

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## A politician to emulate

Ivy does it for the third time

THE Narayanganj mayoral election concluded with results that did not come as a surprise to many. Political analysts are apt to believe that it was the good image of Selina Hayat Ivy as a politician that contributed to her winning a third straight term as Narayanganj mayor. She defeated her rival, Taimur Alam Khandakar, by a big margin.

Ivy, backed by the ruling Awami League, maintained her poise and posture to win the hearts of voters. In an environment where it is easy to get allured by corrupt practices, she carefully stayed away from any wrongdoing and concentrated on people's welfare. The people of Narayanganj talk about the developments done during her tenures as the mayor, such as improving road conditions. Her unwavering stand against criminals and social violence has been praised by all quarters. This time around, she has promised to build a green city. Prominent figures in the city speak about her acceptability to all kinds of people as a plus point.

It may be mentioned that the Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC) went to the polls for the first time in 2011. Ivy clinched the mayoral post by beating the then Awami League-backed candidate by more than 100,000 votes. The next election was held in 2016, when she defeated a BNP-backed candidate and became the mayor for the second consecutive time. And after her third victory on January 16, 2022, she vowed to "work tirelessly" for the people for the next five years. Independent observers mention her pro-people stance throughout her political career and want to give her full credit for the sterling achievement.

Invaliding fear and speculations of violence, the NCC election was held in a festive and peaceful manner. History shows that almost all the local government polls are tainted by irregularities ranging from bribing voters, snatching ballot papers and intimidating voters, to creating panic through brandishing lethal weapons. It is sad yet true that scores of people were killed across the country in clashes taking place even during the ongoing union parishad polls.

Against such a backdrop, it came as a relief that there were no reports of irregularities or violence anywhere during the Narayanganj polls. Voters turned up in good numbers. According to the Election Commission, turnout was 56.25 percent. We believe the Election Commission deserves kudos for holding a free and fair election. However, it needs to be said that some voters, especially elderly people and female voters, lodged complaints regarding issues with fingerprints while using the EVMS. Glitches and a lack of experience in handling EVMS also slowed down polling at some centres. We believe that thorough training on the use of EVMS for the Election Commission officials is due before holding future elections.

We congratulate Selina Hayat Ivy on her spectacular win and believe that the Election Commission can hold a free and fair election if it wants to.

## Police attack on SUST students condemnable

Closing a university at the first sign of trouble can't be the norm

WE are concerned at the way police on January 16, 2022 responded to the agitating students of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) who had confined the vice-chancellor to press home their demands. Police reportedly charged batons on the students, fired rubber bullets and blasted sound grenades. At least 30 students were critically injured in the incident, along with a number of police personnel and two teachers.

According to media reports, students of Begum Sirajunnisa Chowdhury Hall started demonstrating on the campus on January 13 with their three-point demand: resignation of the hall provost; resolving alleged mismanagement of the dormitory, and bringing in a student-friendly provost committee. They met the VC on January 14 and gave a 24-hour ultimatum for the issues to be resolved. After the deadline of the ultimatum ended without their demands being met, they started their protest again. And, on January 16, as they confined the VC, police swooped on the students.

The question is, was there no other way to calm the troubled students without police attacking them? Why couldn't the authorities meet the students' demands before the situation took a turn for the worse? If their demands could be met or if their concerns could be quelled somehow, the current situation could have been easily avoided. Instead, what started as a protest has now turned into a movement for the VC's resignation.

Another question that must be asked here is: Why do our public university authorities always resort to shutting the campus down and vacating the dormitories to avoid resolving issues raised by students? On the other hand, is there no other way to hold a protest without confining a vice-chancellor, which happens quite frequently at our public universities? We think the SUST administration should have listened to the students' problems with sincerity and tried to solve them before things turned this bad. And, under no circumstances should the administration have directed the police to attack the students. Now that the university has been shut down indefinitely, it is the students who will be the ultimate sufferers, as they will lose precious time from their academic life already squeezed by Covid-imposed closures and complications.

It is good to know that the provost of Begum Sirajunnisa Chowdhury Hall has resigned from her post. Now the SUST administration should resolve the other problems raised by the students and reopen the university as soon as possible.

# When justice remains elusive for victims of gender-based violence



Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a sub editor at the Metro desk of The Daily Star.

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

GENDER-based violence (GBV) has always been a major cause for concern in Bangladesh, but it reached an alarming level in the last two years. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), at least 1,321 women were raped or gang-raped across the country in 2021, of whom 47 were killed after rape and nine died by suicide. At least 640 women faced domestic violence, of whom 210 were tortured for dowry. Of the 640 women, 372 were killed and 142 died by suicide.

Most incidents of GBV remain unreported; only a fraction of such cases make the news. Seeking justice is a process with utmost complications—accessible and comprehensible for one group, but not the same for others. Even when cases are filed, there are loopholes that can be exploited against the victims—even the most educated, capable and aware ones. Then there are thousands of others without formal education, awareness or even proper guidance on legal issues.

About a month ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a fact-finding mission on the GBV situation in the most remote areas of Rajshahi, organised by the Research Institute, Bangladesh (RIB), DASCOH Foundation, NETZ Bangladesh and National Conflict Transformation Platform. My experience of meeting a victim and another's family from Rajshahi's Godagari upazila made me wonder: Does access to justice depend on class and socioeconomic identities? Is there a rampant inequality when it comes to the mere process of seeking justice?

Take Mahbuba, for example. Mahbuba (17) is an acid attack survivor, who was forced into a marriage by her husband Murad (27). In 2018, 15-year-old Mahbuba was married off and went to a different village to live with her in-laws, who would torture her for months over dowry. Four months before the acid attack, Mahbuba came back to her parents. Murad tried repeatedly to take her back home, but she refused to go unless he could ensure her well-being at his house. On October 2, 2020, Murad threw acid on Mahbuba from outside her window, burning her face, neck, one eye and part of her chest.

Mahbuba's father filed a case on the same day under the Acid Control Act, 2002. Murad was arrested, and there were multiple hearings. On November 30, 2021, Murad was granted bail.

According to the Acid Control Act, 2002, a tribunal has to complete the whole trial within 90 days of receiving the first written instruction. All crimes under the act are cognisable, non-compoundable and non-bailable. Yet,

in Mahbuba's case, the perpetrator was released on bail. The case is still on trial.

When the fact-finding team mentioned this information to Mahbuba's family, there was visible confusion. Turns out, even their lawyer didn't mention this to them. When asked if their lawyer was government-appointed, some said yes, while the others said they were paying the

brother claimed that they wanted to file a murder case, but filed a case of abetment under pressure from police. They tried to have the case transferred to the PBI or the CID on grounds of negligence, but with no success.

When asked, Kakonhat police OC Kabir Hossain said they often recommend plaintiffs to file certain cases after



ILLUSTRATION: NAHATIA JAHAN MONNI

**The unavailability of legal aid and counsel for those in need is an issue that needs to be discussed alongside the more prominent discourses regarding GBV.**

# Confronting Global Racism



Andrew Sheng is adjunct professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing and the University of Malaya. He was formerly the chairman of the Securities and Futures Commission, Hong Kong. Copyright: Asia News Network

ANDREW SHENG

RACE is staring us in the face. Confronting and dealing with it is highly emotional and disturbing, so much so that in polite company, it's unspeakable. But we can't avoid it, because racism has become global.

Malaysian social commentator Chandran Nair's new book, "Dismantling Global White Privilege," is a book that confronts racism by calling it a privilege. Is White Might right? Do Black Lives Matter? Should Yellow be identified with Cowardice and Peril? Identifying race with colour is so highly charged that no one can discuss it objectively. For a person of colour, to criticise white behaviour is often dismissed as subjective bias. For the white media to label others as corrupt, aggressors, enemies, evil, low IQ, is considered objective free speech. Fair deal?

Nair's book is a battle cry to create a more free, equal world, where skin colour should not be a barrier to a more just planet. The book is a cringing read, because every page challenges our assumptions of daily life—that it is free, equal and democratic with rule-based order.

The pandemic proved that the world is not free, when the poor, aged and weak can't afford vaccines and are free to die in even very rich countries.

The world is not truly democratic because if every one of the 7.8 billion

global citizens had a vote, the one billion rich, powerful and mostly white people would be out-voted with a very different global order.

The rules-based order raises the fundamental question—who sets the standards, norms and rules? Can we have a proper conversation on whether these rules are fair to all, and are at least enforced fairly, justly and transparently?

Nair has looked comprehensively at white privilege from the angles of history, business, media and publishing education, culture, sports, fashion, and sustainability. It would be facile to dismiss him as biased.

But what does it mean to be white?

White sociologist Robin DiAngelo sums up racism as a black/white binary system that posits a world of evil racists and compassionate non-racists—that is itself a racist construct. Racism as a term was introduced to the English language in the 17th century with colonialism, plantation slavery and exploitation, linking whiteness with freedom and blackness with slavery. Even today in Latin America, there is a "pigmentocracy," in which power and social status are associated with lighter skin colour. That holds true in other societies.

In her latest book, "White Fragility," DiAngelo asks, "How were we, as white people, able to enjoy so much racial privilege and dominance in the workplace, yet believe so deeply that racism (has) changed direction to now victimise us?" Her example resonates with anyone watching Hollywood movies, "When actors audition, they are most often judged by white people, using white standards for roles written by white writers and intended for white audiences... precisely because the system reflects white interests and worldview, white people will not see any of this in racial terms. They are confident that we can represent all of humanity—if no Asian actors apply, we

don't question casting efforts."

The bias built into current standards that is Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) was first observed by Canadian psychologists Steven J Heine and Ara Norenzayan in their survey of psychological studies, which were mostly based on Western college students with WEIRD characteristics. The biased sample behaviour is then generalised as global representative standards.

Nair concludes that change can come by rejecting the three Es: Entitlement, Exclusivity and Exceptionalism.

But will change happen?

DiAngelo sums it up best: White fragility is a reaction from both white liberals and conservatives. The conservative populists want to fight against any challenge to the erosion of white rights, whereas the progressives want more state intervention to address inequities. She, however, thinks that "white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of colour." Polarisation stalls change, because the right is against state intervention, whereas the left calls for more, not realising that it creates a dependency syndrome that is neither fiscally nor socially sustainable.

My personal view is that racism is often an excuse not to address the wicked problems of social injustice and planetary destruction. Blaming each other will not work anymore for the existential issues that face us. Race is only a mask over deep injustices locked down into our psyches of power and hierarchy. Technology has enabled us to begin a conversation at local, communal, corporate, state, regional and global levels on how to shape a world of peace and sustainability, rather than demonising each other and beating the drums of war.

I recommend Nair's book to be read, even if what he says is uncomfortable to many.

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