

UP polls campaigning around with irregularities

It's shocking to see the Election Commission show such disdain towards election law

ACCORDING to a report in this newspaper on December 26, 2021, the Election Commission, in clear violation of the law, accepted nomination papers after the stipulated time for union parishad election at Chandipasha union in Mymensingh's Nandail upazila. It is another condemnable but not surprising move taken by this commission, which has been mired in controversies throughout its tenure.

The report said that one Iftekhar Hossain had submitted nomination papers as an independent candidate on December 8, while the next day Amdadul Haque Bhuiyan submitted his with Awami League's recommendation attached. However, on December 10—the day after the final date for submission—Iffekhar submitted his nomination papers again, this time with the Awami League's recommendation. In complete violation of the law, the Election Commission accepted his new papers and cancelled his previous submission, while cancelling Amdad's nomination at the same time.

Locals have alleged that the union's poll officials had initially refused to accept the papers submitted after the deadline. However, local lawmaker Anwarul Abedin Khan put pressure on them to break the law. The fact that the Election Commission has been so willing to bend the law at the insistence of anyone is deplorable. The law is there for a reason.

A similar incident took place in Rajgati union in the same upazila, where another candidate submitted his papers with the ruling party's recommendation, while one Abdur Rauf submitted his independently. However, Rauf got the party candidacy and the other candidate's nomination was cancelled. According to the election authority's own circular issued on November 27, no political party can nominate more than one person for the chairman post in the union parishad polls. "If more than one person is nominated by a party, the nomination paper will be considered void," it wrote. Section 12 (7) of the local government (union parishad) law also states that if any person signs more than one nomination paper, all their papers except the first one submitted will be cancelled. Then, on what basis has the Election Commission violated these rules?

The Election Commission owes the public an explanation. The fact that this commission has repeatedly failed to address election irregularities over the years has been bad enough. Now that it's breaking the law itself, it is setting a dangerously bad precedence for our democracy.

The matter has now reached the High Court, and we hope that the court will give its judgement as per the correct interpretation of the law. We also hope that the court will hold the election authority to account for its blatant disregard for the law, and ask it to answer for its disdain towards the people's right to participate in a free and fair election, where the laws are strictly followed by all concerned.

Protect our migrant workers in Malaysia

Govt must address the issues of cost burden and exploitation

IT is certainly good news that Malaysia is again set to hire Bangladeshi migrant workers, after a three-year hiatus since 2018 imposed by the then Malaysian prime minister. Not only will this offer a much-needed boost to our economy after the downturn caused by Covid-19 lockdowns, but the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the two countries gives hope that workers may have some protection throughout the migration process and after. However, as migrant workers' rights activists have pointed out, there remain some issues which could perpetuate the previous problems of forced labour and high recruitment costs, borne by the workers.

The foremost issue is that the MoU, signed on December 19, has not been made public yet. A statement by the Bangladeshi expatriate ministry stated that recruitment costs on the Malaysian end would be borne by employers, but there is no mention as to who will bear the costs of migration for the workers on the Bangladeshi end, nor what will be done if they are exploited or underpaid once they arrive in Malaysia. This goes against the ethical recruitment model of the International Labour Organization (ILO), as per which all recruitment costs must be borne by the Malaysian employers. In the past, workers have had to pay up to four times more than the agreed amount to get to their jobs in Malaysia. Needless to say, the lack of transparency regarding the MoU creates cause for concern in this regard—especially with the involvement of private agencies. Sometimes, there are many unauthorised agencies in the midst of these—in Bangladesh and in Malaysia—which trick workers into paying them high and/or illegal fees.

While the existence of the MoU is reassuring, it would be of no use if it was not properly implemented. It is, therefore, crucial for both the governments to cooperate and monitor the recruitment process closely, so that workers are not burdened with high migration costs. Additionally, the activities of the legitimate private agencies involved in the process must also be monitored, and these agencies must in turn work for the benefit of the workers, instead of exploiting them by charging unnecessary fees. Essentially, the Bangladeshi authorities must ensure transparency and fairness of the recruitment and migration process for our workers. These are people who leave behind their families solely to earn a living in an unfamiliar land, while also boosting our economy through remittances. They deserve to be protected from exploitation.

End of 2021 brings déjà vu to apparel makers



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

12 months, and how the country's RMG industry would navigate the coming year—what obstacles might lie in wait. With 2022 upon us, it is hard to escape the feeling that we are still trapped in a spiral of uncertainty which is being driven, of course, by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many experts assumed that the pandemic would be over by now or, at

THERE is a profound sense of déjà vu as we approach the end of 2021 and look forward to what the new year will bring. At the end of every year, I like to reflect on the lessons learnt over the previous

will prove to be less dangerous than Delta. Looking to the next year, the overriding message is very similar to that of last year: proceed with caution. The domestic RMG manufacturers have experienced a buoyant period in the second half of 2021, but there is still an unease and tension within the industry—a sense of dread that our progress could be derailed at any moment. We must, therefore, be sensible as we head into 2022, and not take any undue risk. We should keep a close eye on the pandemic developments in our main markets by following the local news outlets in the EU, US and beyond. In fact, now more than ever, it is important to be up to speed with what is happening in other parts of the world, to understand how such events might impact us as apparel makers.

Another issue I certainly see rearing its head in 2022 is inflation. As producers, we have witnessed the impact of inflationary pressures in terms of the rising costs of raw

their own challenges.

In such a circumstance, it is hard to see many solutions to the inflationary pressures in our industry, other than for manufacturers and customers to have an open, transparent discussion on the issue with some give-and-take efforts put in by both sides. In the long term, if these price hikes "set in" and become normalised, we need to consider whether a cultural shift is required in terms of what end consumers pay for clothing—something I have discussed regularly and would merit a whole new article.

The third issue that I believe will be big in 2022 is regulation. Our customers are, more than ever, seeking best-in-class suppliers who conform to certain standards and regulations regarding the environment and social issues. This shift is moving at a rapid pace, and it is occurring in response to the pressure placed on fashion businesses by their

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Compliance to certain standards and regulations will be one of the major issues in our RMG sector in the coming year.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

the very least, we would be able to see an end in sight. Yet, as I write this article, chaos reigns in some of our main markets in Europe and the US. We are seeing lockdowns once again in some countries, which will unquestionably have an impact on the amount and types of clothing being purchased. The primary indication is that the new coronavirus variant, which is sweeping Europe, is milder than its predecessor, which brought on the worst bout of the pandemic around the world earlier this year. We must hope and pray that this is indeed the case, and Omicron

materials, such as cotton. Cotton is the lifeblood of the RMG sector in Bangladesh, and its price has risen continually in the past year. Broadly speaking, the price of cotton now is around double the price just before the pandemic broke out in late 2019. Prices for organic cotton, which many of our customers are now requesting, are particularly high.

The challenge with these price hikes is that they are often absorbed by suppliers. Customers have little sympathy for suppliers when we complain of rising raw material prices—perhaps because they face

own governments as well as international agencies. Where is fashion made, whom is it made by, and under what conditions?—these are questions our buyers are having to provide answers to in increasing detail.

The implications for us, as suppliers, are increased regulatory costs, more paperwork and extra hassle. But we must accept and embrace this new regulatory environment to thrive in the fashion industry of the future. "Due diligence" is the key phrase on every fashion executive's lips right now. We cannot bury our heads in the sand on this issue.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Stopping the For-Profit Pandemic



ANDRES CONSTANTIN

of everyday communication. People everywhere have learnt more about epidemiology, virology, and immunology than they ever expected they would.

And yet, despite the increased attention to public health, few people can name the world's leading cause of death. That is not an accident.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs)—especially heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes—account for over 40 million deaths per year, strain healthcare systems, and impose significant social and economic costs. But they do not attract nearly the same attention as infectious diseases like Covid-19, even though they are largely preventable.

It has long been known that tobacco use, alcohol consumption, and diets that are high in fats, sodium and sugars increase the incidence of NCDs. But, despite some progress in recent years—particularly in reducing tobacco use—these risk factors do not receive

the attention they deserve in discussions worldwide. That is partly because the companies that manufacture, promote, and sell these products play a major role in shaping how the public perceives NCDs.

Tobacco, alcohol, and food companies have a long history of downplaying their products' effects on public health. And, since the start of the pandemic, they have used Covid-19-related marketing campaigns and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to divert public attention further.

A study covering 18 countries, conducted from March to July 2020,



Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) account for over 40 million deaths per year.

PHOTO: AFP

collected more than 280 examples of ways Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nestlé, and PepsiCo exploited the public health emergency to market unhealthy products to vulnerable populations. In Brazil, Nestlé and Danone donated ultra-processed foods to a government programme to provide food to low-income residents. Coca-Cola contributed its sugary drinks for food parcels in South Africa. And Colombian food manufacturer Alpina promoted high-sugar yogurt as an essential food to improve the immune system.

Similarly, according to a recent report,

tobacco companies used pandemic-related CSR activities to expand access to senior government officials and repair their public image. In one audacious example, Philip Morris International donated ventilators to hospitals in Greece and Ukraine.

The incoherence of a system that works hand-in-hand with some of the biggest contributors to NCDs while trying to respond to Covid-19 should provoke general outrage. But these activities have gone largely unnoticed and unremarked.

It is true that, in some cases, corporations have stepped in to deliver goods or services that governments failed

fulfil their obligation to protect their citizens from the harmful activities of third parties—including multinational food, beverage, and tobacco industries. Failure to monitor these corporate activities amounts to a violation of their citizens' fundamental human right to health.

The experience of Big Tobacco offers some insight into how the international community can approach industry interference in public health. Following the adoption of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which entered into force in 2005, governments around the world recognised that the industry had been engaging in a concerted effort to undermine and subvert tobacco-control efforts, and some countries adopted measures to address the problem.

In light of the tactics corporations have deployed during the Covid-19 pandemic, legal measures must be adopted to de-normalise activities that, masquerading as displays of "social responsibility," offer short-term benefits to communities that come at the expense of public health. Governments must not only ensure public awareness of the harms caused by tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy foods—they must also establish measures to limit policymakers' interactions with these industries.

As WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus recently put it, "If tobacco was a virus, it would long ago have been called a pandemic and the world would marshal every resource to stop it. Instead, it is a multi-billion-dollar business profiting from death and disease." His comment applies no less to other products that contribute to NCDs.

Governments must take decisive action to counter the role of the private sector in undermining public health. Even when corporations step up to help a community, officials should ensure that this aid does not address problems by creating new ones.

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