

The EC can only go so far with the old ways

It must show courage and determination to build confidence

If morning shows the day, the Election Commission's is not exactly showing a very good day. If anything, its early days in office have been more reflective of the old, bureaucratic ways of doing things than a genuine drive to build public trust with courage, determination and foresight. This is also evident from how it is approaching problems in the run-up to the June 15 Cumilla City Cooperation (CCC) election – its first major hurdle to overcome. The fact that the CEC has refused to exert his authority after a lawmaker reportedly flouted an official directive shows that the EC has a lot to do to effect change, nowhere more so than within itself.

Such helpless surrender is a throwback to his predecessor who would notoriously refuse to take responsibility for any electoral irregularity reported. But this, we must say, is unbecoming of a commission tasked with damage control. It came with the promise of restoring confidence in the electoral system after two highly controversial general elections. No one expects it to deliver miracles. But executing the right policies and standing firm in the face of opposition, particularly from the ruling quarters, is part of the job. It means finding ways around non-compliant parties as well as legal and institutional bottlenecks to prepare the ground for fair and participatory elections.

The EC's ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders involved should give it pause for thought. There are ideas galore, but ideas alone don't work without a strong motivation. During its sixth round of talks held on Sunday, former election commissioners shared some observations that are worth consideration, such as the importance of inclusive elections and the decisive role that the ruling party can play in creating a conducive environment. They talked about the importance of a neutral election-time government. One stressed the need for completing counting of votes in daytime to avoid the influence of "jinns and ghosts" after sunset. There was even a suggestion for placing the public administration and home ministries under the authority of the EC during polls to ensure the neutrality of these vital institutions.

The CEC also weighed in by reminding everyone that the EC alone cannot hold elections – that "voters and political parties are vital stakeholders" too. True, but where is the initiative to gain the trust of voters and opposition parties? What message do they get when the CEC refuses to take action to ensure that the rules apply to everyone during election campaigns? We urge the EC to own up to its part of the responsibility to hold fair elections. We also urge the government to ensure that it has unconditional support in fulfilling that responsibility.

Who will hold the reins of brick kiln owners?

Toxic smoke from these kilns is damaging crops, health

WE as a nation are proving to be consistent in damaging the environment in every possible way. We have destroyed most of our natural forests, followed by the deliberate pollution of vital resources like water and air. With the vanishing forests, many beautiful species of birds and animals have also vanished, and many surviving species of sweet-water fish may soon be gone too as water pollution continues across the country. As for air pollution, we've managed to hit all the wrong indicators to become a country with the worst air quality.

Brick kilns – there are still many of them – are a major reason why we have a huge presence of micro-pollutants in the air. This daily has been regularly publishing reports on the assault of brick kilns on nature, highlighting the fact that most of them still burn wood as fuel which contributes to the release of lethal carbon-monoxide in the air.

In this respect, another dismal story was published on Monday. It shows how toxic smoke from brick kilns is damaging Boro paddy on nearly 100 acres of land in Mirzapur upazila, Tangail. The fume is damaging vegetables and other forms of vegetation growing adjacent to the paddy fields. It is disconcerting to learn that the brick kilns start their operation before the onset of the Boro paddy cultivation season in most areas. We have often come across graphic reports in print and electronic media of half-ripe paddy turning black and lifeless on the fields, causing huge financial losses to the farmers.

Though some brick kiln owners reportedly complied with the government directive to keep the height of the chimney at 130 feet, in reality, many owners hardly follow the rules. As a result, toxic emissions continue to damage the Boro paddy before the harvest time. The local administration and political representatives seldom admit responsibility for this situation or do what's necessary to make these unruly elements conduct their business in a responsible manner.

The story from Tangail is but a reflection of what's happening all over the country with brick kilns spewing toxic smoke in the air. Besides damaging important cash crops and vegetation, it also causes health problems by entering the respiratory system of humans. If there is any record of the number of people who die each year from air pollution, it would be frightening. The government, therefore, must take urgent steps to undo this damage and save our environment by punishing non-compliant brick field owners.

New Election Commission, Same Old Course?



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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

THE Election Commission of Bangladesh has been mired in controversies over the last decade. Bar a few rare instances, the elections held at the national and local levels since the 2009 general election have been questionable at best. From allegations of rigging and voter fraud to instances of violence and murder in the vicinity of polling centres – every election has been marred by one or multiple such incidents. Consequently, the people of the country have lost their trust in the electoral system, which is an ominous sign for a democratic process. And for this situation, the last two election commissions, led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad and KM Nurul Huda, are largely to blame.

So when the process of appointing the new election commission started at the end of last year, many political parties did not show any interest. BNP and some other political parties did not even join the dialogues leading to the formation of the new election commission. Although the new commission was formed through a new law in February, it is yet to gain the trust and confidence of a good number of opposition parties, including the BNP.

There was a time when only the major political parties used to publicly express their distrust of the electoral system and the election commission. But at the time the present Election Commission was formed, it became clear how far the crisis of confidence had reached, because the response from the general public was lacklustre and rather unenthusiastic.

It is in this context that the new commission adopted a submissive tone since its formation. Soon after the formal announcement, I spoke to the newly appointed chief election commissioner (CEC), Kazi Habibul Awal, over the phone. He said, "If I can hold acceptable [to all] elections, maybe I will have the joy of success, or else I will have regret."

Still, we remain optimistic as the CEC has said they will try their best to hold a participatory election. He also said it was not possible for the commission alone to ensure a good election. In this case, all political parties and law enforcement agencies would also have to do their part – so would the civil society and the media.

There are several challenges before the Habibul Awal-led commission. First, the opposition parties need to be reassured enough so that they participate in the elections. Second, the commission should present a roadmap for overcoming the shortcomings of the last elections to the nation. Third, it should make it



▲ **The Election Commission needs to set a new course of action, instead of following their predecessors' footsteps, if they want to hold credible elections.**

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

clear to everyone that they would not be susceptible to external interference while performing their duties – and be prepared to resign en masse if they are unable to do so. Overcoming these challenges are key to making the upcoming general election beyond reproach.

This is also where our disappointment

the political parties, the administration and other stakeholders. Asked if the election would be acceptable if BNP did not take part in it, the former CEC said BNP was a big political party, so it would not be acceptable if the next parliamentary election was held without it.

The irony of that statement could

lies. So far, the Election Commission seems to have hardly done anything to address these challenges. Although they have not yet confirmed whether the next general election will be held with electronic voting machines (EVMs), it appears that the commission is favouring the idea, despite the fact that most political parties in the country are against using EVMs in elections. Such a stance is only contributing to further distancing the Election Commission from the political opposition.

In May, at a function in Madaripur, Election Commissioner Anisur Rahman said the political parties were welcome to use their own IT experts to examine how EVMs work. He also said the CEC would give a USD 10 million reward to anyone who could find faults with the EVMs. The CEC quickly refuted his fellow commissioner's claim, pointing out that he could not make such bizarre comments.

While the debate over using EVMs in elections continues, former CEC KM Nurul Huda, who is dubbed by detractors as the "organiser of vote by night," said recently that elections under the ruling party were sensitive and challenging. He said it was not possible for the Election Commission alone to hold a free and fair election without the cooperation of all

not be more obvious. Here was the election chief who had overseen the most questionable election in the country's recent history that left little doubt about irregularities among almost everyone who followed it. It could well be said that it was his failure to hold free and fair elections that led the BNP to become sceptical about joining the electoral process, lest they lose face again.

Nurul Huda's former colleague, former election commissioner Mahbub Talukdar, later brought some of the incidents from that time to light. But the former election chief remained undeterred.

Free and fair elections are part and parcel of a democracy. Failure of the previous two election commissions to ensure it has deeply hurt our democratic process, with the general people turning apathetic towards the electoral process and major political players losing faith in it. In order to bounce back from this situation, the Election Commission needs to build trust among both the people of the country and the political parties. And then they must work towards delivering a free, fair and participatory election that is above question and acceptable to everyone. But the new Election Commission seems to be walking the old path of its predecessors, and needs to change course if it wants to be credible.

Let the Rohingyas set their own narrative



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MOHAMMAD MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

IT has been quite clear in various segments of society in Bangladesh that the solution to the Rohingya crisis is becoming a distant dream. The attitude of the West and donors is gradually gravitating towards blame instead of appreciation as Bangladesh is criticised for shifting the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char as well as for not allowing proper education, skill development, lack of human rights and employment opportunities. The donors are pressuring Bangladesh to have long-term planning and budget for the Rohingyas. There are loose comments about the option of integrating Rohingyas into Bangladeshi society. Apart from this, a recent China-mediated repatriation initiative of situating 700-800 Rohingyas (few members from a family) at different places in Myanmar is an uncomfortable proposition.

This initiative includes about 300 Hindu Rohingyas (possibly the last of the community in the camp, and as a whole family package). Meanwhile 40,000-60,000 Rohingyas who fled to India during the genocide are also slowly entering Bangladesh – perhaps they are being pushed back, meaning India, the regional heavyweight, is also getting rid of the Rohingyas. So, finally, it all boils down to Bangladesh. The other regional power that is trying to mediate the recent repatriation initiative would favour Myanmar's interest. As a

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student of social studies, I understand Myanmar's interest would get preference over Bangladesh, because Myanmar is a strategic partner of China, whereas Bangladesh is a development partner. Meanwhile, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, the impending food shortage and fuel politics, the budget for Rohingyas will shrink, and there are indications of this already on the horizon. All these factors are making Bangladesh anxious from a feeling of "being left alone," despite its generous humanitarian approach towards the Rohingyas during their most difficult days.

My understanding is that Rohingyas are not returning to Myanmar anytime soon – not at least the way Bangladesh wants. Interestingly, negotiation from a position of weakness seldom brings the desired result. Both Bangladesh and the Rohingyas are bargaining from a position of disadvantage compared to Myanmar. So what are the alternatives?

Let me share a story. In 2018, at the UN General Assembly session in New York, I was nominated to attend a sideline event organised by the International Labour Organization (ILO). It was on indigenous peoples' rights. There were seven speakers, of whom six were officials of the ILO and other agencies of the United Nations. The only speaker who was not from the UN, but representing the indigenous people of the world, was a Chakma gentleman from Bangladesh. The point I am trying to make here is that the scope for education, exposure and empowerment allows vulnerable communities to have their voices heard in international forums.

The Rohingya issue is becoming a struggle for Bangladesh, and the Rohingyas' plight must not lose its sensitivity, tempo, impetus or strength. Rohingyas should be intellectually, politically and economically empowered

to speak for themselves and they should be assisted to create a position of advantage in international political, intellectual and human rights spaces. This approach is likely to create more anxiety regarding their repatriation among some strategic communities in the country. In spite of that, Bangladesh may consider the reality and allow international-level education, skill and leadership development for the Rohingyas to develop their own narrative and tell their own stories to the world. A developed human resource is better for everyone. On the contrary, a traumatised young population without proper education, hopes and dreams is a ticking "insecurity time bomb."

As the US has recognised the crackdown on the Rohingyas as genocide, this situation may be pursued to help marginal Rohingya families to migrate abroad, and settle there and pursue education. This diaspora, in two decades, will turn into a major advocacy tool. However, Bangladesh has to keep this issue alive and on the table, bringing the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), regional organisations, the egalitarian world community and the UN on board.

It would be too much of an expectation on Myanmar's part that Bangladesh would let "Myanmar's battle" take place on Bangladesh's soil. They should find political solutions for the political issues they have created themselves, instead of securitising them and unnecessarily blaming its neighbours (It is on record that Bangladesh offered joint and coordinated patrolling along the border. This is a gesture that is one of a kind in this neighbourhood. Myanmar has not been very enthusiastic about this). It should, moreover, not be forgotten that even "strategic patience" has a shelf life.