

Why build U-loops only to demolish them later?

Officials must be held accountable for wastage of public money

IT'S quite disappointing to see the fate of two U-loops built on Dhaka's airport road two years ago to ease traffic congestion there. These U-loops, despite being successful to some extent to serve their purpose, were recently demolished to construct the country's first bus rapid transit (BRT-3). Reportedly, Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) built these structures spending Tk 3 crore, although they knew those would be demolished for BRT construction. The question is: Why would they spend money on a project despite knowing its future? This, once again, shows how unplanned our development activities are and how public money is often wasted on arbitrary projects.

Many crores of taka have already been spent on various projects to ease Dhaka's obnoxious traffic congestions, with little improvement in sight. Over the past 15 years, the government reportedly spent Tk 119 crore to modernise and digitalise Dhaka's traffic signal system, but all the money went down the drain because of such inefficient planning. Building footbridges, footpaths, and roads, and then dismantling them to make way for some other projects have rather become a norm. The lack of foresight is evident in most such projects. Reportedly, 11 U-loops were built under such a project undertaken in 2016. Now, two of them have been demolished. Who knows what will happen to the rest if other new projects are taken up?

Dhaka's traffic condition is one of the worst in the world. The city has been ranked 10th among 228 cities in terms of poor traffic management in the World Traffic Index 2020. Also, according to Buet's Accident Research Institute (ARI), the country lost an estimated Tk 55,685 crore last year due to traffic congestion in Dhaka alone. Therefore, we definitely need projects to solve its traffic congestion, but those need to be well-planned and well-coordinated and certainly part of a bigger plan for the entire city's traffic management. No projects should be taken up arbitrarily without considering their sustainability.

In this particular case, we think the DNCC made a major blunder by building U-loops that they knew would be demolished soon for the sake of another project. Reportedly, the U-loops will be built again once the BRT project is complete. This means that the public will have to pay twice for the same project, which is totally unacceptable. The DNCC authorities must be held accountable for such wastage of public money. The government also should take a lesson from this incident and ensure no such wastage out of flawed planning ever takes place.

The magic of tea in North Bengal

Tea cultivation proves to be profitable for growers

IT is good to see that many farmers in the northern region are now happy as they can see profit coming from cultivation of tea. A number of farmers in the district have reportedly opted to grow tea instead of traditional crops which did not bring much profit. A report by this daily narrates the story of one Imran Ali, a farmer, who started to grow tea on his 1.7 acres of land in 2005. The decision, he says, changed his life forever as he saw a profit of Tk 14 lakh last year. Encouraged by the returns, Ali has now brought 8.5 acres of land under tea production.

This is great news from a socioeconomic point of view as tea production in the district has benefited many small and marginal farmers like him who switched to tea from rice, wheat, sugarcane, jute and tobacco. The profit will definitely increase their buying capacity and help them become economically solvent. The added benefit of growing tea, as reported by the farmers, is that it does not cause harm to the land's fertility.

Beginning with 455 acres of land in 2002, Panchagarh has already gone ahead of Chattogram in terms of gross annual production of tea. It is now second only to Sylhet, and according to data from Bangladesh Tea Board, tea from Panchagarh accounted for about 15 percent of the country's record tea production of 96.5 million kilograms in 2021. Records also show that last year, tea was cultivated on 11,433.9 acres of land in nine registered and 21 unregistered gardens of the northern region, helped by its higher and more fertile grounds that allowed growers to pluck leaves after a year of planting saplings. The production capacity of the entire area will increase manifold if another 50,000 acres of land can be brought under the coverage.

It needs to be mentioned that the idea of starting tea production in Panchagarh was a bold one but it has paid off. Those pioneers who started it showed the path for the next generation of investors and growers. It is no mean feat that only within two decades, Panchagarh tea growers have outpaced those in Chattogram who have been in the trade for many more decades. We hope this will continue in the coming days to further boost our economy.

In EC formation, was AL's political tactic at play?



Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee is the chief reporter of The Daily Star.

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

THE new Election Commission, led by Kazi Habibul Awal, is the first in the country's history to have been formed through the enactment of a specific law, as prescribed in the constitution 50 years ago. This makes it unique, to say the least, although it is too early to say whether it will be able to live up to the expectations that led to this moment. The five-member commission formed by the president will be judged by their actions and decisions with regard to the monumental task that lies ahead—holding credible elections.

In the coming days, there will be a lot of discussion on the EC's performance. For now, however, let's turn our attention to how the five commissioners were picked following a hectic selection process—and political parties whose recommendations eventually mattered—to understand if there was a pattern to this process.

There are some interesting facts to consider. For one, not a single name recommendation by any heavyweight political party was taken into consideration. Rather, a small Islamist party's recommendation yielded an election commissioner two times in a row. How is this significant?

After the search committee called on political parties to propose names for the posts of chief election commissioner (CEC) and four other election commissioners, the BNP, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and several other parties did not respond to its request. Not only did they not recommend any names, they also didn't participate in the president's dialogue on EC formation before.

On the other hand, the ruling Awami League, main opposition Jatiya Party, the Workers Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), Bangladesh Tariqat Federation, Ganatantri Party, Bangladesh Nationalist Front (BNF), National People's Party (NPP), and Bikalpadhara Bangladesh took part in the dialogue and also proposed their picks to the search committee, as did some organisations and individuals as well.

Of the 322 names proposed to the search committee, 138 came from the political parties, although the committee didn't disclose the identities of those who made the recommendations. It didn't disclose details of the 10 shortlisted nominees either, despite repeated calls for those names to be made public.

After the president constituted the 13th Election Commission on February 26, based on the shortlist submitted by the committee, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader said that none of the names recommended by his party had been appointed. And it's not just the ruling party—none of the major participating parties, including Jatiya Party, Workers Party, JSD, and Bikalpadhara, got any mileage with their recommendations.

The twist lies in how smaller parties got their recommendations accepted. Let's start with Bangladesh Tariqat Federation, a lightweight Islamist party, which has already proven itself as the "luckiest" party in terms of selecting election commissioners.

CEC Habibul Awal was Tariqat's number one recommendation, while Brig

one of them. Immediately after the EC was formed, Zafrullah congratulated the newly appointed commissioners. BNP, however, wasn't happy with his move, not least because it could allow Awami League to claim that BNP had "indirectly" engaged in the process through Zafrullah. Recently, the BNP high command decided to boycott Zafrullah, and party leaders and

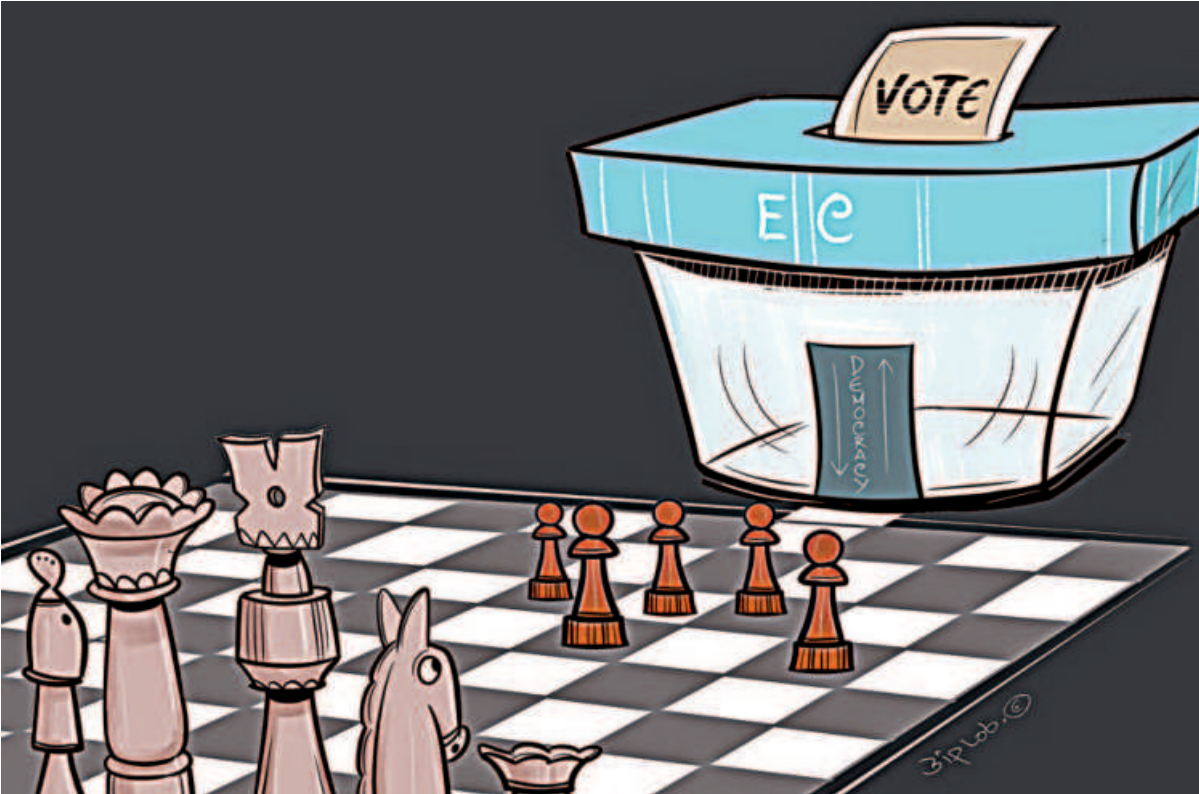


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

Is it possible that the ruling party used like-minded and pro-government parties to push its preferred names, instead of submitting those themselves, to avoid criticism?

Gen (retd) Ahsan Habib Khan, another name proposed by this party, was chosen as one of the election commissioners. Interestingly, the same thing happened in 2017, when then-CEC KM Nurul Huda and other two commissioners—Rafiqul Islam and Brig Gen (retd) Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury—were picked up from the five names proposed by Tariqat.

Besides Tariqat, other parties that got lucky with their recommendations were BNF, Ganatantri Party, Samyabadi Dal, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD), National Awami Party (NAP), and NPP, with some of the recommendations repeated between them. Incidentally, Ganatantri Party, Samyabadi Dal and NAP are all part of the Awami League-led 14-party grand alliance, while Tariqat is part of Awami League's electoral alliance.

Now, let's look at these political parties' representation in parliament.

In the 350-seat parliament, Awami League has 302 seats, Jatiya Party 26, BNP seven, Workers Party four, and JSD, Gono Forum and Bikalpadhara have two seats each, while Tariqat Federation and Jatiya Party (Manju) have one seat each. Independent candidates have three seats. So, except for Tariqat, none of the parties associated with EC formation—BNF, Ganatantri Party, Samyabadi Dal, BSD, NAP, and NPP—has any parliamentary representation.

Here is another twist: even though BNP boycotted the whole process, Gonoshasthaya Kendra founder Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, known to be close to BNP, did recommend names to the search committee, with CEC Habibul Awal

activists have been verbally instructed not to invite him to any of their programmes, nor to participate in any of his.

The president's role in the appointment process is significant. According to Section 48 of the constitution, the president shall act in accordance with the advice of the prime minister in all matters, except in case of the appointment of the chief justice and the PM herself. So, as per the constitution, the president must have consulted with the PM prior to appointing the EC. If that is the case, why did the PM not advise him to appoint her party's recommended names? Did she advise him to pick names from the lists of the small political parties, and if so, why? And why did the PM advise him to drop the names proposed by parties with strong support base and organisational structure as well as representation in parliament? Did she leave the whole decision-making process to the president without interfering? We really don't know.

The names proposed by the ruling party were not selected by the president this time, while in 2017, only a single name was selected from its recommendations. Is Awami League not capable of proposing the right candidates? Does that indicate a political bankruptcy for a party as old and big as AL?

Or, is it possible that it used like-minded and pro-government parties to push its preferred names, instead of submitting those themselves, to avoid criticism?

If that is the case, it is a smart political tactic indeed.

Is democracy worth fighting for?



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DEBRA EFROYMSON

THE eyes of the world are on Ukraine as its citizens fight to uphold their democracy in the face of Russian aggression. But how many people are aware that American democracy is similarly under grave threat?

America has long been considered an exceptional land, where democracy thrives and people of different backgrounds all have a chance at prosperity. This optimistic view of America has, admittedly, always been questionable given the country's embrace of slavery, its imprisoning of a higher percentage of the population than any other country in the world, its refusal to ratify important treaties including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its odd clinging to the electoral college, which allows the loser of the popular vote to become president.

The United States also has a unique (among democratic countries) system of lifetime appointments for Supreme Court justices, meaning that there is no rhyme or reason to how many justices any single president can appoint. Of the nine justices now on the Supreme Court, five were appointed by presidents who lost the popular vote (George W Bush and Donald Trump). Barack Obama, despite winning the popular vote twice, only appointed two

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justices, while Trump, who lost the popular vote twice, was able to appoint three.

While America's 100 senators are currently split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats, those 50 Democratic senators represent nearly 40 million more voters than their Republican counterparts. Meanwhile, thanks to the filibuster, it requires 60 out of 100 votes to pass laws, meaning that the Senate cannot pass major legislation. This suits the Republican Party, which is dedicated to blocking virtually all legislation. In the words of the Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, "100 percent of our focus is on stopping [the Biden] administration." McConnell also famously publicised his intention to ensure that Barack Obama would only serve one term. He failed—but he did make it extraordinarily difficult for Obama to get anything done.

Donald Trump, the very definition of a sore loser, continues to deny that he lost the 2020 election. The Big Lie has taken over the Republican Party and has been used as an excuse to make it harder to vote if you are poor or not white. In 2021, 19 states enacted 33 laws that will make it harder for Americans to vote. Some Republican-led states are considering laws that would allow the state legislature to overturn election results. Crazy fantasy? Well, look at Trump's claim that Mike Pence, as vice president, could have overturned the election.

In any case, however democratic or not the US has been in the past, now for the first time it has been demoted to the status of a "backsliding" democracy by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) think tank.

I don't mean to make Republicans out to be the only bad guys in the system. Then Senator Joe Biden drafted, and President Bill Clinton signed, new legislation that dramatically increased the prison population in the 1990s, particularly increasing the number of Black and brown prisoners. Politicians of both parties are more beholden to their corporate sponsors than to the public, and the results show in the nature of the bills they draft and in their votes. But while Republicans literally have no platform (other than to lower taxes on the rich, ban abortion and various books, and make it harder for people of colour to vote—none of which are popular among the masses), the Democrats, to some degree at least, are trying to pass voting rights legislation, universal healthcare, and various other policies that would make life easier for the poor and middle class.

A country that regularly elects the loser as president, is now veering into autocracy in terms of believing that the president is above the law and that elected officials rather than the electorate should determine elections, and that is grossly skewed in its representation—and then makes it almost impossible to pass legislation—is hardly a model democracy. Factor in its treatment of Black, indigenous, and other people of colour, and it never has been one.

And I haven't even mentioned the January 6 insurrection.

So while we watch Ukrainians fight heart and soul to save their democracy, some pundits are asking just how hard Americans are willing to fight to save theirs.