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Rising violence ahead of UP polls is alarming

The Election Commission can't sit idle while the electoral code of conduct is violated

WE are concerned about the growing incidents of violence and deaths in the run-up to the second phase of union parishad (UP) elections. Up until now, at least 23 people have been killed across Bangladesh in incidents of violence related to the UP elections, which began in June this year. And most of the incidents of violence involved clashes between supporters of candidates nominated by the ruling Awami League, and those of the rebels in the party.

Violence during elections—be it the local government election or the national election—seems to have become the norm in the country. We have witnessed this during the 2016 local elections where, reportedly, more than 140 people were killed in pre-and post-election violence. According to Democracywatch, at least 60 people died in the factional clashes between the Awami League-nominated candidates and its rebel candidates in 2016. We are witnessing a similar trend this time too.

What is the Election Commission doing when the pre-election violence is escalating with every passing day, and the electoral code of conduct is being violated by the candidates and their supporters? The chief election commissioner recently said that the commission was embarrassed and concerned with what was happening. What we would like to ask is: Does the Election Commission's role end with only being embarrassed? Is expressing concerns enough, when they have immense legal power to take action in these cases? What is the commission doing to ensure that there is a level playing field? Have enough measures been taken to create a conducive environment for holding free and fair elections?

Moreover, the law enforcers' role should also be questioned here. What steps did they take to prevent these violent incidents from happening? In any case, the police should investigate the incidents promptly and submit charge sheets in cases filed in connection to these incidents as soon as possible.

As for the ruling party, such violent clashes between the supporters of its nominated and rebel candidates just goes to show a lack of discipline within the party. The Awami League should address these issues and find a solution to stop such factional clashes. Needless to say, the process of nominating candidates should be done more democratically. At the same time, the party should take stern action against those engaged in election violence and disqualify them from participating in the elections. Only expelling a few of the candidates will not work.

Last but not the least, the growing incidents of pre-poll violence as well as the threats given by some of the candidates to the opposing candidates and their supporters will only discourage the voters from going to the polling centres, eventually weakening the overall democratic system in the country.

Govt's poor policy for SMEs must change

They are the backbone of our economy

A study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has confirmed what we have repeatedly written in this column—that government policies have not adequately helped small and medium enterprises (SMEs) overcome the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas large businesses have received significant and timely financial support from the government, during the entire pandemic period, government support to SMEs has been disappointingly slow and inadequate.

While concentrating on the challenges endured by banks in disbursing stimulus packages, the government completely forgot to address the challenges SMEs face when borrowing from banks. For instance, the amount of documentation that has been demanded from the SMEs to borrow from banks is completely unreasonable, given the size of these enterprises. This is just one example of how poorly the government support programmes for SMEs have been formulated. A lack of data by the government in regards to the SMEs—particularly by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)—has been a major cause for such poor policy formulations. For example, there is currently no official data on the number of SMEs operating in Bangladesh. The last time such data was collected was back in 2013, when there were around 7.9 million SMEs.

It is estimated that SMEs and cottage and micro-enterprises generate around 90 percent of all private sector jobs in Bangladesh. The fact that government policy has performed so poorly at helping these enterprises during the pandemic explains why so many jobs have been lost in the formal sector in the last two years. Experts around the world agree that SMEs are the backbone of any economy. Yet, the lack of focus in getting most SMEs back on their feet has been a real setback for our economy.

For our economy to quickly recover, the government has to provide greater support to help the SMEs bounce back. In that regard, collecting data on SMEs for better targeted support is the most essential first step. Experts have repeatedly said that the government should involve NGOs and microfinance institutions to disburse loans to SMEs at low interest rates. It should also incentivise banks to lend to SMEs—which is usually more work for banks, as they prefer to approve one big loan to one big enterprise, than go through the hassle of approving hundreds of small loans to many small enterprises—through special schemes. The government should also consider setting up a specialised bank to address the needs of the SMEs.

In terms of policy interventions, the government has many options. But time is quickly running out, as many of these enterprises are desperately struggling to survive.

Improving education needs the right kind of political strategies



THE elections held in the US in the first week of November this year had state and local representatives, including two governors, mayors and school board members, up for selection. The governor's election in the state of Virginia attracted national attention, because polls showed a close race between the Democrats and the Republicans. Another distinction of the Virginia race was that school education became a major election issue.

In the context of the education response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the growing prominence of the "culture war" pertaining to identity, values, and raising the next generation, politics of education has become an area of contention across the globe. Bangladesh is no exception.

In Virginia, Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin released an advertisement featuring a mother complaining about her son having to read, in a high school English course, the novel "*Beloved*" by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. The novel depicted the horrors of slavery and the black experience in the US. Youngkin made it an issue of parental choice and control over their children's education. The Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe argued that parents' preferences may be diverse, which have to be considered, but decisions have to be made by the elected school board. Republican propaganda managed to paint McAuliffe as anti-parents to the conservative voters of Virginia, and he lost the election by a narrow margin.

Other education questions that stoked controversy in Virginia and elsewhere were CRT, DEI, SEL parental say, and protection measures against the pandemic. CRT means Critical Race Theory, a concept that suggests that racism in society should be a subject of

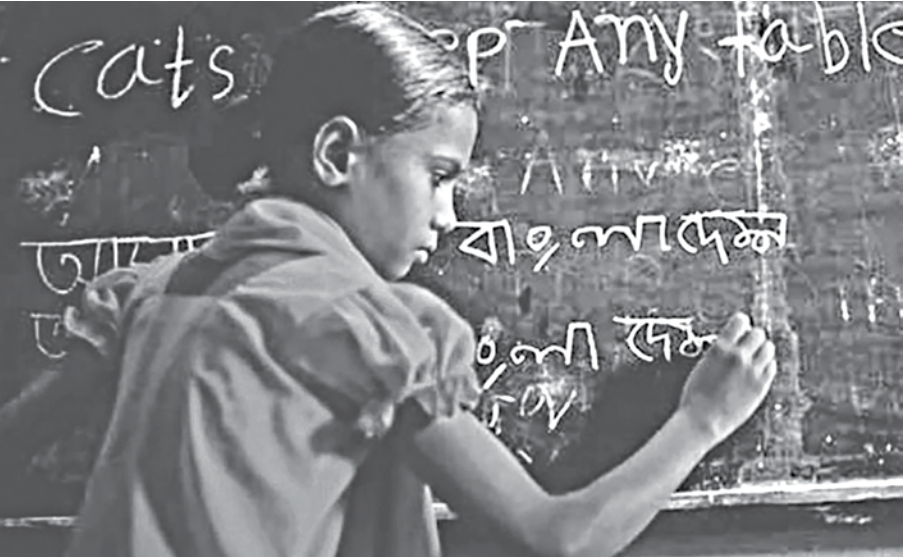
and vaccination, have become highly politicised—the Republicans, particularly the supporters of former President Donald Trump, look upon any state-prescribed requirements as infringement on parents' and citizens' rights.

By some estimates, one-third of the students in school-level education are in madrasas, which do not prepare their students as productive workers and active citizens of a rapidly changing modern society.

Political observers suggest that the win for the Republican could be a clue as to what may come in the 2022 midterm elections, when the balance of power in Congress is up for grabs—and when 36 states hold gubernatorial elections. A Republican win may even pave the way for Trump contesting and returning to presidency in 2024.

In Bangladesh, tensions have arisen from time to time about selecting textbook contents and the political compromises made that went against the basic state principles enshrined in the constitution. Faith-based madrasa education, both with public funding support and privately in what is known as the Qawmi madrasas, have grown as a parallel system. The rapid growth of the madrasas happened after the fateful change of the political regime in 1975 that had halted the democratic evolution of the country. By some estimates, one-third of the students in school-level education are in madrasas, which do not prepare their students as productive workers and active citizens of a rapidly changing modern society.

Many words have been written about the political and policy priorities in education, and how politics have led us astray. The importance of reclaiming the fundamental values of secularism, democracy, socialism, and nationalism and what these concepts mean for education



Meaningful reform in education cannot happen without political backing.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Education advocates and academics would like to see that education rises higher on the political agenda of a nation, so that the problems related to education get the necessary public and political attention. The friends of education may get more than they bargain for, when education issues are caught up in the larger political controversies of society.

study in academia. DEI refers to diversity, equity and inclusion, which should guide education content and management. Its importance has come to the fore as a response to the Covid-19 impact on education, but it is difficult to agree on what exactly may be done about it. The protection measures against the pandemic in schools, including wearing masks

Think twice before giving in to fast fashion



THE character of Miranda Priestly (played by Meryl Streep, from the 2006 film "*The Devil Wears Prada*")—albeit exaggerated for dramatic effect—was the boss of all our nightmares. But her iconic monologue about how fashion trends from the runways become diluted and eventually seep into our dull, regular lives cannot be faulted. But that was 15 years ago, and now, fashion trends are as accessible for the Andy Sachs (portrayed by Anne Hathaway) of the world as can be.

Since the beginning of this millennium, trend cycles have been getting shorter and shorter, thanks to fast fashion producers such as Forever 21, Zara, and H&M. This has been allowed to go on to such an extent that now, over two decades later, fast fashion brands are putting out a new collection almost every week, each collection consisting of tens of new styles. This is further perpetuated with the rise of fashion influencers on the internet. Before, it was only celebrities whose style would dictate what was "in" at a given moment in time. Now, there are niche internet "micro-celebrities" in seemingly every neighbourhood of the world, who are able to influence fashion trends by flaunting their styles on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. And though it is unclear which came first—influencer culture or fast fashion—there is no denying the fact that they both result in the production and dumping of tens of millions of clothes every year.

But the pollution that is caused by fashion is much more nuanced than trucks full of clothes being discarded into a landfill.

While high-end fashion companies moved from bringing out two collections per year to five in the last two decades, other, more retail-based brands offer tens of collections annually. Obviously, this has created demand and also fulfils it, but research suggests that people are also getting rid of clothes faster than they used to.

Data from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) shows that the fashion industry by itself is responsible for 10 percent of the world's carbon emission. If fast fashion is not stopped in its tracks, the emission could spike to 26 percent by 2050, according to estimates by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a UK-based charity that promotes circular economy. Meanwhile, even the washing of polyester clothes (a material found in about 60 percent of

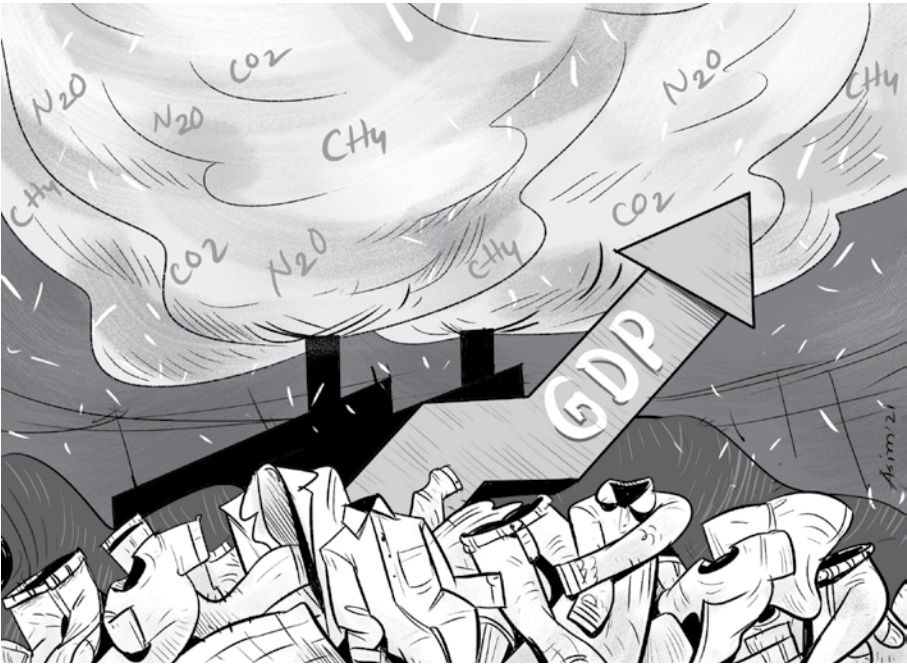
all fabrics) releases microplastics into our oceans, which never break down. In fact, a 2017 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimated that 35 percent of all microplastics found in the ocean came from the washing of synthetic clothes.

But the production of cotton clothes is no more innocent on the pollution front. Cotton itself is a very water-intensive plant, and to harvest and use it to make even one shirt and a pair of jeans could use up more than 12,200 litres of water, as per the data from UNEP and the World Resources Institute (WRI).

Such horrifying statistics should mean that all of us would be desperate to try and slow down the production of new clothes—if not eliminate it completely and use up what we already have. If only

to consumption, enabled by uber fast deliveries of products even from the other end of the world, is what allows fast fashion to grow and thrive—no matter one's knowledge and consciousness of the climate crisis.

All companies and many consumers in RMG-importing countries are aware of the environmental impacts of fast fashion, and there are often initiatives from both groups to be more "sustainable." Consumers may try to limit their purchases of new clothes and opt for thrift and charity stores, which help to keep clothes from ending up in landfills and also benefit a local community. Clothing retailers may only buy from factories which have certain green credentials, such as the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certificate.



Sustainable fast fashion is a paradox, no matter how responsibly and consciously people consume said fashion.

ILLUSTRATION: ASIM ROY

it were that simple.

Last year, locked in at home and resorting to retail therapy as the perfect distraction from the impending doom, I myself was in the thick of buying things online and being quite mindless about it. There was no forethought put into why I was buying what I was buying. Things would just come up on my social media feed through advertisements or from pages I already followed, and I would place an order simply because something seemed pretty or cool, and not because I felt a need to add it to my collection. But I would not stop at calling my purchases from that period "want-based" either. It was sheer impulse that I acted on, much stronger than need or want. And this kind of a "have to have it" approach

According to a *Prothom Alo* report, these "greener" RMG factories, of which there are about 135 in Bangladesh, can reduce electricity consumption by 24-50 percent, water consumption by 40 percent, and carbon emissions by 33-39 percent.

However, all that still does not change the truth that "sustainable fast fashion" is a paradox, no matter how many people consume said fashion responsibly and consciously. As long as trend cycles are getting shorter—and are being enabled by competitive production of clothes and widespread promotion of styles through social media—more clothes will be purchased and will subsequently be dumped, to stay in our environment and harm its creatures for thousands of years.

The dilemma for Bangladesh in this

has been highlighted in a number of columns in this daily earlier this year.

In neighbouring India, the ruling BJP government has followed a staunchly Hindu nationalist agenda as a national policy, straying from the secularist principles of independent India. Its reflection in education is described as "safronisation of education" that glorifies Hindu contributions to Indian history and aims to raise the next generation as patriots steeped in the Hindutva values.

There has been pushback against the ultra-nationalist political and educational agenda in India. The new National Education Policy of India announced in 2020 is based on a human capital rationale derived from the neoliberal approach, with the aim to make India a globally competitive economic superpower. It takes a stance that attempts to navigate between ideological positions and diverging objectives. The NEP reveals something of the complex political reality in any country, including India, where the ideological safronisation priority may be in conflict with the global economic ambitions.

I have been working with two of my colleagues on a book on the persistent quality and equity problems of education in South Asia. We drew the conclusion that the political dynamics of decision-making in education ultimately determined if the right priorities would be chosen and if the decisions taken would be implemented. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, who wrote the foreword of the book, said: "Politics clearly matters ... When institutions, various stakeholders such as teachers and parents, professional bodies, and committed leaders come into alignment—itself a political process—the chances of successful reform are greater."

Meaningful reform in education cannot happen without political backing, but it is a double-edged sword. As noted above, it can be a diversionary or even a destructive force. Education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and the young people themselves, are powerful in numbers and can be the upholders and champions of education. They can be a formidable strength when they are united by a common vision, and when they harness their own energy and idealism toward fulfilling this vision. Turning them into a force for positive change is a worthy and difficult challenge, which also calls for a political strategy.

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regard is a considerable one. Do we choose job creation and our economy, or do we save the environment? The obvious solution is the diversification of our export basket, so that the burden is taken off of RMG manufacturers to keep our economy growing. With 84 percent of our exports dependent on the RMG sector alone, this solution—if it ever occurs—will doubtlessly be an arduous one for us to reach. But more importantly, it will leave many of the estimated 4.2 million workers (as per a 2020 survey by the Asian Center for Development) of this sector jobless. When these factors are taken into account, it may seem that the eradication of fast fashion production will only harm Bangladesh.

But this is why it is important for us to take the beaten and battered phrase "whole-of-society approach" seriously when dealing with the climate crisis. Unlike the capitalist model of the textile and fashion industries, climate change does not discriminate between borders. Its effects will eventually get to all of us, unless we all—individuals, companies, intergovernmental organisations, and governments—do our part to curb them. Disaster is not imminent yet, but we must not allow it to become so.

To look out for our own, so to speak, the government must first create opportunities for our workers to develop their skills in areas besides RMG manufacturing. This, along with shifting the burden of our exports away from the same industry, could help Bangladesh be less of a participant in the using up and damaging of finite resources, the slow killing of wildlife and marine creatures, and the increasing of its own vulnerability to climate change. As consumers, we can act by making conscious choices instead of impulsive ones.

Instead of throwing away whatever you don't need, try to hoard your clothes. Even if an article does not "spark joy" now, it may do so in a few months or years. Or you can find someone—a friend, relative, acquaintance—to pass it down to, who you know will make good use of it. Even if one person's goodwill helps the environment in a minuscule way, it will have positive visible effects in one's own life in terms of less expenditure and clutter.

Consciously doing things to look after the environment is part of good housekeeping, and not limited to your immediate surroundings. Just because textile, fashion and other polluting industries turn a blind eye to their own misdoings—enabled by less climate vulnerable governments—does not mean consumers should too.

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