

Can we ever have a spotless election?

The EC should address concerns about the past of some NCC candidates

IT was only yesterday that we congratulated the Election Commission for holding a fair and peaceful election in Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC)—a parting gift from a soon-to-retire commission otherwise bedevilled by controversies. However, it took all of 24 hours for this moment to be spoiled. According to a report by this daily, while mayor-elect Selina Hayat Ivy got a well-deserved win on Sunday, there were at least 13 councillors who contested and won the election despite having multiple cases filed against them, on charges ranging from murder and drugs to arms and explosives. Of them, eight were affiliated with the BNP and five with the Awami League.

True, many of these cases may have been politically motivated, but it doesn't take away from the fact that the Election Commission has failed to do its job of candidate screening properly. "Data related to these cases are an essential part of the candidates' personal information," as an expert told The Daily Star, "and it's the duty of the commission to inform the voters about this." The commission didn't even upload the candidates' basic information on its website, he added. What this essentially means is that it failed to uphold people's right to information, and thereby opened up the possibility for misinformed decisions. The question is: Why did the Election Commission allow it to happen?

This is especially unfortunate, because it may partly damage the credibility of an election the likes of which we haven't seen in a long time. Just imagine: no clashes were reported for about 18 days in the run-up to the polling day. There was no show of muscle power. Voters exercised their right without fear or intimidation. Even the two mayoral candidates exchanged pleasantries after the results were announced. When did we last see a peaceful campaign like this in the country? Now contrast this with the record of the last city corporation election held in January 2021, in Chattogram, where at least two people ended up dead. The whole campaign was marked by clashes. Even the five phases of the ongoing union parishad elections have been marked by heavy clashes and casualties. Unfortunately, such incidents as well as allegations of various electoral irregularities have been the hallmarks of the tenure of the current Election Commission, which expires in February.

But the NCC campaign gave us hope that while we cannot change the past, the future doesn't have to be weighed down by it. The legal ramification of the latest revelation about NCC councillor candidates is unclear. But it leaves a message for the upcoming Election Commission that you can't be too careful while conducting an election in a political climate like ours. We urge the authorities to look into the merit of these allegations, and take measures accordingly.

Public transport cannot be held hostage

Govt needs to be more decisive and firm with the transport sector

IT is hardly believable from the current state of affairs on our roads that we're going through a still-raging pandemic. As the country witnesses yet another surge in Covid-19 cases, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has informed us that the government retreated from its earlier decision to run public transport at half capacity. We cannot help but note the apparent disregard for public opinion and safety in the "ministry concerned" verbally telling the BRTA that buses can now run at full capacity, before informing the public—who would be most affected by this decision—about it. Although one official from the Dhaka Road Transport Owners' Association (DRTOA) refuted the allegation that the government made this move under pressure from transport associations, we find it hard to believe, especially given how it frequently bowed to lobbying from the transport sector in the past.

As this daily has reported, in the last 30 days, the government has made at least three decisions as per the demands of transport associations, mostly led by influential and politically connected people. Just last week, the authorities, under pressure from transport associations, waived fines for drivers who fail to renew their documents on time. Consider how the implementation of the Road Transport Act, 2018 has been delayed frequently, and how much it has been modified to suit the demands of transport owners and workers. The question is: Whom do the authorities serve—the public or the influential transport associations? An argument has been made by officials that there would have been a crisis of transport if buses operated at half capacity while all institutions remained fully open. If this is the case, we wonder why the government had not thought of this possibility before announcing its initial instruction to transport associations.

It is truly disconcerting to see the government bending so easily and frequently to demands made by transport organisations, with no regard for how it affects the public or what message it conveys to them. We urge the government to come up with coherent plans for public transport, keeping in mind the need to curb the surge of Covid-19 cases and to avoid another full lockdown. The goal must be to reduce the rising number of cases, while implementing a system of transportation that sits well with other regulations.

Free our universities of suppression and violence



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IT is a matter of common sense that a university is supposed to create space and opportunities to generate knowledge, open up scopes for creative ideas and thinking, invite questions against the existing knowledge and system, and raise voices against injustice, discrimination and oppression. From this perspective, students and teachers walk the same path, where teachers have a greater responsibility to ensure a proper environment and create the space for students to become active thinkers. Teachers should be friends, philosophers and guides to their young students, and also be open to questions and differences of opinions.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing a completely different scenario in Bangladesh now, where critical thinking and voices raised against injustice and corruption are suppressed even at public universities. The recent incident of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) is a reflection of that.

This is how it started: female students of SUST were peacefully demanding solutions to some long-standing problems regarding daily meals and the environment of the halls. But the situation snowballed quickly as the residential hall authorities and university administration responded first with misbehaviour, then with threat, and then by unleashing ruling party activists and later police on the students.

A university administration is supposed to look after the well-being of its students. But in our universities, as far as the administration is concerned, they look at students through the lens of power. The vast majority of students are of little importance to the administration. But then there is a small section of students affiliated with the student wing of the ruling party, who terrorise the campus, forcibly occupy the residential halls or control the distribution of seats in the halls, and so on. This group is seen to be in close terms with the administration. The latter uses the former in various ways to protect their own interests, and as such, succumbs to all their demands.

University authorities are supposed to maintain close relations with all their students, and be responsive to all their problems. But it is unfortunate that when university students in Bangladesh voice legitimate issues or concerns that affect them, teachers and the university administrations either ignore them or react with annoyance or anger to their



▲ **A university is a place where many different voices and opinions are supposed to be nurtured.**

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

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plight. On the other hand, when it comes to the terror tactics employed by the ruling party activists, the administration is conspicuously silent. Rather, they hand over the control of the halls to the student wing of the ruling party and allow them to extort money from various construction projects and surrounding areas. This discrimination is rampant in all university campuses across this country. We saw this

talk to the students, who ensures that there is no terrorist or police attacks on the students. However, the main problem in our country is that the government wants the type of intuitional heads who will be loyal to them and implement all of their plans without question. Nowadays, the prerequisite for a VC is being able to surrender all of their self-esteem and being ready to work closely with corrupt,

tragic situation take a horrible turn when we saw police suppression of student protests with the permission of or at the behest of the administration.

It is inconceivable that teachers can endorse violent attacks on their own students. It is possible that students might have problems with some of their teachers. But the role of a teacher is to listen to the students' grievances and engage with them in a constructive manner. Instead of doing that, they allowed students to be attacked—not just by the police, but also by the student activists of the ruling party.

If we are to believe that the SUST administration was not involved in the attack on the students, they should take action against the perpetrators. However, no action has yet been taken against the attackers. This proves that the attacks were directly or indirectly provoked by the administration. It can't be an acceptable norm for a university administration to unleash ruling party activists on students one day or police the next day.

We have seen university VCs in our country—the kind that we want to lead the highest institutions of education—who resigned from their post after state forces stormed into campus and attacked students. That's what the role of the VC should be. A VC is a teacher—they are not a member of the police or military. A VC is someone who should give the utmost importance to the students, who should

irresponsible and anti-people groups. Big construction projects have become the main area of interest for university administrations, ruling party bosses and their student leaders. The priorities of education and student interests are not on their agenda.

No university administration has taken any measures against criminals and the corrupt, or against violence committed by ruling party leaders. What they do is use the cadres for their own benefit, and if they face a difficult situation, they close down the university. Closing down the university is not the answer. Those who find solutions in doing so are not qualified to run university operations.

This problem exists all over Bangladesh. VCs and administrations are flexible towards the powers that be and rigid towards the student bodies. When students protest against injustice and corruption, they respond with anger and violence, with the help of political cadres and state forces. That cannot be the environment of a university where learning and free thinking is valued.

Universities should be run by putting knowledge-sharing and the interests of general students at the forefront. Therefore, teachers should be teachers first and last. The SUST authorities should reopen the university soon after meeting all the demands voiced by the students, and ensure an environment appropriate for higher learning.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Envisioning Governance 4.0



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IN 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic and the myriad crises it spawned may finally start to recede. But even in that best-case scenario, a tsunami of new challenges—from the failure of climate action to the erosion of social cohesion—is within sight. When our institutions are well-governed, we pay little attention to them. They are simply invisible infrastructure supporting the economy and virtually all aspects of the social order.

Today, however, many people have lost faith in their leaders. Faced with mounting risks and our collective failure to address them, we have started looking for culprits. Some point the finger at inept political leaders, others blame "Davos Man" CEOs, and a desperate, growing minority sees an elite conspiracy behind the current gloom and doom. But at the heart of our failure to foresee and manage global risks lies an unresolved problem of global governance. We tend to view history as a series of big, earthquake-like events. But the degradation of global governance was mostly a case of gradual erosion.

In the Governance 1.0 period immediately after World War II, both public and corporate governance were marked by the rule of the "one man": the elected or unelected "strong leader." This

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type of leadership worked well in a society where the cost of information was high, hierarchical power and management functioned relatively smoothly, and technological and economic advances benefited almost everyone.

The Governance 2.0 model, emerging at the end of the 1960s, affirmed the primacy of material wealth, and coincided with the rise of the economist Milton Friedman's "shareholder capitalism" and progressive global financialisation. The new managerial class, accountable only to shareholders, reigned supreme and had global reach. And while the 2008 global financial crisis dealt Governance 2.0 a serious blow, its narrow vision continued to prevail until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The brutal social and economic shock inflicted by Covid-19 ushered in Governance 3.0. Crisis management currently dominates decision-making, with leaders focusing on operational thinking and showing relative disregard for possible unintended consequences. This short-term, trial-and-error approach has led to haphazard management of the pandemic and its socioeconomic fallout. But when the pandemic ends, we will need a new governance model. Governance 4.0 would differ from its predecessors in several fundamental respects.

First, it would replace today's short-term crisis management with long-term strategic thinking. A focus on current problems must be complemented with action to tackle climate change, reverse biodiversity loss and address related social challenges such as involuntary migration.

Second, Governance 4.0 must replace the tunnel vision and top-down approach that prevailed in the past. We live in a complex and interconnected world.

The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in society must change. Businesses can no longer ignore their social and environmental impacts, while governments can no longer act as if they alone have all the answers.

Third, the current emphasis on a narrow conception of economics and short-term financial interests must cease. Instead, the primacy of society and nature must be at the core of any new governance system. Finance and business are important. But they must serve society and nature, not the other way around.

Many leaders remain stuck in the shareholder capitalism mentality of Governance 2.0, while some societies still favour the strongman structure of Governance 1.0. And as long as Covid-19 remains a threat, the crisis mentality of Governance 3.0 will continue to dominate boardroom and cabinet discussions. But many leaders are already thinking and acting like pioneers for a new age of governance. They include business executives advocating for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics. Above all, young people are demanding a better future.

Instead of criticising such leaders for not "staying in their lane," we should welcome them for acting outside of their narrow interests. The best gauges of responsible and responsive governance today measure the extent to which leaders embrace and consent to stakeholder responsibility over shareholder responsibility.

The 21st century will bring many unprecedented challenges. If we want our successors to look back at the progress we made with the same satisfaction that we felt at the end of the 20th century, our governance model must evolve.