our roads.

What are we doing to save our water sources?

Start with saving our rivers and wetlands

VARIOUS reports on the occasion of World Water Day, observed on March 22, have brought the terrible foreboding of a scenario in which we will literally run out of water. For Bangladesh, the urgency of conserving our water bodies could not be more critical. Dhaka, for instance, is practically losing all its rivers—Buriganga, Sitalakhya, Balu and Turag—to unprecedented pollution and indiscriminate encroachment. Despite government efforts to clean up the rivers and remove their illegal filling in, things are getting worse rather than better.

Untreated human waste, heavy metals, toxic chemicals are indiscriminately dumped into the rivers, making the water hazardous to drink. Tanneries, textiles and other industries without effluent treatment plants have poisoned our rivers. And all this has happened over the years with the authorities responsible being well aware. The results are frightening enough: WHO and Unicef have found that four million people in Bangladesh lack access to safe water and 85 million lack improved sanitation. The deaths of 2,000 under-five children every year from diarrhoea after consuming contaminated water are the result.

Meanwhile, the ground water table in Dhaka city is being depleted to dangerous levels as surface water becomes unusable in many areas.

So what are we going to do about the impending crisis ahead, the signs of which are already manifesting themselves? Experts have cried themselves hoarse stating that river grabbing and pollution of rivers and wetlands must be completely stopped so that they can be restored to their original state. The government must realise that ad hoc measures to remove illegal structures in and around rivers will not work unless there is a political will to adopt a zero tolerance regarding encroachment. We have seen how unscrupulous groups with political connections have managed to usurp portions of rivers and other water bodies, despite the laws and regardless of government drives to remove illegal occupation. The authorities must enforce the requirement of mandatory effluent plants for all industries as well as the ban on dumping toxic chemicals. The sewerage coverage by Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) must be immediately expanded to cover the entire city. Awareness campaigns to sensitise people to stop wasting water during household use have to be initiated.

Unless we take such immediate steps to protect our water sources, we will be looking at a very frightening future.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

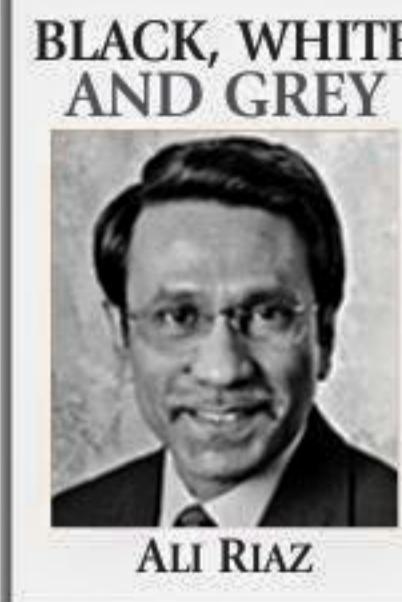
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Burial of electoral power

Ducus election took place on March 11, 2019 after about three decades. People from all walks of life were eagerly looking forward to the election. All those involved with organising the poll were well-educated, established professionals and academics; we thought they possessed a certain level of wisdom, ethics and integrity. But our expectations were dashed. We again experienced some ridiculous examples of vote rigging, ballot stuffing, sealing of ballot paper beforehand and enforced voting for a particular party's panel. It was the same drama of the general election of December 30, 2018 that was replayed on a different stage. The students who directly or indirectly worked for panels other than the winning panel were marked, and their future in the campus will not be easy. Altogether, Ducus had given us some hope after a long time, but it ended with lots of overwhelming questions about our future leadership and the future of democratic practice.

Md. Mojammal Hoque, Chattogram

It is not the system but its misuse that is at fault



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

ALI RIAZ

THE idiomatic expression, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water", is not something we expect to use every day. The origin of it may have a cultural context but it is quite universal in its use. The idea is to caution those who, becoming overzealous in finding a solution to a problem, scrap the entire thing, including the parts which are good and

functioning. To some extent, it is equivalent to the well-known Bengali phrase, "cutting the head to cure the headache". Even the most naïve among us understand that while such a solution will achieve the goal, it will come with a price that is unbearable by any standard. Of late, some conversations on the electoral system of the country are on the verge of suggesting a solution like this. The ongoing Upazila elections, particularly the empty polling centres, have become a matter of internet trolls, a subject of ridicule, although everyone understands that an election is no laughing matter. This sarcasm is obviously a sign of frustration. The media coverage of the two rounds of elections have shown not only empty polling centres, but in some cases, strolling animals were the only ones to be found there. These pictures are testimony to the fact that the voters have discovered the futility of the exercise, as was also the case with the Dhaka North City Corporation election.

The Election Commission, as an institution, has not opted for introspection; it hasn't asked, let alone tried

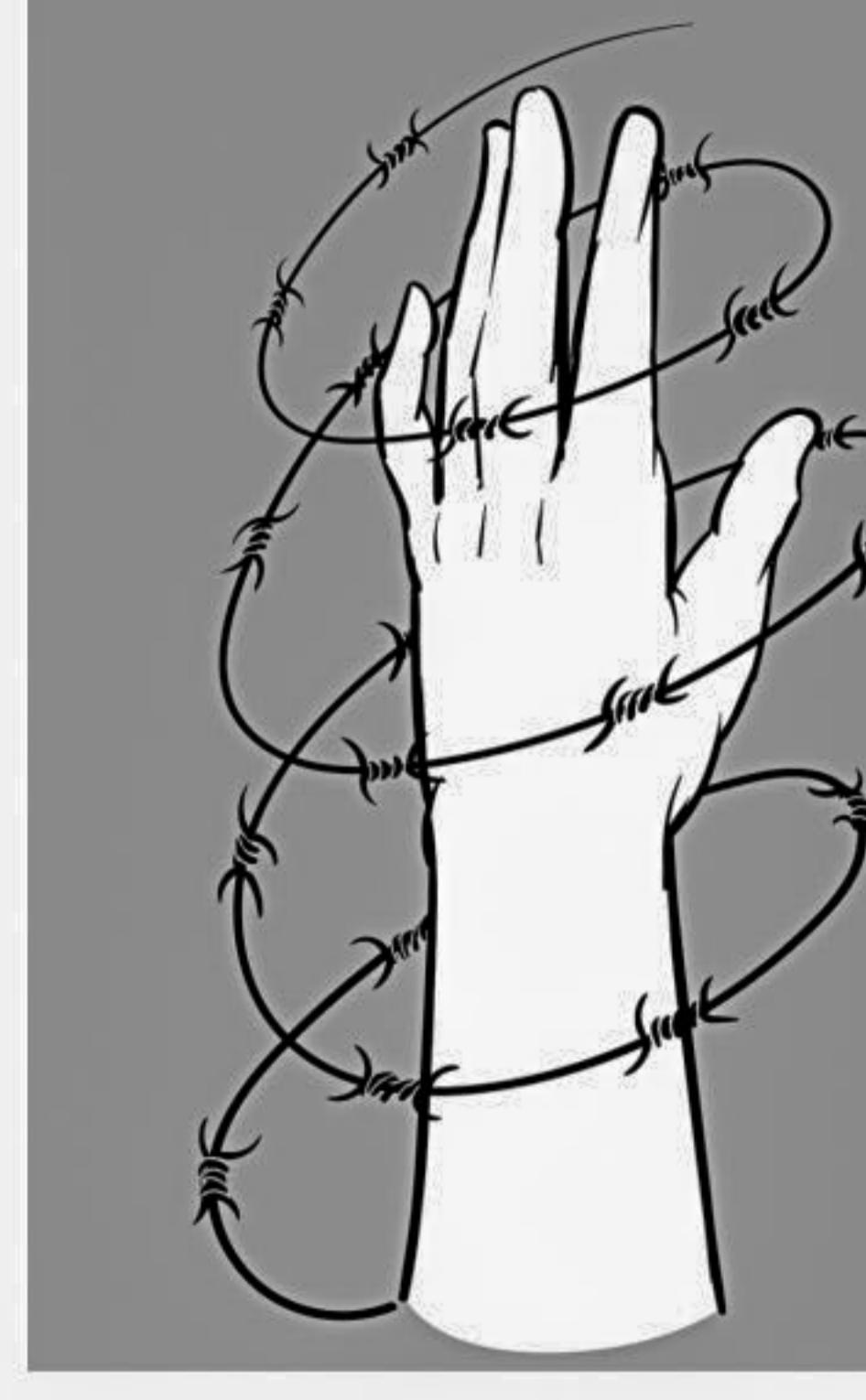


IMAGE: FREEPIK.COM

There is no doubt that the electoral system in Bangladesh, and in many other places, has flaws. One of the major reasons for the recession of democracy, particularly in consolidated democracies, is the immense frustration of citizens regarding the prevalent electoral systems.

to find an answer, to how and why this unprecedented phenomenon has become endemic. However, one commissioner has spoken. Mahbub Talukdar has commented that the existing electoral atmosphere is a "warning signal" for democracy. Is it merely a signal of an impending crisis or a reflection of the crisis itself? But what he has prescribed to cure the ill is something that warrants our attention. "Reform to the electoral process is needed for holding a meaningful election and continuation of the democracy," he said in a written statement recently (*The Daily Star*, March 18, 2019). The premise of the statement is not something I want to focus on here, although that too can be discussed. I am rather interested in his recommendation.

There is no doubt that the electoral system in Bangladesh, and in many other places, has flaws. One of the major reasons for the recession of democracy, particularly in consolidated democracies, is the immense frustration of citizens regarding the prevalent electoral systems. It is commonly argued that money and power have undermined the essence of elections; elections are no longer delivering the verdict of the people. Therefore, the idea of representation has become meaningless. In Western democracies, the health of democracy used to be judged based on four indicators: voter turnout, party membership, trust in politicians, and interest in politics. All seem to be on the decline for quite some time. As they are closely related, the overall health of democracy has deteriorated; many have suggested it is on its deathbed, and a few have already written the obituary.

As for the United States, various polls have demonstrated that "intense partisan polarization, a lack of bipartisan cooperation, a civility deficit, the role of money in politics, outside interference in elections, media bias, and low citizen participation" are making people concerned (Karlyn Bowman, "Democracy in Crisis?", *Washington Post*, August 15, 2018). In Europe, some of these factors are present, but it has its own specific issues. In a report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in June 2018,

Saska Brechenmacher noted that Europeans feel the current electoral system provides more room for extremist and anti-pluralist political forces to gain political representation and that supra-national bodies such as the EU has moved the decision-making beyond the national boundaries causing representation to be inadequate. These discontents on both sides of the Atlantic have some basis. But none resonates with the current situation in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshis until recently, as late as December, were enthusiastic about elections. In previous participatory elections, there was no dearth of voters. Low voter turnout, in recent elections, is not caused by the inadequacies and imperfections of the electoral system. However imperfect the system was, it succeeded in delivering. Undoubtedly it warranted improvement, as many political parties and academics have pointed out many times. But the current situation has not emerged because of the lack of faith in the electoral system, not because most citizens have suddenly gained an insight into the flaws, but essentially due to the machinations of the ruling party over the years and the abject failure of the Election Commission to protect a fundamental right which it was entrusted to protect. Therefore, the trust deficit is not on the system itself, but on the institutional mechanism and the politics which have deliberately hollowed out the system.

Under such circumstances, a mistaken prescription will only help to push the situation further into a downward spiral, however well-intentioned it may be. While I have highlighted Mahbub Talukdar's comments, presumably he is not alone in such thinking. The whispering is there. The recent comment by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that no question about the election would have arisen had there been BaKSAL can well be added to the list of potential solutions on the table. But lest we forget, BaKSAL was not only about local-level administration and election—it brought a sea-change in governance, including introducing the one-party presidential system.

Be that as it may, the solutions being proposed reminded me of Bertolt Brecht's poem, "The Solution". Written in 1953 after the East German uprising, Brecht sarcastically imagined a state that will solve all its problems by "dissolving" the people rather than face censure or challenge.

"After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?"

Hopefully Bangladeshis are yet to be there regarding the electoral system.

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WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY

We Can End TB

N INE year old Sabbir was ill. For several weeks he complained of chest pain and had a bad cough, sometimes coughing blood. His parents took him to a

pharmacy where he was misdiagnosed and given ineffective medication. When his symptoms did not go away, Sabbir went to a doctor who fortunately recognised the symptoms of tuberculosis or TB. The doctor referred Sabbir to a nearby hospital but after three months of treatment his health deteriorated, his weight fell to 42 pounds, and he still tested positive for TB. Sabbir was referred to the National Institute of Diseases of the Chest and Hospital (NIDCH) in Dhaka, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID's) Challenge TB programme, who discovered Sabbir had drug-resistant TB. NIDCH staff began a specialised medical treatment regimen and after 19 months of hospital, home treatment and drug therapy, Sabbir gained weight, finally tested negative for TB, and is now a healthy young man back at school.

Tuberculosis is the world's most lethal infectious killer. It is an ancient malady caused by a bacillus spread when people expel bacteria into the air, usually by coughing. When people with TB cough, sneeze or spit, they propel TB germs into the air. A person needs to inhale only a few of these germs to become infected. Those with active TB in the lungs may experience a persistent cough, fatigue, fever, weight loss and night sweats.

If not treated, TB can lead to death. TB claims more lives than HIV/AIDS and malaria combined. But it is a preventable, treatable and curable disease.

Training paediatricians to better identify and treat TB is an important part of US/Bangladesh programmes to prevent and cure TB. The community-based multi drug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) treatment is one of the many innovations the US Government, through USAID, supports in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh. As a result of this partnership, Bangladesh accelerated TB case detection and treatment. Bangladesh also piloted the shorter MDR-TB regimen now recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and commonly known as the "Bangla-

des Regimen". In 2018, the Bangladeshi government procured first-line TB drugs with its own funding, demonstrating its strong commitment to the fight against the disease.

Despite these promising efforts, Bangladesh accounts for 2.3 percent of the total undetected TB cases worldwide, and almost 70 percent of MDR-TB cases in Bangladesh go undetected.

On September 26, 2018, international leaders met at the United Nations to discuss, for the very first time, the global

response to end this epidemic. These leaders made a commitment to end TB by 2030. Worldwide, the US government has been actively involved in the fight against TB through its investments in the Global Fund, WHO, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and USAID. Recently, USAID Administrator Mark Green announced a new TB business model, the "Global Accelerator to End Tuberculosis," which will catalyse investments across multiple countries and sectors, public and private, to end the epidemic.

March 24 is World Tuberculosis Day, an annual event to recognise the day in 1882 when Dr Robert Koch discovered the organism that causes TB. It is a day to recognise achievements in TB prevention and control. And with renewed and focused global commitment, we can defeat TB. Together we can ensure a brighter, healthier future for the children of Bangladesh, like Sabbir, and all children everywhere.

Earl R Miller is US Ambassador to Bangladesh.

TREATMENT OF TB INFECTION (LATENT TB)

