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Violence and irregularities in the third phase of municipality polls

An ominous sign for democracy

AS the third phase of municipality polls was held on January 30, reports of violent clashes and irregularities again made news headlines. Elections to 62 municipalities in 36 districts were held in the third phase. And like the previous two phases of elections, this phase was also marred by clashes, ballot box stuffing and ballot snatching, driving polling agents out of voting centres and beating them up, and ruling party men occupying polling centres, as reported by this daily. The situation turned so chaotic in some polling centres that many opposition candidates boycotted the election, bringing complaints of election rigging against ruling party candidates.

While our correspondents were visiting the polling centres in Bogura, they found hundreds of ruling party leaders and activists, wearing "green caps" and the badges of the AL candidate, patrolling the polling centres and the surrounding areas and preventing opposition supporters from entering the station.

It is worrying to see how violence and irregularities have become a norm in our elections, despite repeated assurances from the Election Commission of holding fair and violence-free elections. Voters have already lost their faith in the election process and have also started questioning the role of the EC. And if things continue to go on like this in the next two phases of the municipality polls, the Election Commission will definitely lose its credibility.

The low voter turnout in the recently held Chattogram City Corporations polls, also marred by violence, was a reflection of people's attitudes towards elections. However, there was some form of enthusiasm among voters about the municipality polls as voter turnout was not bad in the second phase. But we can say for sure that voter turnout will decrease in the next phases if violence and irregularities by the ruling party men cannot be checked.

Before the elections, the Election Commission informed us that they took all the preparations to hold the third phase polls peacefully and prevent any kind of violence. The spokesperson of EC also told us that they have taken a lesson from the CCC polls. But in reality, they were not prepared to stop violence and election rigging. Although a few polling officers were withdrawn over negligence of their duties and an upazila-level AL leader was arrested on charges of capturing a polling station and creating chaos in the election in Bhuiyanpur, Tangail, no more steps were taken by the authorities concerned to stop chaos in the polling centres.

We urge the EC to investigate the allegations of election rigging by the opposition candidates and take steps against those who violated the electoral rules. And those who created chaos and resorted to violence to intimidate the voters should be arrested by the police and punished according to the law. These steps should be taken before the fourth phase of municipality elections is held so that people can find some form of enthusiasm in going to the polling centres and casting their precious votes.

When lawmakers break the law

The Speaker of the House must hold them accountable

NEWS of transgressions by public servants and elected officials are so common that one no longer feels surprised hearing of them, but this instance perhaps takes the cake. In the leaked tape of an alleged conversation between a member of parliament and officer-in-charge of Keshabpur police station, the MP was heard asking the OC to stage a bomb attack on the police station to frame a local environmentalist for arson, and also to set fire to a brick kiln using plainclothes policemen and then frame him for dacoity. The environmentalist, a lawyer by profession, is working in conjunction with an organisation to close down the brick kilns in Jashore, most of them illegal. These kilns are doing irreparable damage to the environment, particularly to the date palm trees for which Jashore is famous. And that is what has apparently incurred the MP's wrath. What makes the matter more reprehensible and ironic is that the said MP happens to be a member of the parliamentary committee on forests and environment.

The incident, startling as it is, reveals a few things about governance, rule of law and the level of moral and ethical depredation in society. We have, over the years, seen many instances of the practice of using law enforcing agencies and local administration to meet the personal agenda of some people in power. Mohammad Shahid Islam alias Kazi Papul, a Bangladeshi MP abroad, who was convicted for crimes like bribery, human trafficking and money laundering, is a case in point.

The latest incident also shows how illegal traders, in this case the brick kilns owners, thrive on political patronage. Reportedly, not only is this kiln illegal, it has received the patronage of local MPs over the years. It also reveals the relationship between some members of the law enforcing agencies and local MPs, not in terms of performing beneficial work for the public good, but in conniving and helping to violate the law and specific orders of the court. The brick kiln in question has been declared illegal by the High Court.

Members of Parliament are representatives of the public and are the repository of our trust. An MP asking the police to resort to an illegal act is a culpable act that demands action from the Speaker of the Parliament. We expect a thorough investigation of the incident, with no attempts to whitewash or brush it under the carpet. The government should protect the lawyer in question, who is working in the public interest, from any kind of intimidation or threat to his personal safety.

The journey towards fighting corruption



FAHMIDA KHATUN

MACRO MIRROR

DEBATES on any global index and ranking where a country does not perform well are common almost everywhere. From politicians to experts to common citizens—all have distinctive and diverse views. This is of course a sign of a thoughtful and argumentative nation. While no ranking and indices are perfect since there is always some margin of error in estimations, and thus we should not get overwhelmed by these numbers, the importance of such indices cannot be undermined, however. It gives an indication on the achievements made by countries and reminds us to do better by addressing the concerns. So even if we discard the rankings, the underlying messages have to be taken seriously.

The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2020 published by Transparency International reveals that Bangladesh's position is 146th among the 180 countries that were included in the ranking on corruption. In terms of score, Bangladesh achieved 26 out of 100. In a

To improve the efficiency of development efforts and to propel economic growth, corruption has to be rooted out. The reduction of corruption requires drastic measures.

scale of 0 to 100 used for scoring in the CPI exercise, 0 indicates a highly corrupt and 100 indicates a clean country. In 2020, both the position and rank have remained the same as that of 2019, in the case of Bangladesh. Within South Asia, Bangladesh is ranked the second lowest.

Whatever the CPI ranking may say, the prevalence of corruption and its negative role in the economy cannot be overlooked. The Global Competitiveness Report (GCR) 2019 also identified corruption as one of the top problematic factors in doing business in Bangladesh. The GCR found a number of malpractices, including the existence of unofficial transaction for awarding public contracts, and bribes in tax payments and export/

import. Of course, corruption is a global concern. Although it is historically more prevalent in the less advanced countries, the developed countries are not free from it either. That is why in the CPI 2020, no country could score 100. However, more than the score, what is important is the effort to stamp out corruption from society. How a government perceives corruption, and how a society looks at

If incompetent school teachers are employed at public schools through bribes, the quality of education suffers. These students may fall behind in accessing higher education and securing employment. This has a long-term implication on the overall human capital situation and the welfare of future generations. When the government cannot generate resources through taxation due to high tax evasion, there is

than many countries from the fallout of the pandemic.

In Bangladesh, economic growth has so far been autonomous of governance to a large extent. However, to improve the efficiency of development efforts and to propel economic growth, corruption has to be rooted out. The reduction of corruption requires drastic measures. Digital governance can help this to a large extent. Technology has brought spectacular changes, not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. However, this is yet to be used in full force in the case of establishing transparency.

Institutional reform of the responsible bodies for overseeing corruption is also critically important. The first-generation economic reform measures in Bangladesh led to the opening up of its economy in the 1990s. But they were not coupled with reforms and the strengthening of institutions at that time. In the following decades, a few regulatory and institutional reforms were undertaken to accelerate economic growth, albeit on a limited scale. The banking sector is one of those institutions which underwent some reforms, but the reform initiatives did not result in much improvement in economic governance, as they were incomplete.

As part of establishing accountability, exemplary measures including reward and punishment in the system and practice of rule of law, can play a crucial role. Although the willingness to improve transparency and accountability in the public administration has been expressed by the government several times, substantive initiatives are yet to be undertaken. As a result, red tape and slow service delivery are experienced by common citizens. Strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission is also extremely important. The autonomy of the organisation should be upheld so that it can perform its duty as a watchdog body with integrity.

However, the fight against corruption cannot be fully successful without involving people from all walks of life in the process. It has to be a collaborative effort between the government and all other stakeholders in society.

In the last 50 years, Bangladesh has set an example of turning its fate from a bottomless basket to a fast-paced economy. It can set another example by becoming a corruption free country in the next 50 years. This will be the best promise to make during the golden jubilee celebration of Bangladesh's independence.

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ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

corruption, are important to understand what measures are expected of the government.

Studies have shown that corruption has not only economic costs, but also social and environmental costs. When infrastructure collapses due to the poor construction by a less qualified contractor who got the contract through bribes, then it is not only a waste of resources and loss of potential output of the economy, but also a loss of invaluable human lives. Corruption is also a disincentive to those who genuinely want to invest, but suffer from uncertainty over getting the necessary permissions. High facilitation fees may become less cost-effective for many businesses and reduce their competitiveness. An industry paying exorbitant "speed money" for a public service would be in a less advantageous situation than the one which gets it done by paying the regular price. A business paying existing interests for bank loans would struggle to compete with a business that enjoys frequent interest waivers or has defaulted with the bank. Such disincentives may discourage those who could add more to national output in terms of job creation, innovation and productivity through investments.

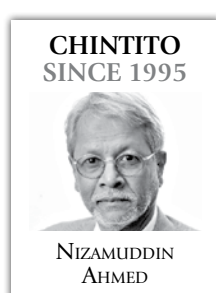
The social cost of corruption is also high and has a distributional impact.

inadequate resources for social protection for the poor. Hence, it hampers inclusive growth.

The environmental costs of corruption are no less important. When encroachers construct buildings by filling up rivers and lakes or cutting forests illegally, the environmental damage caused is irreparable. When unfit vehicles with high carbon emissions run on the road, getting away with paying bribes, the cost of that pollution is human health. This increases government expenditure on cleaning up the degraded environment. The pollution also reduces productivity and prosperity.

The reduction of corruption is connected with the improvement of overall governance in the country. There is no denying that over the last five decades, the Bangladesh economy has transformed into a promising one on many accounts. This is evident not only through higher economic growth, but also through less volatile economic growth. Despite various external and internal shocks such as the global financial crisis, regular natural disasters and above all, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the country has been able to show resilience and achieve better growth compared to most economies across the world. It has been predicted by various organisations that Bangladesh will recover better and faster

The drawback with prototype designs of residences



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

INDIVIDUALITY builds self-confidence as opposed to dependency, creativity against suppression, cooperatives instead of idle

loners, an active workforce vs laissez-faire, contributors not dumb receivers, and choosers not beggars. Allow me to elaborate.

A man entered his house. As usual, he went to his bedroom, took off his shirt, and was about to zip down when the bathroom door opened.

In the blur of the evening twilight, her silhouette pronounced against the backdrop of the LED light, he thought his wife was looking unusually pretty today, definitely slimmer; could be the fading daylight, he thought. He switched on the bed lamp. Both of them shrieked at the same time. She was not his wife. "What the prototype design are you doing here?" the now covered lady cursed and shouted.

Shaking for various reasons, the man shouted, "Dec... pooo..." That was the name of his wife of 30 years. Now Dipu was in the next-door garden, watering the carnations, tulips and red roses, symbols of her undying love for her man, three decades in wedlock and half in courting. She rushed in panic to where her husband was and found him still naked waist-belt upwards.

"What the prototype design are you doing here? How could you", she shouted in rage, her eyes welling up.

Another day, another house. No, same house, because many are not any different from the others.

Asked the buyer quizzically, "Are you sure you showed me this house?"

"I am in this business for 30 years, and you think I will not know one house from another?" was the haughty response of the real estate guy.

"I thought mine had a wider entrance door..."

"Impossible!" was the response.

"So, does that mean that all the identical houses have the same price tag?" "Impossible!" was uttered with a

salesmanship smile, "Is that even a possibility? Owners are different, taste is heaven and hell, and the locations are all unique. Same price, huh! *Kee je kaun na?*"

Another day, this time a river. All the paint manufacturers have gathered on the bank of River Rongdhonu, meaning rainbow. Cheeky people! Throwing aside all their differences, they have unanimously decided to bury all their paints in the sea. Since only one

I don't know if you know this, but similar diet, identical sleeping habits, breathing the same air and repeating arguments can make husband and wife look like siblings. You can try this at home. That's another reason for loss of attraction because there are no opposite sides.

In prototype houses, the spare parts shall be common. Each will thief from the other, perhaps unwittingly even,



PHOTO: COLLECTED

colour shall survive in the industry of classlessness, the time has come to decide which shall survive the messy squabble. A jury was held.

Said Red, "Ask any child, I rest my case."

Blue: "I wish Nayak Raaj was here, *neel akasher neechay...*"

Green: "You guys are aware about the revolutionary excuse people offer for abusing the earth."

Yellow: "It is unfair to have this exercise so far away from Pahela Boisakh."

White: "Mix'em all up, and here I am."

So, our houses shall be from bleached to grey (from dirt) in the age of equality because seeking approval is complicated under a complicity of state organs.

thinking to be the owner of the parts. Residents will have to write their name on everything. Then the fighting will start, obviously, if there are two Kamals and 50 Nasreens in the same neighbourhood.

No apology for the long prelude, necessitated by the discovery (at last) that obtaining approval from RAJUK requires extensive lobbying, hop-step-and-jump, and bribery, according to reports in the media. Therefore, it is being proposed that in planned government residential areas, homeowners will have the option to choose from several fixed designs; thus bypassing the need to lose the bottom of one's. But, wait, RAJUK will monitor the construction, something in which they are miserably bad since inception. So, why again walk the same path?

Admirably, the sincere purpose of the proposers is to mitigate public suffering and curtail corruption. More preposterously though, the advocates believe that the beauty of a developed area is affected by buildings of various heights, as is the current practice. Manhattan, anybody? I do wonder how the world would be if all of us were exactly as tall as the 38-year old Turkish Sultan Kosen, who at 251 cm (eight feet plus) is the tallest living male. I am already feeling dizzy.

The justification of the sponsors of the idea is that existing variations make it difficult to assess municipal service requirements, and that the such a scheme is practised for government planned areas in many countries. Exactly! In those countries they also practice honesty and sincerity. Fix the system, do not succumb to its evil side.

While we have to wait and see whether harassment will be any less, the aesthetics will suffer for sure, as will individualism that distinguishes one from the others. A customised home not only reflects the personality of the owner, but enhances personal happiness, and makes him content and blissful, autonomous and responsible, giving us the benefit of a stronger society. A happy nation is conducive to further development.

On the other hand, an attempt to tailor humans to monkey each other has been abhorred throughout civilisation. Worthlessness and low esteem were never considered positive attributes. Independent thinking and creativity are important instruments of independence.

The downside of a prototype design, and more so if the private sector emulates the government, is that architects would be cutting grass, engineers planting potatoes, and town planners planning their move to another vocation.

We understand the bizarre proposal to have identical houses is in its infancy. Let us nip it in the bud. Undeniably, there is corruption in the people who run the system. Educate those people. Overhaul the system. But, leave the matter of aesthetics to the architects. Let engineers innovate.

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