UP election violence doesn't bode well for sound local governance

SHUPROVA TASNEEM

OVER the past few weeks, almost every day, we have read news reports on clashes in the lead-up to the November 11 union parishad (UP) elections. On Monday, 20-year-old Md Shihan, who was critically injured in an attack over the upcoming polls the day before in Jadabpur union, in Dhaka's Dhamrai upazila, succumbed to his injuries and died. He was reportedly a supporter of Abdul Majid, the Awami League-nominated candidate for Jadabpur, whereas his attackers are alleged to be supporters of Jadabpur UP Chairman Mizanur Rahman Mizu, a rebel candidate of the ruling party.

Shihan is the fourth victim to lose his life in the recent pre-poll violence. On October 28, Sadir Mia (19) and Hiran Mia (35) were killed and over 20 others injured when two groups clashed over the upcoming elections at Paratali union in Narsingdi's Raipura upazila. According to the officer-in-charge of Raipura police station, Paratali UP member Shah Alam has been embroiled in a feud with his rival *"Chhoto"* Shah Alam, over establishing supremacy in the area, and the deceased were supporters of the latter.

On the night of October 26, Sajibur Rahman (47), who was a member of Kaptai union parishad in Rangamati, was killed in clashes between the supporters of Awami League-backed candidate Abdul Latif and the supporters of yet another rebel candidate, Mohiuddin Patwari Badal. So far, more than 52 people have been injured in pre-poll violence.

This is not the first time that we have seen such clashes during local elections. According to *The Daily Star*, around a dozen people have been killed across Bangladesh centring the first and second phases of the UP elections this year. In 2016, we witnessed some of the worst cases of violence ever seen during the local elections. According to Bangladesh-based organisation Democracywatch, 89 people were killed in pre- and post-election violence, and 53 were killed on election days. Of these 142 deaths, at least 60 were the results of factional clashes. While the latest round of elections has not reached such a dire stage, this trend of increasing political violence between different factions of the ruling party is something that should raise an alarm for us.

In the November 11 elections, the daily *Prothom Alo* puts the number of rebel candidates at 691 against the 848 seats to be contested—that is, 691 candidates who are members of the ruling party, but did not receive the party ticket, so decided to run as independent candidates. These rebel candidates have increasingly become a thorn in the Awami League's side. Although in its 2016 national council, the Awami League adopted a measure that stated that rebels in local body polls would be expelled without being served any show-cause notice, the measure has not proven to be much of a deterrent.

In September, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader warned that such dissidents would not receive any posts in the party and would not be picked as party nominees. Yet, no amount of show-cause notices, warnings of punitive actions and even expulsions from the organisation seemed to have stemmed this tide. According to *Prothom Alo*, the situation has reached a stage where, in some areas, lawmakers asked party leaders not to nominate anyone and keep the elections open to independent contestants in order to maintain peace. This really begs the question: Given that party-backed nominees are such a huge cause of friction in local elections, why was this system even put into place?

Of course, one could argue that national party-backed candidates are more likely to be able to get things done through a party chain of command, creating more cohesion between local and national government. However, keeping local and national representation separate also has the added benefit of limiting MPs' exercise of power over local administration. When both belong to the same party, it is far too likely that the MP will be able to exert influence in selecting his preferred candidates for the local level seats. And as recent media reports and the factional clashes confirm, there has been a great deal of agitation regarding party-nominated candidates from grassroots levels. Critics have identified a lack of a chain of command and nepotism in the nomination of candidates as one of the major reasons for the continued presence of rebel candidates.

It is true that many of the party-nominated candidates have left much to be desired. On Wednesday, *Prothom Alo* reported on how AL-backed candidate Shah Alam of Holdiapalong union parishad in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia upazila said that those who will not vote for him will not be allowed to be buried in the local graveyard. Incidentally, during the 2016 elections, he allegedly said, "the police are government goons, they are boat's people. And that boat belongs to me." Similarly, according to *The Daily Star*, on Monday night, Shariatpur Sadar upazila Chairman Abul Hashem declared that no one will be allowed to ask for votes for opposing candidates. Such behaviour from the members of the ruling party do far more harm to the party's reputation and organisational strength than the existence of rebel candidates; yet very few actions seem to be taken against them.

The Election Commission's silence in these instances are all the more concerning.

It is absolutely unacceptable that political infightings and factional clashes are interfering with a democratic process like the UP elections. PHOTO: STAR

So far, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) KM Nurul Huda has said that the commission is "embarrassed" over UP poll-related violence, and it will work to prevent any further incidents. Will such statements build the people's confidence in the Election Commission's ability to hold free, fair, and peaceful elections? A report in this daily detailed how the commission had issued a show-cause notice to one ruling party candidate in Dhamrai's Sombhag union for threatening independent candidates during a campaign rally. While this is a step in the right direction, there are many more such candidates that the election authorities have failed to deal with.

The Election Commission's fundamental role is to ensure smooth functioning of the democratic process. However, the recent trend of uncontested elections and the growing apathy of voters towards local elections demonstrate a worryingly significant weakening of this process. In the first round of the UP elections, 45 union parishad candidates won uncontested, which means 29 percent were elected without a single vote being cast. Although the election commissioners have spoken about how they cannot comment on the parties' internal politics and the decision of opposition parties to boycott the elections, experts have said that the Election Commission must be held accountable for failing to create a conducive environment for an all-inclusive election.

The nomination of undesirable candidates and the election of uncontested candidates at the local level is a significant deterrent to building a strong local government, which is at the heart of every democracy. In Bangladesh, the union parishad is the first stage of contact between the people and the state (their representatives). It is not only about reaching government services to the grassroots, but about empowering ordinary people by giving them access to local, democratically elected representatives. At this level, it is extremely important for the electorate to vote for the candidates and not the symbols, because the relationships they maintain are both social as well as political.

For example, recent studies on domestic violence have found that women mostly prefer to go to union parishad members or chairmen to seek remedies. However, in a majority of these cases, they face victim-blaming or are sent back to their perpetrators after an unlawful mediation by the local administration. This is only one example, but starting from the fair distribution of government allowances to the representation of local needs to national policymakers, locally elected representatives have a significant role to play in any country.

It is, therefore, extremely disheartening to see our local elections mired with political infighting and factional clashes on the one hand, and voter apathy and uncontested elections on the other. By now, it is clear that local elections backed by national parties have not had a positive impact—if anything, it has taken us further away from the possibilities of decentralisation, weakened the political parties' discipline and organisation, and hampered the potential for impartial elections by creating an increasingly polarised electorate. While dealing with these issues will require more long-term actions, in the immediate elections, the least the Election Commission and the relevant authorities can do is ensure that the polls are fair, credible, and violence-free.

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The road to development begins with education

GOLAM MORTOZA

WE are the biggest applauders of our own successes. Sometimes, regional and international arenas, too, portray our positive growth through development indicators. When many countries found themselves in dire straits because of Covid-19, Bangladesh's economic indicators remained somewhat consistent. Bangladesh is a "role model" for development—this is a common phrase now.

On some indexes, Bangladesh is ahead of even India—and this is often highlighted in many discussions nowadays. There is no doubt that Bangladesh has some big, notable achievements under its belt. For instance, no matter how debatable the per capita income index may be, there is no denying the fact that Bangladesh is in a better position than India. India is a huge country, where certain areas are home to extreme poverty. So the question remains whether it is justified to draw comparisons between the two neighbouring countries. But that is not what I want to discuss here—I firmly believe what the indexes indicate.

Bangladesh's success in exporting RMG products and human resources, its contribution to peacekeeping in several countries, and success in food production are, indeed, a matter of pride. So it is expected that those in power would claim credit for these feats. And they deserve it.

Keeping all this in mind, I would like to share my two cents on the "role model of development."

There are many examples in world history where a poor nation has changed its fate through development. We don't have to look very far: some of these examples exist nearby.

The development process through which Lee Kuan Yew turned the fishermen's village of Singapore of 1965 to the highly-developed country it is today, or how Mahathir Mohamad changed the Malaysia of 1980s to what it is now, hardly needs any elaboration. Japan's development after World War II, since 1945, and South Korea's rise after the Korean War of 1950 are success stories that have taken the world by surprise. Thailand is no different either.

In order to rebuild and develop, all these countries focused on one thing: developing their human resources. They established strong state institutions, using which they reached the height of success they enjoy today. And to achieve all of this, the first initiative that they took was educating all their citizens. At first, they brought in foreign experts with high salaries for a certain period of time to help with nation-building. In the meantime, they sent their young students to Europe and North America for higher education. Once those students returned home, equipped with modern knowledge, these countries no longer needed to hire foreign experts.

What good does a first class degree do if it is achieved through memorisation? PHOTO: COLLECTED

After World War II, Europe and the US put more focus on air links. Japan, one of the Axis powers, was barred from making aircraft. But Japan did not sit idle, and instead focused their research on making fast trains. Only 10 years after the great war, Japan managed to invent high-speed trains in 1955, solely through their home-grown experts. They took USD 80 million as a loan from the World Bank to facilitate this project.

During the Summer Olympics in 1964, which was held in Tokyo, Japan stunned the entire world by inaugurating their bullet train service.

For Japan, as well as all developed countries, education was the prerequisite to development. They put the highest possible priority to education and research in their development policies.

Now the most critical question arises: How much importance has Bangladesh, which is hailed as the role model for development, put in its education sector? Let's not look into what Europe and North America, or Asian nations like Japan and Korea do. Compared to its South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh has the lowest allocation for its education sector. It is generally said that countries with less than four percent of budget allocation for education cannot succeed. Bangladesh's budgetary allocation for education is about two percent.

We don't follow the policy of sending our brilliant students abroad and have them gain expertise through higher education. Those who do that using their own means, seldom think of coming back. But then, the government has no attention to spare to create an environment where those who want to return home are given the due respect, good work environment, and the opportunities to implement their knowledge and expertise. Nepal is ahead of Bangladesh in terms of the number of students going to the US for higher education. No Bangladeshi university has managed to take a respectable spot in any of the international rankings, but we can find the names of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Nepali universities on those lists.

The CEOWORLD magazine published a list of best educational systems in 2020, where India was ranked 33rd, Sri Lanka 77th, and Pakistan 83rd. Even Myanmar ranked in the 92nd place. Bangladesh was not even on the list.

A recently published news story, published by *The Daily Star*, revealed that graduates of Dhaka University, who achieved first class in Sanskrit, could not speak or read Sanskrit. And they had applied to teach at the Department of Sanskrit in their alma mater. Speaking to this daily, Dr Madhabi Rani Chanda, a professor at the Department of Sanskrit, said: "There is no scope for denying the fact that the educational standards in this university are declining day by day. Most of the students score good marks by memorising the answers."

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It's not just the Department of Sanskrit; this situation is alarmingly prevalent everywhere in Bangladesh.

The pathetic condition of Bangladesh's education sector has been repeatedly exposed in many relevant international researches over the last few years.

Bangladesh is ranked 116th among 132 countries in the Global Innovation Index. The Global Talent Competitiveness Index sees Bangladesh in 123rd position among 134 countries. In the Global Knowledge Index, Bangladesh is ranked 112th among 138 countries.

In all three of these indexes, Bangladesh trails behind India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

We claim to have become "Digital Bangladesh," but our internet and mobile data speed is the slowest among all South Asian nations.

Using this ultra-slow internet, I tried to find if there are other countries where two rival student organisations, or two factions of a single organisation, frequently engage in violent clashes using an arsenal of weapons, often leading to bloody and sometimes fatal outcomes. From Uganda to Nepal, I couldn't find a single example of such a phenomenon. Uganda has a history of student uprisings against dictatorship. Similar accounts of movements can be found in the histories of Nepal and India as well. But I have yet to find an example that even vaguely resembles the incident of two rival wings of the same organisation beating each other up, which resulted in one student ending up on life support, his doctors forced to remove a part of his skull to help his healing process. On the bandage around his head, these words were written: Haar nei, chap diben na (No bone here, do not apply pressure).

In our "role model" development philosophy, education and research have zero importance. What is important is building roads, bridges, flyovers, and buildings. There is no denying the fact that infrastructural development is a staple for overall progress. But we have forgotten that infrastructure provides support for achieving development goals—they are not the markers of development themselves. For sustainable development, we need skilled, tech-savvy human resources, and to achieve that, there is no alternative to proper education and research. Importing expertise from abroad can be a temporary measure, but it can't be a permanent solution. We have built bridges and satellites using foreign expertise. The technology remains unknown to us. The knowledge that we need to train skilled manpower is still beyond our grasp.

Golam Mortoza is a journalist at *The Daily Star*. The article has been translated from Bangla.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
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Memo No. 35.01.3800.434.13.1306.21-3201(20) Dated: 03/11/2021

Amendment/Corrigendum Issued: 1

This is an online tender, where only e-Tenders will be accepted in e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, please register on e-GP System Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd).

e-Tenders are invited in e-GP System Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd) by Executive Engineer (PE), RHD, Road Division, Joypurhat for the procurement of:

Repair of damaged pavement by partial aggregate base type-II, Carpeting, Single Bituminous Surface Treatment work and protective work at 112th (P), 113th & 114th (P) K.M. of Bogra-Naogaon-Mohadebpur-Patnitala-Dhamoirhat-Joypurhat (R-545) Road under Road Division, Joypurhat during the year 2021-2022.

Tender No. 02/e-GP/EE/JRD/REV/2021-2022 & Tender ID No. 618191.

e-Tender details can be downloaded are from **25/10/2021, 11.15** to **08/11/2021, 17.00** on e-GP System Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd) for pursue.

e-Tenders will be accepted only up to **09/11/2021, 11.15**. Accepted tenders will be opened online immediately after **09/11/2021, 11.15**.

03/11/2021
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