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FOUNDER EDITOR  
LATE S. M. ALI

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## Frame law immediately to constitute a new EC

*Only a non-partisan body can engender trust in the people of the country*

DESPITE our much-vaunted march of democracy since its resurrection from the bonds of the *khaki*, our democratic institutions have fared badly because of the characteristic propensity of the political party in power to fill vital institutions with “our men,” or “our women” for that matter. The blame lies not just with the current regime—all political parties have been more or less guilty of this delinquency.

Unfortunately, the worst sufferer of such a biased attitude has been the Election Commission (EC). With every successive government, the commission has been made more blatantly partisan. It is no wonder that one of the reasons for the decay of democracy in Bangladesh is the loss of people’s trust in the electoral system. With every election, fewer and fewer people have exercised their right to choose their representatives, knowing that their votes matter little, the result being a foregone conclusion. The turnout in local elections—the most recent of them held only a few days ago—testifies to our views. And this ominous state has been acknowledged even by some serving members of parliament.

Can a nation that suffered unimaginable losses in terms of human lives—to establish the right and freedom to choose their own representatives and have them run their own affairs, and not by those who defile and distort the system to “get elected”—countenance such a state of affairs? We certainly do not want a repetition of the 2018 general election, nor the dozens of local elections held since then.

Through our columns, we have been calling for enactment of appropriate laws to govern the formation of the Election Commission. We, therefore, endorse and strongly reiterate the call of those who have been demanding such a law, including that of 53 eminent personalities who recently also called for reforms, so that the civil administration and the law enforcement agencies are made resistant to all extraneous pressures and inducements.

We wonder at the reluctance of the party in power to do so. After all, our constitution mandates such a law. However, while we are calling for enactment of a law for Election Commission formation, we are aware that any law can be circumvented—as we have seen happen many times before. But a law in place would at least restrict the ruling party’s ability to ride roughshod over the provisions indiscriminately.

Only a credible institution can retrieve the faith of voters in the electoral system which, as of now, stands severely sapped. Also, it is in the interest of the ruling party that elections are not only claimed free and fair, but are actually so. Only a free, transparent and unencumbered Election Commission can ensure that. We also believe that, despite the process of selection of the commission members, everything depends on the quality of the individuals holding the posts, the strength of their moral fibre, and their obligation to the people and their conscience. In a democracy, it is not the verdict of the court but of the people that renders validity to an election, and to the people elected.

## Why construct a market inside Dhupkhola field?

*It indicates a lack of appreciation for history on the part of authorities*

IN a city already devoid of enough playgrounds, the decision by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) to build a market inside the Dhupkhola field is disconcerting, to say the least. The Dhupkhola field is not just a playground where people play different sports—it is a place where residents from nearby neighbourhoods come together to hang out and spend time with their friends and families. Therefore, constructing a market inside the field will most certainly change the entire characteristic of the field.

The Dhupkhola field also has a rich history of producing athletes who have gone on to represent Bangladesh at the highest levels of their respective sports. The first Test centurion of Bangladesh, Aminul Islam Bulbul, is just one cricketer of note who trained in the field. Mohammad Rafique, considered one of the best spinners Bangladesh has ever produced, is another. Former national team footballers such as Ataur and Mamun Babu also trained in Dhupkhola field. There are currently three cricket academies based in the Dhupkhola field, where around 500 cricketers practise on a regular basis. Who is to say that the next great Bangladeshi cricketer will not emerge from there? And what will happen to the fate of these 500 athletes once the market eats up a significant chunk of the field?

According to the DSCC plan, the authorities will construct a five-storey market to house the 394 shops set up around the fields, which will take up 0.62 acres of the field area. The city corporation is also going to construct walkways, seating arrangements, parking spaces, and a cafeteria, which will further reduce the field’s space. All these will bring down the total size of the field to 4.01 acres from 7.47 acres. Right now, the 7.47 acres of the field area is split into three parts: Jagannath University field, East End Club playground, and an open field for everyone to use. The construction of the market, by significantly reducing the total field size, will affect everyone who wishes to use it.

Research by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) shows that the city’s fields barely meet 10 percent of the public demand. When open playgrounds are already in such short supply, why is the DSCC taking up a project that will reduce them even further? There seems to be no logical explanation to this. The director of the Dhupkhola Math (field) Development Project justified the decision by saying that the facilities were being built because of “space constraints.” But what about the lack of playing fields in Dhaka? How will the authorities make up for that? We urge the authorities to seriously reconsider their decision and find an alternative site for the market’s construction.

# Building a healthy e-commerce sector needs strong actions



quite some time, about malpractices by a number of e-commerce companies. But those complaints fell on deaf ears, and the companies continued their business right under the nose of the relevant authorities. However, the problem could not be ignored for long as it became too big and unavoidable. The owners of e-commerce platform Evaly have been arrested for fraud, and cases have been filed against them under the existing law of the land. If they are proven guilty, they may have to stay behind bars for three to seven years, according to legal experts.

But will it help those who have lost their money? This is the most important question in the whole Evaly episode right now. Judging by our previous experience, getting back the customers’ stolen money is a distant reality. Though the measures taken by the authorities are a positive move, it will not solve the problems faced by the affected people. Recovery of the money by confiscating the assets of Evaly seems to give a little hope. It has been reported that the value of Evaly’s assets seems to be much less than the amount customers have paid the company to purchase products. The legal battle is a long process, and the affected people may not get their money back. Indeed, there have been similar cases before where the affected customers were not fully compensated. One may recall the misappropriation of customers’ deposits by the sponsor of the Oriental Bank Ltd in 2007, and the collapse of the bank. Till today, many clients of the bank have not gotten their money back. Not too long ago, people were also cheated by multilevel marketing companies that allured innocent people with the promise of higher returns on their deposits. The deceit of those businesses was unearthed a few years into their operations, and the culprits were put behind bars. But the cheated customers did not get their money back. Several low-income people lost their lifelong savings.

Will the customers of Evaly get their money back? When and how? As discussion on the solutions to the Evaly problem continues, there have been demands for compensation from the government. This is, indeed, a dangerous proposition. Government money is taxpayers’ money, and that money is for the development of the country and to support the poor. We are still in the middle

of the Covid-19 pandemic; a good number of people in the country—who lost their jobs during the pandemic—are yet to get their jobs back and earn their living like they used to before Covid hit the country. Public money is to support people during such difficult times, generate jobs, and create opportunities for the people. Why would the hard-earned money of our taxpayers be used to compensate for a crime committed by two greedy individuals? This will only encourage malpractice in this sector as well as in others. The government’s objective should not be encouraging bad practices, but to root out the greed of deceitful businesses like Evaly.

E-commerce is a new but potential sector for Bangladesh. It is a source of employment for the youth. In Bangladesh, the capacity of the job market to absorb all of the aspiring young population is limited. This sector creates opportunities for them. But this prospect is not for the unemployed youth only; many smart and promising young citizens, who could easily find good jobs but do not want to work for others, have started their own businesses with innovative ideas. They have created jobs for others; they have set examples of ethical business. Several successful e-commerce businesses are also attracting foreign investment because of their reputation. Having a large population, Bangladesh is an attractive destination for the e-commerce industry. As our per capita income is increasing, consumerism is also expanding. It will continue to do so as the country is expected to do better in the

*Since the unveiling of the Evaly scam and the dishonest practices of a number of other e-commerce businesses, the issue has become the centre of our attention.*

coming days. But unethical practices of a few e-commerce companies have damaged the customers’ confidence. If this is not remedied, it will not only have a negative impact on youth employment, but also on the overall economy. So, policymakers must address customers’ concerns without delay.

With the unveiling of fraudulent practices of a few e-commerce companies, the role of regulatory bodies has come into question. The Ministry of Commerce and the Bangladesh Bank have critical roles to oversee and monitor such businesses. These malpractices have been

going on for several months. Why these were not tracked and stopped by the responsible departments are questions that must be answered. Going forward, there is a need for coordination between these and other relevant bodies, such as law enforcement agencies, e-commerce associations, the financial organisations which facilitate payments, and a consumer rights protection department, for a healthy e-commerce sector. Following the Evaly debacle, the Ministry of Commerce has launched Digital Commerce Operation Guidelines, 2021. It has instructions on product delivery, payment, information



The e-commerce sector in Bangladesh has immense potential; it must be protected from unscrupulous business practices.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

to customers, etc. It also mentions that if companies fail to comply with the guidelines, the government can shut them down. Also, consumers can lodge complaints with the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection and relevant courts. There are demands from some groups that these guidelines should be more comprehensive and stringent. There are also suggestions for new laws. However, e-commerce companies do not want a separate regulatory body. They want facilitation, not regulation. Legal experts suggest that the existing laws can be amended to take measures against the fraudulent companies. But having good laws is not the solution to the problem—proper implementation of the law is the key.

Since the unveiling of the Evaly scam and the dishonest practices of a number of other e-commerce businesses, the issue has become the centre of our attention. Affected and agitated customers are on the street demanding their compensation; news and expert analyses are also pouring in. Many have been trying to say that the customers who have been ordering recklessly from the e-commerce company in question have also been greedy. This is an inappropriate analogy. The Evaly owners got involved in the crime of

did not realise that such discounted rates are impossible, and businesses cannot sustain through such irrational practices. This cannot be a business model. This is a cheating model.

Given the importance of the issue, it may continue to be the topic of discussion for some time—perhaps before another, more serious incident happens! However, this issue is important not only because customers have lost over Tk 1,000 crore to Evaly; the problem is much bigger than that. It is about this whole practice of becoming rich overnight through malpractices and corruption, and yet receiving acceptance and even accolades from our society. They occupy the cover pages of magazines, they are projected as role models and are discussed in the media and elsewhere, and they take the centre stage of programmes attended by powerful people. They would shamelessly show off their wealth, while others would admire them. At times, the power of their money is stronger than the power of policymakers. Hence they stay above the law. They get away with crimes. The Evaly scam is yet another test case for the policymakers to prove its commitment to the common people of the country.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

# In fashion, ‘sustainability as usual’ may no longer be enough



recognise that “business as usual” is no longer an option on a planet where we are already seeing evidence of global change on a daily basis. The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change, states that many of the changes observed in global climate are unprecedented in thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of years. It says that the changes are widespread, and that the role of human influence on climate is undisputed.

At the same time, if one considers the above argument in light of Bangladesh’s most successful export industry, it is evident that we may have a problem. Fashion creates millions of jobs in lesser developed countries, such as Bangladesh. If the “fast fashion” tap were to be switched off—in the name of protecting the environment—many of these jobs would be gone, and the societal impact would be huge.

Our leaders recognise this conundrum—this balancing act between societal and environmental impacts. It is for this reason that the idea of decoupling economic growth from climate impacts is so appealing. Such a decoupling would mean that economic growth would become a sustainable goal for all of society.

Is this even possible? Until relatively recently, decoupling of this nature has been viewed as a fanciful notion. This is because the majority of historical data and projections illustrate the intrinsic link between material and energy use and

the consequent carbon emissions/climate impacts.

As a consequence, many people have difficulty reconciling the sustainability goals of a business model—fashion, in this case—which is dependent upon selling more and more business units. In short, they say we can’t have our cake and eat it.

I personally have one foot in this camp, and believe that the idea of “sustainability as usual” may no longer

solution where we can separate traditional GDP growth from climate impacts. Within the textile industry, this is via recycling and the circular economy. I have written about this issue before, but I believe it deserves growing scrutiny in countries like ours, which are so heavily dependent upon labour-intensive manufacturing industries, such as clothing production. It is in our own interest to embrace solutions that can separate growth from the impacts of



The RMG sector of Bangladesh requires a rethink of business operation model to avert climate crisis.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

climate change, given that our industries are so dependent on carbon-intensive manufacturing.

How can we do this? One way is to shift to the use of renewable energy, as I have previously discussed in my column.

But a complete rethink of our RMG manufacturing base may also be required, if we are to shift towards a less resource-intensive operating model in line with circular economy principles.

The three major principles around circular economy are: smarter use and manufacture of products; extension of product lifespan and its parts through reuse, repair, refurbishment, and

remanufacturing; and useful application of materials such as repurposing, recycling, and material recovery.

While not all of these ideas will be easy to apply in the RMG manufacturing space, many of them could extend the useful life of garments. For example, textile materials can be repaired and refurbished, and alternative markets can be found for them. Is our garment industry ready to explore these ideas?

If all of this sounds quite radical, that’s the intention. I said sustainability as usual might not be an option moving forward, and as manufacturers we need to think about what this new landscape might entail if we are to remain relevant to our fashion buyers. Be in no doubt: our buyers are looking for solutions in these areas. When they talk about “going circular,” it is us, their manufacturers, that they are relying on to enable them to achieve their goals.

What can we do now to prepare for a less resource-intensive, circular environment, where GDP growth is decoupled from carbon emissions?

Most experts agree that several steps will be required for textile manufacturers. One is to phase out the use of unsafe materials and the discharge of microfibres (another huge issue for our customers). This will require more innovative garment design and smarter production processes.

The second is changing the way clothes are designed, a step to be taken in collaboration with our buyers.

Step three is designing products keeping recycling in mind, so that the products are recoverable at the end of their “life.”

Taken together, these actions would initiate a major step for our RMG sector. At some point, we may need to think very differently about our business models as part of a broader societal shift away from a linear business model. These are difficult questions, but now is the time to think about their answers.

Mostafiz Uddin is the managing director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE).