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Extraordinarily low voter turnout

The EC must answer for the disillusionment of the people

THE Dhaka city corporation elections held yesterday only reiterated what is increasingly becoming a disturbing trend in elections in the country—low voter turnout. In sharp contrast to the loud and wasteful campaigning that characterised the run-up to the elections, voter turnout in most polling centres on February 1 was abysmal, signifying a general disillusionment and frustration among the public regarding the electoral process.

And why wouldn't the people be disillusioned? What did the Election Commission (EC) do during the national elections in 2018, and upazila and DNCC elections in 2019 to gain people's trust that it would hold a free and fair election—one in which their choices and voices would matter? Was the EC able to ensure a level playing field for all candidates and create a conducive environment where voters can exercise their democratic right without fear of coercion or harassment? If anything, the EC has been consistent in its complete disregard for any concerns raised by opposition parties, civil society and the general public regarding discrepancies and favouritism in the electoral process. This election, unfortunately, was no exception. The EC has deliberately ignored dissenting voices, even when it originated from within the commission itself. Rather than accept responsibility for the low turnout rates, the EC has, once again, and in a characteristic style, blamed the candidates for their failure to draw the voters. In their haste to pass on the buck, they have perhaps forgotten that the onus lies on them to assure the voters that their votes do count.

The controversial manner in which the EC took the decision to install EVMs in all polling centres in the city—without addressing opposition concerns and building public confidence in a new technology—perhaps only made voters more nervous. Our reports suggest that the public had good reasons for concern. For one thing, many reported that their fingerprints didn't match with the database and hence they were unable to cast their votes. Yet others noted the almost complete lack of privacy in choosing a candidate and the direct and indirect intimidation of ruling party polling agents in the booths. In many reported instances, taking advantage of people's confusion regarding how to use EVMs, polling agents cast the vote on their behalf. In more severe instances, supporters of opposition parties, who were "caught" voting for other parties, were harassed. Similar allegations had also been made during the national elections in 2018 and we had warned the EC that such incidents could happen again if they did not take enough precautions. Unfortunately, they did not, and they also failed to educate people on how to use EVMs so that they could not be easily manipulated.

Meanwhile, the EC has not only downplayed the allegations of harassment and intimidation of BNP polling agents but the Chief Election Commissioner Nurul Huda has gone so far as to suggest that polling agents should have the strength to stay put at polling centres. It is of grave concern that instead of investigating these allegations seriously, the EC would rather encourage polling agents to engage in a turf war at the polling booths. We are further troubled by reports of harassment and violence against journalists while discharging their professional duties. For instance, a crime reporter from an online portal was attacked and seriously injured, reportedly for trying to take photographs of a procession where some youth were allegedly carrying firearms and sharp weapons. Yet other journalists, including from *The Daily Star*, were attacked and harassed when they tried to take photographs and driven out of the polling stations. Why were journalists attacked and driven away if, as the EC claims, the election was free, fair and peaceful?

In the end, perhaps we should not be surprised that the elections turned out the way they did. When an Election Commission fails to stay neutral and dispense its responsibilities and obligations according to its constitutional mandate—allowing parties to become bigger than the people—disillusionment in the political process is only inevitable. We must acknowledge how serious this apathy can be and find a way to restore the faith of voters in democracy. We can and must do better.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Mobile gaming poses serious risks

Online multiplayer battle royale games have taken the world by storm in recent years. One particular game, considered to be one of the best-selling and most-played video games of all time, has millions of players across the globe. In Bangladesh, a large percent of the youth are active players of that game and many are even addicted to it. Many students neglect their studies to play it and are unable to concentrate on anything else.

According to reports, the World Health Organization (WHO) termed "gaming disorder"—impairing a person's capacity to function normally in their daily activities due to their severe gaming habits—as a form of mental disorder. The amount of time the players spend looking at the screen is unsafe for their eyes, not to mention the bad posture that is harmful for the spine. There are many more threats to the human body from prolonged gaming. I think there is nothing wrong in playing online video games as long as it is under control. In order to ensure the future generation remains healthy and active, parents must monitor their children's activities and also make sure they remain active in real playgrounds and not just the virtual ones.

Yasin Al Jim, East West University

Redrawing Rohingya Strategy

AFTERMATH OF ICJ RULING



C. R. ABRAR

WITHIN a week of the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that provisionally recognised the group identity of the Rohingya and the

unremitting persecution that the community has endured over decades, Bangladesh government announced that it will grant access to education to the Rohingya children. The decision has been enthusiastically welcomed by the refugee community as well as rights groups at home and abroad. Under the scheme, Rohingya refugee children up to the age of 14 will receive education following the Burmese curriculum, and children above that age will get skills training. Announcing the plan, the newly appointed foreign secretary of Bangladesh noted that "the government has felt the need to keep Rohingya children's hope for the future alive with extending education and skills training to them."

Long before the August 2017 influx, the government had for years stood by its decision to not allow refugee children access to education, presumably on grounds that it would create opportunities for the refugees to permanently settle in Bangladesh and may also work as an incentive for those still living in Arakan to cross the border. The recent decision is of major significance for the lives of tens of thousands of refugee children. Access to education will not only help them realise their innate potential, it will also empower them to make a distinction between right and wrong and thereby protect them from the machinations of promoters of violent extremism (something that the government and the international community are pretty concerned about) and human trafficking. Education will help the refugees to pursue livelihood opportunities upon their eventual return to Burma and also in cases of third-country settlement. The policy change is also in sync with the government's obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that affirms that every child has a right to education.

There is little doubt that effective implementation of the policy will entail, among others, mobilisation of a huge amount of resources, developing comprehensive curricula and infrastructure, identifying and securing the services of qualified teachers, and careful balancing of the educational needs of the children of the host community with those of the refugee children. No less important will be maintaining the quality of education and having the curricula accredited by the appropriate authority. This bold decision of the Bangladesh government demands an active engagement of the international community in sharing the responsibility of educating all children in the affected areas.

In an otherwise hostile global environment for the refugees, Bangladesh's granting of sanctuary to the persecuted Rohingya and rendering various kinds of assistance to them, albeit with international support, have earned it a towering moral standing. The ICJ ruling vindicated the correctness of Bangladesh's position. It is now incumbent on the

world community, particularly the powerful states, to live up to their obligations and shore up efforts to bring about an end to the genocidal practices of the Burmese state against the Rohingya and help create an enabling environment in Arakan for them to return with safety and dignity as bonafide citizens of Burma. It is also the time for Rohingya strategists in Bangladesh to reflect on policies that need to be amended or framed in light of the emergent reality.

One of the first issues to address is recognise the group as "refugees". By all calculations, the Rohingya in Bangladesh fulfil the criteria to be termed refugees. They fled their country of origin (Burma) due to well-founded fears of persecution, are unable to get the protection of that county, and owing to fears, are unwilling to return. By all counts, like their preceding cohorts of 1978 and 1991-92 who came to Bangladesh and were granted refugee status, this group also qualifies as refugees. But so far, for reasons not explained, the concerned authorities of Bangladesh chose not to grant the same status to this group that endured severe conditions fleeing

soon create conditions for their return, then time has come to revise the decision, acknowledge the sufferings of these people (which received due recognition at the highest court of the world) and term them "refugees".

No one disputes that dealing with neighbours, particularly recalcitrant ones, is a difficult task. Over decades, on the vexing Rohingya issue, Bangladesh has been extremely tolerant and flexible in engaging with its eastern neighbour. It tried to address the return of a "residual caseload" of 25,000-35,000 registered refugees from the 1991-92 influx through bilateral discussions with little progress. Out of deference to the Burmese, it did not alert the international community to the steady inflow of refugees in small bands or large groups fleeing persecution and violence in Arakan state since 1992 until August 24, 2017 (that eventually numbered about 300,000)—considering that it would complicate the ongoing repatriation talks over the "residual caseload" and cast negatively on bilateral trade and connectivity initiatives. Respecting the Burmese desire for years (quite erroneously, one would argue),



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/DANISH SIDDIQUI

Rohingya refugees stretch their hands to receive aid distributed by local organisations at Balukhali makeshift refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, on September 14, 2017.

mass atrocity crimes including killing, rape, maiming and arson. For reasons still unknown, Bangladesh government preferred to call them "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals", a slightly improved version from the initial tag of "illegal intruders".

The term "forcibly displaced" undermines the gravity of the crimes that this group has been subjected to. Refugees are people who flee persecution or war. They are seeking asylum somewhere outside of their home country because returning home is too dangerous. Quite unlike the "forcibly displaced", refugees enjoy specific protections under international law, including that they should not be sent back to their home country. Under the principle of burden sharing, the international community is obligated to ensure protection of the refugees. Surely, all members of the Rohingya community meet the above conditions and thus are eligible to be recognised as such. If the decision not to term the Rohingya "refugees" was taken to placate the Burmese authorities with the underlying hope that Naypyidaw would

Bangladesh even refrained from terming the community "Rohingya", denying the group its rightful claim to identity (which was unequivocally reaffirmed in the ICJ ruling), and till this day continues to brand the refugees as "forcibly displaced" people. Even after experiencing the huge flow of refugees after August 25, 2017, instead of viewing the Burmese policy in Arakan as genocide—the mother of all crimes (as the ICJ has provisionally deemed)—Bangladesh appeared to have been on board with the Burmese who presented the Rohingya issue "essentially as a border, law and order and human mobility question."

Notwithstanding all the above efforts of Bangladesh, instead of positively responding to the good neighbourly gestures, the Burmese state deemed those as weaknesses and persisted with its genocidal agenda, discreetly banishing the Rohingya from Arakan, freeing up the land for a plethora of mega-development projects, being aided and abetted by its international partners including those who sit and aspire to sit as permanent members in the Security Council. In

the final week of August 2017, the regime went for the "final solution" by unleashing a reign of terror on unarmed Rohingyas. The scale of barbarity of the operation and the subsequent hypocrisy of the Burmese state in stalling the bilateral repatriation plan over the last two years are well-known.

Such a backdrop provides the rationale for Bangladesh to review its Rohingya strategy. The Burmese reaction to the ICJ ruling gives an indication that the country is yet to acknowledge the crimes it has committed against the Rohingya and is in no disposition to create an enabling condition for the refugees to return. The hope that has been raised by the ICJ ruling, and the opportunity it has created for ensuring justice and making the Burmese state accountable, should be harnessed to its fullest extent. The condition demands that Bangladesh takes a firm stand against its rogue neighbour and actively engages with the ICJ process. Whether the country should file a separate case in the ICJ or be a party or act as intervener in the existing case is a matter of further debate and consideration.

In the current world of brazen realpolitik, The Gambia, a small nation in a far-away land, totally unaffected by the Rohingya genocide, has played a formidable role for ensuring justice for the voiceless Rohingya victims and survivors. However, jurist John Packer has directed our attention to a major weakness of the case—that it entirely rests on that small, weak country, which may shy away from its current stance under unforeseen circumstances (such as a change in government). The situation demands that others (of the 150-odd countries that are party to the Genocide Convention) file either separate cases or become parties to the existing case to bolster the process of justice and accountability. The ICJ ruling should induce at least a few more states, particularly those who champion world peace and human rights, and also those who advocate the cause of Islamic Umma, to live up to their commitment and uphold the lofty principles. Here again, Bangladesh, as the most injured third party, can play a decisive role in banding together a coalition of the willing.

On the Rohingya question, so far Bangladesh has been unable to secure any tangible support from the much-celebrated friendly states. Time has come for the political leaders of Bangladesh to convey its people's extreme disappointment and displeasure to the concerned states for backing the wrong side on this critical issue. Bangladesh's expectation that henceforth those states would pursue an objective and balanced Rohingya policy vis-à-vis Bangladesh and Burma should be clearly communicated.

At a time when hopes for justice and accountability for the Rohingya were fading and frustration was creeping in among those who cherish right over wrong, fairness over injustice, the ICJ ruling has opened up a new vista of optimism. It has created a big opportunity for Bangladesh, a country that has garnered a colossal moral capital. Time has come to make a wise investment of that capital and play a proactive role in addressing the Rohingya genocide. Rohingya strategists in Bangladesh may also be well-advised to refrain from taking any step internally that may undermine this elevated standing.

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Will the new Bodo accord give peace a chance in Assam?



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE signing of the tripartite peace agreement among different factions of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Indian government and the Assam

authorities on January 28 has set the stage for an end to one of the longest-running insurgencies in the northeastern state of India. According to Home Minister Amit Shah, the nearly four-decade-old Bodo insurgency has claimed 4,000 lives.

This was the third peace accord with the Bodo outfits since the movement and insurgency for a separate Bodoland to be carved out of Assam had begun in late 1960s. The first two agreements were signed in 1993 and 2003, but unlike the January 28 one, they did not cover all the Bodo groups. That was the reason why Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the latest accord "stands out." That was why Shah termed the accord as "comprehensive" as it brought under its ambit four splinter groups of NDFB, All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and United Bodo People's Organization. As per the accord, a total of 1,550 militants of the NDFB would lay down their arms and their armed units would be dismantled. The militants will be given a lump sum payment of ex-gratia, as per the accord.

The movement for a separate Bodo state began in 1967-68 and gained

momentum in 1987 under the banner of ABSU. Subsequently, the armed militant group Bodo Security Force came into being with Ranjan Daimary as its top leader. It was later rechristened NDFB, which later suffered splits. However, the demand for a Bodo state was the common thread that ran through all factions of the Bodos.

The January 28 peace accord has been arrived at without any mention of the demand for a separate state to be carved out of Assam. Amit Shah said the territorial integrity of Assam has been assured with the accord because every single Bodo group has come on board. However, when asked about their demand for a Bodo state, ABSU President Promod Boro said, "the issue would be discussed at the right time." Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma insisted the demand for a Bodo state has ended with the latest accord.

The messaging of the peace accord with all the Bodo outfits without compromising the territorial integrity of Assam is considered significant for the state's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which is facing the heat of protests over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In fact, Assam was initially the hotbed of anti-CAA protests and five persons perished in police firing on protesters and violence. In the 2016 assembly elections, the Assamese people had given a major mandate to the BJP. With unrest still simmering among the majority Assamese-speaking people over the CAA, the BJP hopes to benefit from Bodos—who have a sizable presence in the four districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri in Assam—in the fresh assembly polls due next year.

Many provisions of the latest peace agreement are reworked versions of the earlier two ones. For instance, granting more legislative, executive and financial powers to the existing Bodoland Territorial Council. Another highlight of the January 28 accord is that it provides for the establishment of a commission to reconstitute the existing Bodo Territorial Areas District (BTAD) by including new Bodo-dominated villages and excluding villages with

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non-tribal majority population. Also, the BTAD will be renamed Bodoland Territorial Council. The accord comes with promises of packages for promoting education through the establishment of a National Institute of Technology, sports through Sports Authority of India, and development of bamboo, handloom and dairy industries in Bodo-dominated areas and setting up of a railway coach manufacturing factory.

To showcase the third Bodo peace

accord as a big achievement, the BJP has called a rally in Kokrajhar on February 7. But challenges to peace remain. The first two peace accords with Bodo outfits failed to end the militancy by them. One just has to recall that 90 people died in serial blasts set off by Bodo insurgents in Assam in October 2008, and 40 Bangla-speaking Muslims were killed in Baksa district in 2014. It remains to be seen how the third agreement works. A key question following the agreement is how the fault lines between Bodos and non-Bodos in the four districts shape up. The competition for land in the area is the main bone of contention between Bodos and non-Bodos, and has the potential to spark ethnic tensions afresh. That, in turn, could add to the cauldron of unrest caused by the anti-CAA protests in Assam and reignite militancy by the anti-talks faction of United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) headed by its fugitive supremo Paresh Baruah.

It is not without a reason that Assam's finance minister, who was present in New Delhi at the time of the signing of the January 28 accord, talked about a more inclusive peace effort in Assam by roping in outfits which are yet to join the negotiations. Both Sarma and Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal are keen to have ULFA (I) at the negotiations table. Paresh Baruah reportedly told a TV channel in Assam that his group was ready for talks if its demand for "sovereignty" is on the agenda.

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